

Recent Black Maritime Studies

C. Mark Davis

Volume 23, Number 2, Spring 1994

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad23_2re03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Davis, C. M. (1994). Recent Black Maritime Studies. *Acadiensis*, 23(2), 148–154.

Recent Black Maritime Studies

SCHOLARSHIP FOCUSED ON THE BLACK EXPERIENCE in Atlantic Canada is in the midst of a major transition. And this is good. Ironically, the serious study of Maritime Blacks is not all that old. Only recently have writers endeavoured to critically comprehend the significance of the Black contribution to regional history. Such pioneers as James W. St. G. Walker, Donald Clairmont and Frances Henry offered important insights into the study of a forgotten people.¹

Yet getting beyond an established body of knowledge has proven difficult. As often happens in the academic and teaching environment, the challenge to research new aspects in order to know and appreciate the whole story was being foregone for what was known and easily accessible. A concentration of research on specific themes, events and people began to develop. While it was essential that such topics as the Black Loyalist migration, the Black experience of the First World War and the relocation of Africville be investigated and documented, the domination of certain topics discouraged pursuit of the broader picture. Black Maritime history was in danger of being marginalized, even if it was faithfully dusted-off for each Black History Month.

This situation is about to change. The recent publication of several works examining Black Maritime culture and identity will hinder the on-set of intellectual paralysis. Some look at familiar subjects and crucial events with fresh approaches. Others study new and different topics with promising results. Still others frame critical questions that cannot be ignored. All significantly broaden and deepen the parameters and scope for scholarly undertakings. Indeed, two studies in particular, *The Spirit of Africville* and *The Black Battalion*, originated in self-generated efforts by the regional Black community in a determination to recover and tell their own history; it is to be hoped such efforts will continue.

At first glance Grant Gordon's *From Slavery to Freedom, The Life of David George, Pioneer Black Baptist Minister* (Hantsport, N.S., Lancelot Press, 1992) appears unusual and over-referenced. Of the 365 pages, only 165 pages are text, the rest bibliography. If so much material exists on David George, why write a book? Further prying, however, reveals Gordon successfully fulfils several objectives. He completes the most definitive study of George to date. He assembles in one place all of the pertinent documents dealing with the George adventures, and demonstrates that "a review of the life of David George provides much insight into the experiences of most Black Loyalists" (p. 163).

The George character conforms well to this type of study, especially if like Gordon, one is willing to be part historian, part folklorist and part detective. The

1 See, for example, James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (London, 1976); Walker, *A History of Blacks in Canada, A Study Guide for Teachers and Students* (Ottawa, 1980) and Walker, *The Black Identity in Nova Scotia: Community and Change in Historical Perspective* (Halifax, 1985); Frances Henry, *Forgotten Canadians: The Blacks of Nova Scotia* (Toronto, 1973); and Don Clairmont and Dennis Magill, *The Africville Relocation Report, Volumes 1 and 2* (Halifax, 1971, 1973) and *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community* (Toronto 1987). See also W.A. Spray, *The Blacks in New Brunswick* (Fredericton, 1972) and Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada* (Montreal, 1971).

story of an historical figure who lived from 1743 to 1810, experienced slavery in the deep South, the underground railway, the American Revolution, the Loyalist migration, the Shelburne riot, the move to Sierra Leone, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, produces a fascinating portrait. Although it seems that Gordon has looked under every stone possible, some readers may want even more details and speculations, particularly on George's religious conversion, the secret of his personality, his views on relations with other denominations, his insight on black-white relations and his understanding of the significance of loyalism to the Black community. Gordon's study is a solid contribution to the Baptist Heritage in Atlantic Canada series, which collectively will be an invaluable window to the regional world.

Readers should be familiar with aspects of Calvin Ruck's *The Black Battalion, 1916-1920, Canada's Best Kept Military Secret* (Halifax, Nimbus, 1987). This is partly because other writers have touched on the topic and partly because the book is a revised edition of Ruck's earlier publication, *Canada's Black Battalion: No. 2 Construction, 1916-1920* (1986). The new version is superior in layout, writing and attractiveness. Similar to the Africville initiative, Ruck's work was an outgrowth of a commemoration, the Black Veterans' 1982 Reunion and Recognition weekend sponsored by The Society for the Protection and Preservation of Black Culture in Nova Scotia. As usual, the Black Cultural Society organized a first-class show. Ruck, a prominent Nova Scotia human and social rights activist, now retired, was designated co-chair and invited to record, reflect and report on the event. Although the weekend celebration was a happy and successful affair, duly highlighted with photos and stories, Ruck also detected the underlying acrimony. Generally he witnessed in testimony and later verified with careful research that the Black experience in the First World War, was like their experience in most other pursuits — a daily clash with overt racism.

Ruck shows that Maritime Blacks wanted a piece of the First World War for the same reasons as most residents; they were stirred by a sense of duty, influenced by the progressive spirit, wished to embrace their military heritage, and did not underestimate the potential for adventure and excitement. Private William F. Guy of Nova Scotia informed Ruck that, "We knew what we had to do. We did not think about it; we were ready to fight. We were fighting for our country, Canada, to save it for our parents and our people to have a country to live in. I never expected to come back" (p. 48). Attempts at volunteering for service, however, were continually frustrated, and as it is with most prejudice-based decisions, it was not altogether clear why Blacks were barred. The racist policy was evidently based on a variety of stereotypical arguments, which maintained that Blacks were notoriously unreliable, if not cowards, could not be trusted with loaded rifles, and that their mere presence would hurt white enlistment and morale. According to Ruck, Native Canadians did not confront comparable difficulties. Indeed, it was these vague references to "a white man's war" that pushed liberal-minded individuals to insist on a policy statement. The result was begrudging permission to form a Black, segregated, non-combatant labour unit. In 1916 the No. 2 Construction Battalion, Canadian Expeditionary Force was born.

Black construction soldiers served with distinction. First assigned to the Canadian

Forestry Corps in France, they would later join other Black soldiers in the trenches. It is unfortunate that so little is known of the Black contribution to the war effort. It would seem that the consciousness-raising impact of the Great War, like that which converted Albertans and Nova Scotians into Canadians at Vimy Ridge, also had its impact on Black Canadians. Sergeant A. Seymour Tyler later remarked, "Do not let anyone tell you different, no man is any braver than a Black man. He has everything that it takes, and he has proven it, although he has not received recognition for his courage. After all, the Black man went over there, he trained like a soldier, he fought like a soldier and died like a soldier, and that is all any whiteman can do" (p. 59). Furthermore, the post-war disillusionment was also sobering for the returned vet. As Ruck points out, "The Great War did not end all wars, it did not make the world safe for democracy, and it did not signal an end to racial prejudice. Blacks were still subjected to segregated housing, segregated employment, and even some segregated graveyards" (p. 72).

Ruck's dip into Black veteran history only whets the appetite for more. A day-in-the-life snapshot of a No. 2 veteran would be instructive, particularly since Ruck argues that often Black soldiers received greater respect overseas than at home. Is this because all are equal before death? Further exploration could be devoted to the paradox whereby before Conscription, Blacks wanted to serve but couldn't, and after Conscription, when they had to serve but resisted. He also notes that many Maritime Blacks served in other combat units, including the 85th, 88th, 102nd and 116th Battalions. There are obviously numerous untold episodes yet to be related. Ruck establishes a firm basis for a study of Maritime Blacks in the interwar years. Moreover, there is a real sense of urgency surrounding this theme in order to collect the oral history before it vanishes. Fortunately, Ruck is still on the trail and is pushing into new arenas. He continues to collect First World War information and anecdotes as he prepares another important study of the Maritime Black experience in the Second World War.

A project of the Africville Genealogical Society, *The Spirit of Africville* (Halifax, Formac, 1992) is another fine example of a short study breathing life into a documented event. The tragic story of Africville has been well known, at least regionally, for some time. But not until recently have Africvillians been given a voice. The catalyst was an exhibition and conference entitled "Africville: A Spirit That Lives On" held at Mount Saint Vincent University in 1991. In this coffee table publication, photos, poems, and testimonies are used to bring immediacy and offer intimacy to what is meant to live and play in Africville. They forcefully illustrate the depth of suffering that occurred when the community was destroyed.

Although there remains debate over the extent to which Africville was an embarrassment to the City of Halifax, this book makes it crystal clear that for those who lived there, it was home. It was an independent community with an independent sense of place. Children played, old folks gathered, people went off to work and came home hungry for supper. There was a rhythm to life. Everyone was familiar with Kildare's Field, Tibby's Pond and the "tracks". The Seaview African United Baptist Church was the heart of life "where the road ends". Africville forever suffered from substandard community infrastructure. Although there is a tinge of romantic nostalgia in the book, it is mostly acknowledged that residents were

plagued with poor roads, water, sewage disposal, housing and fire safety. The community was in desperate need of development initiatives and financial assistance. Yet, no help came their way. Instead, city authorities decided in 1964 that Africville would not, rather than could not, be saved. The community was bulldozed, and the residents relocated into the inner city.

Former Africvillians continue to share a tremendous sense of loss and bitterness. Most are convinced that Halifax neglected Africville intentionally, because they were Black; that they were not properly consulted on relocation, because they were Black; that they were relocated rather than assisted in Africville, because they were Black; and that they were not given adequate compensation or sufficient aftercare, because they were Black. Obviously, *The Spirit of Africville* is appropriately titled. It is not surprising that "Remember Africville" has become a rallying cry against all Black injustices in contemporary Nova Scotia.

Jim Hornby's *Black Islanders, Prince Edward Island's Historical Black Community* (Charlottetown, Institute of Island Studies, 1991) is a welcome addition to Atlantic studies. Very little has been written on Blacks of the Island, and the absence has constituted a major gap in regional comprehension. As Hornby noted, "Prince Edward island has been a silent partner in Maritime and Canadian Black history" (p. 101). There are few people more qualified to construct such a needed analysis. Hornby is a lawyer by profession who has researched and advocated island studies for several years. Indeed, his work illustrates that not enough is known about Blacks on the other two Atlantic islands, Cape Breton and Newfoundland.

Black Islanders was not designed to be a definitive account of Island Blacks. Briefly surveying the period from slavery to the modern era in 100 pages has left the work disjointed and pedestrian in places. Appropriately, it is meant as a beginning point, to initiate interest and facilitate discussion. In this objective Hornby succeeds. Interestingly, although the Island Black population was small compared to other provinces, experiences were similar. There was slavery, cruelty, unofficially yet designated Black districts, underemployment, redevelopment and racism. Historically, for the individual, it probably made little difference if you were Black in Halifax, Saint John or Charlottetown.

It is, however, more difficult to document the Island experience than in other locations. Challenging the investigator is the reality that there were always less than two hundred people, and, of those, few of free-Black origins, who owned land, built estates and left wills and artifacts. Because of its size, the Black community became highly integrated with other Islanders. Like many Maritimers, Island Blacks frequently moved on to greener pastures, and the remainder did not have their numbers greatly supplemented with new immigrants. Moreover, Island Blacks have yet to explore and record their own past, in their own words, as others have. Consequently, the historian is left to scanning non-Black sources, such as newspapers, letters and legal records, which reveal expected results. Meanwhile, the best that Hornby, or anyone can do, is to be as thorough as possible and exercise cultural sensitivity, always conscious that the full story has yet to be told. Eventually, Island Blacks will regroup and share insights, like the people of Africville, and it will not be surprising if the focus will be on warm summers, school days, local heroes and the vital church.

Few studies on Maritime Blacks are more refreshing or stimulating than George Elliot Clarke's *Fire on the Water: An Anthology of Black Nova Scotian Writing* (Lawrencetown Beach, N.S., Pottersfield Press, 1991). This will not surprise those familiar with the highly distinguished, award-winning Maritime poet-scholar.² Still, the total impact far exceeds expectations. This volume includes early and modern Black writers from the 1785-1935 period and is sub-divided into "Genesis", "Psalms and Proverbs", and "Acts". The anticipated second volume, "Revelations", will present writers of the 1936-1971 era. Clarke apologizes for relying upon established authors and for not scrutinizing Blacks' journals for lesser-known material. The sentiment, though understood, is plainly not necessary. The 18 writers selected are more than sufficient to ignite critical evaluation. Moreover, by highlighting the main works, Clarke has provided a context for further literature research and comparison.

Clarke has a comprehensive editorial sense. Not one of the selections is included as filler. Indeed, it is a service to have the compelling narratives of David George (1743-1810) and Boston King (1760-1802), the anguish of John William Robertson (circa 1850s) and George A. Borden, (1935-), and the reflections of Carrie Best, (1903-) and William Parker Clayton (1921-) gathered in one manuscript. Readers will find many of the selections both inspiring and haunting. It will be hard to dismiss the words of George Borden when he writes in "A Race Defaced", his ancestors were "Defaced...defamed...defaulted/but never defeated" (p. 162) or in his "To My Children I Bequeath", "If my life/has not prepared me/for Heaven/it has most surely/exposed me/to all the horrors/of Hell.../I fear no evil!" (p. 167). Through poems, songs and testimony, Clarke has demonstrated the passion and uniqueness of the Black experience. It is hard to disagree when he argues that "Africadians", as he calls them, are a distinct people.

It is when the author stretches to dissect meaningfulness that Clarke is at his best. His short 15-page introduction is a seedbed of provoking ideas. Although he generally argues in snippets, his assertions are intriguing. He claims, for example, that liberty was more important to Black Loyalists than to other Loyalists, because they chose to move on to Sierra Leone when equality was denied in Nova Scotia. He maintains that Nova Scotia Blacks are more prone to seek and find identity in their collective rather than in their individual selves. He says that Nova Scotia Blacks have a prudish streak, "a natural feature of an ecclesiastic community" (p. 16). He contends that North American Blacks were probably responsible for the evolution of the hymn into the folk song. He argues that Maritime Blacks are a "hybrid" people, not from their own choice, but nevertheless the subjects of cross-racial, cross-cultural and major historic influences. One cultural consequence of this history was the emergence of spiritual, anti-romantic, anti-modern expressions.

Clarke has displayed the conviction to ask hard questions and insist upon the development of a reliable and thoughtful paradigm. The challenge is to re-visit, re-examine, re-evaluate and re-write. Can any of Clarke's impressions be expanded into conceptual models? If not, why not, and what are the exceptions or limitations to the rule? In a genre in desperate need of refreshing ideas, Clarke's work is exciting, and

2 See Clarke's two books of poetry, *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues* (Porters Lake, N.S., 1983) and *Whydah Falls* (Winlaw, B.C., 1990).

his second volume should display the same trailblazing spirit.

Although Patrick Brode's *The Odyssey of John Anderson* (Toronto, The Osgoode Society Series, University of Toronto Press, 1989) is not on a regional theme, a careful browsing suggests it may contain valuable approaches for future Black Maritime studies. Brode, a lawyer and lecturer at the University of Windsor, uses a legal case study to illuminate aspects of ethnicity and international law in mid-19th Upper Canada.

The saga began in 1853, when Missouri slave John Anderson killed one Senca Diggs, a slave-owner and slave-catcher, in his escape to Canada. For six years Anderson led a quiet life near Brantford, until 1860, when he was arrested for the death of Diggs. For about a year the Anderson case was an international cause célèbre while proceedings and debates raged over whether to extradite Anderson back to Missouri to a certain death. Extradition was possible. Under Article X of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty of 1843, warrants could be issued in the cases of "murder, piracy, arson, and forgery". Meanwhile, Canadian and British abolitionists argued that murder was justified by a higher moral law if it involved a slave escaping from slavery. Ultimately, Anderson was released on a technicality. According to his warrant he was arrested for "stabbing and killing" Diggs, not "murder" as per the wording of the Treaty. The spectacle ended quickly. Anderson was proudly, but temporarily paraded about England by the British Anti-Slavery Society, then shipped off to Liberia, when his propaganda usefulness faded. Anderson died somewhere in obscurity.

For regional purposes, Brode's analysis is instructive. His poke at the hypocritical side of the sacred abolitionist societies is well-deserved and long overdue. As with other reform movements such as the temperance, prohibition, church and charitable organizations, the abolitionist impulse needs to be dissected and scrutinized. Who joined them and why, and how are they indicative of the society in which we live? As well, although it appears at times that Brode is far more concerned with legal arguments than Black history, examination of the extradition issue not only questions Canada's legendary safe haven status, but also illustrates that not enough is known about the runaway underground to the Atlantic Region. Are there similar Maritime court cases that demonstrate legal position, and test the depth of Maritime prejudice? Indeed, where Hornby apologizes for having to heavily rely on court records, Brode's approach advocates mining such material for their worth. The disappointing part of the Anderson investigation is Brode's failure to offer larger insights on being Black in 19th-century Canada. His faith in Canadian institutions and jurisprudence, and praise of the presiding judge, Chief Justice John Beverly Robinson, is heartening, but not surprising given that a similar tone was evident in Brode's earlier study of Robinson.³ Yet, what if the treaty technicality was not present? What would have happened, and would the ramifications have been justified?

It seems apparent that Maritime Black studies are entering a renaissance of sorts. As has been pointed out by others, much has been written on Black experiences, but it has often been difficult to judge where it all connects and compares in the mainstream of regional and national historical progression. The examination of

3 See Patrick Brode, *Sir John Beverley Robinson: Bone and Sinew of the Compact* (Toronto, 1984).

Black culture within broader categories such as loyalism, Canadian-American relations, reformism, war, nationalism, community development and literary expression demonstrates both the uniqueness of the identity and its cohesion to humankind. By rejuvenating Black scholarship, recent authors have also injected fresh perspectives into Atlantic and Canadian Studies.

C. MARK DAVIS