

*Bridglal Pachai*

## **The African Presence in Nova Scotia**

Nova Scotia occupies a special place in the story of the African diaspora to Canada: it was home to the first arrivals in the country. As for the Maritimes,<sup>1</sup> the number of persons of African descent living in Nova Scotia has always represented the highest figure. The smallest number was always to be found in Prince Edward Island, listed as 165 in 1881 but only 48 in 1961.

Numbers aside, the story of black settlements and black pioneers, of obstacles and organizations, of initiatives and achievements as well as failures and frustrations, is a fascinating story that is only now receiving recognition and respect. Previous pioneering studies by Robin Winks, William Spray, James Walker and John Grant,<sup>2</sup> among the notable few, are now being buttressed by spirited contributions by organizations like the Black Educators Association<sup>3</sup> and the Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia.<sup>4</sup> Poets like Maxine Tynes, George Elliott Clarke and George Borden are recapturing and reinforcing the black experience in powerful verse while playwrights like Walter Borden and George Boyd are using voice and verve, rhyme and rhythm, to put on centre stage the power and the personalities of the African diaspora.

This is to show that the efforts are producing results. In his context, it is worth pointing out that individual numbers and percentages of population are in themselves inadequate indicators of value and relevance. The pioneering study in Prince Edward Island promoted by the Institute of Island Studies and entitled *Shadows: A History of Black People in Prince Edward Island* by Jim Hornby, which will be published shortly, is an example of a valuable study even when numbers have always been small. What is important is the fact that the combination of the African diaspora with the African continent produces a figure on the contemporary scene of over half a billion persons living in

various parts of the globe. In an age when interdependence is crucial for survival and progress, a world population of half a billion cannot be ignored or undervalued.

Yet for so very long, people of the African continent as well as of the African diaspora were ignored and undervalued, as were other peoples of non-European origins. The story of the African presence in Nova Scotia is no exception to this generality.

The first recorded information of the African presence on Nova Scotian soil is that of the seaman, Matthew Da Costa, a member of the French expedition which landed at Port Royal in 1605. Da Costa is credited with having knowledge of the Micmac language, a fact which in itself suggests previous contact but which also draws attention to a well-known feature in African societies: the facility to master many tongues. Before Da Costa's century ran out, it was recorded that, in 1686, a black person was living on Cape Sable Island.

Thus, the recorded African presence in Nova Scotia goes back to the seventeenth century when there was little else than the Micmac people who had preceded them and the Acadians who were contemporaries. During the following century, the numbers rose from a trickle at the beginning to what was likened to a flood of immigrants before the eighteenth century ran its course. When Halifax was founded in 1749, there were persons of African descent in the town as new immigrants arrived from Britain as well as the New England colonies. While it is true that many of the blacks were in bondage, it is not necessarily true to deem all of them to be in that category. At least fifteen black persons were issued with rations in 1750 in Halifax. Not all recipients of rations were slaves. Ten years later when the Nova Scotia government opened up new lands to immigrants, free blacks came from the New England colonies to stake their claims in such places as Halifax, Liverpool, Bridgetown, Annapolis, Onslow, Cornwallis and Falmouth. One of them, Barbara Cuffy, was one of the founders of the town of Liverpool in her capacity as a principal shareholder.

Blacks were not doing too badly in terms of numbers as far as ethnicity went at this time. In the census of 1767, Nova Scotia's population was 13,374. The leading immigrant ethnic groups were as follows: Irish: 853; English: 302; German: 264; Blacks: 104; Scots: 52.

The greatest influx into Nova Scotia of members of the African diaspora took place as a result of the arrival of black loyalists brought to the province by the British government during and after the American War of Independence. Between 1782 and 1784 some 3,500 free black loyalists settled in Nova Scotia at first, and then a few in New

Brunswick, after 1784. The proportion of the black population rose to ten percent—the largest it has ever been in the history of Nova Scotia. Had this number stayed on permanently in the province, the story of black numbers, quality, performance and achievements would have been certainly different. However, one-third left for good to return to their ancestral home in Africa, in 1792. This emigration of some 1196 persons included the preachers and teachers of the time, the leaders and the landowners, the skilled and the free. Africa gained from David George, Thomas Peters, Joseph Leonard, Adam and Catherine Abernathy, Moses Wilkinson and Boston King, distinguished earliest settlers whose experience represented a sore point in the treatment accorded to British subjects of African descent. Nor was it the last sore point.

The proportion of blacks in Nova Scotia's population was never the same after 1792 even though two major immigrant streams are remembered as the Jamaican Maroons and the United States Black Refugees.

As for the first of these, the Maroons, some 511 arrived in the province from Jamaica in 1796 and some 550 left the country permanently in 1800. The temporary sojourn of the Maroons was part of a colonial design to quell the spirit of a rebellious people who were proud of their freedom and their cohesiveness. Of all the members of the African diaspora who set foot on Nova Scotian soil, the Maroons were the only ones who did not look to Canada as the land of promise and plenty, of safety and security, of freedom and fortune. All these the Maroons had sought and fought for in their native land. Caught up in a colonial conflict, they became pawns in a colonial game in Jamaica and in Nova Scotia. In Jamaica, their militancy was a threat; in Nova Scotia, their stubbornness and inflexibility were also deemed to be a threat to a conservative white society unaccustomed to black assertiveness. And so, they too had to move on.

The Black Refugees who came from the States as a result of British support and promises during the war between Britain and the U.S.A. in 1812, arrived in Nova Scotia between 1813 and 1816, adding some 2,000 persons to the population. These refugees came from the southern states where they were still in bondage. The history of their arrival and settlement makes for a fascinating story, the story of a people invited and encouraged to come but for whom no prior arrangements were made to receive them, to settle them and to make them welcome additions to an expanding province. In desperation, the governor of the day, Sir John Coape Sherbrooke, placed them in a poor house in

Halifax and on Melville Island, once a stronghold for prisoners, off the Halifax north-west arm. Only later, were they settled in Preston, Hammonds Plains, Beech Hill, Halifax, Windsor Road, Cobequid Road, Fletcher's Lake and Beaver Bank.

By 1816, persons of African descent had been in and out of Nova Scotia for some two hundred years. This was at a time when their kith and kin in Africa, except for parts of the southernmost region of the continent, were ruled by Africans themselves. The disruption and the upheavals of the slave trade had, of course, left their legacy on the continent. Their descendants were now in the throes of making a new life for themselves in Nova Scotia, as in other parts of the globe.

In Nova Scotia, however, a different situation was developing. In February, 1815 the governor informed the House of Assembly that the black refugees entering the province were providing much needed labor in agriculture in spite of the difficult circumstances under which they arrived. Governor Sherbrooke asked that they be given government grants, including land grants, to enable them to make a good beginning with their new lives. The members of the House ignored this request. Instead, two months later, in April, 1815, they attacked the "character, principles and habits" of the new black immigrants claiming that the majority of them competed unfairly with white laborers and servants, being unfitted by nature to live in the Canadian climate or to associate with the white colonists. The House requested that black immigrants be prohibited from entering Nova Scotia.

Had it not been for international commitments by the British House of Commons, to promote a humanitarian movement everywhere in the British empire, black immigration to Nova Scotia would not only have been prohibited in the early decades of the nineteenth century, but blacks would have been deported from Nova Scotia in the next few years if the mood and the motions of the legislative assembly were anything to go by.

From 1816 onwards, the reality was that members of the African diaspora were in Nova Scotia to stay; segregated black settlements sprang up in various places such as: Preston, Hammonds Plains, Beech Hill, Cobequid Road, Windsor Road, Africville, Birchtown, Digby, and Guysborough. Inducements surfaced from time to time to encourage them to relocate in other parts of the British empire. Except for 95 persons who elected to go to Trinidad in 1821, the black population of Nova Scotia was determined to stay on for better or for worse.

The rest of the story provides ample evidence of both these features. Organizations and institutions were put in place to give expression to the African voice echoed by products of the African diaspora. For the remainder of the nineteenth century it was the African United Baptist Association, founded in 1854, which bore the burden of this role. The Baptist church became the cement of the family and the pillar for the community. If the first distinguished church leader of the nineteenth century, Richard Preston, who as lay person and ordained minister provided leadership for forty-five years from 1816 to 1861 and in the process established a Mutual Aid Improvement Society and an Anti-Slavery Society, he was but the first in a long line of distinguished leaders which included such names as Wellington States, William Andrew White, William Pearly Oliver, Donald Fairfax and Donald Skeir, taking the list to contemporary times.

In the course of time, and up to the Second World War, the African voice and African aspirations were echoed by other organizations: the Halifax Colored Citizens Improvement League founded by Beresford Augustus Husbands in 1932—and headed by him for 36 years; and the Colored Education Centre founded by a Guyanese physician, Dr. F. Holder in 1938.

As in Africa, the tempo of the activities increased in the period following the Atlantic Charter in 1941 and the end of the war in 1945. While the previous incipient nationalist movements in Africa developed into lively mass-nationalist movements after 1945, culminating in independence for the colonies, in Nova Scotia, the period was marked by the emergence of a number of secular organizations to extend the scope of political participation and to increase the demands for improvements in housing, employment, education and human rights. Though the political process was nothing like the civil rights movement in the United States, the new organizations worked hard to bring about meaningful changes in a society in which race relations were based upon the well-laid foundations of white superiority and dominance. Inroads were hard to make and changes were slow in coming.

The Nova Scotia Association for the Advancement of Coloured People was formed in 1945 and continues to exist up to the present. At a time when it was the only provincial body to articulate the concerns of the black population its work was invaluable. Through its efforts new areas of employment opened up and instances of racial discrimination were brought to the attention of the courts and the public. When Nova Scotia passed the Fair Employment Practices Act in 1955

and the Fair Accommodations Act in 1959, the influence and the impact of N.S.A.A.C.P. were evident. It was only in the late 1960s that other organizations appeared on the scene.

The factors and circumstances that led to the formation of the Black United Front in 1969 are traceable to the changing order in the 1960s on the international, continental and national scenes. Nova Scotia's black population felt the surge of independence movements in Africa, civil rights movements in the United States, and events on the Canadian scene relating to Quebec, to biculturalism and bilingualism, and ultimately to multiculturalism. There were emerging precedents for action to bring about changes, including strikes, boycotts, dialogue, coalitions and co-operation. Older persons influenced by years of experience rubbed shoulders with younger persons with urgency and militancy in their minds and on their agendas. It was a time for change, for a meeting of minds, for an amalgam for united action. From this exciting mix, the Black United Front was formed in 1969.

Years later, new agendas emerged in keeping with the growing maturity of the black population and a growing realization that if much was achieved since the foundation years of notable ancestors, much was missing in an age when human rights were being propagated everywhere: establishment of self-esteem; recognition of the accomplishments and contribution of blacks of the diaspora and their descendants in every walk of life in Nova Scotia; platforms for specific undertakings by groups and individuals; and, research and publications which would enable society as a whole to appreciate and accept the contribution and the concerns of the black people of Nova Scotia. In this context, between 1969 and 1989, the following organizations and institutions emerged: the Black Educators Association, the Society for the Protection and Preservation of Black Culture in Nova Scotia (the Black Cultural Society); the Black Cultural Centre for Nova Scotia; the Black Business Consortium; the Black Professional Women's Group; the Congress of Black Women; the Association of Black Social Workers; and, the Afro-Canadian Caucus of Nova Scotia.

Thus, it can be said with pride and satisfaction that the African presence in Nova Scotia was active and conspicuous, concerned and caring, for three hundred years. In a province and country made up of immigrants from all parts of the world, those from Africa constitute a segment second to none as worthy residents of Nova Scotia and citizens of Canada.

## NOTES

1. Bridglal Pachai, *Blacks in the Maritimes*, (Tantallon, N.S., Four East Publishers, 1987).
2. Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada; a history* (Montreal: McGill-Queens U P, 1971); W. A. Spray, *The Blacks in New Brunswick* (Fredericton: Brunswick Press, 1972); James W. St. G. Walker, *Black Loyalists: the search for a promised land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870*. (New York: African Publishing Co., 1976); John N. Grant, *Black Nova Scotians* (Halifax: Nova Scotia Museum, 1980).
3. Bridglal Pachai, *Beneath the Clouds of the Promised Land: The Survival of Nova Scotia's Blacks*, Vol. 1, 1600-1800 (Halifax, Black Educators Association, 1987). Volume 2 is in preparation.
4. Colin A. Thomson, *Born with a Call. A Biography of Dr. William Pearly Oliver, C.M.* (1986). Belle Barnes et al., *Traditional Lifetime Stories. A collection of Black memories*, Vol. I. (1987). Calvin W. Ruck, *Canada's Black Battalion. No. 2 Construction 1916-1920*. (1986). Mohamed Abucar, *Struggle for Development: The Black communities of North and East Preston and Cherry Brook, Nova Scotia 1784-1987* (1988). Charles Saunders, *Sweat and Soul. The History of Blackboxers in the Maritimes* (In print, 1989). In addition, the Black Cultural Centre publishes its anniversary lectures. Titles available are: James W. St. G. Walker, "The Black Identity in Nova Scotia: Community and institutions in historical perspective" (1986); Gilbert H. Scott, "Cultural Pluralism, Multiculturalism and Community Development" (1987); Pamela G. Appelt, "Citizenship, Culture and The Black Community" (1988); Peter J. Paris, "The Moral, Political and Religious Significance of the Black Churches in Nova Scotia" (1989).