

Black History Month started in England on 1st October 1987 to challenge racism and ignorance and acknowledge the history of peoples from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia. It has grown in popularity despite two concerns: that the focus on black history should be year long and not limited to one month and that this can separate black history from being embedded in British history. It also soon slipped into being the history of people from the African diaspora only as in the USA model.

Despite these concerns Black History Month can provide opportunities to learn about the history of African descended peoples and challenge the view that African descended peoples are new arrivals who have not contributed to British society.

One such opportunity is the publication of African Lives in Northern England, which has been supported by the Catholic Association for Racial Justice. The 54 people featured include a Roman emperor, the first professional black footballer, first black woman magistrate, notable orators against enslavement and racism as well as more ordinary lives as soldiers, sailors, servants, engineers, physicians and community builders.

These lives were often explicitly influenced by Christian belief and practice as the explorations below show.

Mary Ann Macham (1802-93) escaped from enslavement in Virginia, USA, stowed away and arrived in North Shields on Christmas Day 1831 and was met by two Quaker ladies. The Quaker families provided her with a home, employment, possibly a stipend as in her later years she was described as 'a retired servant of independent means' and a resting place. The graves of Mary Ann Macham and her husband are surrounded by those of eminent Quaker families.

Tynemouth Parish Church Magazine published in their Christmas number, December 1950 her story, noting 'it affords another example of the practical Christianity which has come from Quaker piety'. Due to this early recognition by a church group and the research undertaken by the Old Low Light Museum we know the basic facts of her long life including the horrific treatment she endured when enslaved. Her experiences and feelings as she adjusted to her life as nursemaid, servant, family life with a husband and stepdaughter and then with her deceased husband's relatives have not been recorded. Nor do we know whether she took part in the abolition of 'slavery' fervour that was taking place in chapels in her town and in her street.

Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), a preacher and orator was a principal character in stirring up this anti-slavery fervour during his visits to England. He mixed with the highest society, being termed 'the Negro Hercules'. Charles Dickens publicly apologised for missing one of his London speeches and the owner of the Cunard shipping line publicly apologised for the racist treatment he received on their ship. He was warmly welcomed in the Northeast, spoke at chapels and halls throughout, with special trains being hired to take the crowds from Sunderland, North and South Shields to his speeches in Gateshead. He stayed with The Richardsons, a Quaker family in Newcastle and Cullercoats and with the Spence-Watsons, another Quaker family in Gateshead. The Richardsons bought his freedom from enslavement and, with others, raised the funds to enable him to set up a publishing business in New York state.

But Quaker support for him and his cause did not deter Frederick Douglass from criticizing Christianity, against the advice of some of his supporters. He strategically stated, 'I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding... partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land [the US]', and he attacked the Free Church in Scotland and other evangelical churches for their financial dependence on enslavers.

Celestine Edwards, (1858-94) a labourer, preacher, editor and author, born in Dominica, stowed away at the age of 12. It is likely he was brought up as a Roman Catholic, later becoming a Methodist. Like Douglass, he both preached Christianity and attacked some of its practices. His preaching was so wise that a fellow theological student exclaimed 'There was something so unique in a black man teaching white men Christianity, and in knowing more about it than themselves... but he won you to his side.' This 'Negro lecturer' spoke out in Sunderland on the equal humanity of the black 'race'. He criticized the Protestant missionaries in Africa, the invasion of Rhodesia and Uganda and racism in England 'the birthplace of the very essence of the seed of prejudice against the negro race'.

Martin Luther King (1929-68) is perhaps the most famous preacher of African descent to visit the Northeast. He amazed the dignitaries at Newcastle University when he first accepted their invitation and then followed through, despite having just been released from prison (He was imprisoned 29 times and assassinated in 1968). In 1967 he flew to England for three days only to receive an honorary Doctorate in Civil Law from Newcastle University and deliver a speech naming the three major world problems as 'war, poverty and racism'. Martin Luther King wrote of this recognition of his work 'in the ministry as a tremendous encouragement, far overshadowing the barbs and arrows of the daily press'. Many of the others recorded in this booklet may well have been sustained by their Christian faith.

Jonas Abladey (1960-) a maritime radio and electronics officer from Ghana gained his engineering qualifications at South Shields Maritime College. He attributed the support from the local Christian community to his withstanding the racism he experienced, contributing to the community and bringing his children up to be 'cultured, disciplined and God-fearing'.

These five stories demonstrate that the history of African people in the Northeast is part of our Christian, Northeastern and British history. They provide role models in withstanding and challenging racism, war, poverty and in building community. As the Tynemouth Parish Church recognized these stories need to be promoted widely in our churches all year, not for one month only.

The African Lives in Northern England booklet, with its fifty-four illustrated stories, can be purchased for a limited period from caroline@s4a.org.uk.