

BRITONS

through

NEGRO

SPECTACLES

A. B. C. MERRIMAN-LABOR

BLACK BRITAIN



WRITING BACK

BRITONS THROUGH NEGRO SPECTACLES

About the Author

A. B. C. Merriman-Labor was a barrister, writer and munitions worker born in Freetown, Sierra Leone, in 1877. His published works include *A Series of Lectures on the Negro Race* and *The Story of the African Slave in a Nutshell*. He also edited two editions of the *Handbook of Sierra Leone*. He arrived in the UK in 1904 to study law. In 1907, he organized a centenary commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade in Westminster Abbey. He later embarked on an 'entertainment-lecture' tour called *Life and Scenes in Britain*, travelling across thousands of miles of West, South West and Central Africa, which he expanded on to create *Britons Through Negro Spectacles*.

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NEGRO SPECTACLES

A. B. C. Merriman-Labor

With a new introduction by
Bernardine Evaristo



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*Affectionately dedicated to
my darling mother*

*whose weekly letters of love and admonition sent me during
my stay in the white man's country have led me to think
that though far she is ever so near to inspire me with
a sense of devotion to duty in order that I may
one day 'do or die' in the battle of life.*

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Publisher's Note

In this book are some expressions and depictions of prejudices that were commonplace at the time it was written. We are printing the book as it was originally published because to make changes would be the same as pretending these prejudices never existed. At the same time, we have chosen to redact the word 'n——', which appears frequently throughout the text, in recognition of the particular harm this word enacts and in the belief that contemporary readers should not have to endure that harm in order to access important literature.

Introduction

It's such a pleasure to introduce readers to this buried treasure of a book, *Britons Through Negro Spectacles* (1909), written by the Sierra Leonean writer Augustus Boyle Chamberlayne Merriman-Labor. It's a travelogue and social commentary in which he subverts the colonial ethnographic gaze on Africa and repositions it on to the occupants, culture and customs of the colonial heartland, London in particular – an incredibly audacious conceit at a time when the British Empire was at its peak.

The book's numerous chapters have headings such as 'Britons, Blacks and Bargains', 'The Invisible Spirit of the Britons', 'White Women and Black Men', 'Frocks, Frills and Flounces' and 'Matters Moral, Immoral and Unmoral'. The author adopts the persona of a character who is acting as a tour guide to an imaginary person he refers to as 'Africanus', explaining the city and culture to him as they perambulate across it.

While his speech is obviously aimed at Africans who haven't been to Britain, he's actually establishing his superiority over the imperial nation. Authoritative, knowledgeable, witty, mischievous, he comments on the high and low of street life in great detail, from the finely dressed to the beggars in rags who sleep in the gutters – and everyone in between.

Humour pervades the book, yet in its preface Merriman-Labor

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states that ‘one of my aims in writing is not so much to be humorous, as to reveal truths spoken in jest’. He is indeed a satirist, who explains his approach thus: ‘Considering my racial connection, and the flippant character of literature which, at the present time, finds ready circulation among the general public, I am of the opinion that the world will be better prepared to hear me if I come in the guise of a jester.’

In such a guise he tells us,

. . . most Negroes agree with Darwin that the Blacks come from the ape. As regards the parent of the Whites, the common Negroes differ . . . They say that the original ancestor of white people is the grunting creature – the filthy pig . . . The common Negroes in a mirth-provoking manner argue that, because the skin of the pig as seen at the butcher’s resembles that of a white man, therefore the white man is the child of the pig.

Pretty daring stuff, right?

Through his observations, we also discern differences between Africa and Europe. When he describes the scale and scope of London’s geography and buildings, with a population of six million, he unwittingly reveals the comparative smallness of African cities. When he says that an underground train buries a person ‘when alive, three hundred feet below ground’, we know that tube trains do not yet exist on the African continent. The necessity to describe snow as ‘rain which comes in the form of white powder’ makes clear its absence in most of Africa.

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A churchgoing Christian, Merriman-Labor disapproves of the busy public activity in the capital on the Sabbath and notices, tellingly, that sermons ‘did not threaten the hearers with “the everlasting fire and pain” as missionaries are accustomed to do in West Africa’.

So who was Merriman-Labor, one of Britain’s earliest black writers? Not much was known about the author until the first biography about his life, *An African in Imperial London: The Indomitable Life of A. B. C. Merriman-Labor*, by Danell Jones, was published as recently as 2018. Well researched and comprehensive, it’s my primary source for what I’ve learned about the author. I urge people to read it to find out more about this exceptional man.

Born in 1877 in Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, Merriman-Labor, a brilliant student, left school at sixteen owing to lack of funds and worked briefly as a schoolteacher in the Gambia. With literary aspirations, his first work of fiction, a story called ‘Building Castles in the Air’, was published in the *Gambia Intelligencer* in 1895, before he reached the age of eighteen. This was followed by other publications including *A Series of Lectures on the Negro Race* and *The Story of the African Slave in a Nutshell*. He also edited two editions of the *Handbook of Sierra Leone*. For his pamphlet *The Last Military Expedition in Sierra Leone* he adopted the pseudonym ‘An Africanised Englishman’ – to hide the fact that he was a black man.

Eventually, Merriman-Labor joined the civil service in Freetown, saving up for six years in order to visit Britain. Jones tells us, ‘He saw the written word as his weapon against the injustices

of colonialism, and London as his literary home.’ We also discover that he’d read in the *Sierra Leone Weekly News* that, once in the city, ‘colour would be no barrier to recognition’.

When he arrived there in 1904, it goes without saying that he discovered the opposite to be true. Still, he found employment as a clerk and a teacher in Stockwell, and used his savings to study law at Lincoln’s Inn. At the same time he set up the African General Agency, with the aim of facilitating better business relations between Africa and Europe. However, this was a commercial enterprise, which contravened the rules of engagement at Lincoln’s Inn, and he was forced to close the agency. As if studying law wasn’t enough, in 1907 he organized a centenary commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade in Westminster Abbey, no less. Clearly enterprising and energetic, before he was called to the bar in 1909 he also embarked on an ‘entertainment-lecture’ tour to Africa called *Life and Scenes in Britain*, travelling thousands of miles through West, South West and Central Africa, which he expanded on to create *Britons Through Negro Spectacles*.

This book, unsurprisingly, was trashed by the critics upon publication. The *Law Journal* damned it as ‘valueless’ and the *Daily Express* decried its ‘low jests’. Deliciously feisty, wild and high-spirited, flipping a finger at the colonial overlords, it’s astonishing to think that it was written over a hundred years ago, but unfortunately the author was a century ahead of his time. Far from being welcomed into artistic circles, he was ultimately cast out and ended his life in penury. Renouncing his English name, he changed it to Ohlohr Maigi. During the First World War he worked as an inspector in the vast complex of the Royal Arsenal

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munitions factory in Woolwich, where I grew up, as it happens. Interestingly, my mother's grandfather and other forebears worked in that factory. Perhaps they knew him, or knew of him. He certainly would have been noticed as a black man at that time.

By the end of the war, Merriman-Labor had contracted terminal tuberculosis, dying in the Lambeth Workhouse Infirmary in 1919 at the age of forty-two. I like to think that if the author had arrived in Britain as a young man towards the end of the twentieth century, instead of at the beginning of it, there would have been so many more options available to him and most definitely more interest and support for his writing. For someone of his intelligence, activist spirit and GSOH, he might have been a comedian commenting on social injustice, or a leading human-rights barrister. Perhaps he'd make films and documentaries about aspects of African history or Sierra Leonean society; or he might become a publisher, academic or Member of Parliament. Instead, he was a daring challenger of a society that thought he had no right to answer back, no right to hold a mirror up to their own attitudes; a society that was not 'better prepared' to accept his good-natured jesting.

Some of his books and pamphlets are in the British Library for further reading, and I hope the reintroduction of this book as part of the Black Britain: Writing Back series, coupled with the biography by Jones, will see him resurrected from obscurity and re-evaluated as a significant writer and figure in our literary history.

Bernardine Evaristo

August 2021

Preface

The outline of this book has been presented in the form of entertainment-lectures entitled 'Life and Scenes in Britain', which I delivered to hundreds of Europeans and thousands of Africans, during my recent tour of fifteen thousand miles through West, South-west and Central Africa. The favourable reception given to the lectures has encouraged me to enlarge on, and otherwise to amend them, with a view to this publication.

As regards the style of writing used in the following pages, I may say that, for the sake of clearness and simplicity, I have adopted a somewhat diffused phraseology with a bias towards repetition, emphasis, tautology and conversationalism.

It has been said that mine is a humorous style. In fact, the leading West African periodical, whilst commenting on the lectures which are the groundwork of this publication, referred to me as the Negro Mark Twain. I shall indeed be sorry to be regarded solely as a humourist, for one of my aims in writing is not so much to be humorous, as to reveal such truths as may be best spoken in jests. Considering my racial connection, and the flippant character of literature which, at the present time, finds ready circulation among the general public, I am of opinion that

Britons Through Negro Spectacles

the world will be better prepared to hear me if I come in the guise of a jester.

I prefer Bible references to others. I do not thereby admit that, at my age and at this age, I am prepared to accept many of the orthodox interpretations given to passages in the holy book. I prefer scriptural quotations, because they are a thousand times more worldwide in their application than national ones.

A book which is here and there scriptural, and is in part humorous, will, no doubt, help to confirm the great doctrine of Edmund Burke that the sublime has always a ridiculous counterpart. You may therefore expect to find in *Britons Through Negro Spectacles* much sense and nonsense, facts and fiction – the old, the new and the ‘novel’ concerning Britons and Blacks, the whole treatise running, in the words of Nicolas Boileau, the French poet and critic, ‘From grave to gay, from lively to severe.’

A. B. C. MERRIMAN-LABOR

London, August 1909