



Swing low, sweet chariot

There is a problem with the origins of ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’, the tune that English rugby fans mysteriously sing as their anthem. And it’s kind of racist, but it’s not—to me—racist in the way people are saying it is.

For sure, “Swing Low” is a Negro spiritual, and has its origins in black slaves in America but for me that is not the main issue. It’s an unlikely link, granted, and the song’s original context may sit oddly when the majority of the Twickenham crowd is white and well-heeled, but I think the origins are weirder.

I was watching the TV when it first got sung at an international in 1988. England were winning; not only winning, but scoring tries. On the wing, Chris Oti, who is black (a fact that is not irrelevant, as we shall see) was scoring a brilliant hat trick of tries and after a decade of dull, mediocre rugby, England were at the very beginning of a journey towards having a halfway decent team.

So this was in 1988. As the BBC has recently unearthed, ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’ was swung at Twickenham once before, at a tournament called the Middlesex Sevens the previous year. At the time, this tournament was quite a big deal, and Rosslyn Park possessed a (black) winger with lightning speed, called Martin Offiah. He was so good that Rugby League snapped him up that summer, but for a while he was the hottest thing in Rugby Union. With some wit, he was nicknamed ‘Chariots’: Chariots Of-Fire/

Offiah. You get it? So as he scored a series of tries for Rosslyn Park in 1987, some wag in the crowd though to sing *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, because “Chariots” Offiah was doing so well. And, well oiled, the Twickenham crowd joined in.

But here’s the racist bit: or the clumsy bit, if you prefer. I am pretty certain that when the crowd watched Chris Oti score that hat trick of tries in 1988, they didn’t think it was him. They thought that it was Martin Offiah. At the time, we didn’t have many (any?) black players. “One black winger looks pretty much like another player: it must be Offiah”, they thought, and so they sang the Martin Offiah song.

And, in fairness, if you’re 100 metres away from the action, you can’t really pick out individuals. But even so, for me that’s the awkward, embarrassing truth. The ‘Swing Low’ song was sung in honour of the English winger tearing the Irish apart, only it was the wrong one: it was the ‘other’ black winger. They just assumed one black man was the same as the other. It’s pretty bad, isn’t it, when you join the dots like that. But then it became a sort of good luck charm and then within a few years it was the English rugby anthem.

What do you do? Its origin is the crowd’s assumption that muddled up one black winger with another one, because ‘That’s the black one’. Offiah and Oti don’t look remotely alike, but that’s the truth. The ‘slavery’ thing is a red herring; yet I think we’re stuck with it.

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