

A BLACK BOY AT ETON DILLIBE ONYEAMA



BLACK BRITAIN



WRITING BACK

A BLACK BOY AT ETON

About the Author

Dillibe Onyeama is a Nigerian author and publishing executive, who founded the publishing company Delta Publications (Nigeria) Limited. In 1969, he became the first Black person to finish their studies at Eton College, and went on to attend The Writers' School of Great Britain. He has published twenty-eight books – both fiction and non-fiction – covering a wide range of subjects, including biography, education and self-improvement. He lives and works in his native Enugu, in south-east Nigeria.

A BLACK BOY
AT ETON

Dillibe Onyeama

With a new introduction by
Bernardine Evaristo



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To
Walter Davis
In Priam Memoriam

Contents

<i>Publisher's Note</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>Introduction by Bernardine Evaristo</i>	<i>ix</i>
Author's Note	I
1 Arrival	3
2 My First Year	26
3 My Background	54
4 Eton and Etonians	84
5 Work and Games	105
6 Me and the People at Eton	141
7 Homosexuality	167
8 Allowances	172
9 Violence	198
10 Witchcraft, Black Power and Other Happenings	213
11 Farewell	239

Publisher's Note

In this book are some expressions and depictions of prejudices that were commonplace at the time it was written. We are printing them in the book as they were originally published because to make changes would be the same as pretending these prejudices never existed, and that the author didn't experience them.

Introduction

I came across this electrifying memoir many years ago when I was researching forgotten literature about black Britain. Its original title, *Nigger at Eton**, was so provocative, I wondered why I'd never heard of it. I managed to locate a second-hand copy and discovered that the author, Dillibe Onyeama, a Nigerian, had been a pupil at Eton College in the sixties, and that almost as soon as he matriculated, he wrote about his experiences there. I started reading, and the story he had to tell was so gripping and shocking, it wouldn't let me go.

This is no ordinary memoir because Eton, arguably the world's most famous school, has embodied and emboldened Britain's class system for hundreds of years and spawned an astonishing number of prime ministers – twenty, including the two most recent males, David Cameron and Boris Johnson, a worrying contradiction to contemporary beliefs about class and social progress.

Into this establishment hothouse of 1,200 boys with its archaic traditions, rigid hierarchies and a culture of corporal punishment

* The editorial decision to change the title to *A Black Boy at Eton* was made because we wanted to make sure that there were no obstacles to people wanting to read and talk about this book.

Introduction

whereby older boys are authorized to beat their juniors, arrives fourteen-year-old Onyeama, who becomes only the second black African to attend the school.

The son of a Nigerian supreme court justice, who was later appointed a judge of the International Court of Justice at The Hague, Onyeama is clearly the progeny of a powerful and prosperous man, although this makes absolutely no difference to how he is perceived and treated by his fellow pupils, who throw the full weight of anti-black racism at him throughout the four years he attends this ultra-elite boarding school. It's hard not to be horrified at what he endures or to be outraged on his behalf. The imaginations of his peers have been cultivated to see black people through the imperial prism of the racial phenotypes and stereotypes that were concocted to justify the transatlantic slave trade and the British Empire. Instead of attempting to engage with Africa's multifarious nations, cultures, languages and belief systems, they were conveniently written off as thick savages who nonetheless possessed impressive physical prowess. Within this context, Onyeama is never allowed to be just another boy at the school. When he doesn't perform well academically, it is to be expected, and when he succeeds at sport, it's taken for granted. Further, when his grades are good, he is singled out for special attention because his classmates believe he has overcome the intellectual limitations of being black or, in some instances, rumours spread that he has been marked leniently to compensate for it.

Interestingly, for those who argue that, because racism was rampant in the sixties when Onyeama was at the school, this isn't

Introduction

exactly news, it's worth noting that the author, who arrived in Britain from Nigeria at the age of eight, did not suffer from the same level of abuse he encountered at Eton while at his previous British schools.

One of the book's greatest strengths is that, while he is clearly a sensitive boy who becomes attuned to all the nuances of racism he encounters, Onyeama is also a formidable fighter, literally and figuratively. Rather than submit to oppressive forces, he defends himself and thus manages to maintain his dignity, even though it often provokes more of the same.

Published in 1972, four years after he left the school in 1968, this is a remarkably well-written memoir, especially by someone still maturing into adulthood. With events still fresh in his mind, the author has the fluent facility to bring them to life with drama, passion and energy. Somewhat sadly, however, without the benefit of hindsight and still very close to his material, he is also terribly tough on himself to the point where you want to take him aside and commend him on how he navigated such enormously challenging circumstances. Reading about his early experiences of familial dislocation while still in Nigeria at a young age before migrating alone to Britain, where he finds alienation and victimization, makes it easier for us to understand and empathize with his predicament.

One hopes that the persistent dehumanization of someone on account of their ethnicity within the British education system would be unthinkable today. Onyeama was not treated kindly by many of the boys, and while superficial friendships were formed, the 'vicious little Caesars', as he describes them, come across as a

Introduction

mob of feral bullies who put him through hell. *They* are the savages who will one day become Old Etonians, with all the status, privileges and networks this bestows. One wonders how many of these future ‘masters of the universe’ will have gone forth into the nation and infected it with their insular sense of class and racial superiority from influential positions in politics, the judiciary, media, finance, the sciences, academia, arts, banking, business and the armed forces.

When *Nigger at Eton* was first published, Eton’s then headmaster, Michael McCrum, banned Onyeama from ever visiting the school again. Rather like the Catholic Church, its violations behind closed doors should not be permitted to tarnish the reputation of such an august institution. After publication the book soon disappeared without trace, although Onyeama reissued it in Nigeria after he returned home. The author of many books since, he also helped to set up Delta Publications (Nigeria), before eventually becoming its current CEO.

Fifty years later, British journalist and writer Musa Okwonga, of Ugandan parentage, published his own memoir about attending Eton in the nineties, *One of Them* (2021). By then, the overt racism of earlier eras had gone underground and it was only many years after he’d left that Okwonga learnt about the racial aspersions cast behind his back by his classmates. During the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020, when many institutions were challenged on the murky pasts they’d rather remained hidden, the current headmaster of Eton apologized to Onyeama for the abuse he’d encountered half a century before. Okwonga reflects that the bigger issue for debate, about which Eton has always remained

Introduction

silent, is that ‘the history of the British Empire is intimately connected with the history of Eton’.

Yet the past is never dead when we are alive to resurrect, interrogate and reinterpret it, and we must always strive to hold to account those who cloak themselves in moral rectitude and glory while refusing to acknowledge the source of their wealth, prestige and power. Onyeama’s story about landing in the hostile environment of Eton College is a personal one, but the questions it raises have much wider repercussions.

Bernardine Evaristo

August 2021

Author's Note

Everything I say in this book is true. The characters mentioned are real, but many of the names have been changed to avoid possible embarrassment to persons living and relatives of those who are dead. Any similarity in such names is unintentional and coincidental.

Before I started writing, three writers in turn spent months attempting to re-write an earlier version I had committed to paper. After fifteen months, their attempts met with scant success.

For a number of reasons, all three concluded that the material my manuscript contained, along with further material supplied by me at their request, was insufficient to make a full-length book.

During those fifteen frustrating months I was undergoing extensive training at an established writers' school in London: thus, I hope, I acquired some writing experience to tackle the book myself, in my own words, finally submitting it – much to the irritation of my publishers – in long-hand.

A Black Boy at Eton

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the 'ghosts' for the time and unproductive effort they devoted to my original manuscript. But for the encouragement and advice of one in particular (a good friend who wishes to remain anonymous), I would never have had the inclination, patience or endurance to re-write it.

Dillibe Onyeama

Chapter One

Arrival

Eton! A renowned community destined to govern my life for nearly four years, and probably influence it for the rest of my days. Nearly 5ft 10in. tall and rather plump, I was going to be dumped down at great expense among more than 1,200 boys – just one of two blacks among them. Every detail of my first day is etched with sharp, bold strokes into my memory. It was ominously grey, cold and miserable, and fitted my mood perfectly. It was the 19th January 1965, two weeks after my fourteenth birthday. I was driven there, vibrating, from Glympton, a small and very quiet Oxfordshire village, set in a low area and surrounded by a river and hilly fields, with a population of 130. I had spent my Christmas holidays there with my guardian, the Reverend Arthur Cox, an ugly and fierce-looking man with a snub nose who, oddly enough, had no double chin accompanying his 6ft 5in. and seventeen stones. He was at the wheel of his Consul Cortina with his calm, little wife Nora by his side; ill with despair, I sprawled in the back seat, dressed in a dark suit. We had left the vicarage sometime between 3 and 4 p.m.: so soon because all new boys were requested to be at Eton by six; Etonians didn't have to return till ten.

A Black Boy at Eton

Eton was fifty-two miles away and, due to Mr Cox's being a fast driver, we were able to lap up the miles in an hour and a quarter. And, my God, that journey was like a nightmare, and I wanted to disappear. Almost throughout I was submerged in a sea of deep thought, almost hypnotized. I was totally unaware of the world outside; I was not consciously aware of the fact that all the windows were closed and smoke from the Reverend Cox's pipe filled the car. Usually I detested this, for it caused me to feel ghastly and car sick. It was no doubt due to smoking that Mr Cox suffered from an asthmatic cough, which didn't seem to discourage him. Neither his coughing nor his conversation with his wife affected my thinking. I was only distracted when Mrs Cox occasionally turned to ask if I was all right, told me not to worry, and that I would soon get used to Eton. She had to call me two or three times before I was aware she was talking to me; and I must say her motherly voice cheered me slightly, but, more than anything, filled me with a mixture of nostalgia and fear to the extent that I felt like breaking down into choking sobs. I was worried to the scalp! I was filled with a sense of utter hopelessness and desolation.

My thoughts were on ragging. I was expecting to be a butt for ragging for some boys and a strange enigma to others; the former especially I feared. Now and again during my six years in England, I had heard blood-chilling stories of bullying at public schools, and found them most off-putting. One in particular had been the film *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, which was shown when I was about ten at my prep school. The ragging Tom Brown went through at Rugby, the agony and hardship he suffered, alarmed me and indeed my schoolmates. The only relief for us was that

Arrival

the film was ‘just imaginary’, but I got to understand after seeing it that every new boy experienced ragging at public school. I never looked forward to Eton, especially during the years that followed when I was told by people, like masters and even my own father, that I certainly would be ragged.

As I sat in the speeding car, I wasn’t merely worried that I would be bullied, but more so than any other boy – more roughly and pitilessly because I was black. I was led to believe this because of what I was told at a small Crammer I attended for only one term, and whence I passed my Common Entrance into Eton. It was after lunch one horrible, dreary day, a few days before term ended. I was packing my trunk in my dormitory when lanky Charlie Nichols entered. He was a quiet twelve-year-old, fair with a protruding backside and a permanent blush on his face. We said hello and he went to get a book by his bed. He stood there silently for some seconds, as I packed, then cleared his throat and with a sincere and somewhat timid voice told me I wouldn’t be popular at Eton. I faced him inquisitively and asked why. He replied that he had a brother there, several years older than he was, who had told him that Tokunbo Akintola, the other African at Eton, was unpopular because of his colour. I received this with concealed shock and surprise. It was completely new to me and it had never occurred to me to think about it. My only reply to Nichols was that it was unfortunate, and he left. For a few minutes I stood there in my dark flannels and sweater gazing through the window and thinking worriedly. I was encouraged to believe him, for we had always got on well, and I saw no reason why he should be making it up just to get me worried. He’d said it in a way which

seemed that he felt it a good idea to tell me, so I'd know what to expect and perhaps be prepared for it. I, in return, felt it was tactless of him to tell me, and I was put off considerably. I was totally ignorant of what racialism was all about, and I couldn't understand why colour should make Tokunbo Akintola unpopular.

However, until I was in my guardian's car, I had forgotten all about it. As I reflected on the matter and remembered certain events during those holidays at the vicarage, it seemed that the situation at Eton was going to be grim!

The vicarage was a neighbourly looking house with leaves and flowers growing on its walls. It was supposed to be over 800 years old in parts, though it didn't look it – from inside or out. The only signs of old age were the very creaky floorboards and staircases. It was a spacious, two-storey house comfortably resting in a largish garden. Contained in the garden was part of a river called the Glime. Only the splashing of this river down by the small falls disturbed the silent nights.

The vicarage was a holiday home for (mostly public school) students, of both sexes, whose parents worked abroad. Mine were in Nigeria, where my father was a Supreme Court judge in Lagos. The house could take twenty students, though only about half that number usually came; we slept in dormitories. The Reverend Cox was not guardian to any of the others: only to myself and my brother who, three years my junior, was at a prep school in Hampshire. Mr Cox became our guardian through his brother, who worked in Nigeria and was my father's great friend. For over two years I had holidayed mostly at the vicarage. Normally I'd found it an enjoyable holiday home, but that Christmas before Eton, it

Arrival

seemed like hell! It was a hurtful and bitter Christmas. Some of the students, only the boys, started victimizing me. For no reason whatever they molested and taunted me continually. In the billiard room, television room, during breakfast when Reverend and Mrs Cox were not present, they aggravated me, laughing and making unpleasant jokes – none of which was racial. Being highly sensitive, I was always deeply bruised and irritated. Usually I remained quiet. Sometimes I swore at them, only to be sworn at back. Even in front of the girls they continued, but no sympathy came from the girls. Some of the jokes were so comic that they tickled even my quiet brother, who was usually uninterested and didn't wish to be involved.

I kept out of doors as much as possible to avoid the taunts. I rambled across the fields, and more often than before took the bus to Woodstock, a small town three miles off; and sometimes to Oxford, twelve miles away. I spent the day visiting shops and going to the cinema. Most of the time I was fishing in the river, a great hobby of mine at which I was quite successful. I often had to fish outside the garden, for my tormentors came with their taunts, threw stones in the water, and ran away laughing.

Five boys tormented me – all in their late teens. They had come to the vicarage sometimes in previous holidays. They had started on me several days after the holidays began and went on almost every day for over a fortnight. I could do nothing except live with it. On a few occasions I quietly went into the lavatory to cry, vowing never to come there again. It seemed to me that they only made my life a misery out of sheer spite and sudden dislike for me. They had never done it before, and I couldn't understand

what lay behind it all. I often seriously thought of complaining to Mr Cox or his wife, but felt it would sound too childish. If the boys had accompanied their taunts with physical molestation, it would have been reasonable enough to complain, but as it happened it was just mouthwork.

I was totally ignorant that Mr Cox, and no doubt his wife, was well aware of the taunts. He drew me into his study after lunch one day with an expression of great thoughtfulness on his face. Hardly had we entered the large room than he spoke.

‘Now then! . . . You’re not getting on well with the other students, are you?’

I shook my head and said no, I wasn’t. He asked me why and I gave him my reasons in one sentence.

‘And you should be thanking God, Charles.’ He waited for the shock waves to subside. ‘You should be glad. Do you know why they’re teasing you?’

I shook my head and looked at the carpet. I was beginning to feel vaguely guilty by now. I was sure that somehow I was to blame. He went on. ‘They’re preparing you for Eton, Charles, preparing you . . . They know you hate being teased, and they *know* you’re going to get a bad time of teasing at Eton; they know it from experience at their public schools, and they’re preparing you for it. If you want to get on at Eton, you’ve got to stand up to teasing. So don’t think it’s because they don’t like you. All right?’

A choking rage almost suffocated me. I wanted to break every precious thing in that grey man’s study. I would not believe he could be serious, but he was; I could not believe that he

Arrival

expected me to believe the story, but he did. Nodding bleakly, I left the study.

He was Oxford-educated, and vicar of the small church in Glympton. He had three grown-up daughters, one married and the others working and coming to stay only at weekends. I didn't feel a great fondness for him. He was very quick tempered and as fierce as he looked. Perhaps it was because he was an officer in the Second World War, then, for a time, a policeman and finally a parson. He was a strict disciplinarian and often used to chastise, shout at and threaten the students for offences like laziness, untidiness, contradicting him and arguing – the last two of which he deplored most. I was perhaps the greatest offender for the first two crimes, and was beaten several times, deservedly enough, though I hated discipline. He used a slipper or a thin cane, both of which were very painful, especially with his size behind the strokes.

Mrs Cox, on the other hand, was kind and quiet as a mouse. It was during meals as we dished into her excellent cooking that full-scale rows between Mr Cox and one or more of the students, always boys, ensued. Occasionally I was one of them for reasons like not making my bed properly, fishing in my shoes, instead of gumboots, and so bringing mud into the house. All arguments always ended with, 'Shut up, boy! Get on with your meal and don't argue!' But offsetting his bad temper, he had a great sense of humour and was quite amusing at times. We all got used to him and accepted him for what he was.

His lecture to me about the taunts did two things: eased off my bitterness against my tormentors and made me sincerely wish that

I was not going to Eton. The few remaining weeks of the holidays were really terrible. Worrying about ragging was my main obstacle, accompanied by the continuing taunts, which didn't bother me so much now that I knew the reason for them; but I still hated them. They seemed to lessen, too. I thought that perhaps my guardian had told the boys to go easier. I wondered, too, if he could by any chance have told them to do it in the first place, but, as I never discussed the matter with anyone, I never found out. If he didn't, he certainly must have agreed with the idea . . .

As I cast my mind back with a terrible focus, in the car, it seemed that the situation at Eton was going to be as bad as *Tom Brown's Schooldays* – my colour being the reason. There was no possibility of the frightening journey being a fantasy. I was even tempted to wish that my blackness could be just a dream, and I was white instead. I begged that what Charlie Nichols had told me at my Crammer about prejudice at Eton was incorrect.

Soon we rounded a bend and slowed down. This instantly brought me out of my thoughts. I sat bolt upright, now very much awake, and there was a signpost staring down at me: ETON. The blood sang in my head. My heart started on a jazz rhythm. Nerves vibrating, senses fully alert, I looked at everything my eyes could take in. My first impression was that it was a perfectly ordinary place, despite big buildings and narrow lanes here and there. Nothing seemed to explain the reason for the celebrated name it had earned. It certainly did not look in the least hostile or ominous. That was the main thing I was trying to detect. And only a few people passed, mostly grown-ups, no tough-looking teenagers to add sparks to the fear gripping my heart.

Arrival

A few minutes later the car swung into a narrow lane before turning into the drive of Waynflete House, where there were a few other cars. We had arrived. My stomach was knotted with fear as we struggled from the car and I looked up at the big, four-storey house. It looked old and a bit unwelcoming. I carried my luggage to the front door, where we were met by my housemaster and his wife, both of whom I had, in fact, met a year before, when the Headmaster of my prep school brought me to be interviewed.

My housemaster was one of the school's chaplains, and taught Classics. Long-faced, he was as old and as tall as the Reverend Cox with a permanently bowed head, which almost concealed his clerical collar. He had the rather disconcerting habit of not looking you straight in the eye when he spoke, and my first reaction was that he might turn out to be a rather unsympathetic character. His wife, however, seemed very cheerful, and the one counter-balanced the other.

After I had formally shaken them both by the hand, my housemaster, David Wild, took me to see my room, which was on the top floor of the house. Only at Eton did every boy have his own room in which to work, sleep and entertain his friends: it was his haven to decorate virtually as he pleased. After only a few terms, it became as familiar as the walls of a prison cell. It was a largish room, rather bigger than I had expected, with one small window looking towards Windsor Castle, about a mile away across green fields. The room was shiny and old, and the smell of furniture polish assailed my nostrils. The furniture was spartan-utility with a bootbox, an ottoman, a burry (a desk used for all purposes with a removable top on it that was the bookcase), mirror, table and of

A Black Boy at Eton

course a bed, which folded neatly on end against the wall; during the day it was concealed by a curtain. There was also a fireplace and a bucket of coal beside it, because boys were 'privileged' to make their own fires in the evening for warmth. I found it a very impressive room on first sight.

The first person I met there was Mrs Mac, the boys' maid for my landing. She was unpacking my trunk, which had been sent on in advance. Stout, white-haired and old, she seemed a kindly enough person. After being introduced to her, I was taken by my housemaster to his sitting-room, where my guardian and his wife were with the parents of four other new boys. For about an hour we drank tea, ate cakes and biscuits and rather stiffly tried to make conversation among ourselves. I was heartened that the other new boys seemed amiable.

I took my guardian and his wife to see my room. They spent half an hour there, praising it, saying how lucky I was, and that I wasn't to worry, I'd soon settle down. They had said this about twenty times that day but didn't seem aware of it. Then they left. I went downstairs with them to say goodbye, and from the hall I watched the car drive out to the road and disappear. My throat went dry and I swallowed what felt like a chunk of piglead. My vertebrae turned into ice cubes! A surging wave of apprehension – terror – engulfed me in a cold panic. I had never known anguish so intense. I was terribly *alone* and felt I knew the meaning of the word fully. I blinked away hot tears welling up. Reverend and Mrs Cox weren't my parents, not even very close to me: but I knew them and now they were gone.

*