

Professor Day

"We cannot understand one another unless we understand each other's stories." David Olusoga's comment in a recent interview for Prospect might seem obvious to the historians graduating today, but building widespread understanding of stories that have been untold, forgotten, avoided, or suppressed demands tenacity, integrity, and fearlessness. That is the task to which David has devoted much of his adult life. Few in our contemporary culture have done so much to inform and catalyse our public discourse on equality and race, creating a body of work that will inspire generations to come.

David is a Geordie Nigerian. His father was a student at this university when he met his mother in the 1960s. They later moved to his native Nigeria, where David was born in 1970. Five years later, after his parents separated, his mother brought David and his sister to live in her native Gateshead.

The North East is proud of its solidarity and cultural warmth, but David was growing up in the late '70s and '80s when racial divisions were deep here, as elsewhere in Britain. David still bears scars of the physical attacks he faced, and the sheer normality of racist violence as a background to daily life must have been damaging too. When David was 14, the family was driven out of their home by a sustained campaign of terror inspired by the National Front – bricks hurled through the windows of rooms in which children were sleeping, with notes telling them to go 'home'. School did not serve David well, either. His early educational experience was of survival rather than intellectual growth. For example, it took a decade of persistent parental pressure before his dyslexia was even diagnosed. In that environment, David might not have expected much of his future, but life is lived on more than one note, and he has strong memories of feeling wanted in the North East, among peers and particularly his family, with loving grandparents, a caring home with his siblings and his mother who did so much to empower her children. It is an honour to welcome members of David's family including his mother, and his sister and Newcastle graduate – Dr Yinka Olusoga – to the King's Hall today.

Two things helped transform David's outlook: the public library and public service broadcasting.

Over years, Gateshead Central Library opened worlds of history, art and music to David in ways that his schooling had failed to do. Clearly, he felt welcomed and at home there and at the leisure centre next door. John Hudson – the assistant librarian on duty the day that the Olusogas signed up as borrowers – remembers noticing the surname and the mixed-race family, both unusual in Gateshead at the time. With a librarian's natural concern for safety, John also tells me that he had kept an eye out for David and Yinka running happily among the bookshelves while he prepared those handwritten readers' tickets.

Another transforming influence was television. David often cites the work of Michael Wood, whose vivacity overlaid an investigative, critical approach to history, kindling David's ambition to do something similar. Encouraged by all these influences, he began to investigate for himself the history of black people in Britain and set on the road to studying history at university.

David studied History and later Journalism at Liverpool, Leicester and Leeds Trinity, swerving the opportunity to do a PhD. Instead, he (his words) “ran away to the circus” of broadcasting, joining the BBC as a researcher, moving into producing and directing historical documentaries. His talent for developing and delivering relatable history led to his presenting programmes and creating texts with which so many of us are familiar, including *The World's War: Forgotten Soldiers of Empire*, *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, *Britain's Forgotten Slave Owners*, *A House Through Time*, *Union*, *The Unwanted: The Secret Windrush Files*, *Our NHS: A Hidden History*. I am struck by how often the words “forgotten”, “hidden”, or “secret” arise in the titles of David's work. His motivating mission is to help us remember, uncover, reveal.

He feels personally committed to his subjects, and this makes him unsentimental in his truth-telling. Our colleague Professor Gary Craig, who has been thinking and writing about racism for most of his life describes David's work as "'academic' writing crossing the boundaries of history, politics, international affairs and geography at its very accessible and powerful best". There is a clear public longing to understand these hidden histories, and I can see why. The startling effect of seeing David, in his series about the Union, walking through the Belfast streets into which I was born, telling the stories of families like mine, raised questions about the gaps in the histories that I had received, growing up in the Troubles: gaps all too often filled by partisan narrative.

David's achievements were recognised at the highest levels. For example, he won a BAFTA for Britain's Forgotten Slave Owners and numerous awards for Black and British. He was created an OBE in the 2019 New Year's Honours for services both to history and to community integration.

And yet ...

David's move from production to presenting had only highlighted to him the gulf between the diversity on our screens and the inequalities behind the camera in the industry that commissions and creates television. When he was invited to give the 2020 MacTaggart lecture – the great set piece for the TV industry – just 3 months after the murder of George Floyd – he felt impelled to speak out. The video is powerful: he stands in a brooding Bristol City Hall, speaking – as so many of us did in that Covid year – online and to little more than a camera lens. Over 40 minutes he exposed an industry that had normalised inequalities and exclusive social networks. He revealed his own struggles with depression in the face of grinding marginalisation and spoke for a lost generation of black and minority leaders in television. The reaction, at least within the industry, was positive to his revealing hidden and troubling truths. People felt they had been heard.

David's stature was later recognised through the President's Medal from the British Academy for services to humanities and social sciences, the Medlicott Medal for Services to History, and a BAFTA Special Award – one of its highest honours. He is a regular on the Powerlist of Influential Black Britons and holds numerous honorary degrees and other awards, but I hope closest to his Geordie heart is the Freedom of Gateshead that he was granted in 2023.

The child inspired by the public library, the eager consumer and then producer of great public service broadcasting, is now a public historian. Having fled to 'the circus', David was recaptured by academia in 2019, joining his childhood inspiration Michael Wood as a Professor of Public History at Manchester University. He sees his role as bringing sound scholarship into the public media, and bringing wider audiences especially from minorities, to engage with history before they decide that it is "not for them, about them, or interesting to them". In doing so, he uses a huge range of forms from social media to staged lectures to podcasts. I think he does all this because he finds hope, not least in young people more willing than previous generations to celebrate facts rather than passively absorb heroic myth.

Professor Day, When Martin Luther King received his doctorate in Civil Law here in 1967, he urged our predecessors to combat the evils of war, poverty and racism, and reminded us that we are bound together in "an inescapable network of mutuality". David has dedicated his career to that goal and that mutuality: "We cannot understand one another unless we understand each other's stories."

In recognition of his commitment to speaking for the silent, the ignored, the unknown, to uncovering and telling the truth that is the parent to reconciliation, and for bringing that truth into our public life, I present to you Professor David Olusoga as a candidate for admission to the degree of Doctor of Civil Law *honoris causa*.

Prof. J S Fitzgerald
Senior Public Orator
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