# Reimaging Britain: Five Hundred Years of Black and Asian History

# REIMAGING BRITAIN

Five Hundred Years of Black
and Asian History

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*available for inclusion in the eBook.*

## THE LION BEATEN BY THE MAN

A picture was exhibited
in which the artist had depicted
a lion of immense stature
floored by a single man

Those who were viewing were drawing pride from this.

A lion when passing, stopped their chatter
'I can see', he said, 'that in fact
you are given the victory here;
But the artist has deceived you:
he had the freedom to invent.
More reasonably we should have the upper hand,
if my brothers knew how to paint.'

<div align="right">

La Fontaine, *Fables*, Book III, No. X1

Quoted by Chateaubriand in *Adventures of the Last Abencerage*,
in which a Moor in Spain during the Christianisation
of the country laments, 'We don't know how to paint.'

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'History, in other words, is not a calculating machine. It unfolds in the mind and the imagination, and it takes body in the multifarious responses of a people's culture, itself the infinitely subtle mediation of material realities, of underpinning economic fact, of gritty objectivities.'

<div align="right">

Basil Davison, *Africa in Modern History*

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FOR GEORGIA AND JOSHUA

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# PREFACE

This book adopts an integrative approach to black and Asian history in Britain, which encompasses the period from Britain's early Empire aspirations to the 'Empire Within'. Its aim is to put Britain and its African- and Asian-descended settlers into historical perspective, a history of British domination which devalued the cultures and economic contribution of the peoples of Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas and the Middle East as 'inferior'.

Britain's imperial conquests were an astonishing, rapacious achievement. Vast regions of the world were colonised and – after initial private ventures – administered and controlled by government officials, who, over the centuries, behaved autocratically.

From the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, the majority of black (African) and Asian people in Britain have been among the poorest, excluded from society and unreservedly exploited. Their labour value, the *raison d'être* of the black and Asian presence in Britain, has been (and remains) a reminder of the importance of the colonial and postcolonial contribution to the British economy.

Unlike my earlier book, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain*, which explored the industrial and related struggles of blacks and Asians, especially in the twentieth century, *Reimaging Britain* is a work of wider scope. Not only does it point to similarities and differences, but it indicates and makes connections between the various indigenous and migrant groups. Blacks and Asians in Britain are considered significantly in the context of the British Isles, with which these 'subject' peoples were closely bound for centuries.

While much of what constitutes black and Asian history in Britain focuses largely on the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, *Reimaging Britain* broadens the scope and

brings the history up to date in the late twentieth century. Moreover, the book takes a new approach to 'British' history, reconfiguring the images of Britain that arise from relations with its colonial and former colonial possessions – a perspective that contextually juxtaposes the Scots, Irish, Welsh and English (the British) with black and Asian peoples, whose histories, until recently, have more often than not been considered separately rather than seen as reflecting the interdependence of their histories. Blacks, Asians and whites in Britain have been influencing each other for centuries, and this legacy is reflected in the hybridised lifestyles of Britain's black and Asian British youth. British history should no longer be written from the point of view of English nostalgia. Rather, it needs to reflect multiculturalism, for this has been Britain's identity for centuries. It is my hope that this book will lead to a reappraisal of how we approach 'British' history in the future. In this sense, *Reimaging Britain* makes an important and timely contribution to British historiography.

The words 'black' and African are used interchangeably and, as a 'political colour', 'black' also refers to the various groups and their descendants from the former colonial and Commonwealth countries. 'Asians in Britain' refers to people originally from the Indian subcontinent, but also, more generally, people from the whole of Asia, including the Chinese. Indians from the Caribbean are identified as either East Indians or Indo-Caribbeans.

# PROLOGUE

In recent years, as ethnic groups assert their presence and identity in Britain – and indeed elsewhere in the world – much attention has focused on Africa as the cradle of humanity. Since *Homo sapiens* emerged there and evolved to bring the first flowering of human civilisations to the Middle and Eastern regions of the world, pre-eminently the Mesopotamian and Egyptian river valleys, in Asia, Africa and Europe, some things have changed little, namely the division of societies into categories (classes), with the higher dominating the lower. This dichotomy, emphasised by war, served the interests of the higher – a feature that characterised 'most civilisations through most of history, and Europe's most of all'. Stretching back deep into the past, a language spoken throughout Europe, Persia and northern India was identified as deriving from an 'Aryan' or 'Indo-European' grouping. Geographically, Europe was formed as a 'continuum' with western Asia and northern India.

Europe underwent a series of epochal shifts, each one deeply marked by residual elements of its predecessor. Having acquired an indispensable body of knowledge from the Egyptians, the Greeks introduced 'democracy'. Subsequently, the Romans learned from the Greeks how to promote civilisation – as opposed to barbarism – during the expansion of their Empire into Africa. However, while parts of Europe were invaded by the tribal Huns and Mongols, the more menacing threat nearer its borders was the growing militancy of the Islamic world, led by the 'less civilised' Moors and Berbers, who had gained ascendancy in Spain and parts of Asia. While these devout believers continued to perceive Europe as 'Rome' or 'Byzantium', Western Europeans preferred their region to be known as 'Christendom' and their foes as pagans, thus disclosing their indifference and ignorance of the Muslims' faith, while generating a religious tension that would deepen with time.

In the Middle Ages, Christian Crusaders attacked and raided Jerusalem in an attempt to reclaim it from the Muslims. And when in 1453 Christian Constantinople was overrun by Muslims (and renamed Stamboul) the vigorous growth of Islamic militancy posed a new danger to Europe. However, the Muslims were constrained, to some extent, by a lack of inventiveness. Western Europe, on the other hand, was at last showing signs of buoyancy and optimism as it emerged from the Middle Ages.

The two Western European countries that had been most threatened by Islam, Spain and Portugal, initiated European expansion. Portuguese voyages of discovery circumnavigated Africa in 1486 and again in 1497, thus avoiding the 'Turkish barrier' between Europe and the Far East. This was a long hoped for breakthrough, not just because of the prospect of the vast wealth which the East promised, but also, importantly, as a way of countering Islam, the 'old enemy' of the Christian Iberians.[1] In 1492, Christopher Columbus, who had been seeking a sea route to the East, found the West Indies. As a result, by 1520 the Aztecs had been robbed of Mexico, and ten years later, the Incas no longer ruled Peru. Such European (especially Spanish) victories were profitable and generated further confidence and daring. European military victories also had a spiritual dimension, which was integral to Spain's imperial design: native American Indians who were conquered were subjugated to the edicts of Christendom; they became 'Christians of a sort'. Furthermore, they were taught Spanish, a crucial means of enablement for the Spanish Empire.

However, what the Spanish conquests in the Americas and the Portuguese conquests in Asia demonstrated was how thin the veneer of civilised behaviour was when customary restraints were removed. Indeed, the colonial encounter between Europe and the Caribbean would inform European writings and policies, which were shot through with constructions of European political dominance and superiority. The first meeting between Europe and America in 1492, recorded in Columbus's log book, had described kind and helpful strangers, but a change of perception soon followed vis-à-vis 'native' Indians, with cannibalism powerfully evoked in a number of European texts over a period of some 300 years. It was, as Peter Hulme has noted, an

encounter that has dominated colonialist writing, an obsession which appeared from the seventeenth century in such texts as the John Smith and Pocahontas stories, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and, some 200 years after Columbus's first landfall, the 'idea of a pristine' encounter recurred in Robinson Crusoe's highly symbolic rescue of the Carib Indian Friday. There was also the well-known tale of Yarico and Inkle, about the betrayal of an Indian woman by a European man, which coincided with the ultimate subjugation of the native Indians in the Caribbean in the late eighteenth century.[2]

However, this Caribbean contact was a mistake. Though Columbus and other European explorers were intent on finding India, Cathay and the riches of the East, more immediately, they settled for – and indeed increasingly declared their hegemonic and aggressive interest in – Africa, India and the rest of the as yet unexplored world. Thereafter, writing 'history' became a reflection of European colonial and postcolonial ambitions.

PART ONE

THE 'BLACKAMOORES'' PRESENCE
(1500–1900)

# 1 AFRICANS AND ASIANS IN THE BRITISH ISLES (1500–1833)

## BRITAIN, AFRICA AND THE WEST INDIES

Difference has always been a feature of humankind. Indeed, difference was present and integral to human civilisation long before Britain became an expanding empire in the sixteenth century. Historically, and crucial to the making of this 'Empire', was the element of difference in the relationship between England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, whose histories were intertwined. With the passage of time, differences in colour, race, religion and culture would become central to the images and imagery in the history of black and Asian people in Britain. Before the European colonial encounter in the fifteenth century, and contrary to the popular view that 'black' people first came to Britain after the Second World War, there was an African presence in Britain during the Roman occupation,[1] and some argue even before that. Asians too had early contacts with Britain – according to one source, it began some ten thousand years ago.[2] For more than a thousand years,[3] prior to the sixteenth century, many cultures vied for hegemony within the British Isles. In the aftermath of the Hundred Years War and the Wars of the Roses the different cultures were able to function more or less autonomously, but from about the mid-sixteenth century, which marked the beginning of the 'modern period', England was in the ascendant. Yet the façade of a united polity headed by a monarch could not disguise the diversity of distinctive cultures and religious identities. Even earlier, English expansionism had been evident in Ireland, where in the twelfth century Henry II proclaimed himself Lord, thus bringing Dublin and its hinterland under England's control[4] – a portent of things to come.

The East held a strong fascination for many Europeans. Indeed, trade in high-value commodities such as silks, spices and textiles, particularly between Britain and India, flourished, until the Turkish blockade of the overland passage to India in the fifteenth century encouraged the search for an alternative route. The impulse of trade preoccupied questing European nations. Consequently, the acquisition of knowledge of distant lands was highly prized, especially in printed form, following the introduction of the printing press to England in 1477.[5]

The belief that the British Empire was made possible by 'push' factors, including 'domestic economic pressures, ambitious and wise rulers, clever merchants, adventurous seamen and the zeal to carry Christianity abroad', was questioned by John Parker, who pointed out that such forces could not have had the desired impact had the English not developed a knowledge of foreign lands, the means of oceanic travel and a zeal for overseas expansion sufficient to attract large numbers of people to settle in these new territories.

The literate public was crucial at this time, for it was to them that the transmission of 'knowledge and enthusiasm' was aimed. Among this *literati* were authors, translators, patrons and publishers, whose importance equalled that of statesmen. It was they who had introduced the 'idea of empire' to the English and made available books on geography and travel. In this way a wider public was informed and the basis of an empire created.

The arrival of William Caxton and the establishment of his printing press at Westminster set the scene for a period of rapid development as the English looked further afield. As new lands were reached, the printing press disseminated the news and the extent to which ambitious Englishmen were able to open up distant lands can be measured by the influence of books which came off the English presses.

Travel books met a growing need as the English language developed and became the medium through which fifteenth-century travel narratives were expressed and acted upon. Gautier of Metz's *The Mirrour of the World* (1481), Ranulf Higden's *Polichronicon* (1482), Wynkyn de Worde's *Proprietatibus Rerum* (1495) and *Informacon For Pylgrymes Unto the Holy Lande* (1498), Sir John Mandeville's *Travels*, Richard

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