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Source: *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 11, Literature and Its Audience, II Special Number (1981), pp. 127-142

Published by: Modern Humanities Research Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3506263>

Accessed: 01-05-2018 08:02 UTC

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# English Ethiopians: British Audiences and Black-Face Acts, 1835–1865

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The phenomenon of the nigger minstrel show has been the subject of much discussion in the United States. It has been regarded, both by its nineteenth-century practitioners and by recent scholars, as ‘the only true American drama’, even ‘our only original American Institution’.<sup>1</sup> Debates about the origin of this original drama have raged; but whether it owed more to European popular art or to genuinely African modes, it has provided a fruitful field of study, for the same reasons which have been advanced to explain its original popularity. According to Alexander Saxon, ‘taken as a whole, the genre provided a kind of underground theater where the black-face “convention” rendered permissible topics which would have been taboo on the legitimate stage or in the press’.<sup>2</sup> Not only did the minstrel show come to be the major vehicle of the popular culture; its form has been seen, by Jules Zangler, as actually making an attack upon the high culture.<sup>3</sup> The other important and interesting aspect of the form’s success is its role in the history of race relations. Robert Toll’s study of the minstrel show is based upon the fact that it ‘served as a “safe” vehicle through which its primarily Northern, urban audience could work out their feelings’ about ‘slavery and the proper position of Negroes in America’. He shows that ‘minstrelsy’s portrayals of slavery and the blacks reveal the evolution and functioning of American racial stereotypes better than any other source’ (pp. 65–66). The form was flexible: it confronted the upper class American culture on the one hand, and the ‘presumptuous nigger’ on the other. This theory of the minstrel show, however, relates it to only one of its popular audiences. Very little of what explains its success in America is relevant to its success in Britain; and yet this was almost as great. It is therefore my purpose here to explore some of the possible reasons English popular audiences had for their response to the black-face act; and additionally to suggest what developments in the separate evolution of minstrelsy in Britain can be seen to have arisen from the response of the British audience.

<sup>1</sup> Robert Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1974), p.v. Subsequent page-references are inserted in the text.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Ideology’, *American Quarterly*, 28 (1975), 3–28 (p. 4).

<sup>3</sup> ‘The Minstrel Show as Theatre of Misrule’, *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 60 (February 1974), 33–38.

Everyone, of course, could enjoy the new dances and the catchy tunes of minstrel performances; but the British audience was not very interested in the fact that here at last was a truly popular native American art form: assertions of authentic American origin were part of the appeal of some troupes in Britain, but home grown ones did quite as well as imports, and in their work there was a development away from elements of the show that had no relevance to English audiences towards the inclusion of issues which did concern them. Nor could minstrel shows in Britain claim to be setting up a unique popular alternative to the legitimate stage, through which at last taboo topics could be explored: all English cities had minor theatres, music-halls, concert rooms, and penny gaffs. Anything an audience wanted to hear talked about was sure to be on offer somewhere. Here, though, is perhaps a rather oblique point of resemblance between American and British audiences of a certain kind. What the American urban worker got from the minstrel show his English counterpart could get in a music-hall or saloon theatre; but such places, indeed all theatres of whatever standing, were closed to a large section of the British people. The dissenting lower middle classes, the ministers, shop keepers, and respectable ladies who were in some ways the most deprived and repressed cultural group in the land, found it possible to go to minstrel shows; and the success of the particular form of show they patronized was due, one might reasonably surmise, to its being the only access the *respectable* popular audience had to certain liberating elements of popular entertainment.

The most obvious difference between British and American popular consciousness and cultural needs was, of course, that the average Englishman had no need of an art form which would help him deal with complex problems of identity and confrontation with a black population. He had no such problems, and experienced no such confrontation. The British response to this most obvious and important element of minstrel performance must therefore be assessed from a different point of view. I will attempt a brief recapitulation of the history of British awareness of black people, and of the issue of chattel slavery, as it appeared to the nineteenth-century popular audience.

The history of the slave trade to the Americas, in which eighteenth-century Britons took a leading part, is familiar to us; but it was not particularly so to their immediate descendants. The popular memory is short, at least when it is in conflict with the powerful popular propensity for self-satisfaction. In the period with which I am concerned, the generally held opinion was that there were no slaves in Britain except factory children and London milliners, and the fact that there were slaves elsewhere was evidence of the inferiority of all foreigners. In 1853 a correspondent of *Fraser's Magazine*, writing from a confrontation with the realities of the situation in Jamaica, summed up the attitude with exasperated sharpness: 'there is some cloudiness in the perceptions of John Bull which induces him to consider every man with a black face is a slave, and one entitled to his, Mr

Bull's, especial protection, just as he believes every person wearing a foreign dress and speaking a strange tongue, to be a Frenchman and a rascal'.<sup>1</sup> The history of this belief goes back to the legislation which tardily put an end to British involvement in the slave trade, and eventually also in 1833 to slavery in the British Colonies. While the trade flourished, black slaves were a fairly common sight in England. A certain social cachet attached to the owning of a gorgeously dressed black pageboy or footman. At the time of the trial in 1771 which effectively freed slaves in Britain the figure of fourteen to fifteen thousand black slaves in Britain was accepted in evidence. After this event, the numbers of free black people probably rose well above this figure; they were increased by runaways from the West Indies, and black soldiers who had fought for Britain in the American War of Independence. But they were all in a very bad position in the labour market in Britain, and by the beginning of the nineteenth century they had chiefly fetched up in the rookeries, as 'St Giles blackbirds', beggars, and street entertainers.<sup>2</sup> They caught the attention of Regency artists and writers who portrayed low life, and one black figure appears in most such works; see for instance Pierce Egan's *Life in London*, 1821, with its Cruikshank illustrations and its many successful dramatizations featuring a black beggar. They also came to the notice of alarmed officialdom, and in 1786 a 'Committee for Relieving the Black Poor' sent a group of them to Africa. The many amateur sociologists of the early nineteenth century continued to record black men amongst the beggars they chronicled: J. T. Smith published pictures of two of them in his *Vagabondia* in 1817, Dr Coulthart noticed one selling ballads in Ashton-under-Lyne in 1844,<sup>3</sup> and Mayhew, of course, included one in his compendious characterization of London's underworld.

By the time he was writing, in the 1860s, they were very few in number. The influx which had frightened middle-class opinion in the late eighteenth century had died down, and the black population had commenced a rapid decline. The conditions under which they lived hardly fostered longevity, and, more importantly, there were few black women. The scattered men married into the already very mixed populations of the poorest city districts, and virtually disappeared. Eyes unaccustomed to look suspiciously for coloured blood would class their offspring as no more than examples of the new urban breed. A writer in *Blackwoods Magazine* in 1866 summed up the situation of his countrymen as 'living in a country where a full-blooded Ethiopian is as rare as a black swan, where from January to December even a mulatto

<sup>1</sup> 'Concerning the Free British Negro', *Fraser's Magazine*, 47 (1853), 114-122 (p. 121).

<sup>2</sup> In the eighteenth century the only black men to emerge from obscurity in England were entertainers, particularly prize-fighters; by this date, however, they were among the humblest street singers and tumblers.

<sup>3</sup> His observation is quoted in Raphael Samuel, 'Comers and Goers', in *The Victorian City: Images and Realities*, Volume 1, edited by H. J. Dyos and Michael Wolff, paperback edition (London, 1977), pp. 123-60 (p. 128).

is seldom seen, and where, in consequence of this unfamiliarity, no antipathy of race is excited, as in the West Indies and the United States'.<sup>1</sup>

This unfamiliarity was not confined to the middle classes. Even amongst dock and riverside workers black men were exceptional enough to present no threat and to impinge very little upon the popular culture. It was in these rapidly moving urban communities that the new popular art of the music-hall was growing in the 1850s and 1860s, and an appropriate kind of black-face act developed in the halls. At Wilton's in Wellclose Square, in the heart of London dockland, there was a comic black-face act on practically every bill throughout its thirty years of life; but there were not, even in that community, many black men to whom its stereotypes could be taken to refer. The census shows a cosmopolitan community, with people of every European nationality living close together: the Square itself was still a respectable enclave of Danish and German settlers, and in the alleys around Irish groups predominated. In 1851 there was amongst these one man, aged seventy, born in Jamaica, who might have been an ex-slave; and amongst the transient sailors lodged around perhaps nine or ten non-Europeans. By 1861 even these were tidily accommodated in the sailors' home, where four young West Indians must have been very inconspicuous amongst the two-hundred-and-two lodgers from all over Europe.<sup>2</sup> The only black resident of the area seems to have been the waiter at the sailors' home, who came from Turk's Island.

The working classes, then, in areas where the music-hall grew up in strength in the 1850s, were more familiar with foreigners in general than were other Englishmen; but they had no reason to be attracted to black-face shows out of a cultural need related to threats presented by blacks.<sup>3</sup> If they linked the stage personae to real people at all it must have been, as with their social superiors who patronized more genteel minstrel shows, to a group they had never seen: the slaves of the United States. If one is to assume, as I think one must, that the success of popular material depends upon its relevance to the audience's needs and perceptions, then the growth of British black-face must have been based upon an alteration of the original material as much at the music-hall as at higher levels. It is against a background of awareness which in no way resembles the cultural situation in America which gave rise to minstrel entertainment that one must place its success in England.

<sup>1</sup> 'The Negro and the Negrophilists', *Blackwoods Magazine*, 99 (1866), 581.

<sup>2</sup> In 1843, when Dan Emmett's Virginia Minstrels brought the first minstrel show to Britain, their appearance in Liverpool coincided with a magistrate's remarking that there was a need of a sailor's home to protect passing seamen from the vampiric attentions of boarding house keepers. The theft he was dealing with had been from a 'man of colour' (see *The Liverpool Chronicle*, 3 June 1843, p. 4).

<sup>3</sup> If any such need can be inferred from the Wellclose Square census it would refer to the large separate presence of the Irish there, and there were indeed many Irish music-hall songs; but I feel this question is more complicated than Bruce Jackson suggests when he equates the cultural purpose and effect of Irish songs in the music-hall with minstrel shows in America (see 'The Negro and his Folk-lore in Nineteenth Century Periodicals', *Bibliographical and Special Series of the Publications of the American Folklore Society*, 18 (1967), 10).

There were at first, however, some superficially similar attractions to minstrelsy for English and American audiences. Robert Toll has pointed out (p. 34) that in the northern states minstrel shows presented a satisfactory answer to the curiosity of Americans who were not familiar with slaves about what they were actually like. The English shared this curiosity, and indeed had been curious enough to provoke showmen and actors to present them with images of the black man decades before the beginning of the minstrel craze. Charles Matthews studied negro dialect and material in the United States in 1822, and brought it back to England as part of his presentation of negroes in his entertainments; in 1811 a showman operating on a cruder level was prosecuted for the ill-treatment of a negress whom he was displaying at fairs for the interest of the scientifically inclined.<sup>1</sup> The desire to gaze open-mouthed at strange specimens of humanity is a strong and persistent trait of popular culture. In London in 1853 the curious could see thirteen 'wild and interesting' Zulus displaying 'nuptial ceremonies, the charm song, finding the witch, hunting tramp, preparations for war, and territorial conflicts' against moving scenery. The really credulous could, in 1855, see displayed the 'two Aztec Lilliputians, the Reputed Gods of Iximaya', and as a bonus the 'Earthmen, or Erdmanniges', who live by burrowing underground.<sup>2</sup> It is not surprising that when Dan Emmett's Virginia Minstrels, the first full-fledged minstrel troupe, appeared at the Adelphi in London in June 1843 they were billed, despite the demonstrable untruth of the claim, as 'the only representatives of the Negro that have appeared in this country'.

The English audience's curiosity was perhaps more objective than that of white Americans. They were ready to believe that black men danced and sang in a certain way, and the more strange and new the more exciting it would be; but they did not have the personal need to feel that blacks were inferior to which Toll (p. 34) attributes the initial response to the minstrels, and the direction of the shows' development, in America. While the more sophisticated at least of the White American audiences knew perfectly well that they were watching a set of white men parodying blacks for their amusement, the English were inclined to be critical and disappointed if the minstrels were shown to be inauthentic: the Ethiopian Serenaders on a tour of Britain in 1846, for example, were met with accusations of not being real negroes, which it had never occurred to them to pretend to be. In fact black performers, both popular entertainers like Juba and actors like Ira Aldridge, did well in England. When Aldridge played Othello at the Surrey in 1866 his performance was praised as that of a 'scholar and a gentleman', having also the 'dignity' and 'grace' 'which belong to the primitive races'. His appearance there was said to show England's superiority to America, and to be a 'great

<sup>1</sup> Compare this incident with the broadside description, already in the Catnach catalogue in 1832 and still being reprinted by his successors in the 1860s, of the comic-grotesque 'Queen of Otaheite'.

<sup>2</sup> See *Era*, 19 June 1853 and 7 January 1855.

moral lesson' on anti-slavery.<sup>1</sup> This comment encapsulates the major differences between American and British popular attitudes to the issue of the blacks, which dictated the reception and development of minstrel and black-face acts here. As soon as the Englishman could claim to be free of the taint of slave-holding, he turned self-righteously upon the Americans with a show of horror. The self-congratulation with which the popular audience at all levels viewed black people and put them into their songs is the strongest element in the image of the black man in British popular culture.

We can observe the early manifestations of it as part of the radical stance in the early 1830s: in a pamphlet in favour of the Reform Bill of 1832, for example, printed by a provincial bookseller and obviously belonging to the lowliest reaches of the reform agitation, the appeal for support for reform includes a section in support of the Emancipation in the West Indies, and, for good measure, a pictorial attack upon the Established Church.<sup>2</sup> The comment from *Fraser's Magazine*, quoted earlier, on the pro-black bias of English public opinion dated from 1853. The conviction that John Bull was the chosen protector of the slaves was clearly growing in the public mind all through the period from 1830 to 1860, when the last few black faces were disappearing from British cities, the memory of the troubles in the West Indies was fading, and the association of blacks exclusively with the Southern states of America was being fostered by the ever-increasing number of minstrel acts presented in the theatres and halls. By the time of the brewing and outbreak of the American Civil War in the 1860s it was firmly established in the popular mind that England was the land of the free, and that the revolted American colonists proved their inferiority by their refusal to recognize black men as brothers.

Henry Mayhew recorded that the fugitive slave had been so effective a persona for the purposes of begging that 'many white beggars, fortunate enough to possess a flattish sort of turned-up nose, dyed themselves black and "stood pad" as real Africans'.<sup>3</sup> The popular press enthusiastically reprinted reports of meetings great and small from Exeter Hall downwards, at which more eloquent fugitives told their stories and made collections or sold their photographs to audiences 'who were very numerous and were of the poorer class of the community' but who nevertheless insisted upon paying more than the shilling which was being asked.<sup>4</sup> The lowest levels of the press launched out from reporting to jocular exclamation and to fiction: W. S. Fortey circulated anti-slavery ballads, celebrating British captures of slaving vessels or bemoaning the fate of Uncle Tom; a song proffering new toasts for 1862

<sup>1</sup> See *Era*, 26 March and 2 April 1860.

<sup>2</sup> *Thoughts on Reform* (Wellington, 1832).

<sup>3</sup> *London Labour and the London Poor*, 4 vols (London, 1862), from the edition by Peter Quennell of Volume IV as *London's Underworld* (London, 1950), p. 391.

<sup>4</sup> *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 26 June 1861.

set this quatrain between a jibe at an M.P. and an appeal for more pay for needlewomen:

May the Yankees soon settle their quarrel,  
 May they make up their grievance in full,  
 May they cultivate *bacca* and *cotton*,  
 But not *Negro-head*, nor yet *wool*.<sup>1</sup>

The tendency to count the cause of emancipation amongst the list of popular reforms was even manifest on the level of the pious tract: the S.P.C.K. issued the story of *Black Billy*, in which a noble and hardworking escaped slave, now a fisherman, rescues first one boy from a mineshaft (furnishing a very uncaricatured picture for the frontispiece) and then another from a wreck, giving an opportunity for the mentioning of another pet cause of the 1860s, the lifeboat service. From the music-hall to the chapel, anti-slavery was, as the *Blackwoods Magazine* writer said, the 'English-radical and pulpit view'.

In the theatre this view was reinforced by the deep-rooted romantic feeling about the noble savage which belonged to the beginning of the century, and which had been transferred to the stage repeatedly by such people as Dibdin and Colman. The result was an audience response which differed considerably from that of the American public. There is scarcely any need to point out how confused a view it was: how conveniently it shifted all blame for the slavery issue from British shoulders, and how sentimental and debased a charitable impulse could become which not only coincided with British commercial interests, and involved no conflict or self-blame, but which was so emotionally clouded as to extend sympathy for the oppressed slave to the black-face impersonators who were, as white Americans, more likely to be representatives of the oppressors. The important thing about the transfer of anti-slavery sympathy in Britain to black-face performers was that it enabled them to appeal, through the British version of the minstrel show, to a huge popular audience which included some people who had little other access to theatrical entertainment. I want to go on to examine the development of this popular response to black-face acts in Britain.

The first man to bring the minstrel stereotype to Britain was its American 'Daddy', T. D. Rice. When he came to England in 1836 he appeared at two of the minor theatres, the Surrey and the Adelphi, both houses which catered for the lower levels of the popular audience, and which were sufficiently adaptable to accommodate a specialist performer. At both houses he appeared in farce, pantomime, and burlesque, of his own making and supplied by British writers, in the course of which his songs were repeatedly introduced. He was well received, and the critics found his plays amusing; but the audiences went to hear and to see one thing only: 'Jim Crow'. Rice first appeared in Britain at the Surrey on 9 July 1836, where he performed in his own piece, *Bone Squash Diabolo*. His engagement there continued until

<sup>1</sup> *Toasts and Sentiments for 1862* (London, 1862).



October, and he played in *The Virginian Mummy*, also his own composition, *The Black God of Love*, in which he was, according to *Figaro in London*, imperfect in his part, and according to *The Times*, called upon to sing 'Jim Crow' four times at the end of the play, and in *Oh! Hush! or, Life in New York*. He also performed black roles in British plays including Mesty in *Midshipman Easy*. In November he opened at the Adelphi in a play written for him by Leman Rede, *A Flight to America*; this was adapted to British taste, including a scene of rejoicing over Emancipation, and was full of puns. Over Christmas he was in *Harlequin Jim Crow*, and a new piece in February was called *The Peacock and the Crow*. His success was not merely professional: in June 1837 he married the daughter of Gladstone, joint proprietor of the theatre. On his tour in 1838 and his final visit in 1843 he again appeared at the Adelphi, with British plays, *Jim Crow in His New Place* by T. P. Taylor in 1838 and a topically named piece by Stirling, *Yankee Notes for English Circulation*, in 1843. Stirling regularly worked over Dickensian material for the Adelphi. The manuscript versions of most of these plays as submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office are probably the earliest surviving copies of Rice's material. Rice's effect upon the stage was pervasive, and Jim Crow popped up very soon in many London comic plays of all kinds; it was also widespread, so that a parody of the song was printed in Edinburgh in 1838, and *A Flight to America* was staged at Bury St Edmunds in the same year; there was even a Geordie version of the song.<sup>1</sup>

The effect of the song and dance was overwhelming. Rice sang it, and every other blacked-up performer, in whatever play, was obliged to sing it; most importantly, the audiences sang it — in 1837 a drunk had to be ejected from the Surrey because no-one could stop him singing it. Critics remarked disapprovingly on the amount of money Rice made by it; hats were named after it. One can only speculate about the nature of its appeal. Robert Toll holds that it was the dance, 'the first of many Afro-American dances to become a world-wide success' (pp. 43–44); and certainly the visual image of Rice dancing it can be seen to have influenced many performers who came after him in England. Mackney, whose Ethiopian impersonations in the 1860s are discussed below, modelled himself upon Rice, and he started his career as a dancer. I feel, however, that there is more to the Jim Crow act than that. The tune, partly English and partly Irish in origin, is attractive, and catchiness is an essential ingredient of popular success; but I would also argue with Toll's dismissal of the words of the song as 'neither unusual nor especially clever' (p. 43) and therefore not part of its great appeal. The original words were not exciting; but one of the important elements of the song, for American and especially for British audiences, was their adaptability. 'Jim Crow' could be added to, changed, parodied, made to fit every occasion; and its constant evolution was like the transmission of the tune,

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Dr Paul Schlicke and Mr Joe Ging for these latter examples.

something in which all could take part. It was the first of several minstrel songs in Britain which had this important quality. British black-face entertainers made use of the convention, and of songs in negro dialect, for the purpose of comment, often satirical but also simply descriptive, upon the events of the day. All popular song did this to some extent; but the black-face persona became both pretext and formula for the reduction of passing events to a recognizable pattern.

Numerous versions of 'Jim Crow' were printed in the years following Rice's arrival in Britain. Some seem of American origin, but the majority are either directly related to Rice's tour, or are imaginative extensions of Jim Crow's experience to British topics. There is the section which Rice added to the original song to bring the character up to date with his performance, which ends

Den I jump aboard de big ship,  
And cum across de sea,  
And landed in ole England,  
Where de nigger be free.

In 'Mrs Crow' this newly-invented lady recounts her trip to Britain in pursuit of Jim, whom she tracks down on the stage of the Surrey; and in the same songster there is 'Jim Crow's description of Ham', about *Hamlet* performed at the Surrey. In songs printed by several publishers 'Jim Crow's Trip to France' is recounted, for the sake of the rehearsal of several sets of national characteristics: French, Dutch, Irish, Yankee, and English are allowed to make their claims for superiority, and then capped by Jim's retort:

Now I says, look here white folks,  
De country for me,  
Is de country whar de people,  
Hab made poor nigger free.

He is also shown reacting to the current events of London; taking a trip to Greenwich on a steamer (a song Rice is said to have sung, in which the main point is a comic exposition of the workings of steam by another passenger); and going to the Lord Mayor's Show. This is the most lively variation of the pattern: it adapts the chorus as well as the verse:

Den run along, shove along,  
And do jist so,  
Or dey will roll you in the gutter  
At de Lord Mayor's show.

It also includes a nice fantasy sequence in which Jim sails in the Mayor's barge down to Westminster, meeting 'Mrs Mayor and de little Mayors', and 'the great folks all observed me, | And said, your health, Jim Crow'.<sup>1</sup>

In these songs the beginnings of a departure both from American minstrel attitudes and from American sources of humour can be seen. The change is

<sup>1</sup> The songs quoted are from *Mr & Mrs Jim Crow's Collection of Songs* (December 1836).

by no means complete: one of these songsters is very much closer to American stereotypes and uses much stronger dialect than the others, and yet is printed in London;<sup>1</sup> but others already contain material which is anti-slavery (as the examples suggest), which would not be of interest to an American audience, because of the localization of allusion, and which also seems to me to have mutated the verbal humour of its model by assimilation with English patterns of comic language. In Mrs Crow's song, fun is poked at the conventional stereotype of the negro physique, as happens in American minstrel song, but the usual verbal humour of malapropism is replaced by an English kind of joke, the pun. One stanza has Jim coming to pay his *dewours* to her, in the kitchen where she is cook (English songs are often about cooks) and instead he *dewours* all the food. The lengths the writer goes to to fit in phrases in which he can reverse black and white (she cries till she is white in the face, and so on) remind one of nothing so much as the verse of Thomas Hood, with whom this joke was an obsession. It is very much to English taste, and only very remotely related to any notion of real skin colour.

The use of the figure of Jim Crow, or rather his dialect and tune (for very little more of the character is used than that), for commentary on London happenings seems to me analogous to the use made rather later, in the comic magazines, of Irish and cockney dialect borrowed from the stage and music-hall stereotypes. Thackeray's ballads, published in *Punch* from 1845 to 1853, are the best-known example. On the stage these figures had more complicated functions to fulfil in relation to their audience's expectations and needs; but the black-face figure was not automatically placed by the audience's pre-determined response, except for the expectation that it would be funny, and so it was available, as it were, for whatever purpose could be found for it. Adaptation of the American songs to English purposes began with Jim Crow, but continued unabated throughout the period of the minstrel show's popularity. Consider, for example, the songs of Dan Emmett, who brought the first Virginia Minstrels to Britain in 1843. Many of his songs remained in circulation here, but took on a life independent of their creator. The most famous minstrel song of all, 'Dixie', is an example: Emmett composed it in or around 1859, and the authorized version was printed in New York in 1860. Hans Nathan, in his study of Dan Emmett, prints a very different earlier version which he has found in manuscript; and for quite unfathomable reasons it is this version, minus one stanza, which the British broadside printers got hold of and circulated.<sup>2</sup> The British audience, however, probably thought of the words of 'Dixie', whatever they were, as having only a secondary claim to the familiar tune, which was appropriated for many ditties set nearer home, and particularly for one called 'In the Strand', written by Frank Hall and sung for many years by E. W. Mackney. In this version the

<sup>1</sup> *Hodson's Nigger Melodies* (dated by the British Library as 1840, but probably earlier).

<sup>2</sup> *Dan Emmett and the rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1962), pp. 359–60.

blacked-up Mackney tells of his wooing and marrying of a girl called Nancy, whom he met in the Strand. It includes a rather sophisticated joke: the third stanza has him meeting his beloved once again in the Strand, and ends 'I told my love and down did fall | Slap on my knees by the Exeter Hall', at which point the performer no doubt threw himself into a parody of the posture of the enchained slave which was the symbol adopted by the anti-slavery reformers who met inside the Exeter Hall. The image was debased, at this date, through its adoption as a trademark by every beggar who stood pad as an ex-slave. The complexity of the knowing allusion is typical of music-hall song, but a long way from Emmett's plantation jollities and from the emotional fervour with which the American audience invested 'Dixie'.

Other Emmett songs were wrested from their creator, some so altered that the use of his title seems scarcely even an honest theft: his 'I'm gwine ober de mountains', published in Boston in 1843 and so a new song when he brought it to England, was turned into a broadside begging song. The English version is pathetic, while Emmett's was comic, and it ends with an unceremonious appeal:

Now all good people I hab done,  
And I hope you will buy my song,  
For you see I want some browns  
To help me ober de mountain.<sup>1</sup>

One can only assume that the browns (cant for pennies, money) were so vital an element of the song in the purveyor's mind that their incongruity with the dialect he was assuming did not strike him as important. In this song only the tune, a phrase or two of one verse, and the chorus survived from the original; the broadside of 'Old Johnny Boker', published by Emmett in Boston in 1840, preserves nothing of his original but the tune and one line of the chorus, which fits incongruously into the grammar of the new version. Moreover, between perfunctory tales of the cotton fields are interpolated, with no attempt at connexion, these two stanzas:

Prince Albert he did hab a dream,  
Dat he was on board a ship ob steam,  
But when he awoke it was no dream,  
For he was on board the British Queen.

When Vic got up to hunt de bug,  
She said 'Dear Albert, you've kicked off de rug',  
De game being stale and de wedder being hot,  
She collared de bug and put it in de pot.<sup>2</sup>

Bedtime stories of Royalty were a stand-by of Regency journalism, but only the most scurrilous levels of the press would venture upon Queen Victoria in

<sup>1</sup> From a broadside without an imprint, possibly 1860s, copy in the Crampton Collection of Ballads, 7 vols, II, 174, in the British Library.

<sup>2</sup> From a broadside in the Crampton Collection, I, 33.

this way. One feels that the minstrel song is used to cloak the scurrility in a guise which somehow lessened the printer's or the vendor's answerability for it.

I do not wish to suggest that the black-face stereotype became entirely detached from the idea of the negro in British entertainment. There continued to be very successful tours in Britain by American performers, who must have brought their material fresh from the current American situation. British critics often discussed visiting minstrels with a selfconscious display of connoisseurship about banjo playing or genuine plantation songs, and many of the standard American minstrel songs were current in Britain.<sup>1</sup> The minstrel song and dance, like the clog dance of Northern England or the Scottish pipe tune, was understood to be a specialized branch of the business most authentically performed by appropriate natives. At the little St James's Hall the Christy (later the Moore and Burgess) minstrel troupe followed the evolution of the American minstrelsy quite closely, always stressing their American origins and leadership. Harry Reynolds, writing as a performer, described the diversification in British minstrelsy in terms of a distinction between Ethiopian delineation, which maintained links with the 'plantation' material, and the use of black-face as a simple indication that the act used certain comic conventions.<sup>2</sup> This latter style was an English blend of knockabout fantasy, often including comic music and dancing, with the interchange of gags. From this kind of comedy evolved the stand-up comic cross-talk act of the later halls and the variety stage, which thus had amongst its ancestors the contrasting conversational styles of the minstrel interlocutor and corner-men. In the 1850s and 1860s there were dozens of English comedians who banded together in twos or small groups and called themselves 'funny blacks'; they were part of the rapid development of music-hall entertainment, when unprecedented numbers flooded into the profession. Black-face was a good way to start, in that it offered some simply-mastered techniques, the comforting anonymity of a disguising make-up, the relative safety of numbers (one did not have to face a hostile audience alone), and it was all the rage.<sup>3</sup>

There were also, however, some groups who showed, probably unconsciously, a need to place the black caricature presented on the stage in relation to a vestigial awareness of real blacks in Britain. It can only have been an undercurrent of memory of the time when black men competed in some

<sup>1</sup> See *Era*, 25 June 1843, p. 5, a review of the Virginian Minstrels, newly arrived in London; the reporter offers the opinion that 'the present rage for niggers came in . . . with the abolition bill, and if the abolitionists do but patronise the present personators of their favorite proteges, the Virginian minstrels will make no bad thing of it'. He goes on to exercise his punning facilities on the subject, and then to the acute opinion that the performers 'smack more of New York than *ould Virginny*' and to criticism of their banjo technique by comparison with Sweeney. He also criticizes their selection of songs, when, he says, better ones are available both theatrically and from the southern American source.

<sup>2</sup> *Minstrel Memories* (London 1928), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> A Dickensian comment on the irrelevance of black-face to the acts to which it was applied has recently come to light in a fragmentary comic duologue, probably written in the early 1860s, now published by Philip Collins in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 31 (March 1977), 440-50.

spheres with Englishmen which gave rise to the purely British phenomenon of the court-dress minstrel troupes. These groups sprang up in London soon after the first visit of the Virginia Minstrels. They dressed in elaborate costumes of the English court, plush coats and kneebreeches, stockings and buckled shoes, and powdered white wigs. The explanation of this oddity seems to me to lie in the role of blacks in Britain, before emancipation, as footmen and pages. Maintained as symbols of wealth and status, they were always splendidly dressed in liveries, in a fashion which survived as court costume into the nineteenth century. The popular stage had kept alive the memory of the black footboy by using him as part of the background of exotic melodramas; confronted with the idea of black men in another form, singing minstrel songs, what more natural than that they should be unconsciously placed at a safe distance of inferiority, back amongst a slave class, by amalgamation with the older stage image?

But the real driving force that led to the outburst of minstrel troupes and Ethiopian delineators in the early 1860s was related to the growth of popular entertainment on bases much nearer to the hearts of the British public than any possible fear of black races. The situation in America during the civil war was put to use in two ways. Violent atrocity stories were rife: they are a staple of sensational entertainment at all times;<sup>1</sup> but, more importantly, vague sympathy for oppressed slaves was used by performers who stressed that their acts were different from ordinary vulgar music-hall, to reach an otherwise resistant part of their potential audience. Even in London the minstrel shows which appeared outside the music-halls appealed to a distinct audience of their own. The Mohawk Minstrels made their niche by being very English, in contradistinction to the Americanized Christy's, and by establishing themselves by the Agricultural Hall in Islington, where they did most business when the provincials were in town for the cattle show. Reynolds in his naïve manner sums up the Christy minstrels' audience: 'Straightlaced people who even barred the ordinary theatre patronised St James' Hall. It was quite an ordinary experience to observe a dozen clergymen at one time enjoying the minstrels' entertainment; so naturally their flocks followed.'<sup>2</sup> The music-hall side of the business flourished notwithstanding, sometimes engaging the comic members only of a large minstrel troupe, sometimes taking on as a star attraction a performer who at other times got a troupe together and moved out into the provinces, putting on his respectable hat. I shall conclude with a brief consideration of the material of one such performer, E. W. Mackney.

Mackney was an Englishman of theatrical stock, born in 1824. His first stage appearance was in pantomime at the age of nine. Like many young

<sup>1</sup> *Era* for example carried in the issue for 6 May 1860 both the arrangements for Mackney's first provincial tour and a report of the burning of two negroes in Arkansas, with the conclusion that slavery 'pollutes the soul' of its perpetrators. But the paper was just as ready with the gory details of every other kind of murder, especially traditional English ones such as school-masters beating their pupils to death in genteel seaside boarding schools.

<sup>2</sup> *Minstrel Memories*, p. 104.

professionals starting out on their own he organized a minstrel act, with a partner called Joseph Cave. He became a music-hall star very early: he was performing at Evan's song and supper rooms when Morton spotted him and brought him out at the Canterbury, with star billing as 'the Great Mackney'. He modelled his style upon Rice, with an animated dance routine to enliven his songs. Later he made a move, quite common for this period, from the black-face to the 'comique' persona, with its distinctive appearance of exaggerated man-about-town (many comique performers wore golden wigs as extravagant as the black one which was part of the minstrel costume) and its own conventions of character and song. While Mackney was performing in black-face he had a second range of activity, and a much wider audience outside the music-halls to whom he took the same songs. A typical year's work for him was that of 1860, a year in which minstrel troupes were rampant all over Britain, from the Christys at the St James's Hall to the African Opera Troupe grinding round the fishing ports of Northern Scotland on one-night engagements. Mackney started the year with long-starring engagements at Weston's, a West End hall, and Wilton's in the East End. In May he collected a company and set off on a provincial tour. They were billed as 'Miss E. Pearce, Nobility's concerts, Mr Frank Raynor, Hanover-Square Rooms, Mr Geo. Allen, celebrated English basso, and Mr W. H. Watson, R.A.M.'

The intention here was obviously to aim at unimpeachable respectability. They went only to main centres, and started with engagements at the Music Hall Birmingham, the Corn Exchange Wolverhampton, Mechanics' Halls at Nottingham and Manchester, and the Clayton Hall Liverpool. They reached the last by 10 June and succeeded in spite of direct competition from the circus at the amphitheatre on the one hand and the Keans appearing that week at the Theatre Royal on the other. It may well be that their audience included people who would not have frequented other places of entertainment. Competition in Nottingham had been less demanding: their performances had followed the appearance of 'the Nottingham Coloured Opera Troupe', an amateur group of whom the *Era* reviewer said that they had 'improved since last we saw them'. The attendance of such aspirants at Mackney's concerts, and their eager purchase of expensively-published books of his songs, were powerful elements of his middle-class support. The tour ended in Liverpool, and his next engagement was a piquant contrast: he was billed to appear at the Britannia, Hoxton, doing his 'American jig', presumably between their melodramas. In September he returned to the music-halls, Weston's and the Winchester, until the Christmas change of bill. In the course of the year Mackney had therefore sung and danced for everyone from the sailors of Whitechapel and the costers of Hoxton to the serious mechanics of Nottingham and the society of the Wolverhampton Corn Exchange.

Mackney's material was also various. There are some very undistinguished minstrel numbers, which any black-face singer might use on either side of

the Atlantic, like his very popular 'Sally Come Up', which displays the stereotype grotesque caricature of the negro. These songs flow without a discernable break into ones which similarly dwell upon ugliness and grotesque physical humour, but which are part of the indigenous music-hall convention of satirical attack upon women. In his parody song 'Sally Sly' (which is a follow-up to 'In the Strand') he sang in his black-face costume, but the girl is apparently an East End coster: she cries cat's-meat. The jokes are about her having a black eye, a cold in her nose, lumbago, a raucous voice, and every other unattractive attribute. The violence of the song's implicit feeling about the physical hold of women over men and the frustrations generated by songs, like the one parodied, which lavish admiration on women is very noticeable; the black-face convention frees the singer and his audience for a vengeful release of much repressed feeling, under cover of comedy. On the other hand, Mackney's repertoire included naïve sentiment in songs like 'Mingo's Wide Awake', a touching, almost pastoral account of a young lover's attentiveness. The frame of reference is that of the plantation, but it has a delicacy and affection for its subject which is without a hint of caricature. This mood, too, slides over into songs which are still given in the persona of the plantation slave, but derive another dimension from their integration with formulae arising much more directly from the needs and attitudes of their British audiences. An example is 'Polly Bluck', which has a scene of river-boats and dancing blacks on its cover, but is in the vein, popularized by Tabrar, of gleeful celebration of the homely details of love and marriage, with humour derived from cockney rather than nigger dialect.

In British music-hall song the cockney persona is used to invite identification with the singer by the audience; the laughter at such a song is sentimentally warm and personal. The combination of this appeal with the black-face suggests a complete undercutting of the racial overtones it had in America. This is similarly obvious in other Mackney songs which seem to follow strong current trends in the music-hall with which black-face is at odds. In the United States minstrel songs were of course influenced by other popular stereotypes, and the figure of the bragging frontiersman was mingled with the riverboat negro,<sup>1</sup> but the kinds of combination which appeared in Britain in the 1860s would never have been acceptable in America. Songs like 'In the Strand' and 'Oxford Street' are typical comique songs in which a man-about-town meets and woos a girl in the West End; they are full of knowing references to the names of shops and streets of fashionable resort, and to the singer's suavity and attractions. Mackney performed them in black-face, however, which gave rise to song covers in which a black man apparently woos a fashionable white woman. In this, as in the picture which appears on the cover of 'She'd a Black and Rolling Eye', where Mackney in black-face is left foolishly holding a white baby, there seems to me strong

<sup>1</sup> See Toll, p. 40.



evidence of how far, by the 1860s, the British audience was from any of the racial fears which riddle American minstrelsy.

The most famous of Mackney's songs, which he sang throughout his career, was 'The Whole Hog or None'. Its continued success was based upon topicality: the verses were constantly brought up to date, and topical and local references inserted. It was originally written by George Ware. A broadside version of the 1860s talks about the war in America, and Leotard on the rope; another by Charles Sloman mentions Frenchmen playing Shakespeare, lectures on apes, and the possible diseases to be caught while playing at soldiers at Aldershot. Such adaptability, here applied to English matters, was one of the features of the minstrel show in America, and it was a vital part of the effect of 'Jim Crow'. The cover of Mackney's song suggests that the reference to Rice's material was carried through in costume, and in a dance. Traditions in the music hall are subject to strange mutation, and no material, song, dance, technique, or persona will survive unchanged, or survive at all if it ceases to speak to the needs of its audience; but on the other hand there was a fierce conservatism, and a performer was obliged to go on giving the public what they had always expected of him. Mackney, singing about Rifle Volunteers, crinolines, taxes, and Darwin, and jumping like Jim Crow, on the platform of the Mechanics' Hall in Birmingham, is a strangely compounded but, I would suggest, a peculiarly English figure.