

## Birmingham Stories

Myers, Kevin; Grosvenor, Ian

DOI:

[10.1179/004772911X13074595848915](https://doi.org/10.1179/004772911X13074595848915)

License:

Other (please specify with Rights Statement)

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Myers, K & Grosvenor, I 2011, 'Birmingham Stories: local histories of migration and settlement and the practice of history', *Midland History*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 149-162. <https://doi.org/10.1179/004772911X13074595848915>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

Checked for eligibility: 19/08/2015. © University of Birmingham 2011  
DOI 10.1179/004772911X13074595848915

**General rights**

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

**Take down policy**

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact [UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk](mailto:UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk) providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

# Birmingham Stories: Local Histories of Migration and Settlement and the Practice of History

KEVIN MYERS and IAN GROSVENOR

*University of Birmingham*

Over the last decade research on the history of ethnic minority migrant communities in Birmingham and the west midlands has grown, with investigations looking at post-war migration and settlement; ‘race’ thinking and racism; social movements and community activists; faith communities; national identity; issues of surveillance; the local state; public histories and narratives of the city; urban histories and sources; and visual evidence and history. Much of this research has been matched by the presentation of a sustained argument for new narratives of the city’s (and by implication the nation’s) history which recognises that there is a need for a radical transformation of social memory in order to better reflect the cultural diversity and difference that are a part of everyday lived reality. This article aims to do two things: first to summarise research to date on the ethnic minority history of Birmingham and to locate it within a historiography that goes back to Eric Williams’ *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944); and second to place this historiography within a wider context of historical writing and global and national change.

KEYWORDS historiography, migration, race

Over the past four decades, very gradually and not at all in a linear or uniform fashion, cultural diversity has emerged in public debate as a key theme of British history. With the growth of histories of movement and migration, of gendered patterns of settlement and integration, and of ethnic and faith identities in Britain, the significance of ‘race’ and ‘race thinking’ has slowly emerged into public discourse. One can register the increasing attention given to cultural diversity in British history in all kinds of ways, but in culture and the arts, in education policy and in political rhetoric, Britain’s diverse faith and ethnic communities now receive unprecedented attention.

This represents something of a sea change. In the nineteenth century the historiography of Britain, at least as it was represented in archives and collections, preserved in historic houses, enacted in pageants, symbolised in monuments, and displayed in museums, was a remarkably uniform affair. A dominant and basically conservative historiography of the national past was organised around a story of national continuity and cultural unity. The central message was easily summarised: the British (for which read 'English') were a tolerant, peaceful and homogeneous island race, and for both professionals and public the past was a source of national freedom and stability.<sup>1</sup> Updated versions of this story appear periodically — Jonathan Clark's *Our Shadowed Present* (2003) being a recent example — and in popular form it retains wide appeal, as the recent success of *The Pocket Book of Patriotism* (2004) and the periodic rows about the history curriculum in schools clearly demonstrate.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, however, it is clear that there are significant pressures for new national narratives. This article is concerned precisely with this shift from a singular to a more plural view of the past. Taking as its focus the historiography of Birmingham, it seeks to do two things.

Firstly, the article provides a summary of research to date concerned with the history of migrant and ethnic minority communities in modern Birmingham. In documenting the emergence of this research it is important to recognise the social character of historical knowledge. Representations of the past are the work of many hands, and are produced by many different people working in a range of locations and settings.<sup>3</sup> But it is also an empirical necessity in a field of research where academic historians arrived late on the scene and where research into migration and ethnic minority histories continues to be, according to Burrell and Panayi, a 'peripheral area of academic concern within the discipline of history'.<sup>4</sup> More recently and more bluntly, Laybourn described the academic history of immigration 'as being in the doldrums'.<sup>5</sup> No such pessimism is necessary if one looks outside the academy over the last sixty years or so, and if one employs the expansive definition of historical research already explained above. From this perspective, what appears is an initially slow development of historical research but, from the late 1960s onwards, an increasingly vibrant exploration of immigrant, diaspora and (what would become) ethnic minority history in Birmingham. In fact, such is the volume of research, reading, teaching and performance, it would be impossible to fit it into a single article. The result is a selective summary rather than a comprehensive analysis.

The second aim of the article is to locate this historiography within a wider context of writing about British history and contemporary global and cultural change. It

<sup>1</sup> M. Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870–1970* (Cambridge, 2005) stresses, for example, the continuing influence of Whiggism in the period beyond the Second World War.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Clark, *Our Shadowed Present: Modernism, Postmodernism and History* (London, 2003), esp. ch. 2. George Courtauld's *The Pocket Book of Patriotism* (2004), described in a leader in *The Guardian* newspaper as 'a jingoistic view of England and the English', was a surprise bestseller in 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory. Volume I: Past and Present in Contemporary Society* (London, 1994), 3–48.

<sup>4</sup> Kathy Burrell and Panikos Panayi, 'Introduction: Immigration and British History', in K. Burrell and P. Panayi (eds), *Histories and Memories: Immigrants and Their History in Britain since 1800* (London, 2006), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Keith Laybourn, 'IX Twentieth Century', in *Ann. Bull. Hist. Lit.*, 91, 1 (2007), 148.

is argued that local histories of migration and settlement were, at least partly, a response to experiences of migration and ethnicisation. Whether in the form of texts, images or television documentary, producing segments of the past and investing them with meaning was a way of responding to what Schwarz calls the ‘logics of racial thought’.<sup>6</sup> History provided the imaginative resources for thinking about how ethnic minority communities were positioned in a social structure, and those resources offered the basis for challenging racism. More recent changes have led to a decline in the communitarian and democratic impulses which in the past helped to shape the production of Birmingham stories.

## Birmingham historiography

A beginning — a particular date and a specific text — is always somewhat arbitrary, but there are good reasons for selecting Eric Williams’ *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944) as a foundational moment for Birmingham historiography. This is despite the fact that the text, a Marxist analysis of the development and effects of slavery in Britain, was not specifically about Birmingham at all. Indeed, the city actually receives relatively few mentions in the text and appears on no more than ten pages in total. Nor was Williams a pioneer in arguing for the centrality of slavery to Birmingham’s growing economy. Indeed, in a striking passage he argues that:

An old historian of the city has left us with a picture of Birmingham’s interest in the colonial system: ‘axes for India, and tomahawks for the natives of North America; and to Cuba and the Brazils chains, handcuffs, and iron collars for the poor slaves . . . In the primeval forests of America the Birmingham axes struck down the old trees; the cattle pastures of Australia rang with the sound of Birmingham bells; in East India and the West they tended the fields of sugar cane with Birmingham hoes.’<sup>7</sup>

The ‘old historian’ cited here is R. K. Dent’s official history of Birmingham published in the late nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> But this was a rare moment in which Birmingham’s role in the slave trade was acknowledged. For the most part this history remained hidden and Williams’ central argument — that the abolition of slavery was more about changing economic cycles than the celebrated altruism of the abolitionists — remained unpopular and marginalised. And yet Williams is an important figure not just in economic history, where his thesis continues to be debated, but also as one of those West Indian intellectuals — along with C. L. R. James, George Lamming and others — who stimulated the historical research that would eventually turn into black history in Birmingham.<sup>9</sup>

It was Williams’ book which was the starting point for research on an exhibition in 1982 entitled *West Africa, West Indies, West Midlands*. The exhibition, which was supported by Sandwell Local Education Authority and developed by its Afro-Caribbean Support Unit (ACSU), was accompanied by a guide and a series of public talks

<sup>6</sup> Bill Schwarz, ‘Afterward: The Predicament of History’, in Bill Schwarz (ed.), *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester, 2003), 251.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (London, 1964 edn), 83.

<sup>8</sup> R. K. Dent, *The Making of Modern Birmingham, Being a History of the Rise and Growth of the Midlands Metropolis* (Birmingham, 1894), 147. Dent in turn is quoting from *Hints for a History of Birmingham* (n.d.).

<sup>9</sup> Schwarz, *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain*.

and school presentations.<sup>10</sup> Williams' account of Birmingham's involvement in the Atlantic Slave Trade was the first triangular connection documented by the project, and from this trigger other research lines followed — so much so that the original organising conceit about 'Connections' developed into an argument to demonstrate that the black presence in the west midlands significantly predated the accepted picture of post-war immigration; that this presence related to a variety of long-standing connections between the three geographical areas; and that consequently the history of the west midlands was intimately bound up with the history of both West Africa and the West Indies. The research involved both the 'plundering' of the then few published texts about the history of black presence in Britain — Lorimer (1978), Shyllon (1974) and (1977) and Walvin (1973) — and archival and library-based work.<sup>11</sup> The researchers were funded under Section 11 of the Local Government Act 1966, which provided additional resources for those local authorities where there were 'substantial numbers from the Commonwealth whose language and customs differ from those of the community'. The research project, in turn, was a local response to the publication of the Rampton report, *West Indian Children in Our Schools*, which pointed to the failings of schools, the racism encountered within them and the need to change the school curriculum to make it more relevant and inclusive.<sup>12</sup> *West Africa, West Indies, West Midlands* marked the beginning of the historiography of Birmingham-based black British history writing. The following year further research on Birmingham's multicultural history was published through the Saltley Local History Project, a government-funded Manpower Services oral and community history initiative.<sup>13</sup>

Other LEAs picked up the need to provide teaching materials which documented the emergence of multicultural Britain, including the Birmingham-based Afro-Caribbean Teaching Unit (ACTU) who produced a series of posters for schools about black heroes. This was then followed by ACTU working with the Afro-Caribbean Teachers' Association (ACTA) in 1981 to develop an examination course in West African and Caribbean history for 16-year-olds. Local discussions with the West Midlands Examination Board and later with the Joint Matriculation Board eventually led to a special approved O-level syllabus. This occurred despite an embargo being placed on the introduction of new examinations in the early 1980s. The lifting of the embargo was the result of political lobbying through the Department of Education and Science, local MPs and the impact of the Rampton report. The examination course, in various forms, was taught in half a dozen schools and colleges in Sandwell and Birmingham, and only ended with the changes that occurred following the Education Reform Act 1988 and a consequent narrowing of examination syllabi.<sup>14</sup> However, by the time the examination ceased being taught the course included a

<sup>10</sup> Ian Grosvenor and R. L. Chapman. *West Africa, West Indies, West Midlands* (Oldbury, 1982); Birmingham Archives and Heritage (hereafter BA&H), MS 2118 Grosvenor papers. Specific funding for the exhibition also came from the Cadbury Schweppes Charitable Trust and Brockhouse Limited.

<sup>11</sup> D. Lorimer, *Colour, class and the Victorians: English Attitudes to the Negro in the mid-Nineteenth Century* (Leicester, 1978); F. O. Shyllon, *Black Slaves in Britain* (London, 1974) and *Black People in Britain 1555–1833* (Oxford University Press/Institute for Race Relations, 1977); James Walvin, *Black and White: The Negro and English Society* (Harmondsworth, 1973).

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Rampton, *West Indian Children in Our Schools* (London, 1981).

<sup>13</sup> The project published six small booklets looking at different communities in Birmingham.

<sup>14</sup> BA&H, MS 2118, Additional Grosvenor papers: examination correspondence file.

module on 'Black British History', which was supported by the local publication of additional research-based teaching materials which addressed the links between the region and the Indian subcontinent and the experiences of Indian migrants.<sup>15</sup> The introduction of the National Curriculum and the establishment of the school inspection body Ofsted closed down much school- and local-authority-based curriculum development, and changes to the funding of Section 11 away from indirectly supporting anti-racist and multicultural education to a compensatory model also reduced the research activity which had been supporting curriculum development.

While LEA-sponsored research diminished, what had been published acted as a catalyst for changes in museum and archive practice. *West Africa, West Indies, West Midlands* was used in the development of displays about the late eighteenth century at Soho House Museum, Birmingham in the early 1990s;<sup>16</sup> and in 1992 Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, reflecting the growing popularity of oral history, produced *The Land of Money* (1992), personal stories by black migrants to Birmingham collected under a series of themes: departure, arrival and first impressions; housing and work; arrival of wives and children, social gatherings and problems; problems at work, changes, and identity.<sup>17</sup> These stories reflect, amongst other things, the diversity of origin of post-1945 migrants to Britain, the rich cultural traditions and heritage which were brought into new settings, the struggles to establish new communities, the importance of a sense of 'home' and the desire to belong. The stories testified to the importance of popular memory in rescuing black British history from, to use E. P. Thompson's phrase, the 'enormous condescension of posterity'.<sup>18</sup> In 1997 Birmingham City Archives and Local Studies produced *Sources for the Study of the History of Black People in Birmingham*.<sup>19</sup> Other local authority publications followed, notably, Peter L. Edmead, *The Divisive Decade: A History of Caribbean Immigration to Birmingham in the 1950s* (1999) and Yousuf Choudhury and Peter Drake, *From Bangladesh to Birmingham* (2001).<sup>20</sup>

Research on Birmingham's black history was also picked up by religious groups, such as the Wesleyan Holiness Church in Handsworth who produced *Pilgrims Progress 1958–1983*,<sup>21</sup> and activist organisations such as the Birmingham People's History Group. This was a group of socialist historians who organised historic walks and research workshops in the late 1980s and early 1990s and wrote a short alternative history of the city to mark its centenary.<sup>22</sup> Collaborative working was also at the core of the activities of the Sylheti Social History Group<sup>23</sup> and *Black Pasts*,

<sup>15</sup> R. L. Chapman and I. Grosvenor, *Britain and India: An Uncommon Journey* (Oldbury, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Information provided by Rita McLean, the first curator of Soho House Museum.

<sup>17</sup> Doreen Price and Ravi Thiara, *The Land of Money* (1992). The interviews are archived in the Cadbury Research Library at the University of Birmingham. Collecting migrant voices was also a feature of the Millennium Project in 2000 and a collection of interviews is held by BA&H.

<sup>18</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1980 edn), 126.

<sup>19</sup> A much more comprehensive guide by Fiona Tait and Brigitte Winsor, *Black History Sources in Birmingham City Archives*, was produced in 2004.

<sup>20</sup> Birmingham City Council also sponsored research into other minority communities in Birmingham. See, for example, Sue Baxter, *The Chinese and Vietnamese in Birmingham* (Birmingham, 1986).

<sup>21</sup> *Pilgrims Progress: A History of the Wesleyan Holiness Church, 1958–1983* (Handsworth, 1983).

<sup>22</sup> *The People's Century* (Birmingham, 1989).

<sup>23</sup> See Yousuf Choudhury, *The Roots and Tales of the Bangladeshi Settlers* (1993) and *Sons of the Empire: Oral History from the Bangladeshi Seamen Who Served on British Ships during the 1939–45 War*, both published by the Birmingham Sylheti Social History Group.

*Birmingham Futures*. The latter organised for nearly a decade meetings, seminars, research exchange and history projects. The group was established formally in 2000 following a meeting of museum curators, archivists, teachers, community activists and academics with the aim of developing a strategy and framework for building permanent historical and cultural records of black people's lives and experiences in Birmingham.<sup>24</sup> Between 2001 and 2002 the group, in collaboration with the School of Education at the University of Birmingham and with funding from the Paul Hamlyn Trust, organised a programme *Using History to Build Community* which involved school teachers researching different aspects of Birmingham's multicultural history. These included a study of two contrasting figures, the African abolitionist Olaudah Equiano and the upper-middle-class campaigner against slavery, Amelia Moilliet; an oral history project about South Asian migration and settlement in Birmingham; and a study of the 1985 riots and the ways in which Handsworth had been represented in the press. The results of this research were presented at a conference and published in *Making Connections: Birmingham Black International History* (2002).<sup>25</sup> The book — a mixture of images and fragments of stories that are a part of Birmingham's history as a community of communities — published with a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), according to one reviewer

incites all its readers to get into the museum and Art Gallery, to look again at the archives in the City Library, to dig below the surface and find the rich international links which abound in the city's history.<sup>26</sup>

From *Making Connections* emerged a three-year partnership project between Birmingham City Council, the School of Education, University of Birmingham and the Department of Sociology, University of Warwick. *Connected Histories*, with a £1.1 million budget and an HLF grant of £830,000, brought together archivists, academics, web and graphic designers, and outreach workers on a common project to catalogue, research and promote archive collections which held Birmingham's multicultural history. Outputs from the project included a learning guide on how to research black history, the cataloguing of the papers of the Indian Workers Association, and the photographic archive of Vanley Burke.<sup>27</sup> The HLF has continued to support Birmingham-based projects which document the history of the city's community of communities, including Race Equality West Midlands' *Multiple Heritage Voices, Birmingham 1950–2006* (2007) and Sparkbrook Caribbean African Women's Development Initiative's (SCAWDI) *History Detectives: The Black Presence in the West Midlands 1650–1918* (2010).

The first substantive academic study which focused on the history of the black presence in Birmingham was Simon Taylor's *A Land of Dreams* (1993).<sup>28</sup> Taylor's book was an ethnographic study of two first-generation migrant communities: the settlement of East European Jews in the East End of London and the growth

<sup>24</sup> BA&H, MS 2118, Grosvenor papers: *Black Pasts, Birmingham Futures* files.

<sup>25</sup> Ian Grosvenor, Rita Mclean and Sian Roberts (eds), *Making Connections: Birmingham Black International History* (Birmingham, 2002). The conference, book and a travelling exhibition were funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. See also BA&H, MS 2118, Grosvenor papers: correspondence and reports Hamlyn Project.

<sup>26</sup> C. Hall, 'Black Pasts, Birmingham Futures, Birmingham, March 2002', *Hist. Workshop J.*, 55 (2003), 265.

<sup>27</sup> See [www.connectinghistories.org.uk](http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk).

<sup>28</sup> S. Taylor, *A Land of Dreams: A Study of Jewish and Caribbean Migrant Communities in England* (London, 1993).

of an African-Caribbean community in Birmingham. An account of migration and settlement had been included in Sutcliffe and Smith's *Birmingham, 1939–1970* (1974),<sup>29</sup> but Taylor presented the first historical study which concerned itself with the experiences of a migrant community as opposed to local responses to 'newcomers'. This was followed in 1997 by Ian Grosvenor's *Assimilating Identities: Racism and Educational Policy in Post 1945 Britain*. The book included a detailed account of the educational experience of black youngsters in the 1960s and argued for a more inclusive history of Birmingham.<sup>30</sup> Grosvenor returned to this argument on several occasions, and between 2007 and 2009 led the AHRC-funded knowledge transfer project *Birmingham Stories* with Andy Green and Kevin Searle.<sup>31</sup> This project built on the experience of the HLF *Connected Histories* project and shared historical research on Birmingham's black British history and broader historical themes linked to cultural diversity with community groups and heritage practitioners.<sup>32</sup>

Contributions to the historiography of the black presence in Birmingham have not been confined to written texts alone. One of the most important contributions, which will be discussed in depth, is the Philip Donnellan and Charles Parker documentary film for the BBC, *The Colony* (1964). The film documented the experiences of a group of West Indians new to Handsworth, Birmingham in the late 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>33</sup> *From Negative Stereotype to Positive Image* was the title of an exhibition in the city in 1993 which juxtaposed images from three Birmingham photographers — Sir Benjamin Stone,<sup>34</sup> Ernest Dyche<sup>35</sup> and Vanley Burke<sup>36</sup> — taken between the 1890s and the 1990s to illustrate very different photographic practices, from the imperial gaze

<sup>29</sup> A. Sutcliffe and R. Smith, *Birmingham, 1939–70* (Oxford, 1974).

<sup>30</sup> K. Myers, 'Immigrants and Ethnic Minorities in the History of Education', *Paedagogica Historica*, 45 (2009), 801–17 for a discussion of the writing of educational histories which address the experiences of immigrants in post-1945 Britain.

<sup>31</sup> See Ian Grosvenor, "'Seen But Not Heard': Researching Past City Childhoods', *Paedagogica Historica*, 43 (2007), 405–29; Ian Grosvenor, 'From the "Eye of History" to "a Second Gaze": The Visual Archive and the Marginalised in History of Education', *Hist. of Educ.*, 36 (2007) 607–22; Ian Grosvenor, *Hidden Histories: Cultural Diversity in the West Midlands* (London, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> See [www.connectinghistories.org.uk/birminghamstories.asp](http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/birminghamstories.asp).

<sup>33</sup> BA&H, MS 40000/6/1/37/2/C, *The Colony* (1964). Donnellan and Parker were BBC film makers and producers: see [www.philipdonnellan.co.uk](http://www.philipdonnellan.co.uk) and [www.connectinghistories.org.uk/collections/charles\\_parker.asp](http://www.connectinghistories.org.uk/collections/charles_parker.asp).

<sup>34</sup> Stone had systematically collected images recording people and places since the 1860s, but actively pursued photography as an interest in the 1880s. Seven years after his death in 1914, the trustees of his estate presented a collection of 22,000 photographs, 600 stereographs, 2500 lantern slides, 14,000 glass negatives, and 50 albums of collected prints to Birmingham Central Library. The size of this collection reflects Stone's era and the Victorian desire to capture and catalogue 'all' knowledge. In this desire to record knowledge pictorially Stone photographed and collected images during his travels in the West Indies and in southern Africa. The images from these travels are of unnamed sitters, selected and posed by Stone. These images visualised the empire. Stone also traded in images.

<sup>35</sup> Ernest and Malcolm Dyche had a photographic studio in Balsall Heath, Birmingham and in the 1950s and 1960s new black settlers in Birmingham sought portraits to send home to family and friends; see Pete James, *Coming to Light: Birmingham's Photographic Collections* (Birmingham, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Vanley Burke has spent nearly four decades photographing the lives, peoples and scenes of the black British diaspora, and the cultural theorist Stuart Hall has argued that this corpus of work represents both 'the first time that an intimate, insider's "portrait" — as opposed to a sociological study — of a settled British "colony" and its way of life had found its way into print in the form of a memorable set of images' and, through his photographic technique, an exploration 'of "blackness", of varieties of blackness, and ways of being "black" in Britain': S. Hall, 'Vanley Burke and the "Desire for Blackness"', in M. Sealey (ed.), *Vanley Burke: A Retrospective* (London, 1993), 12–14.



of ethnographic ‘typing’ (including photographs of schools in the Caribbean) to black photo-documentary. The effect was to draw attention to the processes of ‘othering’ — the capturing on film of unnamed colonial subjects as part of an imperial project to order and catalogue knowledge about the world, the migration and exchange of such images in the empire, their arrival in metropolitan collections, which in turn gave authority to what the image represented, and the questioning of such representations by juxtaposing images taken of and by the black community in 1990s Birmingham.<sup>37</sup> A second exhibition, *Being Here*, drawing on the Dyche archive, was organised by Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in 1996.<sup>38</sup> Black film makers in the 1970s and 1980s also collected together historical sources and subverted documentary modes and conventions in order to explore the construction of a multicultural image of Britain. John Akomfrah’s *Handsworth Songs* (1986),<sup>39</sup> produced by the Black Audio Film Collective, dealt with race, memory, identity and Britain’s colonial past. It argued that ‘there are no stories in the [1985] riots, only the ghost of other stories’, and it summoned up some of these ghosts using historical footage of Birmingham including a 1937 Labour Day procession, hopeful migrants arriving in the 1950s, Malcolm X on a visit to the city in the 1960s and an anti-National Front demonstration in Handsworth in 1977.<sup>40</sup> Images such as those produced by Burke and Akomfrah, as Bailey and Hall have observed, do not necessarily stabilise earlier and more problematic images,<sup>41</sup> but as Gen Doy reflected, the archive remains the determining discourse if ‘we do not take account of the histories of the subjects in the archive as articulated by the subjects themselves’.<sup>42</sup> What is clear is that in teachers’ centres, classrooms, libraries and community centres over the last thirty years, individuals and groups have sought to find stories buried in the archive or locked inside people’s memories in order to articulate a different discourse, one which offers other versions of Birmingham’s past.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>37</sup> See Sandra Courtman, ‘A Journey through the Imperial Gaze: Birmingham’s Photographic Collections and its Caribbean Nexus’, in A. Ramamurthy and S. Faulkner (eds), *Visual Culture and Decolonisation in Britain* (London, 2006). For a discussion of the importance of exhibitions in presenting multicultural history see R. Watts, ‘Education, Empire and Social Change in Nineteenth Century England’, *Paedagogica Historica*, 45 (2009), 773–86.

<sup>38</sup> BA&H, MS 2118, Grosvenor papers: *Being Here* programme.

<sup>39</sup> *Handsworth Songs* was included in the Liverpool Tate exhibition *Making History*, which ran from 3 February to 23 April 2006; see the accompanying exhibition book *Making History: Art and Documentary in Britain from 1929 to Now* (Liverpool, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> Extracts from the film can be seen on the BFI website [www.screenonline.org.uk](http://www.screenonline.org.uk) and on [www.video.google.com](http://www.video.google.com).

<sup>41</sup> D. A. Bailey and S. Hall, ‘The Vertigo of Displacement’, *Ten* 8, Spring (1992), 15.

<sup>42</sup> Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture, Modernity and Postmodernity* (London, 2000), 136.

<sup>43</sup> Birmingham is not the only location for such endeavours. See, for example, M. Prescod-Roberts and N. Steele, *Black Women: Bringing It All Back Home* (Bristol, 1980); I. Law and J. Henfrey, *A History of Race and Racism in Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1981); Z. Alexander and A. Dewjee, *Roots in Britain* (Brent, 1981); D. Dabydeen, *The Black Presence in English Literature* (Wolverhampton, 1984); M. Sherwood, *The British Honduran Forestry Unit in Scotland, 1941–1943* (London, 1982); *Papers Presented to the Conference on the History of Black People in London*, University of London, 27–29 November, 1984; J. Thakoordin and T. Gilbert, *Eradicate Racism: A Murderous Crime* (London, 1985); *I Remember* (Wolverhampton, 1986); G. Faizi, *The Black Presence in London* (London, 1986); R. Lotz and I. Pegg, *Under the Imperial Carpet: Essays in Black History* (Crawley, 1986); *Caribbean Connections: Southampton and the West Indies* (Southampton, n.d.); S. Collicott, *Local–National–World Links: A Case Study of Haringey History* (Haringey, 1986); *Moving Stories* (Leeds, 1987); *Destination Bradford* (Bradford, 1987); *Whose Freedom* (London, 1988); *Forty Winters On:*

These contributions shared a belief in the power of history to spread enlightenment and to correct ignorance and prejudice, a profoundly progressive aspect of history making committed not to the pursuit of cultural difference but, more usually, to the investigation and demonstration of a common humanity. An interesting example of this kind of history is Donnellan's *The Colony*. Sarita Malik regards the film as a landmark moment in British television history because of its focus on social issues from the perspective of black people who, for one of the first times in British television, talked directly and at length in the film.<sup>44</sup> Among those subjects were Stan Crooke (railway signalman from St Kitts), Bernice Smith (Jamaican teacher), Victor Williams (bus conductor), Polly Perkins (Barbadian nurse) and preacher Pastor Dunn. The film compares the expectations of the migrants of the mother country with the more disappointing reality: of gloomy weather, industrial smoke, the lack of space, the poor housing and, a key theme of the film, prejudice against immigrants. The prejudice stimulates some fascinating observations on English culture and history, and its consequences for the consciousness and identity of both the English and the immigrants — now increasingly identifying as West Indians, or blacks — themselves. Two themes stand out.

Firstly, Donnellan presents important elements that celebrate local and national heritage. There are reflections on Britain's rich historical culture and praise of its civilisation; sections on the rise of steam power and the great men with open minds that revolutionised the world; a section that explains the relationship between Africa, Jamaica and slavery but ends with the comforting revelation that about 1838 Queen Victoria decided to abolish slavery and complements this with shots of statues of both Victoria and William Wilberforce; and a long sequence towards the end of the film in which a group is shown round a local stately home, Aston Hall, by a tour guide. In doing this Donnellan presents, discursively and through cultural artefacts and works of art, a dominant version of the local and national past and a construction of tradition in which notions of identity, community and belonging are fleshed out.

A second important theme is the critique that is presented of this tradition. A substantial section of the opening part of the film, for example, presents some reflections on history and an alternative historical narrative. The claim that imperialism spread false propaganda and created the myth of good and tolerant England is repeated more

<sup>43</sup> *Continued*

*Memories of Britain's Post War Caribbean Immigrants* (Lambeth, 1988); S. Small, *The Politics of British Black History, with Special Reference to Liverpool* (Northampton, 1991); *Staying Power: The Black Presence in Liverpool* (Liverpool, 1991); *Newham: The Forging of a Black Community* (London, 1991); *Llafur*, 5, (1991); *The Black Presence in Nottingham* (1993); M. Sherwood, *Pastor Daniels Ekarte and the African Churches Mission* (London, 1994); J. Layton, *Black People in Warwickshire* (Leamington Spa, 1994); 'The Black Presence in the North West', *North West Lab. Hist.*, 20 (1995–96); *Forty Years On* (Lambeth, 1998); *Roti, kapra or makaan* (Nottingham, 1998); M. Stacey, *The Black Presence* (Liverpool, 1999); J. Garfield, *Black Angels from the Empire* (Stratford, 2000); G. Bell, *The Other Eastenders: Kamal Chunchie and West Ham's Early Black Community* (Stratford, 2002); J. S. Dosanjh, *The Development of Gurdwaras in Nottingham* (Nottingham, 2002). The above is only a selection and does not include autobiographical writings such as D. R. Prem, *The Parliamentary Leper* (Aligarh, 1965); E. Marke, *Old Man Trouble* (London, 1975); C. Thompson, *Born on the Wrong Side* (London, 2006). See also the *Black and Asian Studies Newsletter* (BASA) and the regular listing of projects in back numbers of the journal *Oral History*.

<sup>44</sup> S. Malik, *Representing Black Britain: A History of Black and Asian Images on British Television* (London, 2002), 39. See also Wendy Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939–1965* (Oxford, 2005), 163–4.

than once. And imperialism is also blamed for an ignorance of black history and culture:

It so happens that Africans were the great civilizations of the past . . . If you were to turn around and tell a white man that up to about AD 333 the man who ruled this country was a negro. Septimus Severus was then the Emperor of Rome and he was a full blooded African negro. He died in this country in York organizing the defences against the Scots when then used to break across and beat the hell out of you cats . . .

How on earth can you look at people with a background of this nature and cannot really recognize the fact that these people must have had a culture as well?

That question — and the tension of living in a culture of rich history but one which remains ignorant of the practices and legacies of empire — is a persistent presence in Donnellan's film. It is consistent with his anti-imperialist politics and with his empathy for the marginalised in society.<sup>45</sup> It is powerfully articulated in the sequences shot at Aston Hall that alternately concentrate on the tour guide and some of the black children and adults whose history is erased by this official rendering of the local and national past. The sequence ends with a voiceover from Bernice Smith who says that:

One doesn't want to put slavery on their mind, but if they read history it is something that they have got to look back onto. What I am proud about my forefathers is that although they have passed through such difficult times, they have not lost the value, the value of human being.

It was precisely this desire to become fully human, the possibility of becoming a black Brummie, which stimulated so many of the new narratives of Birmingham's history. These narratives, as with all historical knowledge, were contingent. Produced in concrete time and space, they were conditioned by wider social, political and economic circumstances.<sup>46</sup>

## Context and circumstances

One of the reasons why it is worth recovering this work is that the academic history of immigration and minority ethnic communities, as with related questions about race and (post)colonialism, continues to be marginalised in mainstream history. A comparison with gender history is instructive. By the end of the 1980s there existed a considerable body of literature that either empirically uncovered women's history, or rethought long-standing historical issues, on work, class, education and citizenship for example, using gender analysis.<sup>47</sup> It is now widely accepted that, cumulatively,

<sup>45</sup> Obituaries for Donnellan include G. Reynolds, *Oral History*, Autumn (1999) 32–3; R. Thornber, *The Independent*, 12 March 1999; W. S. Gilbert, *The Guardian*, 1 March 1999. See also [www.philipdonnellan.co.uk](http://www.philipdonnellan.co.uk).

<sup>46</sup> For one pertinent analysis of the relationship between social change and history writing, see K. Chater, *Untold Histories: Black People in England and Wales during the Period of the British Slave Trade, c. 1660–1807* (Manchester, 2009), 2.

<sup>47</sup> Birmingham and the west midlands were, of course, an important centre for the production and analysis of gender history. See, for example, C. Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London, 1986); L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London, 1987); R. Watts, 'Gendering the Story: Change in the History of Education', *Hist. Educ.*, 34 (2005): 225–42.

this work helped to transform our understanding of the course of British history. In so far as work on race and immigration has been produced by historians, either empirically or as a tool of analysis, it emerged significantly later, there is far less of it and, arguably, it has had a much more modest impact on either academic or popular understandings of the past.<sup>48</sup> The academic discipline of history has, in short, proved particularly resistant to race and immigration, whether as a topic for research or as a mode of analysis.

A key factor in explaining this resistance is the status of history in national life.<sup>49</sup> National history writing has been arguably the dominant mode of representing the past in Europe for at least two centuries and it retains a privileged position. In Britain national history may be especially dominant, and nostalgia for certain representations of it particularly notable.<sup>50</sup> It has been argued that one response to a widespread perception of political decline in post-war Britain was a kind of visceral investment in history. In a period of profound transformations — amongst them the loss of global political influence, the end of empire, increased immigration from the New Commonwealth, mass consumerism and the emergence of a newly assertive youth culture — the past, or a particular nostalgia for it, was arguably one of the characteristics of the period.<sup>51</sup> It meant, as Bill Schwarz has argued in a revealing analysis of Enoch Powell's popularity and significance, that England was reimagined as white and as centred: 'it possessed history, tradition, civilization in abundance . . . The black immigrant, on the contrary, had no history, or at least none in the sense of having made it.'<sup>52</sup>

This conviction, which would become central to the New Right project of political and cultural renewal in the 1970s and 1980s, partly explains the production and content of the histories examined in this article.<sup>53</sup> These were histories produced at least partly in response to experiences of migration and ethnicisation, and in opposition to pervasive racism. They emerged out of at least four, sometimes overlapping, locations: a small number of academic histories; a very significant quantity of curricular materials related to developments in formal and informal schooling; the connected emergence of museum and gallery exhibitions, representations and catalogues; and, arguably most significant of all, the fruits of religious and political attempts to promote tolerance and combat racism. Of course, these histories could be very different in terms of their topics, their chronologies and their interpretations.

Post-1945 historical culture in Birmingham bore all the hallmarks of collectivism. It was a city in which people came together in groups — to pray, to demonstrate and protest, to strike and to learn. The histories produced in this period are marked by a general belief in the Forward March of Labour thesis: the idea that what history could

<sup>48</sup> G. Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Michigan, 2005), 126–7.

<sup>49</sup> T. Kushner, 'Social Inclusion: A Historian's Perspective', *Immigrants & Minorities*, 20 (2001), 75–6.

<sup>50</sup> Patrick Wright, *On Living in an Old County: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (Oxford, 2009 edn).

<sup>51</sup> P. Gilroy, *After Empire: Multiculture or Postcolonial Melancholia* (London, 2004); J. Rutherford, 'Ghosts: Heritage and the Shape of Things to Come', in J. Littler and R. Naidoo (eds), *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of 'Race'* (London, 2005), 82–93.

<sup>52</sup> B. Schwarz, 'Unspeakable Histories: Diasporic Lives in Old England', in Peter Osborne and Stella Sandford (eds), *Philosophies of Race and Ethnicity* (London, 2002), 82–5.

<sup>53</sup> P. Dodd. *The Battle over Britain* (London, 1995).

recover was a sense of the dignity of working-class communities and the importance of their forms of collective organisation in securing improved political and social conditions in the period since the Industrial Revolution.

The recovery of the people in history and their insertion into the national historical imagination shaped all kinds of political, professional and religious projects.<sup>54</sup> It has already been noted that Donnellan was associated with projects that searched out the marginalised in society, was keen to explore examples of their political radicalism and, in a global context, sought in them a critique of capitalism and an anti-imperialism that held out the promise of a better future for the colonised peoples of the world. These general aims were shared by the growing popularity of collective historical movements; of labour, people's and women's histories from the 1960s onwards, one important expression of which was the growth of the History Workshop Movement. The annual meetings of the latter are, perhaps, an extreme case in point. These were events characterised by a spirit of cooperation and fraternity, open to all and with all the intensity of religious gatherings.<sup>55</sup> Professional groups, too, could express a similar and admirable idealism. Teachers and educationalists, for example, were highly unionised. One consequence of this was that they had access to a historical explanation of the damage inflicted on children and young people by the class system and, in some cases, articulated a sense of their own identity as (sociological) intellectuals.<sup>56</sup> Christian groups were also influenced by this vision of the people. The Birmingham-based *All Faiths for One Race*, for example, was co-founded by the theologian John Hick who championed a religious pluralism sensitive to different historical and cultural appropriations of God, and who insisted on Jesus' ministry, his actions as a man of the people, as the very essence of Christianity.<sup>57</sup> In short, this was a historical culture marked by a significant process of democratising and by some shared belief in the importance of collectivist organisation.

However, if there is a temptation to romanticise these kinds of collective movements that sought in history an endorsement of the dignity of ordinary people, it should be resisted. For one thing, and despite its sometimes radical rhetoric, and its actual empirical and methodological innovations, the integration of class and nation in post-war British history was less controversial than might sometimes be assumed.<sup>58</sup> The projects and policies that aimed to extend and embed the place of the people in national culture had deep nineteenth-century roots and could secure widespread political consent.<sup>59</sup> They could be presented as the logical conclusion to a history that stressed not only the gradual extension of political rights, but also the emergence of more educated, dignified and respected citizenry. There was also nothing inherently

<sup>54</sup> P. Long, *Only in the Common People: The Aesthetics of Class in Post-War Britain* (Newcastle, 2008).

<sup>55</sup> R. Samuel, *History Workshop: A Collectanea, 1967–1991* (London, 1991), 1–3 notes how the workshop movement 'started from some very simple faiths' and attracted 'members of an invisible church'.

<sup>56</sup> K. Jones, *Education in Britain: 1944 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2003), 87–90, 127–30; S. Collini, *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain* (Oxford, 2006), 45–8.

<sup>57</sup> J. Hick, *Towards a Global Theology: The Reconstruction of Christian Belief for Today and Tomorrow* (Birmingham, 1970?).

<sup>58</sup> Some of the innovations are captured in R. Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981).

<sup>59</sup> J. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge, 1981). Also see D. Feldman, 'Class', in P. Burke (ed.), *History and Historians in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2002).

progressive about the historical narratives produced by such groups. The apparently impeccably democratic attempt to include the people in history had difficulties in adequately coming to terms with the histories of empire, black people and women.<sup>60</sup> The disabled, too, were rarely recognised or discussed. Nonetheless, and whatever their retrospective limitations, this was a society in which groups of people shared historical narratives, and often came together to discuss and debate them.

This historical culture was, even as it became popular, under threat from longer-term processes evident not just in British society but around Western Europe. Even if it is necessary to remain wary of simple nostalgia for an imagined past, there does seem to have been a dramatic decline in the belief in collective action — political, social and spiritual — as the key to improving human affairs. One indication of this was the falling away of organised religious (or at least Christian) worship and associated projects for moral and spiritual welfare. Another was the quite spectacular retreat of trade unionism, and related forms of mutuality, in the last two decades of the twentieth century. In fact, one historian of contemporary Britain interprets the most important aspect of the British experience since 1975 as encompassing a move from *Anger to Apathy*.<sup>61</sup> For if it was still commonplace in 1970s Britain to take collective action, and there were still some other healthy signs of engaged citizenship, thirty years later a key characteristic of British society was marked apathy for communal forms of organisation.

In one sense the historiography presented in this article suggests that concerns about this apathy, and its consequences for the history of the people, are alarmist. Historical research, publication and representation on Birmingham's black and minority ethnic history, virtually absent in the early 1960s, is now a routine feature of the city's history. Birmingham stories, at least as they are now represented in official publications, proclaim the fact of black minority ethnic diversity, and the way in which this has led to a deeper appreciation of the legacies of the past for the present. Elsewhere, it is possible to identify vibrant pockets of historical research, discussion and publication committed to the democratisation of historical knowledge and to a vision of the people as makers of history.<sup>62</sup> Yet this optimistic picture does deserve some qualification.

The new historical era that has emerged across the globe since the 1970s is characterised by, amongst other things, a retreat of the state, the emergence of new forms of capitalism, the fracturing of social relations, and the rise of a more selfish and individualistic age.<sup>63</sup> A sense of anxiety around these kinds of structural transformations is apparent in the terminology of recent government cultural and educational policy which has been concerned with building community, strengthening identity, promoting cohesion and seeking to 'transfer knowledge' from academics

<sup>60</sup> D. L. Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: The New Left and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Duke University Press, 1997), ch. 8.

<sup>61</sup> M. Garnett, *From Anger to Apathy: The British Experience since 1975* (London, 2007).

<sup>62</sup> H. Kean and P. Ashton, *People and their Pasts: Public History Today* (Basingstoke, 2009).

<sup>63</sup> The argument for the new historical era is set out in E. J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914, 1991* (London, 1994). Acute contemporary analysis can be found in R. Sennett, *The Culture of New Capitalism* (New Haven, 2005) and, specifically in the context of multicultural questions, B. Hesse (ed.), *Unsettled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, Transruptions* (London, 2000).

and policymakers to the people.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, both New Labour's Third Way, and David Cameron's Big Society, the latter recently and explicitly identifying curriculum history as a resource for the renewal of national identity, speak to a conviction that there has been a loss of this identity and an associated decline in 'community'.<sup>65</sup>

If the ambiguities of the term 'community' make it wise to be circumspect, it is possible to interpret recent changes in the production and consumption of historical knowledge as confirming this more pessimistic analysis. Groups who may have previously come together independently to discuss and research the past are now increasingly dependent on government funding and on outreach work. Historical knowledge is now also increasingly commodified, more emotive, focused on interactivity and, in many public forms, concerned with a personal story.<sup>66</sup> The past, increasingly, appears as a product to be enjoyed and celebrated. These may simply be new forms of Birmingham stories but it would be unwise to ignore evidence that a democratic and communitarian culture of history, based on a rather different idea of the purpose and value of historical knowledge, is in decline.

### Notes on contributors

Dr Kevin Myers, School of Education, University of Birmingham B15 2TT, UK.  
Email: k.p.myers@bham.ac.uk

Professor Ian Grosvenor, School of Education, University of Birmingham B15 2TT, UK.  
Email: i.d.grosvenor@bham.ac.uk

<sup>64</sup> D. Buckingham and K. Jones, 'New Labour's Cultural Turn: Some Tensions in Contemporary Educational and Cultural Policy', *Journal of Education Policy*, 16, 1 (2001): 1–14.

<sup>65</sup> S. Driver and L. Martell, *New Labour: Politics after Thatcherism* (Cambridge, 1998); R. H. Thaler and C. R. Sunstein, *Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* (Yale, 2008). On proposals for curriculum history see the analysis of Richard. J. Evans, 'The Wonderfulness of Us (the Tory Interpretation of History)', *London Rev. Books*, 33, 6 (2011) 9–12.

<sup>66</sup> J. De Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Abingdon, 2009).