

AN IGNORED INFLUENCE

This account about the influence of **Black Face Minstrels** is mostly based on "*Minstrel Memories*" by Harry Reynolds, published by Allston Rivers Ltd, London, in 1928, describing "**the story of Burnt Cork Minstrelsy in Great Britain from 1836 to 1927**".

To put it into context need to provide dates for emancipation, etc.

All new forms of entertainment leave an impact on popular tastes. Minstrelsy evolved and encompassed many activities now recognised as part of our folk culture, leaving us with an unresolvable chicken and egg argument as to their respective origins.

The beginning of minstrelsy has been traced to the end of the 18th century. Jim Crow was born in 1754 on an estate of Squire Crow, of South American parents who were executed when he was nine for the murder of an overseer. He absconded to New York and played fiddle and did negro dancing with a peculiar jump. Given the original "*Jump Jim Crow*" song, he made enough money that he purchased a farm in Virginia in 1787, married an American woman, and eventually owned slaves himself, dieing in 1809.

"Oh, Jim Crow's come to town, as you all must know,
An' he wheel about, he turn about, he do jis so,
An' ebery time he wheel about, he jump Jim Crow".

Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a tall man of 25, actor and light comedian, heard the refrain sung by a negro ostler when walking in Cincinnati in 1830. Rice could tell a story, sing a song or dance a hornpipe, after a style; he had personality and was slightly eccentric with mannerisms, but he had also tact and shrewdness and was alert for ideas. He tried this in the Old Dury, Pittsburgh, in the autumn of 1830, wearing borrowed old clothes. The novelty was a great success. Then he added other songs to the repertoire including "*Such a Gettin' Upstairs*". Rice remained in Pittsburgh for two years, went on to Philadelphia, Boston, New York and then came over to England, first appearing at the Surrey Theatre, London, on July 9th 1836. But he seldom worked with minstrel troupes. Mostly he did burleques such as "*The Virginia Mummy*" which became a favourite with minstrel comedians for 75 years. They all depended on the inimitable acting of Rice. Rice came to England again in 1838 and 1843. In the later he was Julius Caesar Washington Hickory Dick in "*Yankee Notes for English Circulation*" and did "*Jump Jim Crow*" and "*Sich a Gittin' Upstairs*". But he was paralysed in 1858 and died in New York in 1860 aged 53.

In 1843 Joe Sweeny appeared, who introduced the first version of the modern banjo, which he developed about 1830.

The first minstrel troupe, the *Virginia Minstrels*, formed in New York in February 1843, consisting of Dan Emmett, Frank Brower, Dick Pelham and Whitlock, who conceived it, between them playing banjo, violin, bone castanets and tambourine, and avoiding vulgarity. They came to and performed in England in May that year in Liverpool, Manchester and London in their "original, novel, grotesque and melodious Ethiopian Entertainment." But they disbanded in July. Dan Emmett wrote "*I wish I Was in Dixie*" in September 1859 as a new walk around finale for the show he was in in New York. The greatest financial and social success in the early days was the *Ethiopian Serenaders*, in England from January 1846, the music being taken from the most popular operas of the day interspersed with Ethiopian melodies. These included "*Buffalo Girls*", "*Oh Susannah*", "*The Boatman Dance*", and "*Old (Black) Joe*". The *Christy Minstrels* started in New York in 1846 and ran until just after E P Christy retired in 1854. A company opened in London in August 1857 called the *Christy Minstrels* with enough performers from the original to justify the name, including Joe Brown a champion jig dancer, and with the song "*Nelly Grey*". There soon became an epidemic of "*Christy Troupes*" so that the name became identified with Minstrelsy. In 1882-3 there were 32 touring troupes. From April 1859 till April 1909 there were minstrels continuously at the lesser St James Hall, Piccadilly.

In April 1909 a newspaper said "burnt cork minstrelsy seems to have taken its departure from the list of London amusements, but up to the present nothing of any consequence seems have arisen to take its place." It was still commented as true 20 years later.

E W Mackney usually accompanied himself on a piano, but for his famous topical song, "*The Whole Hog or None*", he capered around the stage in a quaint costume. The original words were written by Chas Sloman, but it was kept up to date with endless topical improvisations. He also played the violin, banjo, bones, guitar and was famous for farm yard imitations on the fiddle. His dancing was so good that it led to him being asked to judge champion dancing competitions. Starting in pantomime in 1835 at the age of 9, he became the leading exponent of Burnt Cork Minstrelsy in England. Mackney retired in early middle age but eventually died in March 1909 aged 83.

"The world's a funny kind of place with funny people there,
It's just the kind of steeplechase in which we all must share,
To high and low, to rich and poor, it all turns out the same,
For if the king is not secure, the knave must win the game.

Oh! law girls, sure Charleston is a pretty city, were you ever there?
If not you ought to go,
For the girls of Carolina, oh, they are so full of fun,
There's no mistake about them, 'tis the whole hog or none!

I wish I were a volunteer that I might have a gun,
I'd exercise at Aldershot and learn to fight like fun,
I'd follow there a soldier's life, and taste its every charm,
And perhaps when I came home, I'd have rheumatics in my arm."

G H Chirgwin, known as the white eyed kaffir, amusingly imitated a clog dancer with the aid of a pair of churchwarden pipes and a tea tray.

In 1880 a minstrel quartette, the *Ethiopian Troubadours*, opened at the Canterbury Music Hall. They did a 30 minute act with overture, ballads by tenor and baritone, quartettes, patter, comic items, banjo selections, burlesque prima donna and ended with a mini burlesque of "*Il Travatore*". *Harry Reynold's Minstrels* appeared in semi-court costume and had a back cloth representing a full troupe of 30 performers and an orchestra. The act included vocal marches, ballads with harmonised choruses, gags, laughing and whistling songs, dances and ended with unaccompanied quartette singing of old time minstrel medleys. After a time it was performed in two scenes, the minstrels sat round in front of a plantation scene without leaving the stage. The performers were interlocutor, tambourine end man, male soprano, tenor, basso profundo, bones end man and baritone. It ran for several years and it brought a minstrel revival to the halls until WW1. The *Palladium Minstrels* were 100 strong with 30 banjoists and went in for the big effects. While in the Variety theatres, the usual costumes could be of the golliwog variety, with eccentric makeup by the comedians making it look like a burlesque of a minstrel show.

The brothers Charles and Harry Raynor were a blackface musical act who introduced the "*Cat Duet*" to English audiences. At one time knockabout black face comedians were then all the rage, then Stump Orators, it lent itself to topical illusions and could be kept up to date. It was thought that performing developed initiative, self-reliance and readiness of wit, cultivated a thick skin, a spirit of serene optimism and a dogmatic belief in oneself. Pierrots were introduced by Clifford Essex about 1880, Harry Pellisser developed the idea in his troupe "*The Follies*".

The best old minstrel shows were built on a solid foundation of good vocal and instrumental music, it was not confined to old time melodies or plantation songs. There was usually up to eight comedians on the corners to ensure variety. There were contrasting voices, male sopranos, male altos, light tenors, dramatic tenors, baritones and basso profundos. The songs and ballads included plantation, simple homely, romantic seranades, martial songs, rollicking sea songs, anything that allowed a final harmonised refrain. They avoided voices with vibrato, needing a firm steady tone. The comedians had a variety of songs, funny songs on many subjects, topical matter, whistling, laughing, yodelling, mimetic numbers, coon songs and dances, concerted numbers, and single and double gags.

Typically the curtain went up to a double arc of ebony hued gentlemen, white gloves and expansive shirt fronts. Interlocutor, selected for deep voice and impressive manner, said "gentlemen be seated". He introduced the Grand Introductory Overture and Opening Chorus by the whole troupe, during which the corner men gave a smart and spectacular performance with bones and tambourine. There followed a programme of mixed sentiment and humour, using song, dance, story and clever specialities. Then a Stump orator with humorous comment on current local

topics. The first part of a show ended with an operatic selection, a medley of plantation songs or a spectacular finale. The second part, "*The Grand Olio of Varieties*", included variety acts, solo dancing, acrobatics, big concerted song or dance acts, musical novelties, mimicry, skits on latest crazes, illusions, pantomimes, and ending with a burlesque of a well known opera or popular stage success, to send everyone away in a bright and merry mood. Key to a minstrel show, compared with a variety show, was a person who was the guiding spirit who ensured the variety and interest throughout, more intimately than the chairman of an Old Time Music Hall.

The *Fisk University Jubilee Singers* were the only group to get the fullest effect out of the old negro tunes.

A "*Statue Dance*" was as follows, a little dance, then a sudden stop and a pose illustrative of say "*The Dying Gladiator*", another little dance and a pose of "*Ajax Defying the Lightning*" and so on.

The best minstrel black was obtained by burning good champagne corks to a fine powder and mixing with water to the consistency of blacking.

Stump Oratory is familiar now perhaps only from the comic solo speeches of Ronnie Barker in *The Two Ronnies*.

Some examples of the use of the tunes in the morris are "*Such a Getting Up Stairs*" at Headington and Hinton, "*Whole Hog or None*" at Brill, "*Oh Sussanah*" at Longborough and "*The Boatman*" at Godley Hill.

The early 20th century collectors largely ignored those tunes that they knew had a composer or were derived from popular entertainment, so many more may have been employed than have been recorded. Where the right questions were asked, it was found that morris sides often sang, performed stunts or skits or other entertainments - rather as the better modern sides - to augment their appeal and the box. The skills employed often deriving from the dancers involvement in other activities outside of the morris.

The so called *Border Morris* of Worcestershire, Herefordshire and Staffordshire included black faces and groups of percussion instrumentists and often used the song "*Not for Joe*", which mentions niggers, banjos and the Wild West Show. It is hard to believe that this preceded minstrelsy! Most intriguing is that amateur minstrelsy followed on after the decline of the traditional Mummers and Christmas dancing troupes in the 20th century when the objective became more the raising of money for charities. This allowed far larger groups in fancy dress. A common costume became the all embracing "clown" suit. Such an easy to make outfit which could be worn over ordinary clothes also became common for the "jazz" or comic bands which had a similar function in carnivals and processions, and of which some still exist, although with more elaborate costumes nowadays, changing annually. Many such groups' photographs have been published in the last 20 years with the fashion for books of historical local illustrations.

As mentioned the mixed entertainment format also evolved into the better class concert party and pierrots as opportunities to exploit individual talents. Like the morris, the concept never stood still and constantly evolved, novelty has always been a strong selling point. The final development of minstrelsy was the *Black and White Minstrel Show* which was a long running successful show on early TV. The original would no longer be politically correct.

What is surprising is how the folk world has steadfastly ignored such more recent performances, having a blinkered view of what is "folk". The book "*Morris Dancers and Rose Queens*" is a collection of local newspaper accounts of events over a short period in part of Lancashire, mentioning all the other dances and entertainments that went along with the same occasions as the morris. All of which are now largely ignored and so unrecorded as they are no longer fashionable.

"One Man's Memory of What the United States Wants to Forget"

Editorial by Brent Staples - The New York Times selection for the Sunday Telegraph 18.7.2006

Nations tend to write their histories by forgetting the shameful parts. In America, once-buried issues associated with slavery and the genocide against Native Americans have resurfaced and been incorporated into the national memory. But World War II has thus far been held apart as an era that is almost beyond reproach. Indeed, the people who led the country in the 40's and fought the war have been transformed from mere mortals into secular saints.

But when it comes to racial justice, any claim of moral superiority is false on its face. Franklin Roosevelt and the national political leadership failed when tested on the great moral issue of the 20th century. It was within Roosevelt's power to strike Jim Crow segregation from the military - which is precisely what Harry Truman would do three years after the war ended. Roosevelt, however, embraced apartheid segregation, actually spreading it from the Army, where it had been long established, into other major branches of the military.

Historians now agree that in the process, the military transplanted Jim Crow racism from the South into parts of the country where it had not previously existed. It further legitimized retrograde racial attitudes by enforcing apartheid policies in the towns where troops spent leisure time.

Beyond that, providing racially segregated living and training arrangements - as well as separate command structures - taxed the country's resources and created a logjam among black recruits. With too few segregated outfits to hold them, hundreds of thousands were either turned away when they volunteered or simply passed over.

Black recruits who actually made it into the military were often greeted by a racial nightmare, especially when they waited out the war in Southern camps. There they faced legendary cruelty from white officers who resented having to command them at all, as well as hatred and harassment from townfolk who were more favorably inclined toward German prisoners of war than toward black Americans in uniform. By the middle of the war, maltreatment of black soldiers had spawned race riots on so many military posts that the Army seemed to be shaking itself to pieces.

African-Americans who lived through this humiliating experience have typically been hesitant to discuss it, and most have taken their experiences with them to the grave. The distinguished historian John Hope Franklin, now 91 years old, broke the silence thunderously in his memoir, "Mirror to America", which offers a clear-eyed but also heart-wrenching portrait of one black family's struggle to serve with honour in a nation that regarded them as less than fully human.

Dr. Franklin was a newly minted Harvard Ph.D at the start of the war. Like most black intellectuals at the time, he was well aware of the nightmare life that awaited educated black men who were drafted into the Army. He hoped to escape that fate by "selling" himself to the Navy, which was desperate for men after the attack on Pearl Harbour. The recruiter seemed stunned as Dr. Franklin reeled off his qualifications, which included shorthand and typing as well as his doctorate. But the recruiter, he writes, "said simply that I was lacking in one important qualification, and that was color".

He next turned to the War Department, which was hiring dropouts from Harvard to write the official history of the war. He submitted his qualifications, which included a book already in press, and even solicited support from the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, all to no avail. "I decided that they did not want to win the war," he told me in an interview, "they wanted to win the status of white people in this country."

His older brother Buck Franklin Jr., had a different, and even worse, experience. He was drafted, despite being married, over 30 and a high school principal, by a bigoted draft board that seemed determined to bring an "uppity" black man down. Assigned to a white officer who appeared to have hated him from the start, he fell into a depression from which he never recovered. He died in 1947, after he either fell or jumped from a hotel window. Dr. Franklin, known throughout his career for his evenness of temper, still refers to his brother's death as murder.

The forces of nostalgia see Jim Crow segregation as a minor blemish on the otherwise noble effort that was the great war. But government enforced racism was actually at the very heart of the enterprise. It undermined the war effort, further poisoned an already racially troubled society and took a savage toll on families like the Franklins. It would be a crime in itself for the country ever to forget that.