**Daniel G. Williams, *Black Skin, Blue Books. African Americans and Wales 1845-1945*.** Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-7083-1987-1 pb. 360 pp. £24.00.

Unrest and civil disobedience in Wales led the government to investigate social conditions in 1847, issue the *Blue Books* and decide that the Welsh language should be banned in schools: thus the Welsh were officially discriminated against by the larger society. This would seem to suggest a comparison to African Americans would be useful. The four chapters in this book claim to cover the relationship between Wales and Frederick Douglass, Harlem, Paul Robeson and novelist Ralph Ellison. There are fifty pages of notes and the bibliography takes thirty pages.

                Despite a good sprinkling of Marxist authors named in the text, there is no solid attempt to contrast the economies, or the different cultures/class structures and ethnicities of the societies. The industrial demand for coal, iron and steel changed southern Wales from the mid-nineteenth century, bringing many migrants (which diluted knowledge of Welsh to 44% of the population in 1911) and contrasting strongly with rural marginal farming elsewhere in the principality. The black minority of the United States, in slavery until the 1860s, experienced an explosion in hope and education into 1877, but then had segregation enforced by law. Crop failure and industrial expansion in the North led to the Great Migration of the 1910s and substantial numbers of rural African Americans settling in U.S. cities. Thus very few similarities.

Some slavery narratives and *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were published in Welsh. Douglass visited Wrexham (close by Cheshire) and his speeches, reported in Welsh, all reflect the nature of mid-nineteenth century Wales. The narrative (chapter two) jumps decades to detail aspects of the “ethnic renaissance in Harlem and Wales” which has the usual information on the 1920s Harlem Renaissance. The Uxbridge (now suburban London)-born Peggy Whistler who may have had a Welsh grandmother and became Margiad Evans is discussed: her “connection to anthropological discourse is not as direct as [Zora Neale] Hurston’s”.  Hurston was an African American anthropologist who famously plagiarised three quarters of an early study. That is noted in Hurston’s biography, which, though in Williams’s bibliography, is not mentioned here.

                Chapter three is subtitled “Paul Robeson, Race and the Making of Modern Wales” and concerns the film *Proud Valley* (1940) set and shot in Wales. Robeson dismissed the other films he had made in Britain in the 1930s. Ellison (chapter four) famously wrote one novel (*Invisible Man*) and here it is argued that his experiences as a ship’s cook visiting south Wales in 1943-1945 were important in that work.

The range of texts quoted and the size of the bibliography suggest that Williams has written a literary study. The blurb has Henry Louis Gates Jr. state this book “fills a void that most of us did not even know existed!” and it describes the work as drawing on “literary, historical, visual and musical sources”. That the bibliography does not list Kenneth Little’s classic 1940s study of Cardiff’s “coloured quarter”, Tiger Bay (*Negroes in Britain*) or Peter Fryer’s *Staying Power*, and only cites two pieces by Neil Evans, shows the history to be weak. Nor is there mention of Welsh-born Thomas Jesse Jones (1873-1950), authority on the education of African Americans which led him in the 1920s to similar roles in British Africa. Jones’s views were widely disliked by African Americans. The musical elements include the modern rock band Manic Street Preachers – and jazz saxophonist Charlie Parker’s 1940s “Red Cross” - the book prints four bars of that solo.

Sadly, seven of the eight illustrations (three are of Robeson and two of black-face minstrels) are very badly printed. The story of African Americans and Wales still needs a historian.

 ***Jeffrey Green***

**Stephen Bourne, *The Motherland Calls: Britain’s black Servicement & Women 1939 – 1945,*** Stroud: The History Press, 2012 (£11.69 pbk; 157pp)

Bourne’s useful introduction  begins by explaining that the term ‘Black’ refers to people of African origin/descent. He then presents data on the numbers of women and men from Africa, the Caribbean and Britain herself who fought for Britain, and notes that it has proved impossible to get accurate data.

From there, the book is divided into four sections: Britain; Guyana and the Caribbean;  Africa; African Americans. Each section then contains chapters on individual participants, both women and men. The largest section is the one on the Caribbean, the briefest on African-Americans. Three are then  Appendices: a brief history of the West Indian Ex-Services Association; the ‘From War to Windrush’ exhibition at the Imperial War Museum; a  very helpful full list of Films and TV and radio  programs dealing with this history; many pages of excerpts from the wartime League of Coloured Peoples’ *Newsletter* relating relevant stories. Again,  very useful indeed. What I think is missing is a full account of the colour bar practised by all sectors of the armed forces and when these were lifted – if they were!

As the chapters are mainly quotations from interviews and published works, these women and men come really alive as you read the book.  Some talk of the racism they experienced, others say they did not experience any. Many tell stories of the racism of the (White) American soldiers they encountered in Britain. And very interestingly, some of the West Indians speak of their resentment at their forced return to the West Indies after the war.

Let me just give one example. One of the people in the book, whom I had met, is Johnny Smythe from Freetown. He was the father of one of my students from my teaching days.  Very tall, very handsome – and the most  formally elegant man I had ever met.  He had come to Britain in 1940, was accepted by the RAF and trained as a navigator. From 1941 he served with a bomber squadron. ‘What made me so uncomfortable as an officer was that I was the only black man in the entire camp’, he wrote.  On his 27th ‘mission’, Smythe  was shot down on the day I am writing this – November 18 -  in 1943, and remained a POW until his release in May 1945.  After the war Smythe worked for some years for the Colonial Office, trained as a lawyer and was admitted to the Bar in 1951. He returned to Freetown; received the OBE in 1978 and returned to settle in England in 1993. He died in 1996. (I had met him in the early 1970s when he was visiting Britain because he disapproved  (on ethnic and social class bases) of his daughter’s intended marriage partner.)

The one chapter on African-Americans is different, as it gives information from some books and articles on their history. Bourne is unaware of the files that I saw many years ago in the National Archives which indicate that at first the British government was going to go along with the racial segregation practised by the USA, and only decided not to because of the influence this would have on Britain’s own Black colonials.  So there was no segregation, but Bourne gives some examples of the horrific racist attitudes by some Britons – and the disapproval by many more of any relationships between Black men and White women.

There is a Postscript paying ’tribute to some of the men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice for their king and country’. These are taken from various war memorials –information from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission: [www.cwgc.org](http://www.cwgc.org) and [www.caribbeanaircrew-ww2.com](http://www.caribbeanaircrew-ww2.com)  (I believe this site was started by my old friend Cy Grant, from Guyana, another navigator in the RAF, also a POW.)

This is an important book. There must be many thousands of books on WWII – but how many even mention the Black and Indian servicemen and women? A handful, if that. The personal stories bring it all to life. So you can laugh and cry, be amused and horrified.  And learn much. It should be read by every teacher as WWII is taught in schools.

*Marika Sherwood*

**Review of an article**

Charles R. Foy, ‘”Unkle Sommerset’s” freedom: liberty in England for black sailors’, *Jnl. for Maritime Research*, 13/1, May 2011, pp.21-36.

This is a fascinating article on reactions to the Somerset decision in 1772. Many in England and more importantly in North America misinterpreted the meaning of the decision, believing that it made slavery illegal in England. It didn’t, of course. The mis-information spread among the enslaved in America: for the period 1773-1776, Foy found ‘almost 150 references to runaways fleeing via the sea in North American newspapers, more than tripling the number of such advertisements in the prior three years’. Some ended up working on privateers, while others served in the Royal Navy – but the exact number is ‘unobtainable’.  It is ‘estimated that 3000 Black seamen were evacuated to England at the end of the revolutions’.

Foy then examines the variable treatment of Black seamen by the RN and by some courts in England and Scotland. (His claim that slavery was abolished in Scotland in 1778 is mistaken, as the Scots could enslave Scottish workers till 1799.) He then details the story of four seamen as illustrations for struggles within courts, with customs officials, with judges, et al. Then looking at what we would call social class issues, he reports that ‘black refugees in England found that each of the four foundations of English liberty was circumscribed for persons without property’, and gives many examples of the treatment of some Black seamen.

An  important article!