

CHANGING THE STORY

PHOTOGRAPHS OF BRITISH LIFE
IN BLACK AND WHITE (1917-1962)

WELCOME TO THE NORTH WALL



The North Wall is thrilled to be hosting *Changing the Story: Photographs of British Life in Black and White (1917-1962)*.

Changing the Story brings us a series of distinct images from an overlooked part of British history, selected and interpreted by multi-award-winning poet, playwright, theatre-maker, performer, librettist and academic Dr Rommi Smith.

We are proud to be collaborating with leading photographic archive TopFoto, where Rommi is the inaugural

Writer-in-Residence, to facilitate this exhibition. *Changing the Story* also marks the continuation of The North Wall's relationship with its principal sponsor, St Edward's School, working together to inspire young people in our Oxford community through creative means. We are indebted to the many individuals who have contributed to its realization.

This exhibition asks us to take another look at the past, the images gently reminding us that our view of history is often the upshot of the stories we were never told just as



Above: British Navy, WW1, Fleet Auxiliary arm, July 1917. Cover: 14th October 1938, crowds of children cheering Queen Mary as she opened a new extension to Lambeth Town Hall, Brixton, London.



130 passengers arrived in Southampton, emigrating to Britain from the West Indies. Sisters Veronica and Velveta McGregor (on right) take tea in the train on their way to London, where their father will be waiting, 1953.

much as the stories we were. We hope the exhibition amplifies some of those less familiar stories and encourages us all to look, with an inquisitive lens, at the narratives that developed unquestioned and unchallenged.

Audio recordings of Smith's new writing are accessible via QR codes, with music by Christella Litras, performed by Rommi Smith, Christella Litras and actor Lladel Bryant.

We hope you enjoy the exhibition and find the content both engaging and enlightening.



John Hoggarth and Ria Parry
Co-Directors, The North Wall

ORIGINS OF AN EXHIBITION

ROMMI SMITH

This exhibition begins in the early spring of 2019:

I am attending the first British American Project (BAP) writers' retreat and am making a cup of tea in the farmhouse kitchen. Flora brings in a sepia-toned digital album of photographs entitled: *The Smith Collection* (part of the TopFoto archive). I note the name on the cover "Smith" and register the metaphors: our shared surname; our resonances and

differences. I don't know, yet, that I am on the cusp of what will be a three-year-conversation. I open the album and am spellbound; immediately struck that what unites these temporally disparate photographs – these stories of people and places across time and space – is the racial diversity of the protagonists in them. These photos flip-the-script on Britishness: my history lessons did not look like this.



The stunning photos in this exhibition disrupt monoculturalist ideas of Britishness as white and dominant narratives of Blackness as other. I have selected thirty-four magnificent images for this exhibition; there are many more in the TopFoto archive. Each image is part of the changing story of Britishness: in Black and White. At the crossroads where the archive and the present tense meet – here I am: a writer, of mixed-heritage, tuning in, looking at the images down the decades. You can hear the whisperings of the past through the porous palimpsest.

In 2019, I suggested to Flora that a series of artists-in-residence respond to the TopFoto archive, engaging with these extraordinary images taken by photographers including Ken Russell, Roger Bamber and John Topham. I am delighted to hold the first residency in the archive and to co-curate this exhibition. My gratitude to: Flora Nedelcu-Smith for the commission; Flora, Alan Smith, John Blean and

the rest of the TopFoto team, for kind assistance during this creative journey; Ivan Stott for important initial inspiration; Stella Litras for dynamic collaboration; the National Lottery Heritage Fund for funding my writing residency; Colin Grant and Writers Mosaic for making further poetry possible, including the poem in response to Ken Russell's exhibition photograph; other members of the exhibition team, including Sian Flynn, The North Wall and Mike Stanfield.

Heartfelt thanks to the Zayne and Oppenheim families: I could not have envisaged that my residency research would unite a family with an exhibition photograph of loved ones (and, in the case of two family members, with an image of their childhood-selves) – I will forever be grateful that this residency has made this so.

Dr Rommi Smith
Inaugural Writer-in-Residence
for TopFoto

Writers Mosaic
(is an initiative of the
Royal Literary Fund).

WRITERS MOSAIC



Rommi Smith is the owner and founder of 125th & Midnight, a production company and small press.

THE NORTH WALL AND ST EDWARD'S SCHOOL



All of us at St Edward's are delighted to be working in partnership with The North Wall, Dr Rommi Smith and

TopFoto to bring you *Changing the Story*, an exhibition which combines photography, poetry and song to explore the diversity of British life and history.

Here at St Edward's, we are phenomenally lucky to have a symbiotic relationship with The North Wall Arts Centre. For 15 years the space that was once the School's Victorian swimming pool has been home to dynamic theatre productions and exhibitions providing beauty and interest for the School and the wider community in Oxford.

The North Wall reflects the breadth of the education which we aim to give our pupils, enriching their curriculum with live theatre, dance, music, art and talks.

Alastair Chirnside
Warden



© Ken Russell / TopFoto

Left and right:
From the series
"Portobello - scenes of
everyday life", London,
October 1954.



THE ARCHIVE

“ *I am an archive. 4000 square feet, millions of photographs crowded into cabinets and corridors, mapped by a digital catalogue as complex as a transport network. I have swallowed your history – yes yours! – stopped on glass from the very dawn of the photographic age. I am cool and dry: heat and humidity will unmake these fragile stories. So will neglect. Miles of shelves mark my boundaries with untold thousands of boxes, 12cm by 5cm by 15.5cm, cradling negatives and news captions from 1910 to the 1980s in the language and thought of the time. In other words ... I carry truth and prejudice in equal measure.* **”**

One image can speak for millions when it comes to archives.

30 April 1936, a 28-year-old former Met policeman photographed a Bedford van on Commercial Road, East London. He was interested in cars; this was an early example of innovative commercial vehicles; and a smiling bystander served to frame the shot. Or perhaps he was a fellow enthusiast who refused to move. Maybe he was the driver, or a friend from the days on the beat? He's relaxed, at home. A witness.

The young photographer's name was John Topham (1908-1992) and he was to become one of the most significant British social documentary photographers of the 20th century.

The witness's name was....not recorded. Not even by a former policeman like Topham, schooled in taking names.

The photograph was a glass negative, captioned, slipped into an acid-free sleeve and stored. It lay unconsidered and unprinted for the next 85 years.

Having started taking photographs in 1927 whilst still in the Met, by the time Topham retired in 1974 he had been published everywhere that mattered, won major competitions, and provoked questions in Parliament.

In 1975 my parents, Alan and Joanna Smith, a publisher and a writer respectively, bought Topham's archive of 127,000 negatives from him and set up a licensing business in their Kent home.

Topham's negatives and (mostly) meticulous log books laid the foundation of the TopFoto archive, and the Smith family built up from there. Venerable Fleet Street agencies, employing the best photographers from the 1920s onwards, were gobbled up by newspapers and their collections often dumped. Except those bought by the Smiths.

John Topham,
photographer,
1940.

Today, TopFoto
thrives in two
radically different
technological
worlds: a 21st-
century digital
business and a
historical archive
of global significance
in glass, acetate
and print.

Far from being an inert,
well-behaved filing system,
the archive is a formidable
creative force, with truth and
disruption at its core.

Rommi Smith's residency has
brilliantly pushed us onwards,
uncovering living connections
between past and present; giving
voice to those silenced in acetate
or glass.

Flora Nedelcu-Smith
Owner-manager, TopFoto

Read
more

www.topfoto.co.uk/blog

Thanks to the DCMS and
National Lottery Fund for Heritage
for supporting the archive, 2020.

BACK FOCUS

“Space between the far surface of the lens and the image plane, when the lens is focused at infinity.” SWPP, 2021



A Ford Bedford commercial van on the road-side, Commercial Road, East London 1936, with an unnamed bystander looking on.

Nineteen thirty-six, on a street
in London. John's just photographed
a Bedford van and there's a Black guy
looking at it, smiling.
He's not the point of the picture,
but yet he has become the point of the picture.

He was a bystander,
but he looks so comfortable.

It's one of the things
where you start to think:
who is he? What's the story?



Scan the QR code to hear Rommi perform a sequence of verbatim poems, crafted entirely from the words spoken in an interview with the TopFoto team, regarding the origins of the TopFoto archive. The poems are set to music composed, arranged and produced by Christella Litras.

WHY 492 WEST INDIANS CAME TO BRITAIN

Archive Pathé-style voice:

Why 492 West Indians Came to Britain -

Caribbean voices:

a good omen,

perhaps?

Optimism.

Flight.

A rosy picture of Britain.

A serious-minded vocation

to succeed

the prospect of a wish

being settled.

Archive Pathé-style voice:

Not all intend to settle here.

Caribbean Voices

(Wry) A good omen?

Archive Pathé-style voice:

Had they thought England a golden land
in a golden age?

Caribbean voices:

Between the closing shores
of Kent and Essex, high above the landing stage
at Tilbury one of [us] looked over the unlovely town
to the grey green fields beyond and said:

“If this is England, I like it.”

Archive Pathé-style voice:

Their quaint amalgam of American optimism
and African innocence...

Caribbean voices:

In the grey light of early morning
against the white walls of the ship
row upon row of [...] pensive faces
looking upon England.

Optimism travelled with [us].

Archive Pathé-style voice:

What manner of men are these the Empire
Windrush has brought to Britain?

Caribbean voices:

Builder,
carpenter,
apprentice accountant,
farmworker,
tailor,
welder,
spray painter,
boxer,
musician,
mechanic,
valet,
calypso singer,
law student.

Arrivals on board the ex-troopship, HMT Empire Windrush at Tilbury. An RAF recruiting officer speaks to a group of men interested in joining the Royal Air Force, 22nd June 1948.

Archive Pathé-style voice:

Or thus they described themselves! And what has made them leave Jamaica?

Caribbean voices:

Lack of work.
Unemployed luck.
Complete hope.

Archive Pathé-style voice:

Mrs Doreen Zayne, formerly and soon to be once more of Blackpool confessed that she did not care for Jamaica and was glad to be home again. She has two children a boy and a girl. Her husband hopes to find work in Lancashire. Their arrival has added to the worries of the trade union leaders of the problem posed.

Caribbean voices:

Surely then, there is nothing against our coming, for we are British subjects. If there is, is it because we are coloured?

Archive Pathé-style voice:

What were they thinking these 492 men from Jamaica and Trinidad, as the Empire Windrush slid upstream?

Caribbean voices:

If I survive – so good: if I don't survive – so good.

Archive Pathé-style voice:

Why 492 West Indians Came to Britain?

(Pause)

Caribbean voices:

Why 492 West Indians Came to Britain?

(Pause)

Older Caribbean voice looking back in time:

Why 492 West Indians Came to Britain?

This philosophy: you take a chance, you don't wait until you die.

Note: the text represents a call and response between the official and the unofficial stories of those who travelled on the Empire Windrush. The text is formed from a series of redaction poems made from a single news article, published in *The Guardian* on 23rd June, 1948. To read the full article scan the QR code on page 13.



Scan the QR Code to hear actor Lladel Bryant and Clinton Cameron (himself part of what is termed 'the Windrush generation'), perform this poem. The poetic script is set to music composed, arranged and produced by Christella Litras.

REDACTION

Why 492 West Indians came to Britain



HMT Empire Windrush,
Tilbury, a crowd of arrivals
on the ship, 22nd June 1948

this philosophy

you take a chance - you don't wait until you die



This redaction is made from a single news article, published in *The Guardian* on 23rd June, 1948. To read the full article scan this QR code.

THE EMPIRE WINDRUSH

MR. HERBERT ZAYNE IS
WRITING A LETTER HOME



"Two of the wives are Englishwomen who followed their husbands to Jamaica and now return with them to England. One of them Mrs. Doreen Zayne, formerly, and soon to be once more, of Blackpool, confessed that she did not care for Jamaica and was glad to be home again. She has two children, a boy and a girl. Her husband hopes to find work in Lancashire."

THE GUARDIAN, 23RD JUNE 1948

I

...And if anyone else asks,
tell them the yearning became too much:

her auntie's laugh; Sunday roasts;
the bandstand up at Stanley Park;

the want for English rain; the promenade;
The Winter Gardens.

Loss was a cloud that followed us around,
despite the heat. We brought our children back

for a different kind of life.
So, we settle on this dream:

10, Amberbanks Grove
off Lytham Road, Blackpool.

II

A month before today,
a doctor bird enters my sleep.

I am painting a room
I have never seen before.

I am painting it the colour of Empire –
the bird's long, black tail feathers move
in a figure of eight; his beak is reclaimed
-sunset which he dips into the river of the dead.

And what rises is nectar,
is flame; each soul's wish upon his coat
in iridescent green. He carries a single leaf
(lesson from the book of the blue mahoe tree)

and his song is the line between dream
and daybreak,

'til he's gone
through the portal to sun -
and I wake...

Doreen and Herbert Zayne on their arrival at
Tilbury on board HMT Empire Windrush with
their children. Mrs Zayne lived in Blackpool
before leaving for Jamaica with her husband
about 18 months earlier, 22nd June 1948.

III

down Farnworth pit.
The dream is not in Blackpool,

so, we move, again, to find it.
Down in the depths of the English

dark, the clocking-card routine
of jibes about the colour of a Black man's skin:

"does it come off wi' the coal dust?"
"do you go dark in the sun?" –

I swat away like flies and tell them this:
I come from a land where the sun was invented!

I rise with indifference –
a pat on the back when the shift is done.

I rise with indifference -
and a charming word for their women!

My name in their next round at the bar –
one of the lads; but the flight in me means

I am the man
who always had his suitcase packed.

When, in time, you find this photo of us:
remember - we were young. And how we tried
to turn the hostile tide
towards acceptance.

Forgive, I swapped the English snow
for a maple leaf –

but after I am gone,
amongst my things -

you'll find my ticket
home.



Scan the QR Code
to hear actor Lladel
Bryant perform this poem.
The poetic script is set to
music composed, arranged
and produced
by Christella Litras.

GHAZAL 1948

EILEEN JOHNSON, AGED 24

With her husband (Willis), and two children (Maureen and Terence), Mrs Eileen Johnson, is travelling to her widowed mother's two-roomed cottage in Nailsea, Somerset. Maureen is carrying a black teddy [...] originally designed to commemorate the sinking of the Titanic in 1912.

ARCHIVAL NOTES, TOPFOTO ARCHIVE



Left: Mrs. Eileen Johnson, 24, seen with her two children, Terence, aged three, and Maureen, aged four and a half, on board the Empire Windrush, Tilbury Docks, 22nd June 1948.



Main image: Stepney Institute: evening classes / night school taking place in Stepney, East London - mothers take their children along with them to their dressmaking classes, July 1952.

Yes, these *are* my children, England.
We're sailing home to you, England.

Home is a kind of shorthand:
"no coloureds. No Irish. No Dogs!" England?

"They're coming to take our jobs, our women!"
- your judgement on my husband, England?

That stare which says: I married Ham;
a female Cain estranged from England.

I turn this golden vow: third finger,
left hand; lie back and think of England:

Mrs Fletcher (the decade before now)
writing her report from Liverpool, England.

"The problem of half-castes", she writes,
"[n]aturally, they grow up [in England]

without any [...] recognisable home-life
[...] after doing the rounds of [...] institutions [in England]

they gradually realise they are nothing."
The *something* of a kiss, England,

we press to the *someone* of our children,
whether they be blood, England,

or chosen. And these are *my* children:
my daughter, almost five, England;

my son who's three. To our girl I give
a small black bear for comfort, England,

in the hopes her dreams won't sink. Our boy
I dress in a sailor's suit, England,

because the sea is his, so he
will never lose his way, England,

nor the ship of himself. In this, I remain – and forever am,
their mother: Eileen Johnson, England.



Scan the QR Code to hear
Rommi Smith perform this
poem. The poetic script
is set to music composed,
arranged and produced by
Christella Litras.

*“There were no prospects for me in Jamaica.
I could not get a normal passage, so I slipped
aboard – I’m not telling you how – and hid.
Troops fed me with food brought from their canteen.”*

EVELYN WAUCHOPE



THREE

at thirty-nine the thread is a running stitch
moving toward forty

too quickly; your hands fashioning
scraps into patchwork; slim income of summer

dresses made for the elegance
of another's shape. Sunrise happens

in other places - one lifetime could be enough
to see them. The spell in everyone's talk

is *that* ticket to other horizons. No time
for back stitch now, the thread is a slip-

stitch to catch when pennies don't add up.
Better get on board *this* boat, go see.

How is the thing of whisper and secret:
coy smile for the gatekeepers;

passing for someone else's reflection –
gets you on. Hiding in plain sight

on the hem of the deck, the frayed edge
of stars on a length of night,

but the scissor-sharp press of the wind
means, you give yourself up -

when the thread proves a bias tape
between decks. What happens next

is part myth and legend:
a Paris-bound heiress's rescue mission;

a trilby passed by the manager
of five Jamaican boxers;

a Jazz fundraising concert.
The thread turning tightrope

to lifeline, into sea road –
its white seams parting

behind you.

Evelyn Wauchope - photographed on
arrival at Tilbury Docks, 22nd June 1948.



Scan the QR Code to hear
Rommi Smith perform this
poem. The poetic script
is set to music composed,
arranged and produced
by Christella Litras.





Ash pit cleaner, Leicester
Central Engine Shed, 1962.

SONNET VARIATION

FOR THE MAN WHOSE NAME I CANNOT TRACE

Brother of the *Black Five* (*four-four-eight-four-eight*):
nineteen-sixty-two looks good on you,
considering. Did “white man’s shit work” by decree
erase your law, or medical degree?

Brother titled: *Ash Pit Cleaner*, the phoenix
has flown her nest; the afterlives of fire
your stock and trade; each vault a bank of ash.
Profit rates are grey - you raise the average.

Brother of *Leicester Central Engine Shed*:
journeying out from Marylebone, your sable-
freight an elongated sentence through Pevsner’s
guides to British counties. And if I think

of what you teach me in the here and now –
it’s how to make a path from ash;
keep your head above ground.



Scan the QR Code to hear
this poem performed by Rommi
Smith, Christella Litras and
Lladel Bryant. The poetic
script is set to music
composed, arranged and
produced by Christella Litras.



THE BALLAD OF JUDY JOHNSON'S BLUES

*“A&A Club London
Conveniently located at
[6] Flitcroft Street, on the
eastern edge of London’s
Soho area, the A&A club
was the ideal all-night,
hang-out for youngsters.
West Indian singer Judy
Johnson gives them a blues
number at the A&A.”*

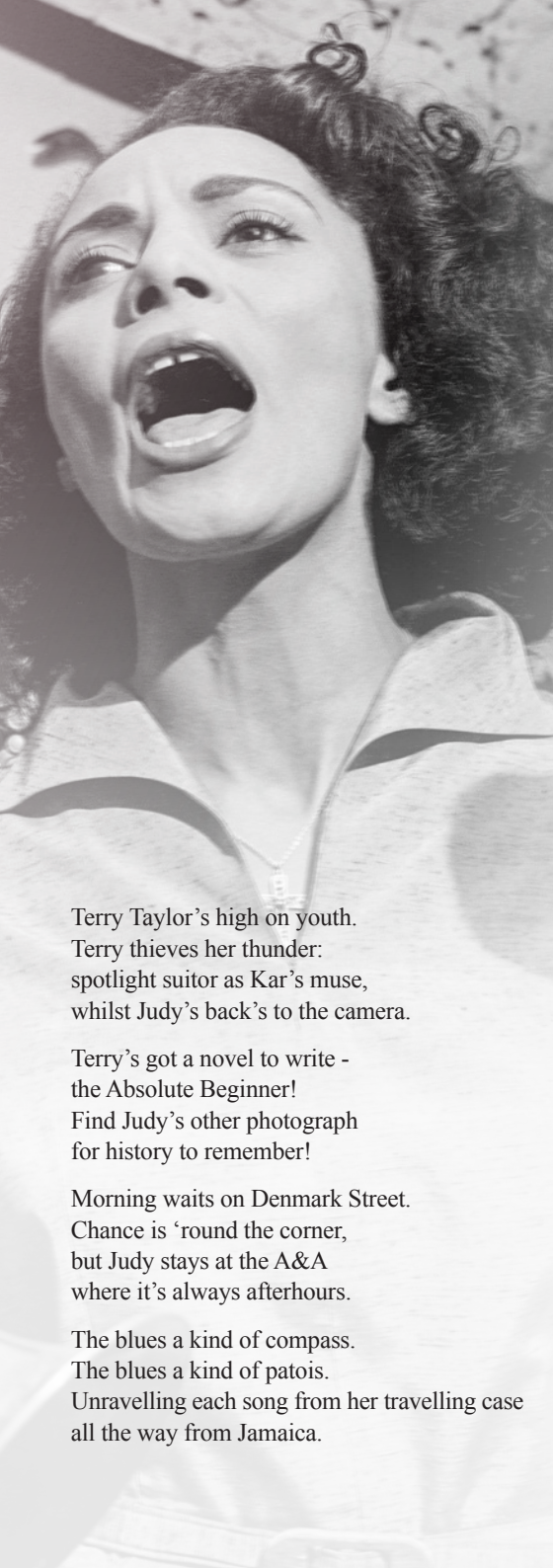
SEPTEMBER 1953

Judy Johnson’s singing the blues
down at the A&A club,
where it’s always afterhours at the bar
and she’s serving them songs by the glass:

*I Asked for Water. I Won’t Cry Anymore
tears are Rollin’ And Tumblin’ -
if I Remember You, I’ll Dust My Blues-
you’re a piece of Smokestack Lightnin’!*

*Every Night About This Time
nothing else will rival
the Blues Before Sunrise she sings
for the sleepless and the hopeful.*

The blues a kind of compass.
The blues a kind of patois.
Unravelling each song from her travelling case
all the way from Jamaica.



Scan this QR Code to see another portrait of Judy Johnson, held in the National Portrait Gallery.



Scan this QR Code to hear Rommi Smith and Christella Litras perform this poem. The ballad is set to music composed, arranged and produced by Christella Litras.



Scan this QR Code to hear Rommi Smith and Christella Litras' perform this poem with an accompanying Vimeo video. The ballad is set to music composed, arranged and produced by Christella Litras.

Terry Taylor's high on youth.
Terry thieves her thunder:
spotlight suitor as Kar's muse,
whilst Judy's back's to the camera.

Terry's got a novel to write -
the Absolute Beginner!
Find Judy's other photograph
for history to remember!

Morning waits on Denmark Street.
Chance is 'round the corner,
but Judy stays at the A&A
where it's always afterhours.

The blues a kind of compass.
The blues a kind of patois.
Unravelling each song from her travelling case
all the way from Jamaica.

Then Judy Johnson disappears
with her setlists and desires,
faster than the ghosts in the rising smoke
of an unattended Gauloises.

There's a rumour in the research,
there's a question in the ether
that haunts the archives of the air,
disturbs those made of paper;

stirs every blackbird on the roof
of the skyline's architecture
and every nightingale that sings
each wakening Soho hour:

did Judy Johnson disappear -
or do we just not see her?

There's a cusp-moon out on Flitcroft Street
where the punters are heading for bed
but Judy Johnson singing her dreams,
yes, Judy Johnson leaving her trace
on the dreams of the architect.

A BRIEF EXHIBITION BIBLIOGRAPHY

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