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NOTE AND DOCUMENT

The Remarkably Unremarkable Life of England's First Black Parish Priest

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Bryan Mackey (1770–1847) was for years the unremarkable, unremarked rector of a rural parish in Gloucestershire. He has, however, the distinction of apparently being the first priest with African ancestry to be ordained into the Church of England and who then served his entire career in Britain. His life history raises questions about historical racism within the Church and the wider society.

Bryan Mackey (1770–1847) was the son of William Mackey of Kingston, Jamaica, born on 7 June 1770. His father was not a plantation owner but a lawyer, working in partnership with Thomas Cockburn. Bryan's mother was Sarah Vick, described as a 'free mulatto woman' in the register of St Andrew in Jamaica, where the child was baptised on 6 March 1771. His older sister, Mary, who had been born on 6 January 1769, was baptised at the same time. The couple's relationship seems to have been relatively stable: another daughter, also Mary, which suggests her namesake had died, was born on 8 June 1772 and baptised on 1 January 1774.[1] Sarah was most likely a child of one of the Vick family, who owned an estate called Shady Spring in the parish of St Thomas in the East.[2] In the Caribbean relationships between white men and Black, usually enslaved, women produced a mixed race caste, which was socially located between the two. There was, however, no

CCEd = Clergy of the Church of England database; *ODNB* = *Oxford dictionary of national biography*; TNA = The National Archives

[1] Registers of St Andrew, Jamaica, at <http://www.ancestry.co.uk>.
[2] Ibid.

intermarriage. It is possible that William Mackey was already married; later in life he had a wife (also named Mary), and the date of marriage is unknown. But even if marrying Sarah Vick would have been technically possible, it would have been social and professional suicide, not only because of colour, but also because of class. Children produced from these informal relationships, however, were privileged.[3]

In 1780 William Mackey brought a private act to the Jamaican Assembly to entitle his son to enjoy the same rights as English subjects: *An act to entitle Bryan Mackey, a free quadroon, the reputed son of William Mackey, esquire, to the same rights and privileges with English subjects, under certain restrictions.*[4] This was not because he was mixed race, nor because he was enslaved (his mother was free); it was because he was illegitimate, and it was something many other fathers did for their mixed race offspring, whether born free or enslaved. Daniel Livesay has researched many other similar cases in Jamaica and Miranda Kaufmann has examined the lives in Britain of mixed race Jamaican women.[5] This kind of action seems to have been taken mainly when their legitimate marriages were childless. William Mackey and his wife would have no children, or at least none that survived.

The act was phrased in a standard format: the child was called his 'reputed' son and his mother was not named.[6] The boy was also described as a quadroon. In the terminology of the day, a mulatto had one white parent and one Black. The child of a white and a mulatto was called a quadroon, someone with one Black grandparent. There were other terms signifying various proportions of Black and white ancestry.[7] The Board of Trade and Plantations in London noted this act, and a similar one related to another mixed-race child, on 21 August 1780.[8]

[3] Daniel Livesay, 'Privileging kinship: family and race in eighteenth-century Jamaica', *Early American Studies* xiv/4 (2016), 688–711.

[4] *The laws of Jamaica: comprehending all the acts in force, passed between the thirty-second year of the reign of King Charles the Second, and the thirty-third year of the reign of George the Third, etc*, i, London 1792, unpaginated, at <https://www.books.google.co.uk>.

[5] Daniel Livesay, *Children of uncertain fortune: mixed race Jamaicans in Britain and the Atlantic family, 1733–1833*, Chapel Hill, NC 2018; Miranda Kaufmann, *Heiresses*, London forthcoming.

[6] Samuel J. Hurwitz and Edith F. Hurwitz, 'A token of freedom: private bill legislation for free Negroes in eighteenth-century Jamaica', *William and Mary Quarterly* xxiv/3 (1967), 423–31.

[7] Matthew Lewis, *Journal of a West India proprietor*, London 1834, 106. Lewis inherited estates in Jamaica, which he visited twice and recorded his impressions. Judith Terry, the editor of the Oxford University Press World's Classics edition, Oxford 1999, 68 n. 278, noted that there was no absolute agreement about these definitions.

[8] *Journals of the Board of Trade and Plantations*, XIV: *January 1776–May 1782*, London 1938. 161. These volumes were originally published by His Majesty's Stationery Office but are now available at <https://www.o-www-british-history-ac.uk.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/jrnl-trade-plantations/vol14/pp328–334>.

When the act was passed, Bryan was already in England, presumably at school. He went on to be educated at Brasenose College, Oxford, where he matriculated on 11 December 1788, aged eighteen, and received his BA in 1792.[9] Being sent to the mother country for his education was not solely because Bryan's colour would militate against his being educated in Jamaica. Schools there were not of a high standard and there was no university. In any case, many people did not intend to settle; they were, like William Mackey, there to make a fortune and retire. By 1789 William Mackey was back in Britain and had bought a house in Milton Lilbourne, Wiltshire. In 1793 his son was ordained as a deacon, and appointed as a curate to the neighbouring parishes of Wotton Rivers and Milton Lilbourne.[10] Although other Black men had been ordained by the Anglican Church, Mackey is the first known to have served in England: others took up appointments abroad. Philip Quaque (1741–1816), who served in present-day Ghana, was the first Black man to become an Anglican priest, and is the best known.[11] Simeon Wilhelm (*c.* 1800–17) was born in West Africa. He was intended for mission work in Africa but died while at school in London. Alexander Crummell (1819–98) was born free in New York, where he was ordained in the Episcopalian Church. He came to England in 1847 and studied at Cambridge. He became curate of St Stephen's Church in Ipswich, then in 1853 relocated to Liberia before returning to America.[12]

Mackey's case is naturally of some interest it in its own right, but paradoxically its real historical significance is that it seems not to have been regarded as important or worthy of comment by contemporaries. Similarly, many years before Mackey, there was at least one other Black parish official who attracted no special interest. In early 1677 John Mills, a householder, became churchwarden of Wolstanton in Staffordshire. When he was appointed, his colour was noted in the parish register to distinguish him from someone of the same name. All the other references to the two men, their marriages, the baptisms of their children and the burials

[9] Joseph Foster, *Alumni oxonienses: the members of the University of Oxford, 1715–1886: their parentage, birthplace, and year of birth, with a record of their degrees*, Oxford 1891, 895.

[10] London Metropolitan Archives, Sun Insurance policy, MS 11936/362/557506. Bryan Mackey's clerical career is given on CCEd at <https://www.theclergydatabase.org.uk>. My doctoral supervisor, Professor David Killingray, noticed his trailblazing position.

[11] Christopher Fyfe, 'Quaque [Kweku], Philip (1741–1816), first African Church of England clergyman and missionary', *ODNB*, at <https://www.o-doi-org.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/70058>, and CCEd, person ID 146155.

[12] For brief biographies of Quaque, Wilhelm and Crummell see David Killingray and Joel Edwards, *Black voices: the shaping of our Christian experience*, Nottingham 2007, 108–24. Killingray and Edwards describe later Black Anglican ministers, as well as others in non-Anglican denominations. Crummell does not appear in the CCEd.

of themselves, their wives and their children do not differentiate between them.[13] Had there not been two men of the same name in the parish, the Black John Mills's colour would not have been specified.

A few months after Bryan Mackey's appointment as a curate, in September 1793, he married Anna Bell of Enford, Wiltshire. Then in June 1794 he was ordained as a priest in New Windsor, Berkshire. He seems not to have spent much time there. A couple of years later the couple were back in Milton Lilbourne, where three children were baptised: Mary in 1796, Susannah in 1798 and William Henry in 1799.[14] Shortly before William Henry's birth Mackey was appointed rector of Coates in Gloucestershire, and he retained this living until his death. The *Oxford Journal* reported the event, without any mention of his colour or ethnic origins. William Tombs, the local lord of the manor, had the advowson, the right to recommend or appoint an incumbent, and he presented Mackey to the living of Coates. A hostile witness said that his father purchased the living for him, but as Tombs himself had bought this right, there is no reason to disbelieve him.[15]

By 1799, with his son established in a career and relocated to Gloucestershire, William Mackey had moved to Over Stowey in Somerset.[16] In 1801, on 6 February, Bryan and Anna's last known child, Bryan, was baptised in Minchinhampton, Gloucestershire, and the couple settled down in Coates to the mundane life of a country parson and his wife. Meanwhile, William Mackey had not endeared himself to the incumbent of his new parish. William Holland recorded in his diary in 1799 that he had met Mackey and his 'invariable companion' Mr Everett Poole. He added 'Mackay they tell me swells the others Guts every day with a bottle of good Madeira – Oh, brave – an Old Buck of Sixty and a young Buck not thirty – Hum –.' A few years later, in 1805 when Bryan visited his dying father, the only reference to his ethnic origin was given in Holland's private diary:

> This young man is his son by a Negro Woman and has had from him an excellent education and is in Orders and has two livings and is in good circumstances. Pity he should suffer his father to suffer distress in his later days, but he is so far from assisting him that in all his visits he is drawing money from him and plundering him and

[13] P. W. L. Adams, *Registers of Wolstanton*, Stafford 1914, 129 ff.

[14] Mary, 16 June 1796; Susanna, 17 April 1798; William Henry, 16 October 1799, at <https://www.familysearch.org>.

[15] *Oxford Journal*, 17 Aug. 1799; *Paupers and pig killers: the diary of William Holland, a Somerset parson, 1799–1818*, ed. Jack Ayers, Stroud 1984; John Disney Thorp says brothers William and Giles Tombs paid £1,800 for the manor and advowson: 'History of the manor of Coates', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* l (1928), 262–3.

[16] *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 20 Nov. 1800, records the sale of his house.

I fear that poor Mrs Mackay will be left without a shilling – I am not very partial to West Indians, especially your Negro Half Blood people.[17]

Holland's denigration of the Mackeys and his remark that he did not like West Indians undoubtedly contains an element of racism, but he had little good to say about many of his white parishioners and was charitable only to those who were in reduced circumstances to whom he could feel superior.[18] As Bryan was a 'quadroon' it may be that his features were not noticeably African, but Holland knew about his ancestry and it is unlikely that the university authorities in Oxford and those in the Church of England were unaware. It simply appears that, aside from one sour-tempered neighbour, none of these people or institutions thought his part-African background was noteworthy.

The study of Black British history was inspired by similar work in America, and in the early days many historians assumed a strongly racist environment on both sides of the Atlantic, quoting the experiences of Black Americans, as Folarin Shyllon did, and some activists still do.[19] Shyllon's polemical works were initially influential but are now rarely cited by academics. Another factor is the emphasis placed by academics on published works about scientific racism and by xenophobic eccentrics, like Philip Thicknesse, and West Indians slave-owners like Edward Long. These, and a handful of others, have been quoted at length, again and again, by historians, perhaps giving their works more prominence than they deserve.[20] The theories and prejudices of these obsessive men, and others like them, are easy to research in a library, but ploughing through primary sources to see what was actually happening takes a long and often frustrating time. With pressures to publish, very few academics can afford to do this, and condemning immorality and the outdated beliefs of the past offers more scope for analysis at length.

In 1995 Gretchen Gerzina observed that discrimination in Britain was based on class rather than colour. She noted how quickly and easily Black people were assimilated and disappeared into English society: there was no segregation.[21] Many researchers are revealing a more nuanced picture of Black people in the past in Britain, mainly working

[17] *Paupers and pig killers*, 20, 106.

[18] His unremarkable career is on CCEd: person ID 43442. The diary provides some disparaging remark on almost every page.

[19] Folarin Shyllon, *Black slaves in Britain*, London 1974, 9 (where Shyllon states that there were slave-hunters in Britain), and *Black people in Britain, 1555–1833*, London 1977, 106–9. Both books were published under the aegis of the Institute for Race Relations, which was then heavily Marxist-influenced.

[20] Edward Long, *History of Jamaica*, London 1774; Philip Thicknesse, *A year's journey through France and Spain*, 2nd edn, London 1778, 102–11.

[21] Gretchen Gerzina, *Black London: life before emancipation*, New Brunswick, NJ 1995, 68, and *Black England: life before emancipation*, London 1995, 183. Gerzina also edited

outside academia, like Miranda Kauffman, Michael Ohajuru and numerous local historians.[22] In previous research, I have examined over 5,000 references to people of African descent in England and Wales between the later seventeenth and the early nineteenth centuries, in sources such as church registers, poor law records, inquests, criminal records and newspapers.[23] These sources reveal that both under the law and generally in official practice Black people were treated no differently from the indigenous population. Colour and/or ethnic origin were rarely specified in official records, except in relation to the poor laws, but they are usually included in newspaper reports.

Many writers erroneously still say that the Mansfield Judgement of 1772 in the Somersett case ended slavery in Britain. Mansfield, however, concluded that slavery did not exist in England and Wales, since it was absent when Common Law was adopted in medieval times and no legislation had been introduced to create it.[24] In courts Black people could, and did, give evidence against whites, which would have been virtually impossible in the Americas. There was even a Black parish constable in Clerkenwell, London, in 1746.[25]

Nor were there laws discriminating against people on the basis of colour or ethnicity. By contrast, throughout the long eighteenth century, and well into the nineteenth, there was substantive legal discrimination on the basis of religion: those who would not swear to be Anglicans were barred from many occupations and suffered other disadvantages.

Undoubtedly Black people did experience some discrimination, as do all outsiders in all societies, but I would argue that Britain was not a racist society, but a society with racists, like Holland. It is an important distinction.

Black Victorians, Black Victoriana, New Brunswick, NJ 2003 and *Britain's Black past*, Liverpool 2020.

[22] Miranda Kauffman, *Black Tudors*, London 2017; Michael Ohajuru, *The John Blanke project book*, forthcoming; Sean Creighton, *John Archer, Battersea's Black progressive and Labour activist*, London 2015, and *Croydon's African and Asian history: an introduction*, London 2016. Creighton has also worked with local historians in other parts of the country. Audrey Dewjee has researched and curated exhibitions in Yorkshire. See also Lucy Mackeith, *Local Black history, a beginning in Devon*, Exeter 2003. There are too many others to list.

[23] I set up a database of some 3,000 entries from all over England and Wales to extract statistical information for my doctoral thesis, published as *Untold histories: Black people in England and Wales during the period of the British slave trade, c.1660–1807*, Manchester 2009. A lecturer in the Geography Department of University College London, a historian then working at the Victoria & Albert Museum and I made three unsuccessful attempts to get funding to put it online. We hoped to inspire local and family historians to research and hence acquire a wider picture of the Black presence. I have since expanded it.

[24] Chater, *Untold histories*, 89–92.

[25] Trial of Catherine Burk (t17460226–13), February 1746, *Old Bailey proceedings online* at <https://www.oldbaileyonline.org>.

William Mackey died soon after his son's visit. His will, written on 5 January 1804, a year before the visit, left various possessions to his wife and son, then divided his residual estate equally between them. They were, along with two friends who received minor legacies, appointed executors. No mention is made of Sarah Vick.[26] Read in isolation, the will implies that Mary was Bryan's mother, and he was born legitimately.

In Coates Bryan Mackey had vestry meetings to attend; parishioners to baptise, marry and bury (he also witnessed a will) and local charities to administer, but it was a very small village so the rector's duties were not onerous. In his first year there, he carried out seven baptisms, one marriage and two burials. Forty-six years later (his last), the numbers of baptisms and marriages had increased to fifteen and six respectively but I can find no burials.[27] In his leisure time, Mackey went shooting and regularly renewed his game certificate.[28]

One untoward event disturbed his clerical life. In March 1807, Martha, the infant daughter of John and Allen [*sic*] Savage, died. She had been baptised by a local Independent minister. Mackey allowed her to be buried in the churchyard, but refused to read the burial service and Savage made a complaint which came before the Consistory Court of Gloucester on 3 May 1809. The court found that Mackey had breached the Constitutions and Canons Ecclesiastical which required ministers to bury parishioners, and suspended him for three months.[29] There were no other repercussions.

In 1813 Mackey was appointed curate of the nearby parish of Sapperton, which presumably supplemented his income from Coates, but this was another small village where there were not many ceremonies that brought in fees. William Tombs had property and family connections there, so it may have been his influence that led to this appointment. The previous year Mackey had sought permission from the bishop of Gloucester to live in Cirencester or elsewhere, because the parsonage house was too small and cold for his wife. The couple relocated to the brighter lights of Cirencester where in June 1813 Mackey was insulted and abused by three men, Abel Harrison, a carpenter, Joseph Packer, a brazier, and John Wait, a plasterer. The reason for and the circumstances of the attack were not given. Showing Christian forbearance, Mackey agreed to stop legal proceedings against them on condition they make a public apology in the local newspaper, the *Gloucester Journal*, and pay

[26] TNA, PROB 11/1422/293.

[27] Will of Sarah Read, 1817, parish registers, Gloucestershire Archives, Gloucester, D1388/box9388/5/4; Correspondence about money left to the poor of the parish by Mr Chanter, P92/CH/1.

[28] *Gloucester Journal*, 9 Sept. 1799, then annually; *Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard*, 24 Sept. 1844. Both Bryan Mackeys, father and son, held game certificates for which an annual fee was charged.

[29] Gloucestershire Archives, GDR/B4/1/760.

expenses he had already incurred, including treatment at Gloucester Infirmary, suggesting he had been quite seriously assaulted. They complied with his stipulations and the matter went no further. As magistrates would be hard on men who had behaved in this way to a man of the cloth, this was a genuine act of charity, saving their families hardship if they were deprived of the men's incomes.[30] No mention was made of any racial motive, which would have been newsworthy and reported.

The Mackeys' surviving children had lives typical of their class and background. Both the young men went into the law. Mary, William and Bryan Jr all married suitably. Susannah remained unmarried, living at home with her parents. Although the younger son made an unsuccessful foray into cattle breeding and horse racing, and became insolvent in 1835, his father was able, at some cost, to rescue him and he returned, successfully, to the law.[31]

Bryan Mackey retired to Southampton, where his elder son was an attorney, some time after 1841. Presumably he left his living in the care of a curate, although he did return to carry out some ceremonies. He died, aged seventy-seven, in Southampton on 25 November 1847, when he was still the rector of Coates.[32]

It is often presumed that in the past Black people in Britain were poor and victimised, but there were literally thousands living quiet, unremarkable lives, like Bryan Mackey and churchwarden John Mills. A few did very well. Cesar Picton (*c.* 1755–1836) used legacies from the family he served as a child and young man to become a prosperous coal merchant in Kingston-upon-Thames in Surrey.[33] Nathaniel Wells (1779–1852), the son of a plantation owner in St Kitts and a slave, inherited so much wealth he did not have to work. He married twice, had twenty-two children, and bought a palatial house in Monmouthshire, where he became a magistrate, churchwarden and High Sheriff of the county. He was also the local Master of the Foxhounds: in hunting country this is perhaps a stronger indication of how he was accepted by his neighbours. His colour is only mentioned in private documents.[34]

[30] John Disney Thorp, 'Rectors of Cotes or Coates', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society* xlviii (1926), 322–3; *Gloucester Journal*, 19 July 1813.

[31] TNA, CP 5/189/27; *Sun* (London), 3 Mar. 1824; *Hereford Journal*, 30 June 1824; *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 9 Aug. 1832; *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette*, 12 Dec. 1833; 1841 census, TNA, HO 107/354/13; *London Gazette*, 3 July 1835; *Cheltenham Chronicle*, 2 Apr. 1835; *Gloucester Journal*, 29 Apr. 1837.

[32] *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 27 Nov. 1847.

[33] Tim Everson,'Picton, Cesar [Caesar] (1754/5–1836), coal merchant', *ODNB*, at <https://www.o-doi-org.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/74647>.

[34] J. A. H. Evans, 'Nathaniel Wells of Piercefield and St Kitts: from slave to sheriff', *Monmouthshire Antiquary* xvii (2000), 91–106; J. A. H. Evans, 'Wells, Nathaniel (1779–

Mackey's career in the Anglican Church was typical of many other workaday priests. He published no sermons, made no significant waves, did not gain any promotions and presumably served his parishioners well enough, except for a single official complaint. His children had lives typical of their class. What is remarkable is that only one official record in Britain, a committee meeting note of the Act of the Jamaican Assembly that legitimised him, mentions either his colour or his ancestry. The only other such mention appears in a private diary written by an embittered man, making it possible to reconstruct his career. Without that, it would not be easy, or even possible, to connect a mixed race child in Jamaica to an unremarkable toiler in the Anglican vineyard in Britain. Bryan Mackey may or may not have been the first Black man to officiate in the Church of England in Britain. What his remarkably unremarkable life certainly reveals is that his contemporaries did not regard that question with any interest.

1852), slave owner and landowner', *ODNB*, at <https://www.o-doi-org.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/10.1093/ref:odnb/74450>.