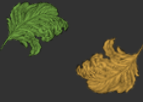


Ideas for using



Billy Waters: Songs from the Shadows

AIMS & OBJECTIVES

Billy Waters: Songs from the Shadows is a graphic novel, designed for ages 11-16, which explores how histories of marginalised communities can be recovered and assessed, using a once-flamboyant but now little-known figure, Billy Waters.

The graphic novel is intended not only to bring Waters's impressive story to life, with its many connections to wider themes in the Age of Revolutions, but also to encourage readers to reflect on how power and agency affect the practice of interpretation and the creation of histories or cultures.

The story draws on the few sporadic archival references left to us about Waters – an American, sailor, fiddler, amputee, performer, pauper, and Londoner – and puts them in larger contexts to help explore the dynamics of representation in history.

The key objective is to encourage students to recognise how history is curated not captured, and that different voices – including their own voices – can reshape understandings of the past, making them richer and more engaging.

Supplementary aims are to help shed light on aspects of migration, military, medical, and Black histories – while exposing readers to a dynamic range of objects and sources from the Age of Revolutions.

SHORT BIO: WHO WAS BILLY WATERS?

Billy Waters was born around 1778 in New York, possibly into slavery (if his mother was enslaved, according to the laws in the British colonies). At that point, thousands of refugees were fleeing to the British garrison at New York during the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783), including Black Loyalists who had been offered their freedom from slavery by the British Army or fled from American slaveholders. Many of those Black Loyalists would eventually leave when the British forces evacuated the city, some settling in Nova Scotia (Canada), and others creating communities in London, or becoming involved in a colony created in Sierra Leone (West Africa).

We don't know whether Billy Waters was born enslaved, if he secured his freedom, or if he left New York, but he definitely accrued some maritime experience as a young man, between c.1790-1812. He was likely involved in labour (like thousands of other lower-class workers in maritime communities) that helped fuel Atlantic commerce – working on docks, on ships, or in manufacturing.

Waters was an experienced seafarer and had travelled widely given that he enlisted in the British Royal Navy in 1811. He may have signed up voluntarily, to escape some other circumstances in his life, or because like many thousands (of all ages and backgrounds) he was press-ganged, pressured into serving against his will. This was a widespread policy during the Napoleonic Wars and had become an acute source of tension between Britain and the United States whose sailors – especially Blacks without documentation – were vulnerable. Either way, William Waters made an appearance in historical records when he was ferried by the navy aboard a small boat from Tower Hill to be signed into the muster book of HMS Ceres on 5 October 1811. Within months, he was transferred to HMS Namur (the same ship that famous abolitionist Olaudah Equiano had served on) and finally HMS Ganymede whose diverse crew left the Nore anchorage in December on a cruising and convoy mission to Spain to support the British fleet.

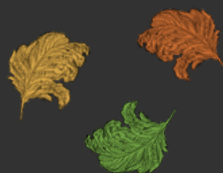
Waters was ranked as an 'Able Seaman' (showing experience and aptitude) and in short order promoted to a 'Quartermaster' (along with another American sailor, Thomas Brown from Providence) on 2 January 1812 – which was a petty officer rank that allowed him more pay and brought important responsibilities for maintaining cannons and ammunition. Black sailors or those of overseas or mixed heritage were commonplace among the global crews of British men-of-war ships – even if ideas of race and class prescribed limits on their becoming officers. But Waters's naval career ended with the life-changing injuries he sustained after an accidental fall from the rigging on 3 March 1812.

After the traumatic shipboard amputation of one of his legs, Waters was returned to Haslar hospital in Portsmouth for recuperation, but assessed as 'unserviceable' and discharged from the navy with a pension that he began collecting at Greenwich in the spring of 1812. Apart from those payments, we lose sight of Billy Waters in the historical record, but at some point between then and 1820 he became a very visible performer on the streets of central London. He developed an act with his violin, singing, and spectacular dancing using his wooden leg – and he had a distinctive costume to match, that included a naval jacket, flamboyant feathers and hat, and a wig. These echoed many elements common to Black Atlantic festivals of one sort or another – like the Pinkster Festival in New York or Junkanoo in the Caribbean and American South.

Waters's act played with ideas of performance and authority and identity – and as a migrant drew from lots of influences: African, American, maritime, folk, and local. He competed for attention and cash on the noisy streets of London, delighted children and theatre-goers, played in taverns, and supported his own family – a wife and two children – who lived in the Rookery of St. Giles, a notorious slum with cheap lodging and many Black and Irish migrants and new industries.

Billy Waters became so well-known that authors, artists, and playwrights adapted his character into their works, resulting in the irony that London's blossoming West End theatres featured popular shows (like *Life in London*: or *Tom and Jerry*) with white actors dressing as Waters and illustrations of him being sold, even while he struggled to make ends meet outside. As London authorities concerned about begging, poverty, and migration cracked down on the poor, Waters was arrested on at least one occasion – threatened with sanctions that were commonplace such as imprisonment or the workhouse. By 1823 he had become poorly, and notices of his death and burial were published – his widow receiving a last payment from his naval pension in June. His reputation lived on and the problematic consumer objects based on his character continued to circulate – the plays, publications, and [porcelain figures](#).

His journey may not have had the moral arc of famous Black abolitionists such as Olaudah Equiano or Frederick Douglass, or have reflected narratives of religious conversion like those of John Marrant or Boston King. He did not make it into the world of the elite like composer Ignatius Sancho or classical violinist George Bridgetower. But Billy Waters has much to tell us about the colours and cultures of lower-class people in the Age of Revolution and the migrants who built new identities and communities even amidst worlds of oppression and difficulty. Only by rescuing such voices from the shadows can we hope to see, to hear, and to understand history's full complexity.



CURRICULUM RESOURCE LINKS AND MAPS

In recent years, according to the [HA Secondary Survey](#) (2021), History departments in UK schools have been making big changes to KS3 curricula to address issues of diversity and inclusivity. Much of this has been oriented towards a fuller engagement with histories of empire, migration, and incorporating the voices and experiences of Black, disabled, and working-class people of different heritage. New resources from exam boards and associated presses have responded to reflect this change, much of the design and uptake driven by younger teachers and the need to adjust to changing classroom compositions, digital opportunities, and urgent questions of social and environmental justice.

Billy Waters: Songs from the Shadows aims to fulfil Shalina Patel's call for "recentring the voices of the colonised ... [to] think about marginalised groups ... widen the story and allow our students to interrogate those stories." This flexible resource can act as a standalone exercise (not only in history, but also citizenship or literature classes) or be bolted onto a range of existing frameworks – addressing as it does the final point in the HA's diversity "Curriculum Review Checklist" which seeks to "enable students to learn that history is an evidence-based, created, contested and selective interpretation of a very diverse past and that debating, rethinking and revisiting [it] is what historians do."

Among the new resources that Billy Waters: Songs from the Shadows can fit with is:

- The story-based approach in Hodder Education's "Changing Histories" series, including Expanding Worlds, c.1600-c.1900 (2025) which describes itself as a combination of textbook, illustrated children's book and coffee table book.
- Hodder Education's KS3 diversifying curriculum topic books, including The British Empire c.1500-present (which includes perspectives from the colonised) and Black Lives in Britain c.1500-present – including especially its depth enquiries on Black celebrities, the Age of Revolution, and Black British lives in music which overlap with figures and reference points in the graphic novel such as Joseph Johnston.
- OUP's History Depth Studies on The British Empire (case study on America) and Migration Nation (case studies on Irish, Caribbean migration)
- Edexcel GCSE History textbooks on Migrants in Britain c.800-present and Medicine in Britain c.1250-present
- OUP's Oxford AQA GCSE textbooks on Britain: Migration, Empires and the People c.790-Present Day – especially sections on losing the American colonies and migrants to, from and within Britain – as well as to fill the large hole between 1780 and 1845! And on Britain: Health and the People c.1000-Present Day – especially sections on pain, public health and poverty, and war and surgery.

KS3 Curriculum Maps for Billy Waters can include:

- Content Framework
 - Opportunity to make links between local, national, and international history
 - Opportunity to address 'second-order' historical concepts within the confines of a single life story: causation, significance, similarity and difference.
- Skills Development
 - Help students to "understand how different types of historical sources are used rigorously to make historical claims and discern how and why contrasting arguments and interpretations of the past have been constructed" (National Curriculum 2013 DfE) in relation to marginalised voices and students' own backgrounds and experiences.
- Enquiry Questions that address:
- Empire (e.g. how did empire and war impact on and shape lives in Britain?)
- Migration
- Ordinary People (e.g. what constraints or opportunities shaped lower-class lives?)
- Topics that cover
 - The British Empire's development and changing shape (often Year 8)
 - Transatlantic slavery and its impacts on individual lives and societies (often Year 8)
 - The Industrial Revolution and its impact on people's lives (often Year 9)
 - Changes wrought by 18th-19th c. revolutions and conflicts (often Year 9)

KS4 / GCSE Curriculum Maps

- Billy Waters and Empire
 - How diverse was the British Navy?
 - What besides slavery, abolitionism, and religion offered a framework for Black Atlantic lives and cultures?
 - Where and how can we find marginalised voices in the historical record?
- Billy Waters and Migration
 - In what ways did empire impact migration to and from Britain?
 - What features marked out migrants' lives and communities?
 - Where did Black overlap with Irish migration to Britain in the 19th century?
 - Links between migration and racism, xenophobia, culture, and class

“Britain is a nation capable of confronting all aspects of its past and becoming a better nation for doing so.” – David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History*, p.xxii.



RESOURCE CREATORS

Ben Marsh

Ben Marsh is a Reader in History at the University of Kent, where he specialises in the history of the Atlantic World and Early America. He has published on gender, race, and social and economic history, including the award-winning books *Unravelled Dreams: Silk and the Atlantic World 1500-1840* (2020) and *Georgia's Frontier Women: Female Fortunes in a Southern Colony* (2007), and the edited volume *Understanding and Teaching the Age of Revolution* (2017). Since 2018 he has led the Age of Revolution (1775-1848) educational project producing resources for UK schools that diversify coverage of the period, including games, graphic novels, and partnerships with the Historical Association and museums. This innovative biographic story, which draws on his research on race and maritime communities in Kent, follows in the footsteps of his successful collaboration with the artist Polyp, *Peterloo: Imagine a World* (2019). The wider project is generously funded by Waterloo200 Ltd. via DCMS (for the graphic novel) and by the AHRC via its Impact Accelerator Award (for the audio dimensions).

Selena Scott

Selena Scott is a Cambridge based artist whose work aims to navigate the Black identity and expose the present ramifications of colonial history. Driven by her Caribbean heritage and personal experience of intersectionality, she uses narrative to invite interrogation and connection beyond time, space and culture. Selena is also the author and illustrator of the Cambridge Black History Colouring Book for the Fitzwilliam Museum, a project aligned with her mission to amplify marginalised histories. This graphic novel holds personal significance for her, reflecting her commitment to challenging historical erasure and giving voice to the experiences of Black figures. Website: www.selenascott.com

Mary L. Shannon

Mary L. Shannon is an author and Senior Lecturer at the University of Roehampton, London. Her work focuses on Regency and Victorian popular culture. Her latest book, *Billy Waters Is Dancing: Or, How a Black Sailor Found Fame in Regency Britain* (2024) is the first biography of Billy Waters, and tells the story of his extraordinary life. Author of the award-winning *Dickens, Reynolds and Mayhew on Wellington Street: The Print Culture of a Victorian Street* (2016), she is a self-confessed fan of dusty archives and lively folk music. Born and raised in London, this project speaks to her experiences of teaching English in London state schools and London universities, and aligns with her goals of sharing the vibrant history of her diverse home city. Website: www.marylshannon.com

Megan King

Megan King serves the Project Coordinator for the Age of Revolution and the Front of House Manager at Benjamin Franklin House at 36 Craven Street, London. Her work focuses on practices of nonviolent civil resistance in eighteenth-century America. As a schoolteacher-turned-historian, this project was simultaneously meaningful and challenging for Megan, as it provided the unique experience of delving into little-known histories and finding creative ways to make them accessible for young learners.

Angeline Morrison

Angeline Morrison is a folk singer, songwriter, multi-instrumentalist and singing workshop leader who explores the traditional music of Britain with a deep respect and curiosity. A direct descendant of enslaved Africans in the Caribbean, Angeline is committed to giving voice to the often hidden, silenced or forgotten Black ancestors who have been present here in Britain for at least two thousand years. Angeline has written an educational resource for The English Folk Dance and Song Society on Black History and English Folk Songs, and in 2022 released the critically acclaimed album *The Sorrow Songs: Folk Songs of Black British Experience* (Topic Records). Website: <https://www.angelinemorrisonmusic.com/>