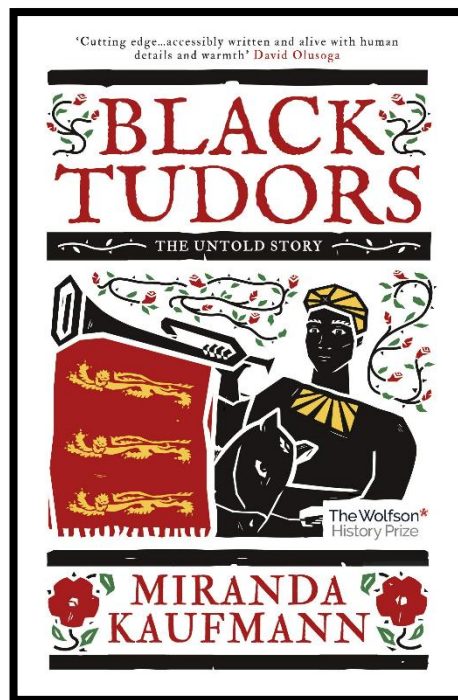
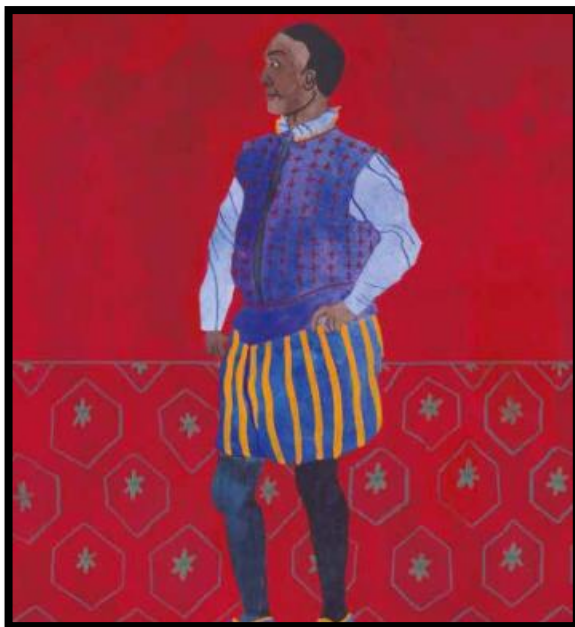


Two Tales of the Black Tudors

The Prosperous Silk Weaver – Reasonable Blackman



*Edward Swarthy –
the landowners
enforcer*

Reasonable Blackman was a silk weaver based, by the end of the 1570s, in Elizabethan Southwark. He had probably arrived in London from Antwerp in the Netherlands, which had a sizeable African population and was a known centre for cloth manufacture. Around 50,000 refugees fled to England from the southern Netherlands between 1550 and 1585, as war raged between Dutch rebels and Spanish forces occupying their country. Blackman had a family of at least three children, named Edward, Edmund and Jane, and as none of them were recorded as bastards in the parish register, we can assume he was married to their mother, about whom we sadly know nothing. she was probably an Englishwoman.

That Blackman was able to support a family is a sign of his prosperity as a silk weaver (in fact, he may have named himself Reasonable in order to draw attention to his 'reasonable' prices). The silk industry was new to England and its products were the height of fashion. Once Queen Elizabeth I received her first pair of silk stockings in 1561, she concluded: "I like silk stockings well; they are pleasant, fine and delicate. Henceforth I shall wear no more cloth stockings." The queen's courtiers followed suit, and such was the demand that imports of raw silk increased five-fold between 1560 and 1593. Tragedy struck the Blackman family in October 1592 when his daughter, Jane, and one of his sons, Edmund, died of the plague that struck London that year. Nothing more is known of Blackman after the death of his children, but there is a tantalising record that suggests his son Edward carried on his father's trade. On 6 March 1614, when Edward Blackman would have been 27, a certain "Edward Blakemore of Mile End, silkweaver" was married in Stepney.

In 1596, a black man called Edward Swarthy whipped John Guye, the future first governor of Newfoundland. They were both servants in the Gloucestershire household of Sir Edward Wynter: Guye managed the iron works, while Swarthy was the porter. This was considered shocking and "unchristian like" at the time, but not for the same reasons we might assume today. It was the fact that such a high-status, educated servant as John Guye had been publicly humiliated that upset the onlookers, not the colour of Swarthy's skin. Swarthy had likely been brought to England by Wynter after he captained the Aid on Francis Drake's Caribbean raid of 1585–86, one of many Africans who fled their Spanish enslavers to join the English. The whipping was just one incident in an ongoing family feud between the Wynters and their neighbours, the Buckes. (Guye had recently married James Bucke's daughter Anne, thus dividing his loyalties). Bucke accused Wynter of a raft of crimes, from enclosing the common land to having had him assaulted. Edward Swarthy appeared as a witness in the ensuing court case of 1597, his testimony confirming that he, a black Tudor, had whipped a white man before a crowd assembled in the Great Hall at the Wynter's home, White Cross Manor. The fact that Swarthy was allowed to testify in court demonstrates that he was viewed as a free man in the eyes of the law. Enslaved people have been prevented from giving evidence throughout history: the Romans would only accept such testimony if it had been obtained using torture, while in 1732 the state of Virginia declared that black men and women were "people of such base and corrupt natures that their testimony cannot be certainly depended on". By contrast, Swarthy's testimony was taken by the Court of Star Chamber without demur.