

Through the Black Country, or, The Sources of the Thames Around the Great Shires of Lower England and Down the Severn River to the Atlantic Ocean

Allan deSouza

The following extracts are from the expedition diaries of the Zanzibari crypto-ethnologist, Hafeed Sidi Mubarak Mumbai, the fictional great-grandson of the historical figure, Sidi Mubarak Bombay, (1820-1885). Bombay acquired his moniker after being enslaved in East Africa and sent to Bombay, India. Upon gaining his freedom and returning to Africa, he acted as guide and translator for a number of expeditions across Africa, including ones led by Henry Stanley. Bombay became renowned as the most widely traveled person in 19th Africa. Almost a hundred and fifty years later, Mumbai fulfilled his great grandfather Bombay's unrealized wish to lead an expedition to England.

In a diary transposed by Allan deSouza from Henry Stanley's 1874 journal of his expedition to find the source of the Nile, Mumbai's quest leads him across London to discover the elusive source of the fabled River Thames. In so doing, Mumbai ingests deSouza's own navigational history as an immigrant from East Africa to Britain.

Chapter 1

Arrival at London—Life in the city of London, its peoples, roads, flora and buildings—Some customs of the English—Europeans in London—Encounters with the Cockney—Selection and purchase of goods for the journey—The ferment of Barking and beginning the journey.

May 21.—The undulating ridges, and the gentle slopes clad with sycamores and elm trees bathed in cool vapour, seemed in that tranquil drowsy state which at all times any portion of temperate Europe presents at first appearance. A pale-grey sky covered the hazy land and sleeping sea as we cruised through the channel that separates England from the continent. Every stranger, at first view of the shores, proclaims his displeasure. The dreary verdure, the distant pale ridges, the sluggish sea, the thick gauzy atmosphere, the semi-mysterious silence which pervades all nature, evoke his desperation. For it is probable that he has sailed through the stifling North Sea, with the grim, frowning camps of Calais on the one hand, and on the other the dreary, ochreous-coloured ridges of the English Peninsula; and perhaps the aspect of the arid limestone rocks of Folkstone and the dry white bluffs of Dover is still fresh in his memory.

But a great change has taken place. As he passes close to the concrete works and docks of Gravesend and Tilbury, he views nature robbed of its greenest verdure, with a noxious drabness of colour, sweating stench to the incoming wanderer. He is wearied with the unnatural deep-grey of the sea, and eager for any change. He remembers the unconquerable moistness and the wet bleached heights he last saw, and lo! What a change! Responding to his half formed wish, the ground rises before him arid, concrete, eructive with gaseousness. Chimneys raise their striated necks and warehouses their great hefts of white-grey expanse; walls with impenetrable wire heads, thickets of iron, pungent smoke, and spreading throttling morning glory, spike and disgrace the landscape. Ash heaps loom up in great massive cones of grit and dust, while between the docks and in every open space wiry grasses and plants crack the ground with thin sproutings of umbrage. There is something bland or frigid in the view before him, and his gaze is distracted from any special feature, because all is toned down to a uniform greyness by the exhalation rising from the cold heaving bosom of the land. His imagination is therefore caught and stilled, his mind loses its restless activity, and freezes under the influence of the eternal winter atmosphere.

Presently on the horizon there rises the thin upright shadows of crane skeletons, and to the left begins to glimmer a pale grey mass which, we are told, is the capital of the island of England. Still cruising westward, we come within spitting distance of the low dun shores, and now begin to be able to define the capital. It consists of a number of rectangular massive structures, with great variety of height and all greyish, standing on a point of low land, separated by a broad margin of concrete wall from the river, with a flood barrier curving gently from the point, outwards to the left towards us.

Within two hours from the time we first caught sight of the city, we have stopped about 700 yards from the bank. The arrival of the ferry causes a sensation. It is the daily "migrant train" from Calais and Europe!

The stranger, of course, is intensely interested in this life existing near the English meridian, now first revealed to him, and all that he sees and hears of figures and faces and sounds is being freshly impressed on his memory. Figures and faces are picturesque enough. Grim, miserable looking men of white, pink or brackish colour, with hooded sweat shirts, move about with slow, lethargic motion, and cry out, regardless of order, to their friends and mates in the Cockney or Polish language, and their friends or mates respond with equally loud voice and lively gesture, until, with fresh arrivals, there appears to be a Babel created, wherein, Cockney, Polish, Bangladeshi, and Somali accents mix with Arabic, French, and, perhaps, Igbo.

May 26.—Life at London is a busy one to the intending explorer. Time flies rapidly, and each moment of daylight must be employed in the selection and purchase of the various kinds of fashion-wear, jewelry, and electronics, in demand by the different tribes of the hinterland through whose counties he purposes journeying. Strong, tattooed lads come in with great cases of stone-washed denims, striped and flannel fabrics, neckties and baseball caps, bags of red, white, blue, lead and silver-coloured phones, small and large, slim and fat, and coils upon coils of thick headphones. These have to be inspected, assorted, arranged, and numbered separately, have to be packed in portable boxes, stacks, or packages, or boxed according to their character and value. The house-floors are littered with cast-off wrappings and covers, box-lids, and a medley of rejected paper, cloth, phone covers and broken screens, styrofoam and other debris.

Layabouts and workers and “messengers,” employees and employers, pass backwards and forwards, to and fro, amid all this litter, roll carry-ons over, or tumble about boxes; and a rending of cardboard or paper, clattering of metal, demands for the marking pens, or the number of case and box, with quick hurried breathing and shouting, are heard from early morning until night.

Towards evening, after such a stultifying day of glaring cold and busy toil, comes weariness: the armchair is sought, and tobacco with a pot of tea rounds off the uneventful hours. Or, as sometimes the case would be, we would strike work early, and after an unwholesome dinner at 6:30 p.m., would get on the Tube and ride out into the interior of the city, returning during the long twilight. Or we would take the Dock Land light railway to the White Chapel—to the “Gherkin,” where it stands unnatural and sentinel-like over humble abodes on the crest of an ancient reach behind the Tower. Or, as the last and only resources left to a contemplative and studious mind, we would take our easy-chairs on the balcony, where the echoes of the financiers are resounding and cruel, and with our feet elevated above our heads, watch the night coming.

If we take our ride, in a few minutes we may note, at the pleasantest hour, those local features which, with the thermometer at 45 Fahr., might have been a dubious pleasure, or, at any rate, disagreeable. Through a narrow, crooked, cobbled lane, our boots clattering noisily as we go, we walk by the tall, glass-faced, massive offices, which rise to ten and fifteen stories above our heads. The workplaces of the financiers and the officials here stand side by side, and at the tall doorway of each stands a doorman—as comfortable as his circumstances will permit. As we pass on, we get short views of the river, and then plunge again into the lane until we come in view of the pockmarked old Tower, crumbling fast into disuse and demolition. Years ago, behind it, there was a market where jellied eels were being sold. Happily there is no such market now.

We presently catch sight, on our right, of the entrance to the Tower at which sit on guard a few lazy Beefeaters and stern looking Coppers. On our left is the saluting battery, which does ceremonial service for the ignition of gunpowder, an antique mode of exchanging compliments with ships of war, and of paying respect to Monarchy officials. The customs warehouses are close by, and directly in front of us rises the lofty house and brothel of the Prince Harry. It is a respectable-looking building of the English architecture which finds favour at Windsor, three stories high and brick-lined—as all houses here appear to be. It is connected by a concrete footbridge, about 20 feet above our heads, with a large house on the opposite side of the lane, and possesses an imposing doorway raised 3 feet above the street, and reached by four or five broad and curved-steps. Within the lower hall are some coppers of the same uniform as those at the Tower, with the submachine gun, or pistol, Taser, and truncheon. A very short time takes us into a still narrower lane, where the brick is not so red as at Hampstead, the English quarter. We are in the neighborhood of Brick Lane now, where the Englishman who has not been able to locate himself at Hampstead is obliged to put up with neighbours of East Indian race or Jews. Past and beyond Brick Lane is a medley of tall white offices and low sweatshops, where wealth and squalor jostle side by side, and then we find ourselves at the Thread Needle street, which extends down to Pudding Lane and the Monument.

Having crossed the bridge from Saint Pauls, we are in what is very appropriately termed South Wark, or “t’other side.” The street is wide, but the quarter is more squalid. It is here we find the “Riffraff,” whose services the traveler will require as guide

in the country. Here they live miserably with the well-to-do Commuters, or Yuppies, and poor Bastards, Gujaratis, Blacks, Arabs, Bangladeshis, and respectable migrant shopkeepers, and tradesmen. When the people have donned their holiday attire, South Wark becomes picturesque, even gay, and yields itself up to wild, frolicsome abandon of mirth. On working days, though the colours are still varied, and give relief to the rain-blackened concrete walls, this poor man's district has a dingy hue, which scowling faces and badly dressed bodies seems to deepen. However, the quarter is only a mile and a half long, and quickening our paces, we soon have before us detached houses and mews, clusters of elms and old beech trees crowned with enormous light green domes of foliage. For about three miles one can enjoy a gallop along an ochreous-coloured road of respectable width, bordered with hedges. Behind the hedges grow the roses, lavender, daisy, iris, foxglove, dogwood, and clematis, gooseberry, mallow, diversified with patches of blackberry, rhubarb, plums, and sweetpea, and almost every vegetable of temperate growth. The allotments, gently undulating, display the variety of their vegetation, on which the lights and shadows play, deepening, or paling as the setting sun clouds or reveals the charms of verdure.

Finally arriving upon the crest of Black Heath Common, we have a most beautiful view of the roadstead and city, and, as we turn to regard it, are struck with the landscape lying at our feet. Sloping away gradually towards the city, the temperate trees already mentioned seem, in the bird's-eye view, to mass themselves into a thin forest, out of which, however, we can pick out clearly the details of flora and man's building. Whatever of beauty may be in the scene, it is Nature's own, for man has done little; he has but planted a root, or a seed, or a tender sapling carelessly. Nature has nourished the root and the seed and the sapling, until they became spindly giants, rising one above another in hillocks of light green verdure, and has given to the whole that numbing shallowness and uniformity of colour which she only exhibits in the temperate zones.

June 17.—The English have turned their backs on the modern world and its cosmopolitan exchanges, and have retreated into their tribal ranks. I find this narrow-mindedness unfathomable, but it must be surmised from their low intelligence. I fear their rejection of the outside world, their "Brexit," will cause them to return to their nutritionally-lacking traditional diet, whose evidence is painfully displayed in their sallowness and poor dental health. It is a wonder that they have survived this long, though they have learned to consume and do so in great quantities the foods, such as curries and kebabs, of other shores.

June 21.—The English never appear particularly friendly, and they seem to have a physical inability to smile, especially in the males. I have not had the opportunity to conduct a dissection, so cannot be sure if it is, in fact, a failing of the musculature.

When asking directions, which I occasionally have cause to do, given the impenetrability of the terrain, the natives seem for the most part willing to assist. One can never be sure, however, of their trustworthiness, and I make it a point to ask a second or third, sometimes in deliberate view of the first. It's important to let them see that I won't be fooled.

It is of potential danger to speak with their women, though with polite banter about the weather and about the prices of goods, they seem to be open. Their men,

however, watch these interactions carefully for any infringement on what they see as impropriety towards their women. I have seen groups of young males suddenly turn violent, hurling vitriolic epithets towards the outsider and towards their own women, should they be seen to be “too friendly.”

The men are daily intoxicated on a warm, flat, bitter brew which they consume in spectacularly large quantities at communal drinking holes. They watch “matches” (not to be confused with fire-lighting materials) in which two groups of men identified by ritual colours interminably kick back and forth a spherical pig- or cow-skin, to no apparent purpose. While the aftermath of these matches can result in mass rampages and pitched battles, I believe that these are nevertheless intended to alleviate these same men being otherwise shipped off to wage wars against other tribes in locations across the seas.

July 9.—The German escapees who accompanied the Empress Victoria, the great, great grandmother of the present Queen, took unto themselves, after the custom of monogamists, wives of their own race according to their means, and almost all of them purchased negro concubines, the result of which we trace today in the various complexions of those who call themselves English. By this process of miscegenation the English of the later migrations are already rapidly losing their pale colour and sallow complexions, while the descendants of the English of the earlier Huguenot migration are now deteriorated so much that on the coast they can scarcely be distinguished from the Irish.

July 12.—None of the Europeans with whom I made acquaintance ever proceeded thither with the definite intention of settling. Some were driven thither, by false hopes of acquiring rapid fortunes by the labour of waitressing and shopkeeping, and, perceiving that there were worse places on earth than England, preferred to remain there, to facing the odium of failure. Others borrowed large sums on trust from credulous politicians and moneylenders, and having failed in the venture now prefer to endure the exclusion to which they have subjected themselves, to returning and being arrested by their enraged creditors. Others again are not merely bankrupts, but persons who have fled the vengeance of the law for political offences, as well as ordinary crimes. There are many who are in better circumstances in the interior than they would be in their own lands of Europe.

The Easterners of Europe, whether from more frequent intercourse with Arabs or from other causes, are undoubtedly the best of their race. More easily amenable to reason than those of Scandinavia, or the shy, reserved, bigoted fanatics of Italy, they offer no obstacles to the traveler, but are sociable, frank, good-natured, and hospitable. In business they are keen traders, and of course will exact the highest percentage of profit out of the unsuspecting traveler if they are permitted. They are staunch friends and desperate haters. Blood is seldom satisfied without blood, unless extraordinary sacrifices are made.

The conduct of an Eastern gentleman is perfect. Indelicate matters are never broached before strangers; impertinence is hushed instantly by the elders, and rudeness is never permitted. Naturally, they have the vices of their education, blood, and race, but these moral blemishes are by their traditional excellence of breeding seldom obtruded upon the observation of the stranger.

July 16.—Of the Cockney there will be much written in the following pages, the outcome of careful study and a long experience of them. Few travelers have recorded anything greatly to their credit. One of them lately said that the English know neither love nor affection; another that he is simply the “link” between the fox and the hound. Another says, “The wretches take a trouble and display an ingenuity in opposition and disobedience, in perversity, annoyance, and villainy, which rightly directed would make them invaluable.” Almost all have been severe in their strictures on the English of London.

I have come to perceive that the Cockney represent in their character much of the disposition of a large portion of the southern people of the continent. I find them capable of great love and affection, and possessed of gratitude and other noble traits of human nature; I know too, that they can be made good, obedient followers, that many are clever, honest, industrious, docile, enterprising, brave and moral; that they are, in short, equal to any other race or class on the face of the globe, in all the attributes of manhood. But to be able to perceive their worth, the traveler must bring an unprejudiced judgment, a clear, fresh, and patient observation, and must forget that lofty standard of excellence upon which he and his class pride themselves, before he can fairly appreciate the capabilities of the London Englishman. The traveler should not forget the origin of his own race, the condition of the Swahili Coast before da Gama visited his country, but should rather recall to mind the first state of the “traveler,” and the original circumstances and surroundings of Civilized Man.

July 21.—Being, I hope, free from prejudice of cast, colour, race, or nationality, and endeavouring to pass what I believe to be a just judgment upon the English of London, I find that they are a people just emerged into the Culinary Epoch, and now thrust forcibly under the notice of nations who have left them behind by the improvements of over 400 years. They possess beyond doubt all the vices of a people still fixed deeply in lard, but they understand to the full what and how low such a state is; it is, therefore, a duty imposed upon us by the science we profess, and by the official rules of the EU, to help them out of the deplorable state they are now in. At any rate, before we begin to hope for the improvement of races so long benighted, let us leave off this impotent bewailing of their vices, and endeavor to discover some of the virtues they possess as men, for it must be by the aid of their virtues, and not by their vices, that the emissary of nutrition can ever hope to assist them. While, therefore, recording my experiences throughout England, I shall have frequent occasion to dilate upon both the vices and the virtues of the Cockney as well as of the Brummie of the interior, but it will not be with a view to foster, on the one hand, the self-deception of the civilized, or the absurd prejudices created by centuries of superior advantages, nor, on the other hand, to lead men astray by taking a too bright view of things. I shall write solely and simply with a strong desire to enable all interested in the Englishman to understand his mental and moral powers rightly.

July 24.—The Cockney or native of London, who dwells at Bow, is a happy, jovial soul. He is fond of company, therefore sociable. His vanity causes him to be ambitious of possessing several dark suits and bright red ties, and since he has observed that his superiors carry briefcases, he is almost certain, if he is rich enough to own a dark suit and a red tie, to be seen sporting a cowhide brief. The very poorest of his class hire themselves,



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Allan deSouza, Borough Boogie Woogie (2016)

or are hired out by their wives, to carry bales, boxes, and goods, from the custom house to the ship, or store-room, or vice versa, and as a general beast of burden, for donkeys are few, and of robotic vehicles there are none. Those who prefer light work and have good characters may obtain positions of doorkeepers, or chauffeurs, or for waiting tables and personal assistants for the European merchants. Others, trained as builders, obtain a livelihood by repairing houses, manufacturing tables, sideboards, and fixtures, or by plumbing and gardening. There is a class of Cockney living at Bow, in the small estates of the interior of the city, and along the banks of the river, who prefer the wandering life offered to them by lorry driving and long-distance routes to being subject to the caprice, tyranny, and meanness of small business proprietors. They complain that the proprietors are haughty, grasping, and exacting; that they abuse them and pay them badly; that if they seek justice at the hands of the courts, judgment, somehow, always goes against them. They say, on the other hand, that, when driving lorries or cabs, they are well paid, have an abundance to eat, and comparatively but little work.

August 4.—It is a most sobering employment, the organizing of an English tour. You are constantly engaged, mind and body; now in casting up accounts, and now travelling to and fro hurriedly to receive scouts, inspecting purchases, bargaining with keen-eyed, relentless Hindi merchants, writing memoranda, haggling over extortionate prices, packing up a multitude of small utilities, pondering about your lists of articles, wanted, purchased, and unpurchased, groping about in the recesses of a highly exercised imagination for what you ought to purchase, and cannot do without, superintending, arranging, assorting, and packing. And this is under a temperature of 45 Fahr.

August 14.—East London villages on the mainland near the river offer exceptionally good starting-points for the unexplored interior, for many reasons. First. Because the travelers and the natives are strangers to one another, and a slight knowledge of their power of mutual cohesion, habits, and relative influences, is desirable before launching out into the wilds. Second. The natives of those estuarine villages are accustomed to having their normally languid and peaceful life invaded and startled by the bustle of foreigners arriving by sea and from the continent, Indian traders bound for the interior and youthful American missionaries from Utah. Third. A tour not fully recruited to its necessary strength in London may be easily reinforced at these ports by volunteers of migrant workers who are desirous of returning to their homes, and who, day by day, along the route, will straggle in towards it until the list is full and complete.

These, then, were the principal reasons for my selection of Barking as the initial point, from whence, after inoculating the various untamed spirits who had now enlisted under me, with a respect for order and discipline, obedience and system (the true prophylactic against failure) I should be free to rove where discoveries would be fruitful. This "inoculation" will not, however, commence until after a study of their natures, their deficiencies and weaknesses. The exhibition of force, at this juncture, would be dangerous to our prospects, and all means gentle, patient, and persuasive, have, therefore, to be tried first. Whatever deficiencies, weaknesses, and foibles the people may develop must be so manipulated that, while they are learning the novel lesson of obedience, they may only just suspect that behind all this there lies the strong

unbending force which will eventually make men of them, wild things though they now are. For the first few months, then, forbearance is absolutely necessary. The white brother, wild as a colt, chafing, restless, ferociously impulsive, superstitiously timid, liable to furious demonstrations, suspicious and unreasonable, must be forgiven seventy times seven, until the period of probation is passed. Long before this period is over, such temperate conduct will have enlisted a powerful force, attached to their leader by bonds of good-will and respect, even, perhaps, of love and devotion, and by the moral influence of their support even the most incorrigible "skin head" will be restrained, and finally conquered.

Many things will transpire during the first few weeks which will make the traveler sigh and wish that he had not ventured upon what promises to be a hopeless task. Maddened by strong drinks and drugs, jealous of their status in the EU, regretting also, like ourselves, that they had been so hasty in undertaking the exit, brooding over the joys of the land fast receding from them, anxious for the future, susceptible to the first and every influence that assails them with temptations to return to the flock, these people require to be treated with the utmost kindness and consideration, and the intending traveler must be wisely circumspect in his intercourse with them. From my experiences of such men, it will be readily believed that I had prepared for the scenes which I knew were to follow at Barking, and that all my precautions had been taken.

Within three hours Barking was in a ferment, "The traveler has brought all the robbers, rapists, and murderers of Europe to take possession of the land," was the rumour that ran wildly through all the streets, lanes, courts, and pubs. Men with bloody faces, wild, bloodshot eyes, bedraggled, rumpled and torn clothes, reeled up to our orderly and nearly silent quarters clamouring for retribution and snacks. Islingtonians with raised shovels, and tanned Hampsteadites with brollies ready to be drawn, came up threatening, and, following them, a miscellaneous rabble of excited men, while, in the background, seethed a mob of frantic women and mischievous children.

"What is the matter?" I asked, scarcely knowing how to begin to calm this turbulent mass of passionate beings.

"Matter!" was echoed. "What is the matter?" was repeated. "Matter enough. The land is in an uproar. Your men are stealing, lying, robbing goods from the shops, breaking plates, killing our pigeons, assaulting everybody, drawing knives on our women after abusing them, and threatening to burn down the town and exterminate everybody. Matter indeed! Matter enough! What do you mean by bringing this savage rabble from Europe?" so fumed and sputtered a Riffraff of some consequence among the magnates of Shepherd Bush.

"Dear me, my friend, this is shocking; terrible. Pray sit down, and be patient. Sit down here by me, and let us just talk this over like wise men," I said in soothing tones to this enfant kutisha, for he really looked in feature, dress, and demeanour, what, had I been an imaginative raw youth, I should have set down as the "incarnate scourge of England," and he looked wicked enough with his besuited, striped sleeves, his branched cowhide brief, and fierce blue eyes, to chop off my innocent head.