The immigrants’ story

Burhan Wazir on accounts of life for the foreigners who moved to Britain

Across the nation, he finds decades-old Muslim communities that have exerted a force on cities already battling with de-industrialization and high unemployment. He also finds a Prison Service struggling to cope with a disproportionately high number of Muslim offenders: in 2016, Muslims accounted for 12,500 prisoners, a rate three times the average of other faith groups.

Fergusson’s enthusiasm for his subjects drives much of Al-Britannia. As an outsider, he presents an honest, forthright if conservative view of integration. Al-Britannia suffers, however, from the author’s tendency to over-write. Descriptions which may be overlooked in foreign reporting are harder to ignore here: ‘I looked out at the rush hour traffic, glistening in the January dark and rain, the mesmeric beat of windscreen wipers the only sound in the car.’

Describing Muslims in east Birmingham, he writes: ‘Their pedigree was as British as a bulldog’s.’ The reliance on interviewing taxi drivers – another trope of foreign correspondents who find themselves in unfamiliar territory – also proves frustrating.

While Fergusson’s access to the wide panoply of British Muslims in often hard-to-penetrate poor and working-class communities shows commitment, Al-Britannia too regularly portrays British Muslim life as a wearying struggle between orthodoxy and survival. Women and teenagers are nearly absent. Readers unfamiliar with the subject would also assume that British Muslims have made no contribution to literature, sport, science, politics, medicine or business.

What emerges from his book is a portrait of communities that share little apart from a feeling of foreignness. Here, Fergusson misses a fundamental point: Muslim communities in the UK are as atomized as those of any other faith. As sections of the British Muslim community have prospered, interests and careers have diverged and converged with mainstream Britain.

For first and second generation arrivals, financial security is an all-consuming obsession. The struggle for education, integration and acceptance are luxuries enjoyed only by third and fourth generations. Al-Britannia ends with the author deciding to observe Ramadan by fasting for 30 days. His diary shows sympathy for the hardships endured by practising Muslims. ‘Islam is not a pick’n’mix religion,’ he writes, finally, ‘I don’t think it is possible to be some kind of Muslim Lite.’

An entirely different and more encouraging view of immigration to Britain can be found in Lovers and Strangers: An Immigrant History of Post-War Britain by Clair Wills. The author, who previously wrote That Neutral Island: A History of Ireland during the Second World War, which won the PEN Hessell-Tiltman Prize for History in 2007, begins her chronology from the end of the Second World War, and Britain’s need for manpower in its industrial heartlands.

Wills describes the arrival of thousands of Poles, Indians, Pakistanis and citizens of the West Indies as an interregnum in their adulthood: a generation who viewed life in Britain as an opportunity to find economic prosperity before returning home.

Even in 1946, the new arrivals, who had fought alongside British troops in Europe, were viewed with suspicion.

The government intervened with pamphlets which said of several thousand Poles living in former army camps in Bradford and Leicester: ‘Really, they’re just like us, they want a home of their own.’ There may be a lesson here for modern politicians who say too little about what
unites immigrant aspirations with local Britons. *Lovers and Strangers* presents a historically rich view of immigration to Britain. Wills writes with both humour and detail about the lives of thousands of single men from Poland, Ireland, the West Indies and South Asia. Many of her tales are filled with the music, alcohol and nightlife which occupied the attentions of thousands of single men.

She also writes about how immigrant communities from different countries differed in their approach to their new host nation. A sizeable number of West Indian writers including VS Naipaul, Andrew Salkey, Stuart Hall and Sylvia Wynter, arrived in Britain in the 1950s as the recipients of university scholarships and grants. By 1950, more than a thousand students were arriving in the UK each year, funded either by Colonial Government scholarships or funds unleashed by the Colonial Development and Welfare Acts. The students were middle class, occasionally wealthy and demanding of their equality.

They were also politically active, and their work can be traced to our present anti-racism and anti-war movements. Their writing was equally elemental in drawing attention to both the Notting Hill riots of 1958, and the electoral success of Conservative MP Peter Griffiths during his openly racist campaign for the

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**Reading List: the state of the USA**

*Failure to Adjust: How Americans Got Left Behind in the Global Economy*  
*Edward Alden*  
*Rowman @ Littlefield*, £15.48  
*Published in October 2016, during a groundswell in anti-trade rhetoric in the United States, *Failure to Adjust* examines the loss of support for trade liberalization, and the options available to rebuild a competitive American economy that tangibly benefits US citizens.

*Invisible Man*  
*Ralph Ellison*  
*Random House*, £7.98  
*First published in 1952, *Invisible Man* tells the story of a nameless young black man’s journey across America in search of an identity that transcends his experience with racial bigotry and intolerance.

*Americanah*  
*Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*  
*Fourth Estate*, £6.29  
*Americanah* was selected as one of the 10 Best Books of 2013 by *The New York Times Book Review*, and tells the difficult and uplifting story of a young Nigerian immigrant to the US and her experience with race, identity and love in a globalized world.

*It Can’t Happen Here*  
*Sinclair Lewis*  
*Penguin*, £5.39  
*First published in 1935 during the high point of fascism, this chilling work of dystopian fiction charts the rise of a politician who, by fomenting fear and promising a return to traditional moral values, becomes the despotic ruler of the US.*

*Another Day in the Death of America*  
*Gary Younge*  
*Guardian Faber Publishing*, £8.99  
*Author Gary Younge chooses a random day in US history — November 24, 2013 — to examine the tragic loss of 10 young lives to gun violence, each story is explored in their own unique chapter.*

*Family and Culture in Crisis*  
*Edward Alden*  
*Rowman & Littlefield*, £15.48  
*Published in October 2016, *Family and Culture in Crisis* examines the loss of options available to rebuild a competitive American economy that tangibly benefits US citizens.*

Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis  
*JD Vance*  
*Harper*, £9.99  
*Part memoir, part social analysis, Hillbilly Elegy was published in June 2016 and thumbed by leading political commentators as the book to read to understand the struggles of America’s white working class. JD Vance passionately writes about his family’s experience with addiction, climbing the social ladder and their loss of faith in the American dream.*

*The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America*  
*George Packer*  
*Faber & Faber*, £10.68  
*This work of non-fiction examines the declining institutions and industry that has transformed the US into a country of winners and losers. Packer peppers the book with biographical examples from across the US that add credibility and a human face to his narration.*