

## David Olusoga Wants Britain to Face Its Past. All of It.

*For more than a decade, the historian and broadcaster's work has focused on bringing his country's uglier histories to light. Recently, more people are paying attention.*



*"I'm interested in the histories we don't tell," said David Olusoga, one of Britain's most prominent public historians.*

**By Desiree Ibekwe**  
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LONDON — In December, when a British court cleared four Black Lives Matter protesters of criminal damages for toppling the statue of Edward Colston, a 17th-century slave trader, in June 2020, it was thanks in part to David Olusoga's expert testimony.

Olusoga, a historian whose work focuses on race, slavery and empire, felt a duty to agree to address the court on behalf of the defense, he said in a recent interview, since "I've been vocal about this history."

At the trial in Bristol, the city in southwest England where the Colston statue was toppled, Olusoga, 52, told the jury about Colston's prominent role in the slave trade and the brutalities suffered by the African people Colston sold into slavery.

The closely watched court decision was greeted with concern by some in Britain and relief by others, and Olusoga's role in the defense offers just one recent example of his work's impact on British society.

Olusoga's comments in court are consistent with a frequent focus of his wider work as one of the country's most prominent public historians: that long-forgotten or buried past injustices can be addressed in the present day in public-facing, accessible media.



*Olusoga in a scene from the docu-series "One Thousand Years of Slavery" on the Smithsonian Channel, for which he served as an executive producer.*

Olusoga's latest TV work is "One Thousand Years of Slavery," which premieres on the Smithsonian Channel on Monday. The show, which he executive produced alongside Bassett Vance Productions, a production company helmed by Courtney B. Vance and Angela Bassett, takes a wide-ranging, global look at slavery through the familial stories of public figures like Senator Cory Booker and the actor David Harewood.

One of Olusoga's best-known projects is "Black and British: A Forgotten History," which explored — through a BBC television series accompanied by a best-selling book — the long and fraught relationship between Black people and Britain, introducing many people to Black communities here that date back to the Roman times.

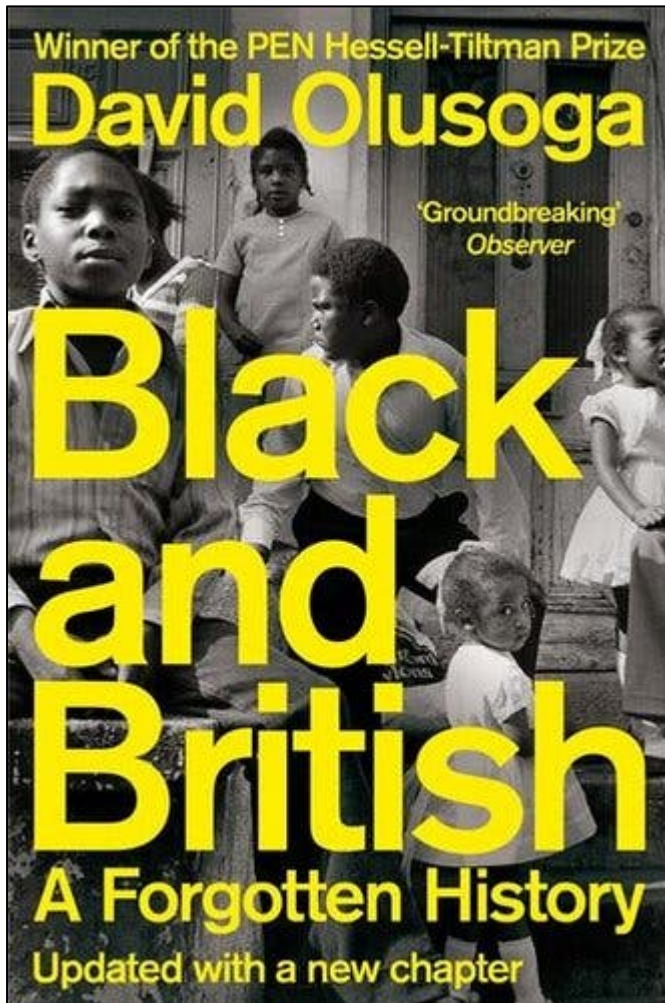
"I'm interested in the histories we don't tell. I'm not interested in retelling stories that we've told a thousand times," Olusoga said. "I'm interested in telling stories that are unfamiliar."

Olusoga, who is half-Nigerian, traces this focus to his mother telling him when he was a child that Nigerian soldiers served in World War II. In that moment, his interest in history overlapped with his attempts to understand his Black and British identity, he said. "It made me realize not just that there was more to this for me, but



also that I wasn't being told the whole truth," he said. "And a lot of what I do is from that moment of realization."

The historian was born in Lagos to a Nigerian father and a white British mother. He moved to Britain as a child and grew up in northeast England with his mother and siblings. In the book "Black and British," he spoke of the racial tensions of the 1970s and 1980s and a campaign of racist abuse his family experienced, which forced them to leave their home.



*Olusoga's "Black and British: A Forgotten History" explores the long and fraught relationship between Black people and Britain.*

Despite having a difficult time in school — Olusoga was diagnosed with dyslexia at age 14 — there he developed a love of history from a favorite teacher and the television he watched. He studied history at university but opted for a career in TV over academia. For Olusoga, "history was naturally public," he said. "I chose very deliberately to leave universities and go into television in order to make history."

After 15 years in TV production, he started appearing in front of the camera. He's now a fixture on British screens presenting shows like "A House Through Time," which each season tells the story of a British house and its inhabitants over the centuries. In 2019, Olusoga was awarded an Order of the British Empire for services

to history and community integration (which he struggled to accept because of its association with the violent acts of the empire).

In an email, Mary Beard, the author of “Women and Power” and a professor of classics at Cambridge University, praised Olusoga’s skills of persuasion. She remembered that, when filming “Black and British” with Olusoga in a rural English village, an older white woman said she was “proud” to know that one of the earliest inhabitants of her village had been Black after being presented with a reconstruction of that ancient woman’s face.

“That is the Olusoga effect,” said Beard, who is another one of Britain’s best-known historians. “He has a real gift for telling stories straight and winning people to seeing things in a different way. It is a very rare gift.”

This is also evident in the impact of “Unremembered,” a 2019 documentary that was made by his production company, Uplands Television. The show, presented by David Lammy, a Black Member of Parliament, brought to public consciousness that African and Asian soldiers who died in World War I were not commemorated in the same way as their white comrades, and many lie in unmarked graves. The program ultimately led to a public apology from Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government.

In recent years, Olivette Otele, Britain’s first Black female history professor and the author of “African Europeans: An Untold History,” has seen a shift in how the Black experience is included in British and European history, which she credits in part to Olusoga.

“In academia, we do all we can, but to be able to democratize, to reach wider audiences has made such a huge difference, so much so that it’s becoming normal to engage with these topics,” Otele said in a recent interview.

For Olusoga, this shift was surprising. “I’ve been telling these stories on radio and television, and fighting for them to be told, for my entire career, and I’ve done nothing different,” he said. “I think what’s happened is the world has changed around me and I think people are more interested in listening.”

At the same time, since the 2020 murder of George Floyd and subsequent Black Lives Matter protests, there have been contentious debates about what gets included in Britain’s public history. In late 2020, following the toppling of the Colston statue, the British conservation charity the National Trust released a report exploring links between some of its sites and colonialism and slavery. The report was dismissed as “woke” by some conservative politicians and many in Britain’s right-wing press.

Yet Olusoga said debates like this show that certain segments of the population reject the uglier elements of British history. The past is sometimes used to make British people feel “that we were magical people from a magical island that’s always been on the right side of history,” he said.



*Olusoga studied history but opted for a career in television over academia, as he believes history is “naturally public.”*

But, “if you only want to tell yourself the positive stories from your past,” he said, “then that necessarily means you cannot have an honest reckoning with your past.”

He added: “And that’s Britain’s issue.”