

What does it mean to be a ‘British Muslim’?

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It was a duty I performed with due diligence. Every Saturday morning I would take the 253 bus from Clapton Pond in Hackney, where we lived, to Brick Lane. During the 1960s, Asian grocery shops were rather rare; and the nearest ones from us were in Aldgate East. So that’s where we did our weekly shopping for atta (white flour for making chapattis), dal (various lentils), Basmati rice, and, of course, halal meat. As the eldest sibling in the household, it was my lot to perform this essential chore.

The journey to and from Brick Lane was full of hazards. Negotiating the crowded buses while carrying two heavy shopping bags was the easy part. It was much more difficult to navigate past the groups of skinheads that loitered in the area. They were very fond of playing a game they described as ‘Paki bashing’. So, frequently, I found myself being chased, pushed around, and on some occasions, beaten up. The halal meat shops were also a repeated target. On one occasion, I witnessed a shop being vandalised and the shopkeeper attacked by a group of skinheads. The following morning, The Guardian described the incident as a ‘colour brawl’ and reported that ‘three Pakistanis were injured in the fight with a group of skinheads’. The Times, reporting the incident under the headline ‘Pakistanis in Clash’ saw it as ‘a clash between a group of young men and Pakistanis’.

I took all the racism around me for granted. My parents believed that suffering, while not an end in itself, was the price one had to pay for being an immigrant. Indeed, as far as my father was

concerned there was glory in being racially harassed. Ridicule and violence, he used to say, has been the fate not only of migrants but also of prophets – look at the great suffering and tribulations that the Prophet Muhammad had to endure. This was our defence mechanism, a mechanism borne out of a certain inability to discover or define a role for ourselves in Britain.

Once, when I came home wounded, my mother put her arms around me. ‘I know it is very difficult, baitay’, she said, cleaning the blood from my broken nose, ‘but things will change. There will be better times ahead. You will see.’ I remember putting my head on her shoulders, closing my eyes, and thinking of a future Britain. A more accepting Britain – 30, 40 years from that day. A Britain with a plethora of old and new communities. A Britain where more than one way of being human is the norm. A Britain that resembles a garden in full bloom . . .

Gardens, by the very fact that they are gardens, consist of a plethora – of plants that provide various colours of foliage, or form hedges and borders, or climb up fences, or play architectural roles; fruit trees, and trees that fix the soil and provide shade; grasses that are essential for lawns. What would a garden be without the birds and the bees, or those worms and insects that both enrich the soil and require some form of pest control? All this truly monumental variety of life exists in symbiosis: things nourishing each other and ensuring the overall survival of the garden. And, of course, the garden needs tending.

I desire a Britain where all the vast and varied ways of being human, all the plethora of different cultures – past, present and future – exist in symbiosis just as they do in a well-tended garden. In essence, it is a vision of a Britain of pluralistic identities. But the kind of identities I seek has little to do with ‘identity’ as we have conventionally understood the term.

In Britain, issues of identity have always clustered around otherness. When I was growing up in Hackney, the immigrant

communities were described as 'aliens'. What is alien represents otherness; the repository of fears and anxieties. It was my difference – noticeable in my colour, accent and general demeanour – that was the source of fear; a fear expressed so vividly in the famous 'rivers of blood' speech by Enoch Powell.

Later, during the 1970s and 1980s, when multiculturalism came into vogue, otherness was seen as something we should celebrate. Cultural difference became a hot commodity that made Britannia 'cool' and sold multiculturalism at home and Britain abroad. Difference ceased to be threatening, and otherness was now sought for its exchange value, its exoticism and the pleasures, thrills and adventure it could offer. But in both cases, indeed in all cases, the racial dichotomies of Self and Other are retained, along with power relationships of domination and inequality.

Frankly, I do not want to be celebrated, any more than I want to be an object of racial derision. And I certainly do not want colourful or ethnic labels appended to my person. Throughout my life, I have endured a number of identity labels, each designed to make me compliant to somebody else's definition of who I should become, how I should behave, what I should think of myself. The aim of these labels is to make you accept internally all the idiocy British society has been storing up for centuries as its assessment of what makes the new Britons who they are.

Who am I?

When people ask me where I am from, my standard reply is 'Hackney'. I wasn't actually born in Hackney but Hackney shaped my formative years and provides me with most of my childhood memories. It is home; and that's where I am from. This is difficult for most people to grasp. They look at me and exclaim: 'Surely, you're Asian.'

It is hard to imagine a more ridiculous statement. There is no such thing as an Asian. Asia is not a race or identity. It's a continent,

where more than half the world's population lives. Even in Asia, no one calls himself or herself 'Asian'. If you are not Chinese or Malaysian, then you are an Afghan or a Punjabi. Moreover, the meaning of the term changes from place to place. In the USA, the Asian label is attached to Koreans, Filipinos and Chinese. In Britain, we do not use the term Asian to describe our substantial communities of Malaysians, Indonesians and Vietnamese, even though these countries are in Asia. So, at best, the label 'Asian' is meaningless. At worse, it is a denial of the fact that someone born and bred in Britain is actually British, full stop. Hardly surprising that all those young people constantly described as 'Asians' have problems finding a suitable location for their loyalties. More savvy individuals would look at me and say, 'Oh, you are Indian'. Sixty years ago, before the emergence of Pakistan and Bangladesh, this would have been a passable description. But today, 'Indian' has become almost as meaningless as 'Asian', largely because the two terms have coalesced. They are lazy references to people of Indian sub-continental lineage. But for Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans and Nepalese the label is explosive. By lumping these diverse communities in one monolithic category, we make them invisible.

My problem with the term 'Indian' is that it has a very specific connotation in the English subconscious. India is essentially 'English India', unchanged in the liberal imagination for the last 60 years. An 'Indian' is a product of the Raj, someone who is bizarre but intelligent enough to have accepted 'our' civilised ways. We saw this during the celebration of the 'Jubilee' – 50 years of India's independence. In numerous television documentaries and newspaper articles, India was reconfigured as a romantic, colonial fiction. In this orgy of celebration there was no mention of Pakistan, let alone Sri Lanka or Bangladesh. It is a limited edition, monolithic India.

But there is another reason why I reject this strong emphasis on my ethnic background. Britain imported the notion of

multiculturalism based on ethnicity from America. The very term 'ethnicity' has its roots in the American provenance where, apart from European immigrants, all other immigrants are defined as ethnics. Ethnicity, more than anything else, connotes primordially constituted Otherness in relation to non-ethnics, the Anglo-Saxons, who are the true Americans.

The distinction is between hyphenated Americans – Italian, German, Polish, Irish, Russian – and ethnics: blacks, Hispanics, Latinos and Native Americans. American identity offers the hyphenated Americans the ideal American Dream of inclusion and opportunity. Thus, only hyphenated Americans have ever made it to the White House. In contrast, ethnics make excellent domestic servants. Ethnicity is the politically correct term for race, for a hierarchy within American identity and for the power of definition that is exclusive to white America. Chinese-Americans had their identity neatly stereotyped in the works of Mark Twain and Bret Harte. Japanese-Americans were the only people interned as real 'enemies within' during the Second World War, a reaction that would have been unthinkable to German, Italian or other 'enemy' or 'quisling state' Americans. In Britain too, ethnicity confers the same power relation. As an ethnic, an Asian or an Indian, I am, by definition, an *outsider*.

Moreover the various ethnic labels – 'Asian', 'Indian', 'Black' – are based on the assumption that I must have a single – or at least principal and dominant – identity. But I, along with most people, have multiple identities and I often invoke different identities in different contexts. So I am a Muslim, a British citizen, of Pakistani origins, a man, a writer, a critic, a broadcaster, an information scientist, a historian of science, a university professor, a scholar of Islam, a rationalist, a sceptic, a traditionalist, and a partial vegetarian. All of these collective identities belong to me; and each one is important in a particular context.

The Muslim label

There is one label that I identify with more than any other – that of being a Muslim. Indeed, I have described myself as a Muslim ever since I became aware of myself. During my childhood and adolescent, being a Muslim in Britain was not problematic. On the whole, Muslims were seen as law abiding, docile folk. It was our colour and ethnicity that was a problem. The first time I became aware that my self-description was a cause for concern to wider British society was during the Opec oil boycott in the early 1970s. Suddenly all 'Muslims' became 'Arabs' and all 'Arabs' were shifty, dangerous people determined to undermine civilisation as we know it.

We can thank European history for such perceptions. Throughout history, Europe, and hence Britain, has seen Muslims as a function of its fears and desires. During the Crusades, Muslims presented Europe with religious, intellectual and military challenges. So they were portrayed as infidels, who were ignorant, and bloodthirsty; the barbarians at the gate of civilisation – which didn't actually exist in Europe. During the 18th and 19th centuries, Muslims became treacherous, rebellious subjects of the Empire. In the early part of the last century, Arabs were oversexed sheikhs ready to whisk white women off to luxurious desert tents, as portrayed by Rudolph Valentino.

How Muslims were portrayed depended on the desires and fears that the West projected on to them. So, it was hardly surprising that in the aftermath of Opec and the Iranian revolution, Muslims were despotic ogres, dangerous revolutionaries, and violent treacherous thugs bent on undermining decency and democracy. However, while British Muslims were seen as inalienably different, we were not seen as dangerous.

But all this changed after the Rushdie affair. The expression of outrage at the publication of *The Satanic Verses* suddenly transformed the Muslims from a law-abiding, compliant community into a volatile group with little appreciation of good, old British values

such as freedom of expression. Just over a decade later, the atrocities of 11 September 2001 introduced a new dimension: Muslims now came to be widely seen as the danger within. So my Muslim identity not only carries this historical baggage, it is also framed by global events. What happens in the rest of the world – like the ‘war on terrorism’ and the invasion of Iraq – defines and frames the relationship between Muslims and others in Britain. It has a direct bearing on my British Muslim identity.

Johnny Foreigner within

My Muslim identity is also problematic in other ways. In a secular society like Britain, where religion is largely marginalised and relegated to private spheres, people find it seriously difficult to see religion as a badge of identity. This is particularly so when all British notions of identity are expressed in hierarchies of race and class.

It is a little too glib to argue that British identity had the luxury of regarding race as external; the definition of difference beyond its shores. But the exercise of power that created an Empire on which the sun never set, a notion of class that defined and shaped modernity and was not a stranger anywhere in the world, are essential attributes of the conventional notion of Britishness. Without it, the British could not be simultaneously xenophobic, internationalist and parochial: the sort of people who go on Spanish holidays to eat fish and chips and drink warm bitter ale. British identity is based on an assumption of authority that makes the world a familiar place – a proper theatre in which to continue being British. It also produced its own internationalist perspective: Britain has had its share of ‘old India hands’, ‘Africa men and women’ – urbane cosmopolitans who know Johnny Foreigner better than they know themselves.

The problem with this notion of being British is that Johnny Foreigner – that’s me, and folks like myself – is now within. All those other categories by which Britain defined and measured itself – the ‘evil Orientals’, the ‘fanatic Muslims’, the ‘inferior races of the

colonies’, the Irish, the immigrants, the refugees, the gypsies – are now an integral part of Britain. It is not just that they are ‘over here’, but that their ideas, concepts, lifestyles, food and clothes now play a central part in shaping ‘us’ and ‘our society’. How can good old Middle England be comfortable with absorbing all these nefarious identities? What happens to conventional notions of Britishness when there is no yardstick to measure difference and define the (white) British as over and above everyone else?

Clearly, this idea of being British has little space for a Muslim like me. The national story on which this notion is based deliberately excludes unsavoury foreigners and is constructed on the basis of a selective process of memory.

A common past?

British identity was (is?) the acknowledgement of a common past. Sharing and having been shaped by this common past is what makes the British different from all other identities.

The trouble is, history is a deliberate human creation, itself another wilful act of power, artificially constructed to support an artificial identity. Europe engineered a cultural identity based on a common descent from the supposed traditions of ancient Greece and Rome and 2,000 years of Christianity. British history books always began with the arrival of the Romans. So British history begins by submerging, barbarising and differentiating itself from Celtic history. Celt and Welsh are words whose linguistic roots, one Greek the other Saxon, mean ‘stranger’. The history of Britain, as written in the age of devolution, records not a common shared past but continuous contest and conflict within the British Isles. Whatever Britain is, it is the creation of dominance by kings and barons and upwardly mobile yeomen who practiced colonialism at home and, after perfecting the technique, moved abroad.

It was Oliver Cromwell who noted that Britain had its ‘Indians’ at home in what he called the ‘dark corners of Britain’. He was referring,

of course, to the residual Celtic corners. It makes perfect sense that Margaret Thatcher, whom I always regarded as Oliver Cromwell in drag, should propose relocating Catholics to Ireland as the solution to the Ulster problem. This was Cromwell's policy: if they will not reform, be educated and submit, then they have no place within the identity, history and society that is Britain.

That no one seriously proposes sending the Union Jack-waving Ulstermen back to where they came from, or removing the Union from them, itself suggests a strong allegiance to a constructed history – the history of irreconcilable difference. As Orangemen so often say, marching with fife and drum to intimidate and demonstrate their dominance *is* their culture. In an age of the politics of identity, culture has its rights. But how far can you defend the rights of a culture whose only reason for being is to retain dominance?

It really is quite dumbfounding how much of Britishness, and by association Englishness, is based on fabricated history. Consider the whole notion of Anglo-Saxon Britain. Winston Churchill and Rudyard Kipling were devotees of Anglo-Saxon history for a reason. It enabled them to ignore how genuinely European British history has always been. Norman kings hardly ever spent time in Britain, spoke French rather than English, and were most concerned with dominating Europe from their French possessions. Of course, the Saxon bit of Anglo-Saxon has its own problems. After the Welsh Tudors, and Scots Stuarts, a brief quasi-native interlude, German monarchs were bussed in to reign over a Britishness that was to be marked by Englishness alone, and that wanted nothing to do with Europe.

The selectivity of historic memory is part of its inventiveness. Ancient Anglo-Saxon liberties were purposefully invented on a number of occasions to fashion the Mother of Parliaments. This foundational institution was not a true, popular, democratic institution until 1929, and the first election based on universal adult suffrage. Yet, the statue of Oliver Cromwell quite properly stands

outside Parliament. His insistence that ancient Anglo-Saxon liberties rested on property owning was indeed the novel twist that secured class hierarchy, made the Restoration of monarchy easy, and enabled manufactured history to continue its work. The pomp and ceremony of the British monarchy was a late Victorian invention. The Royal Family as the model for the normative family – an ideal for a nation – is a post-Edwardian invention; Victoria's son, Edward, hardly being a suitable candidate for model husband and father. And so it goes on.

Thus, notions of race and class are intrinsic to the self-definition of the English. Without the idea of race, there is little left for English identity to hold on to; being only a disadvantaged minority within Britain – the complete inversion of received history. What works well for youthful addicts of street culture does not suit the aspirations of new English identity, and that's why the appeal to the barricades, sending them back, locking them up, has now to be made.

As recently as 1940, George Orwell could state that, 'when you come back to England from any foreign country, you have immediately the sensation of breathing different air'. Identity as difference is less easy to define in an 'England' that is not the sole preserve of 'the English' any more. The population now is much more heterogeneous, with 'Englishness' (however it is defined) constituting only one segment in a multi-ethnic society. Orwell would find the air somewhat strange in a Britain awash with products of multiculturalism from hip hop to *bangra*, chicken tikka marsala to doner kebab, and *The Lenny Henry Show* to *Goodness Gracious Me*. Moreover, the history and tradition that are associated with Orwell's 'Englishness' – the Empire, House of Lords, fox hunting, the national anthem – are either questionable or meaningless to the vast majority of new-English who now live in England. Worse: this Englishness becomes quite insignificant when it is seen in relation to a new European identity which itself is an amalgam of countless other cultural identities.

It is not surprising that 'the English' feel threatened. Moreover, they feel threatened not simply because they see their identity being eroded. What they are more worried about is the evaporation of the power that that identity confers. But an all-powerful identity is like an all-powerful tree in the garden: it sucks the life out of all other plants. When power is skewed in this manner, it is not possible to exist in symbiosis.

A symbiotic shift

Quite simply we will have to move away from our obsession with difference, towards what I would call 'symbiosis' and others have called 'mutuality'. And this shift must begin with a new, inclusive national story.

If I am to feel truly at home in Britain, and at ease with my British identity, then my story must be seen to be an integral part of the national history. Both Muslims and Asians have had a sizeable presence in Britain for over two centuries and have made a valuable contribution in shaping Britain. But more than that, for over 700 years between the Battle of Tours and the fall of Constantinople, Islam played a vital role in shaping Europe. All of this history, which is crucial to understanding the symbiosis between Islam and Britain, has been rendered invisible. It is during this period that Islam actually transformed Europe and turned it into a world civilisation.

The conventional history, defining this period as the Dark Ages, sees the long gestation of embattled Europe forged by the antipathy that sustained the Crusades. Unwittingly the enemy prompts the rekindling of the flame of civilisation when, phoenix-like, classicism arises from the fall of Constantinople. The warlike intervention by the Turks permits a flood of Greek manuscripts to come to the West. This inspires the Renaissance obsession with all things classical, permitting Europe to recover its Greek roots, invent modernity, discover the rest of the world and recover the destiny of world domination implicit in its Roman ancestry.

It is, of course, all a fabulous fabrication. In reality, the Renaissance would have been unimaginable without Islam. Greek thought would have remained a stranger to Europe without Muslim philosophers, and even that liberal humanism, so cherished by us in Britain, would have remained a pipe dream without classical Islamic thought and learning. This history is an integral part of British heritage and should be an essential component of our national story.

Much is made of the difference in values between the Muslim community and the larger British society. But when symbiosis is emphasised, similarity is brought to the fore. When we look at Islamic humanism, we see that its emphasis on universal education, a free health service, science and learning and free thought and pluralism, responsible and accountable governance are difficult to distinguish from British, liberal values – hardly surprising, since Britain took them from Islam in the first place.

However, we will never see such similarities while we believe in single, uncompromising notions of a Truth or Identity that have to be imposed on all those who call themselves British. Just as a garden does not function on the basis of a single species, so the single Truth of Western liberalism or Western Civilisation or some notion of Englishness – cannot lead us to a viable, sustainable multiculturalism. Ultimately, my idea of a Britain of pluralistic identities comes down to how we all see truth differently, according to our historic experiences and current perspectives, and how we all live the truth in our lives, as individuals and communities, in our uniquely different and cultural ways of being British.

Still bigger dividends

Symbiosis, of course, is a two-way street. A national story that incorporates Islamic history would enable Muslims, particularly young Muslims born and bred in Britain, to appreciate just how much of their – Islamic – values are an integral part of the British way of life. This would be a positive way for my children's generation to

acquire a viable British Muslim identity. But there is an even bigger dividend to be had from Britain's embrace of its Islamic roots, and acknowledgement on the part of British Muslims that British values are an integral part of Islam.

The diasporas have played a very important part in shaping Muslim civilisation. The Prophet Muhammad himself migrated from his hometown of Mecca; and the civil society and civilisation he built in Medina was fashioned by a diaspora. The classical civilisation of Islam was built not by Arabs, but by diasporic communities from central Asia, the Indian subcontinent and Africa. The Abbasid Caliphate, commonly seen as the zenith of Muslim thought and learning, was the outcome of the efforts of a diaspora. The independent Muslim states that emerged in the second half of the 20th century, such as Pakistan and Malaysia, were often conceived and created in Britain by a politically active diaspora.

British Muslims can take a leaf from this history and seize the opportunity to reform Islam, in the process changing society in the Muslim world itself. British Muslims are already at the forefront of thinking, writing and articulating contemporary interpretations of Islam as a system of ideas for living. Given the quality of debate on Islamic issues in Britain, it would not be surprising if British Muslims, on the physical periphery of the Muslim world, were to reform and transform the centre.

Seeing is believing

For me to feel at home with my British Muslim identity, I must be able to see the variety of Muslim life in Britain represented in its institutions of government and administration, commerce and business, arts and media. Representation is not only a numbers game, although numbers do matter. Above all, representation is about preventing cynicism, disaffection and the denial of hope and ability.

When I was growing up, one never saw a Muslim face on television, and Muslim representation in the corridors of power was a

distant dream. Now there are Muslim newsreaders, reporters, MPs, MEPs, members of the House of Lords and some hundreds of local councillors. We have made progress; but Muslim representation has significance largely as signs and symbols.

Signs and symbols are important: the first Muslim MP, the first Muslim newsreader, the first Muslim police officer. Minority communities collect and cherish such signs and symbols as conscientiously as the majority – perhaps for different reasons. For the majority they are proof that multicultural Britain is doing well, doing its bit. For the minority the glass is less than half empty. Isolated individual success isn't opportunity for all.

Or as I remember Lenny Henry once saying: 'If you want to be a newsreader – forget it – Trevor got the job.' 'Firsts' are important, but it's the chances of the umpteenth candidates who also want to achieve to their full capability and make their contribution that really matters, and tests the quality of representation.

Cultural plurality based on symbiosis is not just about giving voice to a faith community like the Muslims – it is also about understanding the core role of faith in identity, understanding what we need to give and what we need to take to grow and prosper together. That understanding must begin by appreciating that people are more than a racial category. It's the 'more' that makes us a fully cultured personality and gives us something distinctive to offer – different ways of seeing things, expressing ideas and responding to issues. For me, that's what multiculturalism is all about.

Coda

During the 1960s and 1970s, when I made my weekly excursions, the best known restaurant in Brick Lane was the Clifton. It was as famous for its food as its décor. Pride of place on the menu was given to brain masala, *nihari* (an incredibly rich and fatty broth that was cooked all night) and *payah* (sheep feet): testimonies to the art of conjuring food from the ingredients of poverty.

The walls were covered with huge paintings reminiscent of Indian film posters. The paintings, mostly of semi-clad, generously proportioned women, reminded the regular local patrons of what awaited them back home: a woman inside an oyster lying on a bed of pearls; a woman playing sitar, longing for her lover; a lonely woman catching a fish; two lovers, with the man's head gently laid on the shoulder of a woman. A jukebox incessantly intoned the latest romantic hits from Bollywood. Patrons were often greeted by the owner, Musa Patel, a man whose smile was as generous as his facial hair. To walk into the Clifton was like walking into a street-side café in Sylhet.

Old Musa Patel died in the early 1990s; the Clifton has changed hands a number of times since. Now called Prithi, it is twice the size of the old restaurant. Flock wallpaper and a gaudy red carpet have given way to a wooden floor and Georgian windows. The menu has a strong bias towards seafood, with an accent on Bangladeshi freshwater fish. The restaurant's clients tend to be city types out for a 'Bangla evening'. But the trademark paintings are still there – they have been lovingly restored by a Japanese painter.

So both Britain and Clifton have moved on. 'Things', as my mother had said so long ago, have changed. The skinheads are conspicuous by their absence. The sweatshops have relocated to the Far East; and the Jewish community has moved on to more upmarket neighbourhoods. Far from being tense, the atmosphere around Brick Lane is reminiscent of a perpetual carnival. The young Muslims in this part of London are some of the most successful in Britain: like their parents, the patrons of Clifton, they do not have a longing for home.

They are at home; and they have a strong sense of belonging to the streets where they grew up. Even the new names of the restaurants reflect the transformation and confidence of the Muslim community. In the 1960s and 1970s, Brick Lane restaurants had names like 'Maharajah', 'Curry House' and 'Taj Mahal'; names designed to rekindle images of the Raj and invoke memories of a rich tradition

the Bangladeshis had left behind in the subcontinent. Now, they have names like 'Dawaat' (literally, invitation), 'Alishan' (palatial) and 'Saffron'. These new names indicate not only a certain authenticity of expression, but also the self-confidence of having arrived. In many restaurants, the cooking area is part of the dining experience, not just providing assurance of freshly cooked food, but even more reassuringly bringing back the traditional direct and tactile relationship between the hand that cooks and the hand that eats.

British Muslims are discovering that while identity has historic anchors, it is not fixed to a limited, unchanging set of traditional signs and historic symbols. Both the 'Muslim' and the 'British' segments of 'British Muslims' are a changing feast. And Britain itself is a product of various, diverse and changing traditions – including the centuries old tradition of British Islam. A British Muslim identity is not something we can buy ready-made, or something that can be imposed on an unwilling community. It has even less to do with flag-waving or loyalty tests, such as Tebbit's cricket test, which is based on mindless jingoism.

Rather, it is something that evolves from confidence and symbiosis. It is something from which we learn to change and stay the same, to be true simultaneously to our Muslim roots and British lives. We learn how to live and shape our communities, and discover what has genuine value in a pluralistic society.

So, after 40 years, I open my eyes. And what do I see? A Britain that is not quite a garden yet. We have, however, tackled the basic landscaping, planted a few trees and shrubs, and a sprinkling of hardy perennials. There's a great deal still to be done. But we are getting there.