

Book Review

Story of Queen Victoria and her Indian Muslim aide

Victoria and Abdul: The True Story of the Queen's Closest Confidant by Shrabani Basu, Gloucester: The History Press, pp224, 2010, HB, £18.99

In his *Islam in Britain, 1558-1685* (1998), Professor Nabil Matar wrote, "Throughout the period roughly extending from the accession of Queen Elizabeth in 1558 until the death of Charles II in 1685, Britons and other Europeans met Muslims from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean and Arabian Seas. For the peoples of Spain, France, Italy and Germany, the physical proximity with Islam in continental Europe and the Mediterranean made encounters with the Muslims inevitable: as a result, their literature frequently alludes to Islam and Muslims. In the case of the British Isles, there was a vast distance between London and Edinburgh and Istanbul, but still, the likelihood of an Englishman's or a Scotsman's meeting a Muslim was a higher than that of meeting a native American or a sub-Saharan African because Muslims were present throughout the Mediterranean basin – which at the time of turmoil in Europe, particularly during the Thirty Years War, provided a faster and safer means of transport for traders and travellers than the continental land route." (p2)

Britain's relation with the Islamic world became further stronger and interlinked during the colonial period when British rule was established in many parts of the Muslim world including Egypt and India. This was particularly the case during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Victoria when informal alliances were established with the Ottoman Empire. In the book under review, Shrabani Basu has reconstructed the life and contributions of Munshi Abdul Karim, who became a very close and influential aide to Queen Victoria. Who was Abdul Karim and how did he come to occupy such an important position in the heart of the British Empire?

According to *The Graphic*, "The Munshi Hafiz Abdul Karim, C.I.E., who teaches the Queen Hindustani, came to Windsor in 1887. He was then only twenty-three. He soon began giving lessons in Hindustani to the Queen, who now not only speaks that language fluently, but can write it with more than average correctness in the Persian character. Frogmore Cottage has been assigned to Hafiz Abdul Karim as a residence, and he has been joined there by his wife and his father. Abdul Karim is the second

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son of Khan Bahadur Dr. Hajee Mohammad Waziraddin, first-class hospital assistant in the Indian Medical Department. He was for some time in the service of the Nawab Jadia, as assistant Wakil to the West Malwa Political Agency at Agra. In 1886 he became an India Government clerk. In the following year he was appointed Munshi and Indian clerk to the Queen, and in 1892 became Indian Secretary to Her Majesty.” (Quoted by Basu, p163)

Abdul Karim was a tall, handsome and intelligent young man who arrived in England from Agra at the age of twenty-four to become a personal aide to the Empress of India; he had been an assistant clerk at Agra Jail prior to this appointment. His promotion took place following the death of John Brown, a loyal and dedicated Scottish aide to the Queen, but in Abdul Karim she found a great and able supporter who soon went onto play a powerful role in the royal household. This book “examines how a young Indian Muslim came to play a central role at the heart of the Empire, and his influence over queen at a time when independence movements in the sub-continent were growing in force. Yet, at its heart, it is a tender love story between an ordinary Indian and his elderly queen, a relationship that survived the best attempts to destroy it.”

The author has done well to reconstruct this fascinating tale of love, loyalty and intrigue. Highly recommended reading for those interested in British history during the colonial period.

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

M Khan is author of the widely acclaimed book, *The Muslim 100* (reprinted 2010); the e-version of this book has been recently released (available from Amazon).