Introduction

The first half of the twentieth century is often characterised as a period of economic, political and moral collapse among European nations. Widespread ultra-nationalism, racist and eugenic theories, anti-Semitism, imperialism and world war are all closely and inseparably linked with the period. The rise of fascism across Europe had its British analogue in the Blackshirts of Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, notorious for organising and marching for a 'Greater Britain' and in defence of the Empire, within working-class districts.[1] Indeed the sporadic rioting and disorder which accompanied the Blackshirts' attempt to march through London's East End, together with the race riots that took place in a number of British ports in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, are viewed as symptomatic of the febrile atmosphere of racial tension during the inter-war period in Britain. 'Hitlerism', as the philosopher Hannah Arendt noted in January 1944, exercised its strong international and inter-European appeal during the 1930s 'because racism, although a state doctrine only in Germany, had been everywhere a powerful trend in public opinion'.[2]

Yet this book looks beneath the surface of the imperial nation to the experiences of ordinary working people, who led workaday lives, in and around a northern English industrial city. This might suggest that their stories are rather mundane in comparison to the high drama taking place in the world around them. However, given the characterisation of working-class culture at the time as mired in jingoistic bigotry, it is precisely the quotidian and tolerant nature of their lives that makes them all the more noteworthy. We might assume that in the apparently racially charged atmosphere of a nation steeped in imperialism, the figure of the alien interloper, especially when embodied by non-white people, would provoke a forthright response and shunning rejection by neighbourhoods and communities. Such assumptions notwithstanding, this book

[1] S. Dorril, *Blackshirt: Sir Oswald Mosley & British Fascism* (London, 2007), pp. 369–397.
[2] H. Arendt, 'Race-Thinking before Racism', *The Review of Politics*, 6:1 (Jan. 1944), p. 36.

examines the presence of non-white individuals, and the reactions towards them, within working-class neighbourhoods in the industrial city of Sheffield. Despite their transgression of the all-encompassing notions of racial difference and separation upon which the British Empire rested, these individuals and families remained rooted within the city's working-class neighbourhoods, making a living, caring for their families and fully participating in the crowded, noisy and tight-knit life of their shared communities.

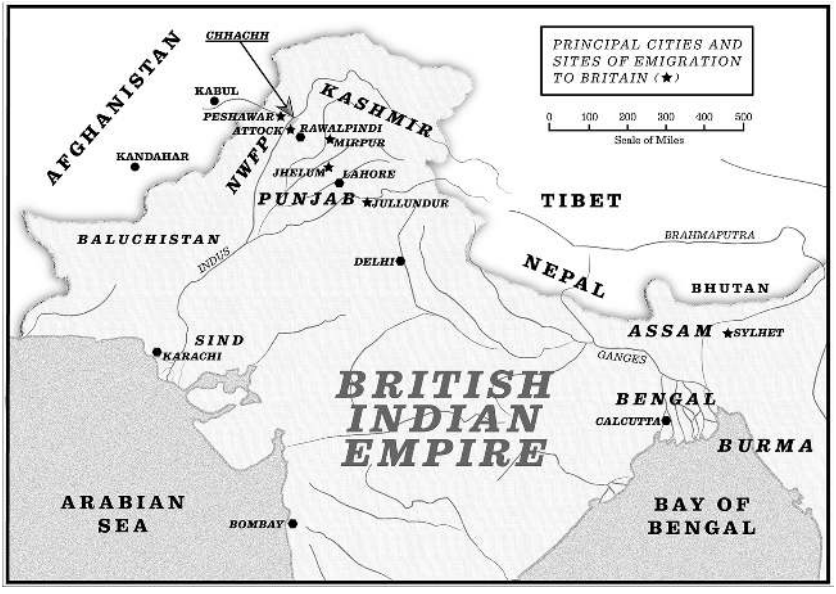
Within one of Sheffield's cemeteries, situated on a hillside in the north of the city, lies a small cluster of graves containing the remains of four of these individuals. The simple epitaph on one headstone reads: 'In loving memory of Souriya, beloved daughter of Ayaht and Hilda Khan, died July 30th 1929 aged 9 months (Mohammedan religion)' (see Figure 1). While the cemetery hosts a number of infant graves, this particular burial is remarkable for its commemoration of a child born to a native working-class Briton and a South Asian steelworker. During her short life in the late 1920s, Souriya was raised in the Muslim faith by parents who were from very different geographical, cultural and religious backgrounds, but who met and married in Sheffield.

Hilda Davis, the eighteen-year-old Sheffield native, married the twenty-six-year-old Pashtun newcomer Ayaht Khan in the Sheffield registry office two days after Christmas 1927.[3] The ceremony was witnessed by two natives: Hilda's mother Beatrice and Dennis Swain, a family friend. While Ayaht's father was a farmer of the Punjab's Chhacch district in British India (see Map 1), his bride was the daughter of a Sheffield steelworks furnaceman who, at the time of his daughter's marriage, lived with his wife Beatrice next door to their future son-in-law. Ayaht also worked in the city's steel industry, firing the boilers supplying steam to power the hammers, presses and rollers that worked the hot metal billets.[4] Hilda's occupation is not known, although it is likely that, like many working-class Sheffield women, both married and single, she was employed in the city's extensive metalworking industries which manufactured cutlery (knives) and flatware (all other metal tableware). In the 1920s and 1930s polishing and buffing cutlery and flatware was

[3] This book uses the endonym 'Pashtun', by which members of the ethnic group generally refer to themselves. This usage is in preference to the exonym 'Pathan', by which the ethnic group is perhaps more widely known in the West and India and which has been widespread within scholarly texts.

[4] Ayah (Ayaht) Khan and Hilda Davis, marriage certificate (hereafter m. cert.): General Register Office, Southport (hereafter GRO), Marriages, Sheffield, Oct.–Dec. 1927, vol. 9c, p. 1411.

Figure 1. Grave of Souriya Khan, Burngreave, Sheffield: 'In loving memory of Souriya, beloved daughter of Ayaht and Hilda Khan, died July 30th 1929 aged 9 months (Mohammedan religion)'. © David Holland



Map 1. Map of British India showing the positions of Chhacch, Punjab, North West Frontier Province, Kashmir, Sylhet and the principal sites of emigration to Britain. © David Holland

one of the main occupations for women and girls in Sheffield; 'in nearly every house there was a buffer', one retired worker recalled.[5]

Such was the global reputation of the city's metalworking industries that the cutlers Mappin and Webb and the steel makers Hadfield's hosted King Amanullah and Queen Soraya (spelled 'Souriya' by the British press) of Afghanistan as part of their royal tour of Europe during 1927–1928 (see Figure 2).[6] The Afghan monarch and his consort were, like Ayaht Khan, both Pashtuns, and their widely reported visit to Sheffield was likely to have inspired the couple to name their daughter after the Afghan queen. Sadly, Souriya, the couple's first child, born ten months after their marriage, contracted tuberculous meningitis (tuberculosis of the brain) and died in July 1929.[7] Despite the tragic death of

[5] G. Booth, *Diamonds in Brown Paper: The Colourful Lives and Hard Times of Sheffield's Famous Buffer Lasses* (Sheffield, 1988), p. 33.
[6] Souriya Khan, death certificate (hereafter d. cert.): GRO, Deaths, Sheffield, July–Sept. 1929, vol. 9c, p. 575.
[7] Souriya Khan, d. cert.: GRO, Deaths, Sheffield, July–Sept. 1929, vol. 9c, p. 575.

Figure 2. The visit of King Amanullah and Queen Souriya of Afghanistan to Sheffield, 27 March 1928. Pictured here at Hadfields Co. Ltd, East Hecla Works. Used by kind permission of Picture Sheffield

their firstborn from a disease then fairly widespread in urban working-class communities, the couple went on to have four more children before 1948: Ahmid (b. 1933), Khonam (b. 1936), Dorhan (b. 1940), and Coresha (b. 1943).

Ten years later, the snap national census taken at the beginning of the Second World War shows that Hilda and Ayaht were living on the Manor Estate (see Figure 3), a newly built municipal housing project, with their two children.[8] Here they took in Vina Brown as a lodger. Vina was a young Sheffielder employed as an emery glazer, one of the polishing roles performed by female workers known colloquially as 'buffer girls' or 'buffer lasses'. The census also shows that Hilda's parents provided lodgings to Hawas Khan, another Pashtun migrant who, like both Ayaht and his Sheffield father-in-law Walter Davis, was employed as a steelworker.[9] Such domestic arrangements demonstrate that the

[8] The National Archives, Kew, London (hereafter TNA), 1939 Register, Khan household, Sheffield, RG101/3562F/002/43-KIWB.
[9] TNA, 1939 Register, Davis household, Sheffield, RG101/3551A/005/3-KIRV.

Figure 3. Sheffield's Manor Estate between the two world wars. This social housing project was built on farmland to the south-east of the city centre. The smoke-filled atmosphere of the Don Valley's steelworks can be seen at the top of the picture. Used by kind permission of Picture Sheffield

everyday connections between natives of Britain and Indian newcomers, frequently formed in the world of work, could be far more embedded in the day-to-day life of the native working class than we might currently allow for.

In the period from the First World War until Indian independence and Partition in 1947, the vast majority of South Asian immigrants in Britain were engaged either in industrial waged labour or as pedlars, while living in and among the neighbourhoods of the generally, but not exclusively, white British working class. Many men arrived in Britain from Indian ports as 'lascar' seafarers, a form of racially segregated cheap maritime labour peculiar to British merchant shipping during the period.[10] Paid a

[10] *Hobson Jobson*, the essential guide to vocabulary for the British imperialist at large on the subcontinent, gives the etymology of the term 'Lascar' as being '… a Portuguese corruption of the Persian lashkar – one who belongs to an army' and defines it as '(1) 'an inferior class of artilleryman ("gun-Lascar"); (2) a tent-pitcher, doing other work which the class are accustomed to do; (3) a sailor … the most common Anglo-Indian use, and has passed into the English language.' G. Balachandran, *Globalizing Labour? Indian Seafarers and World Shipping, c. 1870–1945* (New Delhi, 2012), pp. 124–125;

fraction of the wages earned by white seafarers, some of these men jumped ship in Britain, either to work at standard seafaring rates of pay or to move inland to work in heavy industries such as steel making or coal mining. Others decided to work for themselves as pedlars selling a range of goods door to door, such as clothing and fabrics, housewares or even confectionery.

On their arrival, the men's choice of employment and accommodation placed them in regular and often close contact with working-class natives, and relationships developed which transcended differences of 'race', ethnicity culture and religion.[11] The bonds established (and recorded in marriage, birth and census records) between natives and newcomers reveal that their relationships were often deep and enduring. The composition of the South Asian newcomers' social and migration networks comprised not only kinsmen and compatriots, such as Hawas Khan, but also native wives and families, such as Ayaht Khan's wife Hilda and in-laws Walter and Beatrice, and friends, not to mention neighbours and workmates such as Vina Brown, the Khans' lodger.

But what of the three other graves surrounding Souriya's? Each of these are of relatively young men and are also inscribed to commemorate British Indians, all members of the 'Mohammedan religion'.[12] Despite the graves' somewhat neglected condition today, they lie in a superb, airy

H. Yule and A. C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: The Definitive Glossary of British India*, ed. K. Teltscher (Oxford, 2013), p. 310.

[11] Within this book, the racial signifiers 'white' and 'non-white' are used to identify individuals and populations in terms of how they were viewed and differentiated at the time by British civil servants, the constabulary, local authorities, many social commentators and some of the general population, both within the British nation state and within its colonies. For them, 'white' referred to Europeans, particularly the majority of the long-standing and indigenous population of Britain. 'Non-white' referred generally to individuals and populations who fell outside the 'white' grouping. The concept of 'race' is treated here as a social construct that bestowed essential and immutable physiological traits, which were assumed to manifest themselves in observable cultural and behavioural attributes. Within these broadly constructed categories, used here for historical reasons, fall those termed in this book 'natives' and 'newcomers'. Unless otherwise stipulated, a 'native' is any individual, regardless of ethnicity, race, skin colour or parentage, who was born within the borders of the British nation state. For the purposes of this study, a 'non-white newcomer', or simply a 'newcomer', is an individual who was born outside the British nation state and migrated to its shores.

[12] The graves in Burngreave cemetery, Sheffield, belong to Sultan Mohomed, also known as Sultan Mohammed, a colliery surface labourer (d. 16 July 1923), aged thirty-two; Souriya Khan (b. 1928, d. 30 July 1929), aged nine months; Ali Amidullah, also known as Gisalic or Ali Amidulla, a steelworks boiler firer (b. 1894, d. 12 March 1931), aged thirty-seven; and Alof Din, also known as Alabdin Khan, a steelworks boiler firer (d. 15 Feb. 1927), aged thirty-five or forty. Two of the three men died of heart disease, and the third was killed in an industrial accident at a local colliery.

position in consecrated Christian ground overlooking the city. The alignment of the graves indicates that the bodies were interred perpendicular to the direction of Makkah (Mecca) to the south-east, thus allowing the interred to face along the *Qibla* to the birthplace of the prophet Mohammed.[13] The stone markers are simple and modestly ornamented but are thoughtfully conceived and executed. Indeed, the graves and the associated burial record demonstrate that those who arranged the funerals were prepared to devote time, effort and considerable expense to ensure that these individuals were laid to rest with dignity and the appropriate ceremony. In short, the graves do not appear to be of marginalised individuals who met their fate among strangers, thousands of miles from home. On the contrary, they demonstrate that these individuals died among those who cared for them and had an understanding of their traditions and what was important to them. The cluster of marked graves at Burngreave cemetery represents only a small fraction of the South Asians who arrived in the Sheffield area during the era of British rule over the Indian subcontinent. This period ended in August 1947 with Partition and the creation of the independent states of India and Pakistan.

In a city where the South Asian population is generally viewed as having begun to arrive only in the 1950s, Souriya, a child born to an ethnically mixed marriage, might today be viewed as a somewhat anachronistic curiosity. Nevertheless, preserved sources outlining the personal circumstances of Souriya, Ayaht and Hilda Khan, as well as those for the other individuals interred in the cemetery and the many others who survived them, reveal sufficient evidence for a historical reconstruction of their lives. From these sources this book presents a previously unseen picture of an almost entirely forgotten immigrant population in an inland city where no such population was anticipated and which has not previously been claimed as a site of pioneering South Asian settlement.[14]

Were these individuals anachronistic arrivals in a country which would not witness significant non-white immigration until after the Second World War? After all, the era of South Asian immigration is widely acknowledged to have begun *after* Indian Partition in 1947, the arrival of HMT *Empire Windrush* from the Caribbean in 1948 and the

[13] This description tallies with that given for burials in the home district of the men in the *Gazetteer of the Attock District, 1930*, vol. 29-A (Lahore, 1932), pp. 142–143.

[14] At the time of writing the number of those identified stood at approximately 148 male South Asian immigrants, 79 wives and 111 children, all natives of Britain. This is the minimum extent of the population in the area and represents only those who have left us a surviving historical record of their presence.

introduction of the British Nationality Act in the same year. Indeed, all these events are today regarded as the heralds of non-white migration to Britain. Despite our current conception of non-white immigration, these individuals were not historical curiosities because of their unusually early arrival. Although they were relatively few in number, their role as pioneers of later and larger-scale immigration, and the ethnically diverse social networks they built, made them just as significant within modern British history as the migration which took place after 1947. Additionally, the diversity and breadth of their social networks provide us with an important indicator of the level of tolerance towards ethnic difference that existed within many working-class neighbourhoods during a period in the nation's history that is generally perceived to be one of its most intolerant.

By the 1950s the immigrants' social networks were sufficiently robust to support the thousands of South Asian men who arrived in Britain in search of work from the Indian subcontinent. This is not to argue that there was a conscious project among pioneering South Asian immigrants to enable this course of events, and it is unlikely that any of them considered themselves to be pioneers. Indeed, their original intention was to work in Britain only for a couple of years or so, and many did just that. However, a significant number developed sufficiently strong bonds with natives, particularly through marriage, that they decided to settle in Britain.

Social networks were thus built by young men striving to achieve the best for themselves and their families, whether in their homelands or in Britain. In doing so, these enterprising and optimistic individuals formed bonds, primarily of kinship, work and migration, that were transformed through everyday sociability at work and in the streets into bonds of neighbourliness, friendship, marriage and mutual support. The reactions of working-class natives to these young men overturn our preconception that hostility to perceived racial or national difference was an overriding preoccupation of working-class people during this period. An examination of social networks that, by their very existence, negated the imperial imperative of keeping the 'races' separate forms the core of this book.

Beginning with Peter Fryer's seminal history of black people in Britain, published in 1984, historians of migration have argued that the non-white presence in Britain has been a long one, going back many hundreds of years.[15] The South Asian presence alone has, as the historian Rosina Visram asserts in the title of her book, existed in Britain for over four

[15] P. Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London, 1984).

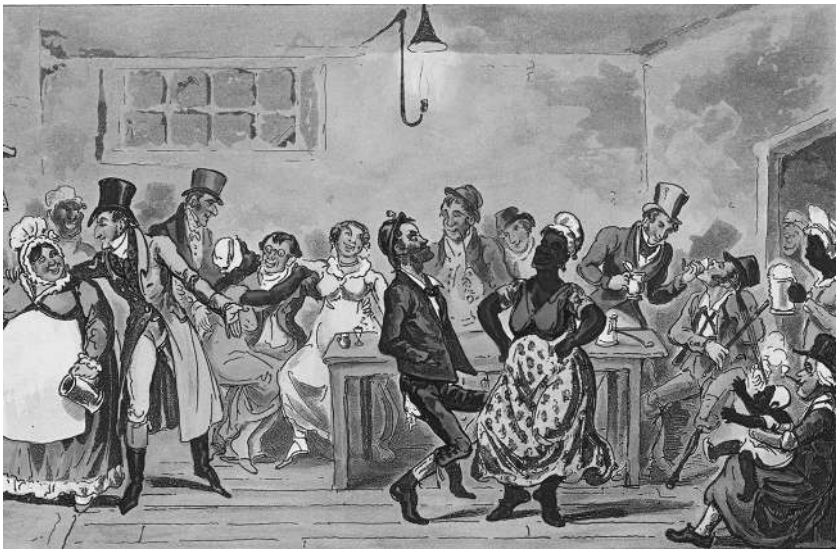


Figure 4. Robert and George Cruickshank, 'Lowest "Life in London" – Tom, Jerry and Logic among the Unsophisticated Sons and Daughters of Nature at "All Max" in the East' (1823). British Library, 838.i.2. British Library/public domain

hundred years.[16] The early arrivals were usually linked to trade as merchants or seafarers, or were servants to returning European colonists. Observers and social commentators of the nineteenth century also remarked upon the non-white presence and sometimes lamented the willingness of the working poor to mix freely with those of similar social status, regardless of their skin colour. Seafarers were no doubt the most visible and numerous of these groups, and there are a number of descriptions of early encounters between white working-class natives and Indian 'lascar' seafarers in Britain.

We might begin with Pierce Egan's semi-autobiographical *Life in London*, published in book form in 1821. *Life in London* records – among other scenes of merrymaking – impressions of the patchwork nature of the social life of the working poor his protagonists encountered in the sailortown districts of the East End (Figure 4). The book describes a tavern scene where 'Every cove that put in an appearance was quite welcome, colour or country considered no obstacle … The group was motley indeed – Lascars, blacks, jack-tars, coal-heavers, dustmen,

[16] R. Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History* (London, 2002).