

Oh Dear, Dear Brum

— justice and equality in a great city, 2013

Review of *Dear Birmingham: a conversation with my hometown* by Karamat Iqbal, Xlibris Corporation (<http://www2.xlibris.com/>), 2013, ISBN 978-14836-1278-2, 228 pp, £13.99

'Dear Birmingham,' writes Karamat Iqbal, 'thank you for being my home for the past forty plus years. Thank you also for welcoming my father and others in our family and community during the fifties. You as a city welcomed them, us, because you needed their labour and they came willingly because they needed jobs. As we have learnt, it has benefited the city in many ways. It has certainly benefited our community, both here and back in Pakistan. I grew up in a brick house, the first in our village, thanks to the money earned in Birmingham.'

Iqbal's book is an extended thank-you letter, almost an extended love letter. It is not, however, just one long outpouring of gratitude and affection. The city which he holds dear can be disappointing and deplorable, a hell-hole as well as a haven, a place of negligence and neglect as well as a nest, woeful as well as wonderful. Iqbal loves his fellow citizens of all backgrounds. But also he wants change, and wants it radically, deeply, urgently. He wants and seeks justice and equality, and wants them for all communities in Birmingham – not only the newer communities which have settled there in the last sixty years but also those whose forebears settled in the city rather earlier.

The story of Iqbal's life in Birmingham has much in common with that of thousands of other British Pakistani people in the city, and in many other cities and towns in Britain as well, particularly in the midlands and the north. His father was a near contemporary of the young men who landed at Tilbury from the SS Windrush in June 1948. His journey and adventure, however, were from the east not the west. He and his friends lived in all-male households desperately working night shifts in the industries which flourished, to quote lines from a Birmingham school song, 'where the iron heart of England throbs beneath its sombre robe'.

The wages and conditions on offer to them were not acceptable to those who had been settled in Birmingham for rather longer, and they met Paki-bashing and Keep Britain White campaigns on the streets; and from the local public sector they met exclusion, neglect and rejection. (Though Birmingham did eventually get round to appointing a 'Liaison Officer for Coloured People'.) Their children, in due course, were not properly catered for in the city's schools. They are the heroes, those early pioneers, in the background of this book. The book would not have been possible without their struggle, resolution, solidarity with each other, survival.

By the 1980s things were beginning to change, at least at the level of policy discourse and documentation. In Birmingham's education system, for example, there were multicultural and antiracist projects led by the late David Ruddell and Birmingham was one of the first authorities to take seriously, or begin to take seriously, the concerns and requirements of its Muslim citizens. In the 1990s and after 2000 there were many fine and warm words spoken by the city's leaders and managers about the need to treat all people equally. Targets were set for creating greater diversity in the workforces of public bodies – the police, health service, schools and colleges, public administration, and so on.

The warm words brought a glow when they were first uttered and proclaimed. They look now, Iqbal shows, hollow and even hypocritical in the extreme, for people of Pakistani heritage continue to be excluded from the city's public life. Iqbal painfully juxtaposes the warm words of policy-makers with the stark data he has painstakingly collected for this book through a series of Freedom of Information requests.

The book as a whole is addressed to all Iqbal's fellow citizens – white as well as black and South Asian – and is concerned with the public good generally, not just with the good of, for example, Pakistanis. It is offered as a contribution to reflection and conversation, not as a manifesto. The political giant inspiring it is Mohammed Ali Jinnah. The intellectual giant is Edward Said. The author also pays tribute to political philosophers such as Bhikhu Parekh and Tariq Modood.

There are four sections. The first tells the author's personal story and interweaves it with the story of Pakistani Birmingham. The second provides population statistics and employment data in the public sector. The third and longest discusses the underlying issues that need to be addressed. It is not just a question of treating people equally, the author argues, but also of recognising the distinctive concerns and values of different communities, and their distinctive experiences of racism. The fourth proposes challenging principles and action points for making dear Birmingham a better – or rather, an even better – great place.

Robin Richardson, a blogpost for Left Central, 2013