



Black Poppies: Britain's Black Community and the Great War

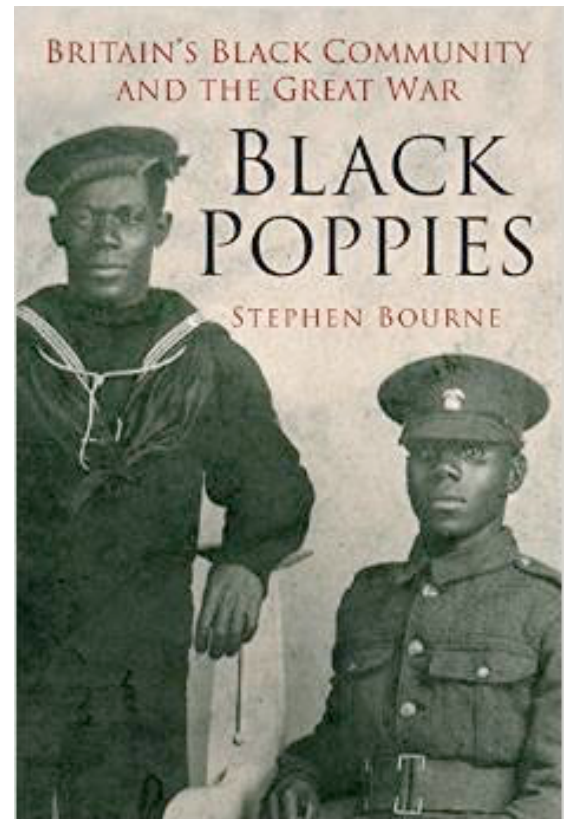
Stephen Bourne

Black Poppies – Britain's Black Community and the Great War
(The History Press, £12.99) **Review by Sean Creighton 4 Nov 2014**

'The near-total exclusion from our history books of black servicemen in the First World War is shameful.... Some black servicemen made the ultimate sacrifice ... and like Walter Tull, died on the battlefields but with the passing of time, with the exception of Tull, the contributions of black servicemen have been forgotten.'

The story of Britain's Black Community and the First World War is told by Stephen Bourne in his book *Black Poppies*, which has sold 1,500 copies in the first three months since publication. It is therefore shameful that despite his past involvement with the Imperial War Museum he and others were not consulted on the new First World War exhibition. There is growing anger that it does not include any noticeable recognition of the African, Caribbean, Chinese and South Asian contribution.

Divided into three sections about the experiences of black servicemen, citizens and communities, Stephen synthesizes existing knowledge with new research in a very readable style. It is not intended as a comprehensive or definitive account. He explains that 'more research needs to be



undertaken for a fuller appreciation and understanding of the subject', especially as David Killingray suggested back in 1986 in the War Office and Colonial papers at what is now The National Archives. Rich in detail it is a valuable handbook for people wanting to prepare talks especially at local level as part of putting 'Black' into the public's consciousness about the true

nature of the First World War over the next few years. It's not just London, Liverpool and Cardiff, but from Newcastle and North Shields down to Folkestone and Bournemouth, and across from Looe and Truro to Leamington Spa, Oxford and Northampton.

A unique section gives the responses of Patrick Vernon (Every Generation Media), Lorna Blackman (Chair, ACLA Cultural Committee, Hornsey and Hackney), Garry Stewart (ex-servicemen), and Nicholas Bailey (actor) to the following questions:

- Why do you think the stories of African Caribbean soldiers in the First World War have been ignored or forgotten?
- How/when did you find out that African Caribbeans served in the First World War?
- Do you think that the British school curriculum should include the stories of African Caribbeans in the First World War?
- Why do you think the British school curriculum mainly focuses on African Americans from history, such as Dr Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks?
- What do you think we should do in 20145-2018 to ensure that young people in Britain are made aware of the important contribution made by African Caribbeans to the First World War?

These questions are a useful list to pose at events on the First World War in general and on the Black role in particular.

Black Servicemen

Stephen discusses the confusion over interpreting armed services rules about recruitment of black men and whether they could be accepted for officer training. It is clear that whatever the formal rules may have suggested, it was left to individual recruiters and officers to take the decisions.

There is a chapter reviewing the experience of the men in the British West Indies Regiment. Stephen is able to quote from the unpublished war memoir of its commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Charles Wood-Hill. There are reminiscences of members who survived, and chapters about

Herbert Morris, the shell-shocked 17 year old Jamaican shot for desertion, and the 19 headstones with the BWIR crest among the Commonwealth War Graves at Seaford Cemetery in Sussex, and on the regiment's mutiny at Taranto in December 1918 over bad treatment while they waited demobilization.

The Royal Flying Corps which became the Royal Air Force in April 1918 had several Indian fighter pilots and a Jamaican.

Black People on The Home Front

Stephen tells the stories of several families who lived either side of and through the War, details of black entertainers performing around Britain. Descendants of some of these families are active today in Britain. I hope that his chapter on the two composers Amanda Ira Aldridge and Avril Coleridge-Taylor will be the start of in-depth studies by Stephen.

Black Britain 1919

The third section on the Race Riots in 1919 in Liverpool, London's East End, South Shields, Newport and Cardiff gives eyewitness accounts and details of how the local black communities reacted.

In the final chapter 'Black Britain 1919' Stephen summarizes the picture of the Black presence, particularly in London, and its level of organization and their activists: African Times and Orient Review, and African Telegraph, the African Students Union, and the African Progress Union.

In his Author's Note Stephen acknowledges his debt to earlier works by Sir Harry H. Johnson, Peter Fryer, Rainer Lotz and Ian Pegg, David Killingray, Jeff Green, Ray Costello, Glenford Howe and Richard Smith, and to documentary producers Tony T. and Rebecca Goldstone AT Sweet Patootee for their film *Mutiny* about the BWIR.

This book is a must to have on your shelves; like Peter Fryer, Jeff Green and Stephen's previous books it will remain a valuable reference book for years to come.