

THEY ALSO SERVED

A Service to mark the Churches Together in England Project New Testament Church of God Handsworth - 2 July 2017

I was honoured to be invited to this Service, and disappointed because I knew my diary would stop me being here in person. It would have been great to be back in Brum. But it's still a privilege to be associated with this ground-breaking project, "They Also Served".

Someone said that 'History is written by the Winners' - in other words it's biased in favour of those who come out on top when wars end. It might be more accurate to say that history belongs to the Writers. Those who have their pens and paper handy have the advantage. It can take generations of research to find out if these first writers of history were telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Or not.

The term 'Fake News' was invented to describe the phoney arguments used on both sides of the Atlantic: before the Brexit Referendum over here, and prior to the US Presidential election over there. But untruths and half-truths are as old as Adam & Eve's excuses in the Garden of Eden.

What really goes on in wartime is particularly difficult to unearth, for there are too many people - on all sides - who are trying to bury it. We do not know exactly what is actually happening right now in Syria and Iraq and Yemen and South Sudan, despite nightly news bulletins.

Ernest Hemmingway wrote this about World War I: "There was no really good true war book during the entire four years of the war. The only true writing that came through during the war was in poetry. One reason for this is that poets are not arrested as quickly as prose writers."

One hundred years after that war we are indebted to Angelina Osborne for her scholarly and painstaking research which undergirds "They Also Served" and is exposing the truth about black service personnel in World War I.

In his book "Black Poppies" Stephen Bourne wrote, "The near-total exclusion from our history books of black servicemen in the First World War is shameful."

He tells us that black volunteers could be found in all branches of the armed forces. Many had paid their own way from the Caribbean to 'The Mother Country'. Soldiers from Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Sierra Leone, Gambia and other African colonies were recruited. Throughout the war, 60,000 black South African and 120,000 other Africans also served in uniformed Labour Units.

Here's the story of one of them. Lionel Turpin was descended from slaves in Guyana. He felt British and, aged 19 joined the army at the York Depot of the York and Lancaster Regiment. Lionel was in the battles of the Somme, suffered two gas-burnt lungs and a shell wound in his back and was awarded two medals. Lionel married and had children, but 10 years after the war died of his injuries.

A separate black unit was formed in 1915: The British West Indies Regiment. By the end of the war, over 15,000 had served in it, from Jamaica and all the Caribbean Colonies. They were paid less than white soldiers and weren't allowed to fight. They dug trenches, carried and loaded ammunition, laid telephone wires and were stretcher-bearers, often under fire. By the end of the war, 185 had been killed, 700 wounded and over 1,000 had died of illness.

Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig spoke of their excellent discipline and high morale in spite of casualties, adding "the assistance they have rendered has been much appreciated by the units to which they have been attached."

Just a few weeks after World War I ended, a former Mayor of Battersea said this at the African Progress Union's Inaugural meeting: "Our compatriots from Africa, America and the West Indies have been fighting on the fields of France and Flanders against a foreign foe. The people of this country are sadly ignorant with reference to the darker races, and our object is to show to them that we have given up the idea of becoming hewers of wood and drawers of water, that we claim our rightful place within this Empire... if we are good enough to be brought to fight the wars of the country we are good enough to receive the benefits of the country."

Many African and West Indian survivors who had fought for their 'Mother Country' decided to make Britain their home. In Cardiff, Liverpool and other cities, they were competing for work and housing and were resented. So-called 'race riots' ensued. In 1919, 2,000 white people attacked shops and houses associated with black people in Cardiff's Tiger Bay. In the same year many black Liverpoolians were sacked from jobs at local oil mills and sugar refineries because whites refused to work alongside them. Charles Wotten, a black ex-soldier was chased into a dock and drowned. The incident was covered up.

After the riots, no black troops were allowed to take part in London's Victory Celebrations.

You have probably been to Westminster Abbey and seen The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. It holds the remains of an unidentified British soldier killed in the First World War. It was the idea of an Army Chaplain who wanted this grave to be "amongst the kings" who were buried in the Abbey.

Was the Unknown Soldier black, or white? The inscription says,
Beneath this stone rests the body
Of a British warrior
Unknown by name or rank
Brought from France to lie among
The Most illustrious of the Land
And buried here on Armistice Day
1920

The real history of the human race is known to the Almighty alone. He has no favourites, no axe to grind, no need to deceive, no reputation to lie about, no votes to covet, no deeds to cover up.

His Son, the Saviour of the World, spoke of Himself as "The Way, the Truth and the Life". He is in all truth and all truth is in Him. It is my earnest prayer that this project, "They Also Served", plus the exhibition and publication Angelina is working on, will be pleasing to Him.

The Archbishop of York, Dr John Sentamu