

Introduction

Did you know that the famous nurse Mary Seacole developed her super nursing skills in Jamaica when she was a girl, practising on dolls and pets before braving the front lines of the Crimea to heal the sick? Have you heard about how the actor Ira Aldridge narrowly escaped capture by slave traders as a boy, before gracing stages all over Europe as one of the greatest ever Shakespearean performers? Have you ever wondered why Claudia Jones, a political journalist, founded Notting Hill Carnival, Britain's legendary celebration of Caribbean culture?

Bright Stars of Black British History is a collection of illustrated biographies shining a light on the lives of Black British people in history. It is a celebration of their contributions to a shared past. The Black presence in Britain is long-standing. People of African descent have lived in Britain for many centuries, and have influenced the course of history in powerful and exciting ways. The stories told here are tightly interwoven with familiar threads in the narrative of British history: the court of King Henry VIII, transatlantic slavery and its abolition, Queen Victoria's reign, the First and Second World Wars, the Jazz Age, and the Windrush story.

Each of the figures in this book has a fascinating story to tell, yet some are just beginning to gain the recognition they deserve. These Bright Stars are people who have made their mark on the course of history because of their courage and their confidence in the possibility of change. By sharing their stories we celebrate them, as the light of their legacies shines brightly to inspire us and give us hope for the future.



When we look up at the night sky, some stars appear to shine more brightly than others. But look closely and you will catch glimpses of other stars in between, stars that join the bright stars together to make up the constellations. There are always people, brave and bold, whose light may be hidden from us, people whose names may not appear in the history books, but whose contribution is key. The difference is simply distance – move closer to a star and it will shine more brightly in your view.

Though we may not always know their names, or the details of their lives, we should also honour the histories of those people who came together as a community to work for change: the rebels and runaways who resisted enslavement; the Sons – and surely Daughters – of Africa who fought for slavery's abolition; the nurses and doctors who broke barriers to care for the nation; the servicemen and women who risked their lives for Britain at war; the musicians, writers and artists whose work has enriched, challenged and changed our thinking.

So join us on a journey of celebration and struggle, resilience and resistance, migration and movement, challenge and change. Join us in joy as we honour these Bright Stars of Black British History.