Smith, Richard
West Indians at War
Caribbean Studies, vol. 36, núm. 1, enero-junio, 2008, pp. 224-231
Instituto de Estudios del Caribe
San Juan, Puerto Rico

Available in: http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=39214802026

Mutiny was first broadcast as part of Channel 4’s contribution to Black History Month in October 1999. The documentary was the first examination of the British West Indies Regiment (B.W.I.R.) since the pioneering studies by W. F. Elkins (1970) and C. L. Joseph (1971). The filmmakers sought to recover the forgotten contribution of the Anglophone Caribbean to the British imperial campaigns of the First World War (1914-1918) and in doing so undertook two important, interwoven tasks. Firstly, they continue the longstanding tradition of questioning accounts of the war presented by the higher echelons and official historians. In the closing minutes of the film, contributing military historian, Julian Putowski, makes this explicit and suggests this challenge to the dominant perspective had taken place in the previous twenty years. More precisely, it can be said to have started to take hold, albeit in a very conventional form, from the early 1960s when the First World War re-entered the popular imagination in Britain. This era saw the publication of Alan Clark’s The Donkeys (1961), which challenged the competency of the army leadership, the stage and film versions of Oh, What a Lovely War (1963 and 1969 respectively), the pivotal documentary series The Great War (BBC 1964) and a revival of interest in the war poets (Hanna 2007). In the past decade, a counter-challenge has been mounted by historians who claim understanding of the war has been distorted by literary tradition, which caricatures the British soldier as hapless victim of military folly (see Bond 1997). Secondly, by deploying interview footage of three of the handful of West Indian First World War veterans still alive in the late 1990s, Mutiny attempts to reclaim this forgotten history through the voices of the servicemen themselves, a tradition pioneered by the producers of The Great War series.

From the outset, Mutiny highlights the deep-seated attachment to the Empire in the hearts of many British West Indians. Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, founded in Jamaica on the eve of the war, immediately sent a declaration of loyalty to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, in the expectation wartime loyalty would result in peacetime rewards for black West Indian majority. These sentiments are expressed clearly by the veterans, termed “black patriots” by the
narrator, as they describe the pride felt when they eventually enlisted in the British West Indies Regiment. “I was so joyful to go and fight for England,” declares Eugent Clarke of Jamaica, aged 106. “All of us felt glad that we were going—we were glad to go, man” enthuses Gershom Browne of Guyana (101). “The English are great. The greatest in the world” declares Jamaican Clifford Powell (110), then the oldest surviving British Army veteran, as he sits in the British West Indian Welfare Centre in Guantanamo, the Jamaican national flag and Union Jack visible in the background.

But this early fervour was not met with equal enthusiasm by the British War Office. The raising of West Indian contingents was initially rejected on a number of spurious grounds, including the suggestion by Lord Kitchener, Secretary of State for War, that black soldiers would be more visible on the battlefield. Clearly, of most concern was that the black man might outperform the white on the battlefield, thereby increasing the confidence of black subjects throughout the British Empire, which in turn might lead to greater demands for self-determination. As Clifford Powell remarked, “When black people have rifles in their hands, don’t joke with them. They mean to fight.” Imperial self-confidence had already been dampened during the Boer War (1899-1902), as Britain struggled to put physically fit recruits into the field. This anxiety still festered in the minds of the Imperial establishment, although Mutiny alludes only fleetingly to this. A parallel strand in Imperial ideology ridiculed the suggestion that black soldiers could possibly be of use to the war effort. This was despite the reliance on black and Indian soldiers in many Imperial campaigns, particularly from the nineteenth century. In racially stratified West Indian societies, any suggestion black men should serve alongside white was dismissed out of hand. Mutiny recalls how C.L.R James was ridiculed when he tried to enlist in the Trinidad Merchants’ Contingent, formed to send middle-class Trinidadians directly to British regiments, rather than the B.W.I.R. As James would recount in Beyond a Boundary (1963:39-40), rejection on the grounds of his dark skin, despite a strong educational and sporting background, was a defining moment; one which explains the central place he attributed to the war in The Life of Captain Cipriani (1932).

The intervention of George V in April 1915 forced the recruitment of West Indians to be taken more seriously. The king and his advisors were keen to present the image of a united Empire, but also recognised the continued refusal of recruits might undermine British rule. By May, preparations were well under way to send representative contingents from the British West Indies, including the mainland territories of British Guiana (Guyana) and British Honduras (Belize). In October 1915, the formation of the British West Indies Regiment as an infantry unit...
was formally announced and over 15,000 men were eventually recruited, all volunteers. While some black West Indians had been so enthusiastic to enlist they stowed away on ships bound for the metropole, others were motivated by a mixture of idealism and pragmatism. Some wished to broaden their horizons by leaving small island communities, others desired an alternative to poverty wages of “9 pence per day.”

As the volunteers sang “we want to catch the Kaiser if we get a chance” the response to the war by those left behind was often less enthusiastic. Some were reluctant to fight a “white people’s war” and regarded the volunteers as “German bait.” The loyalty of even the most pro-British black recruit would soon be tested by the institutional racism of the British Army, as well as the harsh realities of war.

Some of the subsequent poor treatment meted out to the British West Indies Regiment may have been the result of incompetence rather than racism. This was clearly illustrated during the ill-fated voyage of the Verdal, which sailed from Jamaica with the Third Contingent in March 1916. The ship was diverted via Nova Scotia to avoid German submarines, but as they had not been supplied with winter uniforms and as the ship was not properly equipped to carry troops, over 100 men succumbed to frostbite, suffering amputated limbs as a result.

Other circumstances could not be so regarded and reflected a more deep-seated mendacity towards black imperial subjects, despite attempts to portray the war as a universal struggle against Germanic authoritarianism. Under military law black men, whether subjects of the Empire or not, were regarded as aliens and were not permitted to rise above non-commissioned rank. More significantly, with the exception of the three battalions (First, Second and Fifth), deployed during 1917 and 1918 against the Turks, the remaining nine battalions were not regarded as of sufficient front-line calibre and performed labouring duties, such as unloading supplies, road building and transporting ammunition. Despite the vital importance of such tasks, the West Indians regarded their status as deeply inferior, particularly as they were denied the opportunity to fire a shot in anger, although routinely serving within range of enemy shellfire. The recited lines of the “Black Soldier’s Lament,” written in the 1980s by Captain George Borden to reflect the experiences of the black Canadian construction battalions serving in the First World War, highlights this grievance:

Stripped to the waist and sweated chest  
Midday’s reprieve much needed rest  
We dug and hauled and lifted high  
From trenches deep toward the sky  
Non-fighting troops and yet we die (Ruck 1986).
A search of the West Indian newspapers, may have revealed a more specific, contemporary poetic plea, but in terms of other illustrative sources the filmmakers were faced with very concrete difficulties. The Film and Video Archive of the Imperial War Museum (I.W.M.), London, for example, holds four fleeting segments, two of which were until recently miscatalogued. To address this shortfall, footage of other black units has been used to effectively convey meaning, although not unproblematically. In one section, newsreel of black American soldiers training in trench warfare on the Western Front is intercut with frames of Ghurkha soldiers crouching in dugouts in the Middle East. Simultaneously, the narrative shifts from the B.W.I.R.’s service as labourer battalions in France and Italy to the offensive role of the B.W.I.R. in General Allenby’s Jordan campaign.

Recounting his experiences in Jordan, Gershom Browne tells how a comrade died having “met with a shell.” I tried without success to locate this man, named as “Eustace Phillips” (or “Philips”), in the Commonwealth War Graves Commission database. This prompted me to reconsider the merits of redressing historical omission by privileging the memories of the dwindling band of centenarian veterans. The closing sequence of *Mutiny* underlines how this has become an imperative in much recent war documentary (Badsey 2002); the narrator insists that “to fill the gaps in the history books we have to rely on the fading memories of the veterans themselves.” Writing in the late 1920s, Paolo Monelli, the Italian war veteran and journalist, underlined the pitfalls of wartime memoir:

The man who undertook today, in good faith, to narrate his memories as a fighting man would write a false book. Not by his own fault, but because of the qualities of human nature. The most faithful and humble memory distorts long-past events. The shells fall closer, the actions are enormously exaggerated, the periods of waiting lose their length, the intermediate moments disappear: the falsehoods and rhetoric of others act upon us (cited in Harvey 1998:133).

But the potential for veterans’ memories to over-determine historical narrative, particularly around the core theme of injustice and radicalisation, is avoided in *Mutiny*. The veterans reflect on both the universal and the specific, their recollections framed to suggest reminiscence, rather than “truth.” However, that these were men irrevocably changed by a war, which for them has never ended, leaves a lasting impression. Eugent Clarke highlights a separation from civilian life that is never resolved, “Miss the war—you feel like you’re out of place,” a feeling emphasised by Gershom Browne who is emblematic of the eternal soldier, for whom the war has become the defining experience, “I’m glad I’m a soldier. Thank God for the life as a soldier.” Most moving of all is
Browne’s thankfulness for the “discretion” he showed in demanding his comrades did not bayonet surrendering Turkish soldiers in cold blood; an understated act of humanity which highlights how the oppressed West Indian soldier rose above the barbarism of modernity.

The official preference for deploy the B.W.I.R. as labour battalions, rather than front-line troops, and the rising tide of discriminatory treatment could characterise the history of the regiment, in the words of Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Wood-Hill, as a “heartbreaking tale of humiliation and disillusion.” One of the B.W.I.R.’s pivotal advocates, whose lobbying contributed to the eventual front-line deployment in Palestine and Jordan, Wood-Hill was a long-serving officer of the West India Regiment before the war. He was appointed commanding officer of the first battalion B.W.I.R. and documented the regiments tribulations in a brief sketch circulated to the War Office, Colonial Office and West India Committee. Mutiny does not address the more ambiguous, reactionary side of Wood-Hill’s character which resulted in his striking the men under his command (Cipriani 1940). It was an obsession with military honour and discipline, less a desire to redress racial discrimination, which drove his championing of the B.W.I.R. As he made clear in a letter to the West India Committee after the war, Wood Hill firmly hoped military discipline had made Jamaicans immune to political radicalisation.

This was indeed a vain hope, for while West Indian soldiers were prepared to accept authority and endure hardship in exchange for post-war recognition, they were not prepared to suffer indignity and discrimination. On 6 December 1918, shortly after the Armistice, Lieutenant-Colonel Willis, commander of the ninth battalion B.W.I.R., based in the port of Taranto, Italy and notorious for his harsh approach to discipline, was surrounded by angry soldiers when he ordered them to clean latrines used by Italian labourers. The men dispersed quietly, but the following day, the ninth and tenth battalions refused to work. The men were disarmed, but not before unrest had spread to other battalions. War Office secret telegrams reveal a battalion of white troops with a machine company were requested to forestall any further unrest among the West Indies battalions.

On 17 December, 60 West Indian sergeants met to form the Caribbean League, which although short-lived due to internal divisions centred around island identities, marked a pivotal moment in the emergence of nationalist movements in the Anglophone Caribbean. Mutiny reports the memorable and oft-cited slogan emanating from a subsequent meeting of the League, “that the black man should have freedom and govern himself in the West Indies and that force must be used, and if necessary bloodshed to attain that object.” These are the words that struck fear
into the Imperial establishment, and perhaps no wonder so shortly after the Soviet Revolution. But it is also important to recall the more modest aim, “the Promotion of all matters conducive to the General Welfare of the islands constituting the British West Indies and the British Territories adjacent thereto.” This was a distinctly social democratic agenda, but one which British Imperialism and the West Indian plantocracy would find impossible to meet in the post-war economic crisis. Court martials of the alleged mutineers were held before the New Year with the apparent ringleader, Private Arthur Sanches receiving a death sentence commuted to twenty years imprisonment.

The attitude of the British military hardened in the wake of the mutiny at Taranto. Culminating in the “Reign of Terror” (Cipriani 1940) instituted when the base commandant at Taranto was replaced by the South African, Brigadier General Carey Barnard. Eugent Clarke recalled how the men were barred from recreational facilities, “You couldn’t even go to the gate, let alone into town … he was a rough man.” In general, the attitude of the West Indians’ erstwhile white comrades changed. Gershom Browne reported how “they didn’t seem to want any attachment with us … we had always seemed to get on good together in Egypt.” An anonymous black sergeant complained to the Colonial Office that the men were treated “neither as Christians nor as British citizens, but as West Indian niggers.”

The military and colonial authorities were anxious the B.W.I.R. should be demobilised as rapidly as possible and most of the regiment “never saw Blighty,” nor attended victory parades. On their return home, the authorities dispersed the veterans to their parishes so quickly that, as Eugent Clarke remembers, “they never gave us a welcome.” Many, including Clarke and Clifford Powell, emigrated to Cuba in search of work, encouraged by colonial officials. Powell would remain there, whereas Clarke returned to Jamaica in the turbulent 1930s with many other veterans. Dispersal prevented serious challenges to colonial power from the returning soldiers in the short term, although strikes and disturbances, linked to wartime economic privation had already broken out in many West Indian territories. But the war irrevocably changed the attitude of the veterans to Imperial authority, even if an affection for things British still clearly lingered in the minds of Browne, Clarke and Powell when Mutiny was recorded. Barbara Wickham, the surviving younger sister of veteran Clennell Wickham, relates how on his return to Barbados he was asked to vacate a church pew reserved for whites. Wickham stormed from the church, never to return. He later became editor of the radical weekly Barbados Herald. In the words of Gilbert Grindle, Assistant Under-Secretary at the Colonial Office in London, “the black man has come to think and feel of himself as good as the white.”
Notes

1 George Blackman, the last West Indian veteran of the First World War, died in Barbados aged 105 in March 2003 (The Guardian, March 4, 2003, p. 10).

2 See, for example, poems by Sergeant Harold B. Monteith in Smith (2004).

3 Film Nos. IWM 10; IWM 116; IWM 130-05; IWM 413.

4 This newsreel is from the Gaumont Pathé Archive, Paris (catalog 1918/05). Although entitled “With the British Army” it shows black and white American troops in the improvised U.S. and British kit issued to the American Expeditionary Force when it arrived in France.

5 Fussell (1975, Chapter III) and Bourke (1999) are instructive here.

6 Not to be confused with the B.W.I.R., the West India Regiments had a tradition within the British Army dating from the American War of Independence (see Dyde 1997).

7 Reproduced in the Daily Gleaner, June 27, 1921, p.4 (see also editorial comment on p. 6 of the same edition).

8 National Archives CO 318/250/2590 ‘Notes of meeting held at Cimino Camp, Italy, 17 December 1918.

9 The soldier mistakenly reported in the documentary to have been executed for involvement in the mutiny, Private Albert Denny, was in fact shot for murdering a comrade for his gambling winnings (National Archives WO 71/675).

References


Colonial Office Papers (National Archives, Kew, UK), 318/250/2590. “Notes of
meeting held at Cimino Camp, Italy, 17 December 1918.”

Daily Gleaner, June 27, 1921, pp. 4, 6.


War Office Papers (National Archives, Kew, United Kingdom), 71/675.