

## No More Black Messiahs: Let Black History Bask in Ordinarity

### Thinking About Black Excellence in the Life of Walter Tull



*(Photo Credit: Kelly Cooper Photography)*

[Tré Ventour-Griffiths](#) (email: [tre@treventour.com](mailto:tre@treventour.com)) is a freelance writer-spoken word poet who also lectures and facilitates sessions in race and Black history. Doing Leeds Beckett University's MARED course, he did his undergraduate degree in creative writing. Here, he developed an interest in journalism, now having written for numbers of local and wider platforms, including The Happy Hood, NN Journal, The Nenequirer, Diverse Ed, Medium, and Wonkhe.

@treventour / @treventoured   

“White supremacy sets the metric for “Black excellence” only to pull out the rug. It was always a trap to embrace that vocabulary.” - Prof. Tao Leigh Goffe (2021)

Growing up Black in Northamptonshire, the story of Walter Tull is one that was important to me as a child. However, in hindsight, it is one of ‘Black excellence’. Racialised as Black, he was one of the first Mixed-Race players in first class English football (Vasili, 2010: 110-126). Furthermore, he was one of the first men to volunteer to fight at the start of the First World War, going on to be one of the first officers of African descent in the British Army. Often incorrectly, he is claimed as the first, however, there were others (Costello, 2015: 91-113). In this article, I will discuss Walter Tull from a personal perspective of ‘Black excellence’ with historical and sociological underpinnings as a way to interpret his life, concluding why we must rethink ‘Black excellence’ in teaching Black history.

—

In October 2020, Royal Mail implemented four black postboxes as honourifics for Black History Month, commemorating figures including Walter Tull and Mary Seacole (Choudry, 2020; Young, 2020). Britain’s obsession with highlighting individualism over collectivism (even in Black History Month campaigns), would not be so cringeworthy if Black history looked more at grassroots collectivism, and less at individual contributions to white structures. The continued framing of Black

individual achievements in white structures (often in the face of racism) plays into the idea Black lives are only of value if they benefit white institutions, thus upholding white supremacy.

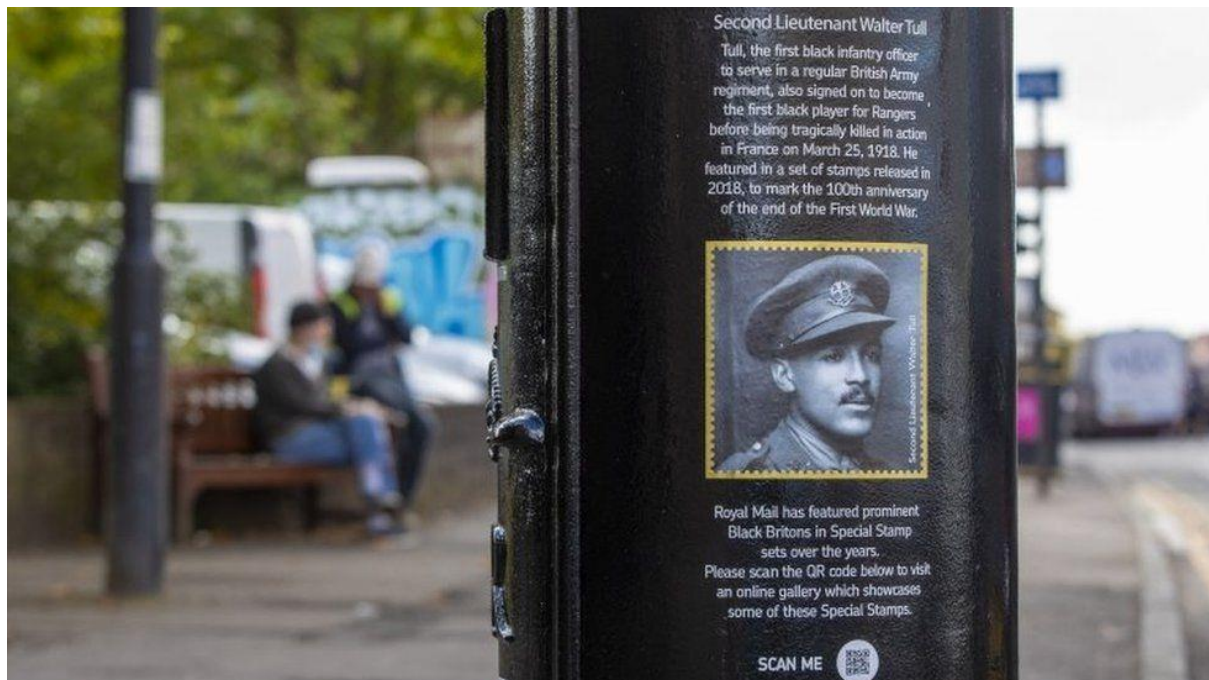


Photo Credit - PA Images via BBC

Currently, the story of Walter Tull is worn and tired because it is spoken through the same positionalities I heard as a ten-year old. If we considered other gazes, maybe I would start to think differently. As a Northamptonian, I have known his story since I was a boy and still, it is told as nothing further than football and the military. In learning about his life as part of Britain's Black history, we must also see how he may have been a victim of institutional racism when he was forced to leave Tottenham after being racially abused by Bristol City fans in 1909 (Vasili, 2010: 94). Also, despite becoming an army officer in 1917, the Army practiced institutionally racist policies with a colour bar that was seemingly ignored by some in the higher ranks (Costello, 2015: 67). Racialised as Black, he became an officer at a time where "Commissions in the Special Reserve of Officers are given to qualified candidates who are natural born or naturalised British subjects of pure European descent" (H.M Stationary Office, 1914: 196). Irrespective of this, it is interesting to observe the numbers of fair-skinned Black-racialised men becoming officers at the time of the First World War, as Ray Costello writes:

"Walter Tull has been described as the first, and sometimes the only black officer in the First World War, but, however worthy he may have been as an individual, there are other contenders. It might be argued that some other officers of African descent were 'not truly black' being very light-skinned or mixed-race, but then so was Tull, though his African

ancestry might have been more recognisable than some others. In that class-conscious age, it is also possible that Walter's lowly origins were more likely to cause him to be associated with the placement of blackness on the social scale in a way that mixed-race officers higher on the social scale may not have been, their origins politely ignored, or at least not commented upon, by their upper-class peers" (p94).



*Walter fought in many battles including the infamous Battle of the Somme (Image Source: waltertull.org)*

Rather problematically, "not truly black" in this context revisits what my Mixed-Race friends of African and Caribbean descent tell me in how they have experienced prejudice from Black friends, colleagues, and even their own relatives. The concept of colourism or shadeism in the colonial era the First World War took place in, was not an anomaly because as Costello (2015) continues, since enslavement "a social hierarchy had developed in the West Indian islands, North America and other parts of the African diaspora, based on the shade of a person's skin" (*ibid*). Colourism is complex, but knowing this we must see how it may have been easier for men like Tull compared to his

darker skinned colleagues, since "joining a 'pals' battalion' of fellow footballers, [Tull] also bypassed and short-circuited the numerous obstacles faced by men of darker pigmentation when trying to enlist ..." (Vasili, 2010: 139). Do students get to ask those critical questions about these barriers, and why they were there? Closer proximity to whiteness both in pigment and hair texture also fits into the hierarchies 'race scientists' created. These are vital questions that must be asked to understand the positioning of Black and Brown soldiers, sailors, and servicepeople during the War, after all "... the Government were worried about damaging decades of white racial prestige" (Olivette Otele in BBC Stories, 2019).

Regardless of colourism, for men like Tull to become officers thus leading white men into European theatres of war and he himself kill other white men – this in the eyes of many in the British political class disrupted the racial order (Emma Dabiri in BBC Stories, 2019b). Second Lieutenant Walter Daniel Tull gave his life fighting for his country, his very existence clashing with the

imperialism of the Britain Empire. Even with his achievements, not until recently did the Commonwealth War Grave Commission (CWGC) acknowledge Black Africans as human beings deserving of burials befitting their war service (CWG, 2021). In short, when Tull died (as someone racialised as Black) he may not have been seen as the hero we celebrate him as today. These were men like other men, but the poisonous 'race science' of Edwardian Britain, put colonial soldiers, namely Black people (including British-born) at the bottom of that hierarchy since "race wasn't just a tool for classifying physical difference, it was a way of measuring progress, of placing judgement on the capacities and rights of others" (Saini, 2019: 61).

In society's obsession with 'Black excellence', it tells me the Walter Tull story is one where he will always be on a pedestal unallowed to be just human. Orphaned before his tenth birthday, he was left to the mercy of the English care system where there were many Black children in the Victorian period (Bressey, 2002). To be honest, Black excellence is draining. Yes, we need to see role models in society, so future generation know what is possible. However, there also needs to be alternative metrics of achievement where being great is not tied to aspiring to whiteness. We need to show the CEO is as valued as the social worker, the teacher, or just existing in the world further allowing the space to be ordinary. Moreover, this means telling histories of the working-class. We need more histories of the Black British working-class in schools, especially in period dramas (Akala in Grant, 2021). Yet, to be valuable to audiences, Walter had to be one of the best footballers in Britain and an officer in the British Army. Could he not just be a man amongst men? Born to working-class parents, I find his careers to be two of the least interesting things about him. His mother's family, the Palmers, were poor white working-class people (Ventour, 2018) whose own story feels like it should be in a Charles Dickens novel. His father's family were from Barbados, with his paternal grandparents born into the racist system of enslavement (@WTHLP). He was born Mixed-Race and working-class in the years of the British Empire. I am more intrigued in that.

When their parents died, Walter and his brother Edward Tull (Glasgow's first Mixed-Race dentist) were placed in Bonner Street Children's Home. There are more histories there I want to explore, including the Black and Mixed-Race histories of the English care system. Nonetheless, the metric for measuring excellence is one rooted in white supremacy (@taoleighgoffe) since as Maya Goodfellow (2019) writes "Whiteness was not simply a descriptor; it was used to give anchor to the idea Europe was the place of modernity and civilisation ..." (p51). Tull will never be just a man, but one laden with the burden of 'Black excellence'. Today, we cannot only label Black people past and present with the labour of excellence when we still struggle to live. In decolonising history, we must also show students the ordinary. Walter Tull is a testament to that. Born within earshot of the workhouse, there are histories of both the care system and the working-class that can be told

through different gazes and disciplines. Furthermore, with the origins of football, the English game acting as nexus between the classes with Black and Brown players at the centre of it all.



*Walter Tull, footballer to soldier (Photo - waltertull.org)*

Is there any use showing students Tull's work life isolated from his childhood, without also interrogating the institutional mechanics he came through? History is written by the conquerors not the conquered, and working-class history is still at a deficit in school curriculums. Tull's story as it stands, is one of 'good history', celebrating the establishment and what he did for them. Through other frameworks, his life story will show what institutions did to him, relevant to not just history programmes but also PSHE, in addition to the social sciences (this may be considered 'bad history').

The Murder of George Floyd was a wakeup call for us to do better, but it reminded me of the problems with 'Black excellence' because "Black excellence is linked to the idea of transcendence ... [it] is of course exclusionary and arguably reproduces materialistic takes of what success looks like. It fundamentally centres whiteness as the kid to impress" (Kinouani, 2021: 162). When the metrics for 'excellence' in the Global North is a white construct, epistemologically, this is an uphill struggle trying to fit into a metric that wasn't designed for us in the first place. Walter Tull is one example, but we can look at many Black-racialised public figures to see how the expectations placed upon them are unhealthy – because in the end, your Raheem Sterlings and Marcus Rashfords will disappoint you. Human beings are not gods (Coman, 2021). We need to unlearn that metric. 'Black excellence' is violence preventing swathes of our people from taking up the space of human being.

The next generation need to be shown that you need not earn millions of pounds to be valued, that feeling is also achievable in being participating members of a community. However, excellence and ordinariness can both look alike, in illuminating images of grassroots organising, love for our families and friends, and honest labour, as all are equal in their own currency of kindness.

## References

- BBC Stories (2019) Alt History: A Forgotten Regiment – BBC Stories. *YouTube* [online].
- BBC Stories (2019b) Alt History: White-washing black soldiers ...' – BBC Stories. *YouTube* [online].
- Bressey, Caroline (2002) Forgotten histories: three stories of black girls from Barnardo's Victorian archive. *Women's History Review*, 11(3), pp. 351-374. Available: <https://tinyurl.com/bressey>
- Choudhry, Sabah. (2020) Black history Month: Postboxes painted to honour black Britons. *Sky News* [online]. Available: <https://tinyurl.com/yvr3t7x9>
- Coman, J. (2021) God-given talent: Saka, Rashford and Sterling blaze a trail for black British Christians. *The Guardian* [online]. Available: <https://tinyurl.com/bappwuu4>
- Commonwealth War Graves (2021) *Report of the Special Committee to Review Historical Inequalities in Commemoration*. Maidenhead: Commonwealth Grave Commission.
- Costello, R (2015) *Black Tommies*. Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press.
- Goodfellow, Maya (2019) *Hostile Environment*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Grant, Kirsty (2021) Akala: Why we need more black, working class period drama. *BBC* [online]. Available: <https://tinyurl.com/7cr2v3dc>
- H.M Stationary Office (1914) *Manual of Military Law*. London: HMSO.
- Kinouani, Guilaine (2021) *Living While Black*. London: Penguin.
- Saini, Angela (2019) *Superior: The Return of Race Science*. London: 4<sup>th</sup> Estate.
- @taoleighgoffe (2021) White supremacy sets the metric for "Black excellence" ... *Twitter* [online]. Available: <https://twitter.com/taoleighgoffe/status/1395206502655447045>
- Vasili, P (2010) *Walter Tull, (1888-1918), Officer, Footballer [...]* London: Raw Press.
- Ventour, T (2018) Why Walter Tull is still a hero today. *Nenequirer*. <https://tinyurl.com/rzzbnnnw>
- @WTHLP (2021) Walter Tull's grandparents were born enslaved, his grandfather William ... *Twitter* [online]. Available: <https://tinyurl.com/ue6vs74>
- Young, Sarah (2020) Black History Month: Royal Mail Unveils Special Postboxes [...] *Independent* [online]. Available: <https://tinyurl.com/4bs4ayew>