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## The West Midlands

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### *Motorway City*

I came away from the Potteries early one very frosty morning and made my way down the old A34, for about fifty miles, toward Birmingham. The road was surprisingly though agreeably traffic free, to say it was a weekday morning. This seemed strange, even at nine o'clock. It could almost have been a Sunday. The A34 was once the main artery from Staffordshire down to Birmingham, before the M6 was built during the 1960s. I suppose the reason it was as deserted as it was when I drove over it was that most of the traffic had abandoned it and was today congesting the M6 several miles away, at the opposite side of rolling fields, speckled appealingly with farmhouses and spreading out in typical Midlands fashion over to my right.

Once I was through Stafford, then the disjointed accumulation of tower blocks, cubes, and squares scattered haphazardly around a circumnavigatory road system describing themselves as the town of Walsall, it did not take me long to reach the outskirts of Birmingham. For some time, the main body of the city was outlined mistily on the horizon several miles distant, lifting beyond a seemingly interminable expanse of suburban roof and tree tops spread out up ahead. The traffic remained quite light, even when I had broken through the outer ring of the city limits and started to negotiate the long dual carriageway plunging through a succession of underpasses and flyovers

– at one point, I passed the Saddam Hussein mosque (the construction of the building was financed by Iraq), which during the Gulf War remained surprisingly graffiti-free – right up into the city centre itself. The reason the traffic remained light was that most of it which was homing in towards the city from the north would be in the process of being swung round and funnelled into the centre from the south, courtesy of Birmingham's legendary motorway network; an aspect of the city I am usually anxious to avoid.

Birmingham is not my favourite city. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Birmingham is not many people's favourite city, chiefly because of the sheer, astonishing ugliness of the city centre, and also because of its notorious inner ring-road system. They tell you when you are in Birmingham that if you know where you are going, then the ring-road system works extremely well (they say the same thing in Leeds); but if you don't know where you are going, then that is probably the foundation of why you take such an instant dislike to the place. This seems to me to be a realistic supposition, for in no other city in England have I ended up wasting so much time taking the wrong turning or the wrong exit from roundabouts, and arriving late for meetings, as I have done when using these multi-lane carriageways in Birmingham. They are a dominating feature of the Birmingham city landscape. Wherever you are the roads seem to be of an unusually large width, an observation which you might pass off as being a touch psychological in origin, were it not linked to the speed you feel you have to move along at mentally to keep up with the flow of traffic that is forever coursing along them. Whichever direction you approach Birmingham from, you soon come into contact with these horrendous eight lane roads that have four lanes aimed in one direction, and four lanes aimed in the other. What is especially unnerving, particularly when the traffic is busy (in its own way this is also darkly amusing) is that if you are on one side of one of these carriageways, the traffic from the inner two lanes is invariably trying to cross over to the outer two lanes, the traffic from the outer two lanes invariably trying to cross over to the inner. You feel like you are caught up in some madhouse of lunatic drivers, an awareness that is probably not

as far from the truth as it might at first sound. We have most of us had our hearts in our mouths at one time or another, when driving along a normal stretch of motorway, when comes the uneasy moment where you are travelling at speed in the outside lane, and the cars gushing down the slip road merely indicate as they accelerate toward the main flow, expecting you to move over to enable them to join the stream of traffic without them having to slow down at the white dotted line. If the motorway is busy, and you cannot immediately move over, there can be a tense few seconds when you are afraid to brake because of the vehicles driving too close behind, and are unable to move over to the middle lane because of the cars speeding alongside.

This sort of thing seems to be happening constantly on the multi-lane carriageways in Birmingham. What makes it worse is the frequency of the junctions, so that there is a steady stream of vehicles constantly jostling for space. Normal busy motorways feel civilized in comparison. At times, especially during the Birmingham rush-hour periods, the speed of the traffic becomes so fast-paced it actually becomes farcical. There can be no serious justification behind such absurd race-track behaviour, except that drivers are simply brutalized beyond reproach. You wonder not only what on earth you are caught up in, but on a more philosophical scale, what on earth the human race is doing with itself, struggling like this, haggling for territorial rights, all in the name of social mobility and the supposed functioning of a modern economy. What prompts the fierce clashing of territories much of the time on the ring road in Birmingham is the way the outer two lanes will suddenly rise up to enable traffic to leave the carriageway at the next roundabout, beneath which the inner two lanes continue their forward plunge, into an underpass and the seeming abyss. Then, as the ribbed-concrete and pebble-dash retaining walls that are holding the roundabout up above you are blurring past, you are no sooner out the other side into daylight again than the outer two lanes bringing the traffic down from the roundabout are trailing in at speed to meet you, like something from a child's Scalextric track. If you do not know where you are going, and you are being forced to travel at speed to keep up with the flow and not collide with the traffic filing in toward the jetstream

alongside, you can easily overshoot the point where the outer two lanes rise up again to deposit vehicles at the next elevated roundabout, and miss your exit entirely. This is especially so when the vehicles surging up behind you *do* know where they are going, and they immediately jump into the space you were hoping to fill.

All of this happened on my very first day in Birmingham when I was there for the purposes of writing this book, so that I was aggravated before I had decently settled into a hotel. I completely lost my bearings at one point, in the midst of an unspeakable morass of converging and diverging traffic. The next moment I was heading away from the city through a hideous prefabricated concrete cutting, beneath an array of blue overhead destination gantries flickering stroboscopically overhead, which informed me I was now heading out toward the motorways. This happened so quickly, with such finality, there was a stupid moment when it felt as though I had finished my business in the city and was actually leaving, when I was supposed to be only just arriving. Then, sooner than it was possible to think, travelling at that velocity amidst such a dangerous surge of traffic, I was being raised up on concrete pillars and swung round, inevitably, onto the preposterous tangle of elevated tarmac known as Spaghetti Junction, laid out up ahead against the pale afternoon sky. From that angle, as I tore in toward it, it looked more like some kind of children's play-track slotted together than a construction seriously instigated by municipal committees and a Department of Transport. Seen in the flesh, seen down at eye level, Spaghetti Junction never seems quite as ominous as the legends that grew up around it during the 1970s made it out to be. It is also smaller than you would expect. The aerial photographs you see of it on the postcards on sale in the souvenir shops in Birmingham, and the aerial shots that appear from time to time on television news bulletins, suggest it covers a much larger area than it actually does. Spaghetti Junction seems to me to be not so much an appalling sight as an utterly ridiculous one. Perhaps to appreciate its true significance aesthetically, it has to be remembered that it was a product of the same cultural atmosphere that gave us the disgusting sense

of design masquerading as popular taste in this country around twenty years ago.

Nevertheless, one thing is for certain: if you are coming to Birmingham for the first time, and you negotiate Spaghetti Junction because you are approaching from the south instead of the north, as I did, and you see up ahead the swaggering jumble of tower blocks making up the bulk of the city centre standing sharply against the sky, you are definitely prepared for the air of the place, of that there can be little doubt. Birmingham has long marketed itself as the motorway city, and the implication from this is that it considers the reputation that has followed with considerable pride. But an off-shoot of this has been the ugly, big city, slightly mad, Greco-Spanish sort of automobile jostling that has become such a hallmark of the character of the city today. This seems to suit the feel of modern Birmingham, for it feels to me like no other city in the country; something that would not be such a bad thing were it not that so often it is for all the wrong reasons. When you approach it from Spaghetti Junction, especially if you have just been forced to turn round and contemplate it from that angle completely against your will as I had, you know you are being drawn into the swirling vortex of big city tension, just as you do in certain areas of London. There is something big and noisy and substantial about Birmingham; something mean and abrasive and inhuman and slightly uncivilized, like the bloated faces, glistening with sweat, one associates with stock-market haggling. The city looks assertive. It is ugly, but ugly in a boisterous way that is manifestly *arrogant*. When you are up in the thick of it you can feel it crowding in upon you. It is completely lacking in charm, of course. But to me what is so distinctive about Birmingham architecturally – and by saying this, I am not saying for one moment that I approve of it – is that you cannot deny that the place looks *impressive*, if one interprets the word ‘impressive’ as it is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (to mean something that is powerful or exciting), instead of the way it is usually applied inaccurately in everyday English speech – to indicate that one is responding to something favourably.

There is no mistaking that Birmingham is an important

city, no mistaking it at all. What is more mystifying is your understanding that, theoretically, it was the same species of creature that built it as built our twelfth-century cathedrals and much of our best classical architecture, when the closest thing we had to mechanical automation was a simple block-and-tackle.

### *This is Birmingham*

I had been to Birmingham before, several times in fact. I had done a small amount of business with a firm in one of the city's industrial suburbs that is connected to the electro-plating trade, for which Birmingham is known (chromium plating was invented there), and was on speaking terms with the two proprietors. I had also enjoyed a bird's-eye view of the city from the top floor of the Birmingham office belonging to the company for which my wife once worked, and had time to consider on more than one occasion that it possessed one of the ugliest panoramas to be found anywhere. From the top floor of an office block, Birmingham looked to be a rambling mass of grey, prefabricated non-descriptiveness, just as it appeared to be when you were a dozen or so stories down below on the ground, hemmed in among the crush of buses and traffic. So many places can be dismissed as ugly, and there is nothing much else that can be said about them. Not much follows in the way of thought process or evaluation. The ugliness of Sheffield, for instance, is simply an ugliness, a compendium of architectural disjointedness and bad planning that appears in places to have been scattered across the surface of the city like chicken-feed strewn across a farmyard. But the impact of its unevenness tends to be mitigated by the Pennine hills rising gently around it. Birmingham does not have this kind of elevated background scenery to soften the blandness of its urban contour-line. This enables another quality to surface, the one that is really responsible for the air of architectural vulgarity many people find offensive when contemplating Birmingham. Because the central part of the city is spread across the face of

a shallow hill, it is lifted up slightly and is more starkly outlined against the sky. There is no clutter of distant suburbs filling in the gaps between the buildings. As a consequence, Birmingham has always seemed to me to resemble more than any other English city I know the long distance shots you used to see on the opening credits to those dreadful American soap-operas that were popular several years back, where a jumble of skyscrapers elbowed one another for attention on the skyline, the clouds reflected across acres of mirror-finished glass; and the great freeways, swirling with traffic, swept toward them as perspective lines sweep toward a vanishing point. Birmingham, in its modest English way, is rather like this. It may be scattered piecemeal and conform to no controlled sense of pattern, unlike some of those much vaster American cities. But you find it difficult to escape the interesting feeling that the essential haphazardness of it all, has somehow not been deliberately *planned*.

Much has been said and written about the architecture of Birmingham, of course. The architecture of Birmingham is, in fact, considered to be something of a national stock joke, and was so long before the Prince of Wales made his famous attack on the Bull Ring Centre and the appalling Central Library, putting the city on the defensive, some years back. It is, however, not enough merely to talk negatively about the Bull Ring Centre, dismiss Birmingham as being ugly and be done with it. You have to look deeper. For something I cannot recall having heard mentioned about the feel of the city is the underlying sense of energy you perceive bound up with the slabs of dirty concrete straining skywards, if you stand back and look hard enough. To an extent, you can perceive the same sort of thing in nearly any major city in the country. But in Birmingham, as an essence, it feels to be uniquely concentrated. When you stand and look at Birmingham, you seem to perceive tower blocks and nothing else. From only a mile or two distant, it is possible to take in the whole of the city centre in a single glance, something you cannot do with London, for instance, because of its size and the way it sprawls. Wherever you are situated on the outskirts of Birmingham, whichever direction along whichever main road or railway line you approach it from, whether you catch sight of it between trees, or through

the gaps between buildings as you climb into your car out in the suburbs, whether you are up in front of it among the crowds circulating around New Street Station and the Bull Ring Centre, that distinctive jumble of closely grouped modern high-rise is piled powerfully and dominantly on the horizon-line, like a string of huge prefabricated concrete exclamation marks at the end of another great architectural sentence. The brashness seems so absolute it is almost stifling. This is the secret to Birmingham's architectural and aesthetic distinction.

Notwithstanding Birmingham's intensely self-conscious aesthetic reputation, or its attempt to seemingly burlesque and sanctify the meaning of modernism by once deliberately bulldozing itself wholesale architecturally, there are some good buildings remaining. After I had booked into The Grand on Colmore Row, I went back out and walked to the top of the street, to the point where it opens out into Victoria Square, now free of traffic, in the central part of the city, and had a look at some of them. As you walk down the side of the Town Hall, more or less a Roman temple mounted on a rugged Corinthian-columned podium, and which holds the unusual distinction of having been designed by the same man who invented the hansom cab, you capture something of the strong spirit of independence for which the city was always known, and of its nineteenth-century reputation for pioneering achievements in municipal administration; one that produced the first town planning scheme in Britain. (This is strangely ironic, considering the hash it was to make of its own planning years hence.) Adjacent is the dominating bulk of the Council House and the adjoining Art Gallery and Museum, distinguished for its collection of Pre-Raphaelite paintings, and which that afternoon I did not linger over because it was alive with parties of noisy school children who appeared to think they had been let loose in a gymnasium. Running all the way up from The Grand to the old Post Office building at the top is a long and impressive line of elderly architecture which, while I was there, like the impressive portico of the council headquarters, was in the process of being sandblasted and restored behind a tangle of scaffolding and tarpaulins, sometimes issuing banging and drilling till quite late at night. This grandiose impression

was, unfortunately, rather short-lived when I found myself guided round the front of the Council House by a series of protective hoardings into the adjoining Chamberlain Square. It was so long since I had examined the notes I made during the Prince of Wales' television documentary about architecture that I had completely forgotten his attack on Birmingham's Central Library, or indeed what the building looked like at all. Chamberlain Square is also pedestrianized. Central to it is the Chamberlain Memorial Fountain, a structure that, if you have tears blurring your eyes from the wind as I had when you stand and stare at it, resembles the top half of a Gothic church tower that has been set into concrete. Behind it curves a steady gradient of shallow concrete steps, so that the entire space forms a natural amphitheatre. Backing on to it is the rear section of the Town Hall, and at the other side, the Council House and Art Gallery. Behind the steps sits a bulging concrete monstrosity resembling a short flight of giant concrete stairs tipped upside down, breathtaking in its simple vulgarity. The contrast it creates against the small oasis of the nineteenth century loosely grouped around it is so violent, as you look at it you begin to doubt your own convictions. Good sense tells you it is a ridiculous spectacle. But because the clashing created is as pronounced as it is, you could misinterpret your reactions and begin to believe there is actually something anarchically appealing about it.

Because of its proximity to a gathering of weighty Victorian civic building, at first I assumed the building was another incidence of municipal architecture gone desperately wrong. I walked inside it, having not the slightest idea what purpose it served, mainly because of the volume of people who looked to be walking innocently in and out of the entrance, suggesting that it might be some kind of public place, perhaps a Hayward Gallery-type exhibition hall. To my amazement I discovered, when I inquired, that I was standing inside the Central Library. This was not obvious, not obvious at all, and at first I assumed a cryptic inference to the shallow architectural merit of much of modern Birmingham was being aired, as opposed to what one normally expects to derive from the content of intelligent books. Opening up before me

was a large open area, not unlike the central atrium to a modern shopping mall, called 'Paradise Forum'. Placed at strategic intervals throughout, creating a ludicrous contrast to the building's utilitarian fabrication, were a number of mock-Greek columns and crumbling porticoes, alongside which were standing what remain in my memory as papier-mache statues. Surrounding them were craft stalls, people selling little artifacts from brightly-painted market barrows, and one man drawing charcoal portraits, so that the space gave a vague implication it might have been another of those places that have had a brief glance at Covent Garden. The Prince of Wales, describing the building, I take it, from the outside, said it resembled an incinerator in which to burn books, rather than a place in which to house them. That is an observation which is entirely accurate. (Or at any rate it is so externally and aesthetically: ergonomically, the building might function very well indeed.) You cannot see a single book in the place when you are down in the atrium of the 'Paradise Forum'. You do not feel that ache for information and knowledge welling inside you that the sight of row upon row of books in libraries – not in bookshops: never in bookshops – normally evokes. It is the constant sense of clutter, of things continually obtruding into your vision, that is such a striking characteristic of Birmingham. If there is any characteristic about the place to be highlighted at all, it is that it seems to be completely unco-ordinated.

And so it was in here, inside one of its buildings as well as out. Everything clashed in this outlandish interior, this theatre of the tasteless and the absurd. There was the concrete building, filled with tubular hi-tech Pompidou Centre-type girders, the essence of ancient Greece, traditional hand-painted wooden barrows straight from the Portobello Road, and to top it all, an ultra-modern American-style ice-cream parlour-cum-sandwich bar. I ate my lunch in that café, and the wiry youth who waited on me approached brandishing something I had not seen before; something which perhaps illustrates clearer than anything the at times hilarious, though behind the comical aspect the deadly serious, way advanced technology is gnawing away at the most elementary of human tasks – he was holding an electronic notepad. It would appear that very soon it will not be necessary for

the human organism to master the art of holding a pen any more. Rather than taking my order down by hand in the usual way, the youth stroked an electronic instrument over a device that resembled an office calculator, which he detached from his belt. I asked him what on earth he was doing. He told me that the pen relayed an electronic signal across to the cash register, where the customer's invoice was printed out automatically, presumably to reduce the potential for error. It was difficult not to laugh at such electronic gimmickry, though to be honest I had already been highly amused ever since I had walked into the 'Paradise Forum', if not since I had driven into the entire city.

I was brought back down to earth that afternoon when I crossed over from one English social reality straight into another: I drove out to talk with the leader of the Birmingham Baptist Inner City Project (BBICP), at its headquarters in a beautiful little brick church down at Balsall Heath, where there is some good work being done to help some of the poorest people in the city. Balsall Heath sounds as though it might be a pleasant enough quarter. Though the feel of the area is the feel of inner city areas everywhere, with busy main roads, a muddle of disjointed architectural Victoriana, cheap shops, and looming perpetually as a backcloth, the canvas of tower blocks and industrial estates surrounded by a saturnine scribble of searchlights and video-surveillance cameras, there was an abundance of mature trees lining the main road I drove along to reach it, softening the approach. Some of the older housing stock, its brickwork glowing beautifully in the afternoon sun, looked very good indeed; and along the main street there was a handful of magnificent nineteenth-century buildings, admittedly fraying now, one of them housing, in a dingy back room, an Afro-Caribbean association where I stopped to ask for directions. But Balsall Heath is actually a very deprived area, and throughout most of the past ten years, the city's Baptist denomination has been attempting to boost community relations there, alleviate some of the more unpleasant social consequences of impoverishment in inner urban areas, and attract greater numbers of people to join the faith. There are a dozen churches involved in the project – I

saw a handful scattered right across Birmingham – and they are all situated in the poorest quarters of the city, some designated as being among the most impoverished in the country. There are the usual social problems associated with these areas, high unemployment, drug addiction, homelessness, domestic violence, and sub-standard housing. Crime is commonplace, part of the social fabric. When I arrived, and said I had made a brief exploration of the area on foot, there seemed to be a moment of genuine surprise when I said that, no, I had not been stopped in the street and offered drugs. That is the kind of place that Balsall Heath is. It seems to be accepted as fairly routine that you should encounter vice, rather as you would notice the sun shining outside during a heatwave. At night the shops are armour-plated, and, in addition to the other social problems the area has, as if those were not enough, it happens to be one of the city's busiest red-light districts. On the way there, I stopped off at the electro-plating firm I have already referred to, to see how the owners were keeping (business was terrible), and to ask for directions to Balsall Heath. When I mentioned the name of a particular road it had been recommended I head for over the telephone by the Urban Missioner at the BBICP, my electro-plating friends instantly erupted into bittersweet laughter, nearly spilling their cups of tea. That road, it seems – to someone as unfamiliar with the city as I was, as had already happened to me up in Middlesbrough – is generally acknowledged to be *the* place to search for girls offering themselves for hire. If only it were possible to find such streets and such social realities and an assortment of people renting out their sexual organs by the hour truly so amusing.

It is bodies such as the Baptist Union that have been making a serious attempt to break the social deadlock hanging over these places and give the poor people assembled there encouragement and hope. There is a tendency to assume that anything with the words 'inner city' in its official title must automatically be council or government funded, as had been the case with the Asian community centre I had visited in Burnley. This is often not the case at all, which is why the activities of a number of secular religious groups (here I suppose one can include the Salvation Army, which has

generally kept its hands free of the dirt of politics and done much good work for the disadvantaged of Britain), are often vastly worthier causes than the squalid little petitions established by left-wing councils and a crowd of jeering pressure groups, that have as their real motivation the thumbing of noses at the philosophy of the current government. What I found remarkable about the BBICP – this is why I want to give it some space – is that the project's funding is derived almost entirely from congregational donations. They have obviously liaised with the city council, in particular over the projected site of a new community, training, and rehabilitation centre across the road, that has not advanced beyond the discussion stage for five years because there is not the money available to purchase the land. It is very difficult for independent organizations to work successfully with councils unless they possess substantial resources to begin with, which the Baptists unfortunately do not. Broader funding has been provided by the West Midlands Baptist Association, and, I believe, the selling of church property; but the majority injected into the establishment I saw had been raised through the offertory after services in some of the more prosperous parts of the city. I am not a religious man in any way, but I have to say that if I ever found myself developing a theological compunction, I would be more than happy to think that it might enable me to join up with people such as these Birmingham Baptists. There is something rather humiliating in coming upon such people – humiliating in that it forces you to come to terms with the febleness of your own selfish preoccupations – something almost moving when you contemplate the work they do and their outlook on life. I couldn't help becoming aware that I was a fairly comfortable human being who would find it difficult to get involved in such schemes because I am always too busy, as are most of the people I mix with, even when we think we have a realistic social awareness and shrewd understanding of life. That is really only another way of saying we are too much concerned with ourselves. Yet these church people make the time, something that must surely entail a certain amount of devotion and self-sacrifice and genuine response to the plight of the less fortunate imposing on their private lives and aspirations,

not just the dropping of a few coppers into an envelope when the woman calls from Christian Aid.

How many of us are seriously prepared to do this? I am intensely sceptical of many charities. Because they generally play on the sentimental feelings of the fortunate, though they do obvious good, I do wonder if many of them sometimes exacerbate the problems they set out to solve and continually diffuse the flashpoint that might be reached necessitating political intervention, thereby indirectly ensuring genuine solutions will never materialize at all. But the most immediately striking thing about people such as these I met in the inner city landscape of Birmingham, quite apart from their straightforward decency, is the obvious lack of political motivation in what they have set themselves up to do. They simply wish to help people less fortunate than themselves. Think what you think about religion: the benevolent nature of their activities is humanitarian and entirely voluntary. It takes courage and determination, and as usual with anything voluntary that attempts to make inroads into the tragedy of human suffering, it suffers from a chronic shortage of funding and gives the impression that it is only just managing to make ends meet. Not many people are interested in what is going on, because there is no immediately obvious commercial gain to be had, only longer term social gain (from which sound commercial gain would come), which is generally not worth tuppence. When I was there some young unemployed lads were playing pool in a small youth club housed in an annex at the side of the church. There were some shelves lined with worn paperback books of the popular sort, some posters, and a few old chairs, but you could see at a glance that everything in the room had probably been scraped together with difficulty. But it was working. As I left, a number of youngsters, all of whom were black, were homing in toward it along the street outside, beneath a ruler-straight row of terraced houses plunging now toward the deepest winter dusk. What kind of Birmingham would they be growing up to inherit? One where social accomplishment for the dispossessed is measured primarily in terms of drug pushing and ram-raiding? I think what truly startled me about the outlook these young people had on life, though in reality it was beginning to startle me less

and less because of the frequency with which I was encountering it, was the way in which they take it for granted that unemployment is part of the natural scheme of things, as though it were just another piece of furniture sitting in the corner of a room.

Are the positive efforts being made by groups like the Birmingham Baptists the kind of thing the official Birmingham is keen to associate itself with? Are the organizers likely to feature in news year's honours lists? This is not a frivolous question. Elsewhere, I spoke to a smart young woman working in an executive capacity within one of the city's development agencies, when I spent a morning looking over Aston's ultra-modern science park. That was a very different environment indeed from the traditional heavy metal-bashing industry Birmingham I had purposefully avoided; the Birmingham which, to cite one of the creakiest guidebook clichés of them all, was always regarded as the 'city of a thousand trades', where it was claimed you could have anything made, from cars to bicycles to jewellery to screws. (That claim will soon be transferred via our exploitation to China, while our own dole queues lengthen and a number of our comfortable economic commentators damn the social and international consequences.) The woman I talked to is highly-qualified, educated, well-paid, and in no position to harbour left-wing grudges. She lives with her husband in one of the area's more affluent suburbs. But she profoundly believed that the city was publicizing only the image it wanted people to see. She thought such a philosophy could in the longer run generate adverse reactions. Some friends of hers had visited the city, having become familiar with the 'Big Heart of England' Birmingham emphasised in its promotional literature; the Birmingham marketing itself as a centre for international excursions; the up and coming Birmingham that enticed the Royal Ballet to establish its base of operations there; the Birmingham of the National Exhibition Centre, vast pop concerts, and Cadbury World; the Birmingham cocking a snook at London. But her friends baulked at the place when they arrived. They were shocked and revolted at the run-down nature of the vast ring of suburbs clinging to the hub of the much publicized city of commercial opportunity, all of them carefully deleted from its glossy publicity material. As a criticism, this

was general, I said, and had formed the hook upon which I had disseminated much of the emerging post-industrial nostalgia in a book I had already written about the north of England. It is not only race horses that sometimes wear blinkers. But if this compartmentalization of Birmingham by the people running it is true, then I do not think one can really believe it is deliberate. Birmingham, like nearly everywhere provincially, is trying, and trying damned hard. If there are failings to be observed then that is because the dynamo behind the noisy renaissance of Birmingham, after it lost nearly a quarter of a million jobs when its heavy-industrial manufacturing base was devastated, is the modern prosperous outlook of comfortable English people, closing themselves unconsciously off from unpleasant realities, not necessarily because they do not want to be shoved up against realities that might throw into question the foundation of much that they hold precious as a culture, but because they are simply too busy getting on with the business of running their own affairs. The prosperity they are capable of generating ought to work to the city's advantage as a whole. At least that is the dubious theory. Unfortunately, the side effect of the compartmentalization of our perceptions and of reality is that it does help to promote a false, almost fanciful picture of society, one of the results of which is bogus publicity material popularizing cities. It obscures truth, which each and every one of us should struggle against if we value our individual liberties, because if we do not, sooner or later it might not only catch up with us, but catch up with a vengeance. The more I saw as I travelled around the country, the more I became aware of the festering seeds of corruption, municipal, political, societal, and mental; and of the importance organized crime is going to play, American-style, in the running of our municipal affairs, once it buys its way into council chambers as more and more services are put out to tender. But by the same token, the more I became aware of this, the more I felt it is probably true to say that in our kind of democracy, as fantastic as it sounds, truth is the enemy of freedom – or at any rate, of our kind of freedom. That is the kind of warped indictment few appear to possess the intellectual stamina to comprehend, perhaps with the exception, I suspect, of someone such as Peregrine Worsthorne.