

Book Review

Understanding the Diverse History of East London

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

Beyond the Tower: A History of East London by John Marriot, London: Yale University Press, pp405, 2011, PB, £25.

The East End of London has been a haven for immigrants of all backgrounds for many centuries. Led by the French Huguenots of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Jewish refugees fleeing from Central and Eastern Europe moved to the East End during the nineteenth century; they were followed by the influx of African-Caribbean immigrants from the West Indies. The latest immigrants to settle in the East End were the Bangladeshi people who arrived in large numbers during the 1950s and 60s. As a melting pot of different cultures, traditions and faiths, the East End of London - located on the backside of the City - is therefore one of the most culturally diverse and ethnically mixed parts of London, indeed, the country as a whole.

Needless to say, the arrival of the Bangladeshis during the late 1950s and 60s completely transformed the demographic make-up of the East End, particularly the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Being once the heartland of British Jewry the new Bangladeshi immigrants helped to reshape the face of East London so much so that today a third of the population of Tower Hamlet is made up of Bangladeshi people. In the book under review, John Marriot, who is a professor of history at the University of East London, has traced the history of East London “since its emergence as a distinct area of the metropolis in the eighteenth century to its postwar decline and potential regeneration. It would be impossible in a single volume to write a truly

comprehensive account, and so I have focused on those moments of change which have held a particular significance for the metropolis or indeed the nation as a whole. The stories are fascinating, full of larger-than-life characters who have entered into English folklore, and historical episodes which reveal the vivid experiences of people at the lower levels of metropolitan life.” (p2)

But why study the history and culture of East London? What is so fascinating about this part of the great cosmopolitan city that is London? According to the author, “arguably, it is one of the best – and least-known parts of England. For most the East End conjures up a rather odd mix of contradictory images. To the outsider East London remains a working-class area, made up largely of unskilled and unemployed workers living in mean streets, and speaking in barely intelligent versions of the English language. The optimistic and sentimental look back to a golden age when East End was an endless round of barrel organs, pearly kings and queens, jellied eels, donkey carts, benign grandmothers, rhyming slang, cockneys with hearts of gold, extended families, good neighbours and enthusiastic responses to all things royal. The long-running soap opera *Eastenders*, which has defined East London for a new generation, may have dispensed with the quaint trappings, but enough survives in its emphasis on community and family values to resonate with older memories. Pessimists, on the other hand, point to the persistence of fascist currents, prostitution, lawlessness, violence, suspicion of strangers, endemic poverty, chronic overcrowding, racial conflict, and dirt in the street and on the faces of children.” (p3)

Nevertheless, it is equally true that compared to the rest of London, the history of East End is rather brief and therefore not very widely known, locally and nationally. But as Marriot points out, “East London was created at precisely that moment when London embarked on a journey which would lead to its role as a great world metropolis. So closely tied were the timings of these historical transformations that it is tempting to impute a direct relationship between them. And with good reason, for it was during this period that East London emerged as the manufacturing and commercial heart of the metropolis.” (p3)

Consisting of twelve chapters and a useful Introduction and Epilogue, in this book, the author has provided a detailed and analytical overview of the history of East

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London especially focusing on the period from 1700 to contemporary times. However, the period from 1945 to the present is far too brief and scanty, thus giving the reader the impression that the book is incomplete, for this period represents an equally fascinating chapter in the history of East London which the author has not covered adequately. It is hoped that the author will consider writing a sequel to this volume focusing on the post-1945 East London, its history and evolution, thus covering up to the present time. In short, this is a very informative and interesting book about one of the most diverse parts of London, and it deserves to be read widely.

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