Richard Vinen
In conversation with Andrew Kelly

Andrew Kelly: Hello and welcome to Festival of Ideas. I'm Andrew Kelly from Bristol Ideas and I'm Director of our Festival of the Future City. Richard Vinen is Professor of History at King's College London, and the author of *The Long '68: Radical Protest and Its Enemies* and *The Unfree French: Life Under the Occupation.* He won the Wolfson Prize for History for *National Service* in 2014. All three books are published by Penguin, as is his new book, *Second City: Birmingham and the Forging of Modern Britain*.

Our biennial Festival of the Future City looks at cities around the world. We look at what makes cities work, and the challenges they face now and have faced in the past. And we're keen to look at the soul of cities, what underpins them, the people who live in, work in and visit cities, the culture of the place, and what makes up the identity of a city. *Second City* does this. And we're grateful to Richard Vinen for joining us today.

Richard, too often work on cities focuses on capitals, and in this country, London, but it's important that we look at other cities, isn't it?

Richard Vinen: Absolutely, yes. I think also that there is something specifically British about this. Although one often thinks of France as a very centralised country, a city like Lyon is very self-confident in its own identity, and also a place where there is actually a lot of historical work. Traditionally, oddly enough, the French have been very good at writing provincial histories, partly because they used to send all their historians out to teach in lycée across the country. Obviously, America is a country where there are a dozen of important cities of which Washington DC is not in any way obviously the most important for anything except politics.

Around the world, there are all sorts of places where the capital is slightly arbitrary. So New Delhi happens to be the capital, well, since about the same

time that Birmingham was the second city in Britain, but Mumbai, Calcutta, are all enormously important places. I think, as is often the case, actually, the British rather like to think of themselves as being not a very centralised kind of place, not a very top-down kind of place, and especially around Brexit, we like to think, oh, you know, these wicked centralising Europeans, why aren't they levelling up like us. Well, actually, of course, if you want a place where regional policy and attention to provincial cities is taken very seriously, that place is, on the whole, continental Europe.

Andrew: I should declare an interest from the start. I grew up not so far from Birmingham. I come from Wolverhampton, or just outside of Wolverhampton. When I was growing up Birmingham was the big city though we rarely went, I have to say. There was the odd school trip to the theatre. You actually grew up in Birmingham, didn't you?

Richard: I did, yes. I grew up in, I suppose, sort of south west Birmingham, on the border between Northfield and Selly Oak. A strange kind of area. I was probably an energetic walk away from Edgbaston, which was once the great centre of bourgeois Birmingham, the area of Joseph Chamberlain, but also an energetic walk away from the Longbridge factory, the centre of working-class Birmingham, the centre of what is now kind of Brexit Birmingham, in fact.

I lived in Birmingham for 18 years. My parents are now very frail, just moved into care, but they lived in the street I grew up in until last summer. And we still have that house. Very characteristically with our lack of imagination we moved next door when I was nine, but other than that we always lived in the same street.

I'm struck by looking back how many things I didn't understand. I think you always think because you lived in a place you understand it. And actually, in lots of ways, Birmingham seemed quite an opaque place to me when I started writing about it.

Andrew: One of the things that we've been doing a lot in Bristol is looking at where the city has come from. And there's a rich heritage of writing about Bristol, often generated by local communities, which gives us a strong evidence base about the city. So I think Bristol is a good city for that.

One thing I want to go through in this discussion is about some of the themes that for me come out of your work, especially in terms of cities and the lessons we can learn from Birmingham for the future of places. You focus particularly on the twentieth century in this book, don't you, but you discuss Birmingham prior to that. Could you talk a little bit about that? There are important lessons there, I think, from the small beginnings, right through to Enlightenment Birmingham and the revolutionary period before the twentieth century.

Richard: Yes. I suppose one thing about Birmingham, and perhaps one of the reasons why it's sometimes neglected, is that it doesn't have the kind of very long-term history of somewhere like Bristol or Liverpool. Very often port cities are the well-established cities in Britain. So Birmingham comes from almost nowhere. When I was at primary school, practically the only thing we learned about Birmingham's own history was that it had been in the Domesday Book. And when I started writing this book, I realised that Northfield, which is actually where I went to school, which of course was not part of Birmingham until 1911, was actually a bigger settlement at the time of the Domesday Book than Birmingham itself. So in that sense, Birmingham comes from tiny origins, and is really a village until quite late in the general pattern of history. And then, I suppose, is made by certain kinds of industrialisation, but made in different ways at different times.

So there's what you described as Enlightenment Birmingham, the eighteenth century, which is a very particular period, I suppose, of, obviously, economics, but also the way in which economics tied in with a certain kind of cultural life, and with this extraordinary group of very odd people. I mean, they particularly famously gathered around the Lunar Society – although not

all were actually members of the Lunar Society – rather eccentric nonconformist people who are often entrepreneurial, but entrepreneurial in a very general sense in that lots of their enterprises really weren't commercial enterprises. They were interested in doing new things, changing the world. There's a big Church and King Riot in 1791, which is a kind of moment of reaction.

Then there's nineteenth century Birmingham, Chamberlain's Birmingham, particularly the Birmingham of what in Birmingham we used to call the five families – these five great nonconformist middle-class families. And then the Birmingham of the twentieth century is the Birmingham that tends to get neglected, because it doesn't have an obvious kind of brand image. It doesn't stand for anything very clear cut. This is actually the period where Birmingham becomes the second city, when it's the second largest city in England, and it's the period where Birmingham for a long time is very prosperous.

So, really, from the First World War until the 1970s, Birmingham is a very economically successful place. But it doesn't fit in, I think, to all the kinds of stereotypes that people often have about provincial towns. It's almost like there's a London central casting view of what a provincial town ought to be. They ought to be lovable Scousers, or impoverished northerners marching from Jarrow or something like that.

Walter Allen, the Birmingham novelist, has this wonderful phrase when he's making radio programmes about DH Lawrence, I guess this must be in the 1930s. He says it's impossible to get anybody who can do any approximation of a Midlands industrial accent on the BBC, because he says the only thing that the people learn at RADA is what he calls the Mummerset accent, a kind of general rural accent. So I think in all those ways, Birmingham tends to slightly disappear at the very moment when it ought actually to loom largest, when it's a very big, prosperous place.

Andrew: We'll go through some of these points. Just on the point you've just made, though, you talk in the book about how cinema was important to people in Birmingham for a long time, in the '30s particularly and onwards, but how they would never, ever once hear a Birmingham accent on the screen, even in films supposedly about the working class.

Richard: Yes, I think that's probably true. I love the sense of what Birmingham must have been like in the 1930s. In a way, the thing that bounced me off into this was reading JB Priestley's *English Journey*, where he goes, among other places, to Birmingham. And he really doesn't like Birmingham at all. He has this wonderful phrase, 'the wrong kind of vulgarity'. I quite like what I think of as being Birmingham vulgarity in the 1930s. And this sense that people who made a lot of money spent it on things that they enjoyed doing, but things that were usually rather escapist things. But why shouldn't they do that? It seemed to me quite an attractive kind of portrayal of a city in a funny kind of way.

Andrew: Going back to the Enlightenment period and the Lunar Society, you also mention the Bean Club, which was a new one on me. When I was watching *The Colony*, which we'll talk about later – the 1964 film about Birmingham – the West Indian bus conductor, Victor Williams, is walking around the Science Museum, and he says what it shows him is how we can elevate ourselves, learning from the dead, the importance of openness, which these people – he's talking about the people 200 years before – had in overcoming barriers and inventing the machines that he is walking past. And what I take from that period, and particularly from your book, is the importance of these families, the importance of the networks, the transcending of boundaries and specialisms, their support for radical progressive causes, and particularly opposing the slave trade, which is something which is central to Bristol's economy for a long time, and also their dissent in terms of religion. How did they work, and what did they achieve as a group?

Richard: Well, it's complicated. I know that's a terrible kind of professorial remark. So the Victor Williams scene, I mean I'm absolutely haunted by that scene really, I come back to it again and again, partly because it's obviously so historically resonant, partly because I slightly wonder how much of that came from Victor Williams and how much came from the producer of *The Colony*, Philip Donnellan.

It's always a complicated kind of film to watch because the producer in some senses is completely absent – all you ever see are West Indians talking on their own – but, of course, one is aware that some of the scenes have been slightly set up. Victor Williams in the long run was not happy in Birmingham. He goes back, a very rare example. Lots of West Indians coming to Birmingham want to go back, but very few of them do. But Victor Williams does, eventually, and then has an unhappy return to Jamaica and then comes back to Birmingham. But you feel he's never completely settled.

When he's looking back on these figures of the Enlightenment, on the one hand obviously they're very inspiring people, and very exciting people. You feel there's a real kind of frisson of what's going on in the late eighteenth century. They're not always good people, I should say. It would be easy to write a kind of happy-clappy history of Birmingham, which would all be about nonconformity, the Cadbury family, philanthropy, anti-slavery. And yes, that would be true in certain respects. It would also be true that sometimes, although Birmingham has less obviously got blood on its hands than Bristol or Liverpool with the slave trade, that actually the richest family in Birmingham at one point are the Galtons, who are Quakers, and they're Quakers who make guns, and they're Quakers who largely sell their guns to the West African slave trade. All these guns are taken down to West Africa and traded for slaves. So these people are actually quite implicated in some quite disturbing things. And likewise, the Chamberlains to Cadburys, they're philanthropic in some ways, but they can also be quite authoritarian bosses at times.

So I'm not in any way trying to write a favourable history of Birmingham. I think Birmingham was a fascinating place, but it's not like *1066 and All That*. I don't think, therefore, Birmingham was a good thing. I think it's, as I say, an interesting thing.

Andrew: And that comes across, there's no doubt about that. One thing that surprised me reading it was the importance of the production of small arms, for example, that you talked about there.

Let's move forward to talk about leadership and cities. You've mentioned Joseph Chamberlain, and he is someone who you can't divorce from Birmingham, such a critical person in the city's history at an important time for the city. He'd been there a while and he and his family remained prominent thereafter. He built on a – what you talk about in one of the chapters – kind of revolutionary tradition in Birmingham. What was behind that?

Richard: Well, I think it's partly religious nonconformity. Joseph Chamberlain's a Unitarian, and Unitarianism had been important in Birmingham in the late eighteenth century. Joseph Priestley, minister and scientist, very significant figure in Birmingham then driven out by the Church and King riots. So it looks like there's a moment of reaction where Priestley's tradition is eclipsed from Birmingham. And then Joseph Chamberlain arrives in Birmingham at the age of 18, and he becomes this hugely dominant figure, as you say.

Chamberlain's one of those completely weird people where you wonder, did anybody possibly listen to what he was actually saying? Because some of the things he was saying were so shockingly radical that you think well, how did people not get alarmed by Chamberlain? And particularly, of course, when he becomes effectively a Conservative after he breaks with the Gladstone Liberals, how does the Conservative Party not become alarmed with him? Joseph Chamberlain is in the 1860s a Republican, a man who believes in the

abolition of the monarchy. Now, he doesn't do much to bring it about, but nonetheless, that's a pretty extreme position for a man who is then the last minister ever to see Queen Victoria. He is never an Anglican, although of course Anglicanism is absolutely central to the English establishment, particularly the English Conservative Party in the nineteenth century. Probably after 1875, after the death of his second wife, he is an atheist.

So he's a man with a very strange set of beliefs in terms of how he relates to mainstream thinking in Britain. And he's also just an extraordinary character. He's a man of such compelling self-confidence, I think, and a man who doesn't think he needs permission from anybody else to do things or be what he's going to be. There's a wonderful phrase in Oscar Wilde's *Importance of Being Earnest* where Lady Bracknell says, 'Was he born into…the purple of commerce, or did he rise from the aristocracy?' And I feel that's exactly what Joseph Chamberlain would have said. He never accepted a title, never wanted a title. he would have been astonished by the idea that the Duke of Devonshire or someone like that, who he utterly despised, was in some way his superior.

Andrew: And he was there for a very short period of time, wasn't he? What did he do for Birmingham and for cities, do you think?

Richard: Well, there's an element of sleight of hand in this. As you say, he was mayor for a short time. And obviously, in some ways, everybody's a mayor for a short time. In some ways, you could say, well, Chamberlain or his allies, Chamberlain or other members of the five families in particular, were mayors of Birmingham probably for about a quarter of all the time from 1841 to 1941. One or other of members of those families, all of which are related to Chamberlain, would have been mayor of the city. But yes, what he does is partly there's a new municipal activism. So things like buying up gas, buying up water, the idea that the municipality can run things, the idea that the municipality can do things, can provide things in a way that hadn't seemed possible before.

I think there's always a bit of smoke and mirrors about this. Chamberlain doesn't actually finish a lot of the things he starts, and he's a national politician for longer than he is a local politician, but he does create this tremendous sense of what might be done. It's almost like the image of Chamberlain becomes more important than the reality of Chamberlain. Famously, an American journalist said Birmingham is the best governed city in the world. Municipal government becomes very, very important in the late nineteenth century in the United States with hugely expanding cities. I think there are a lot of ways in which you could say Chamberlain's major influence is probably in the United States in those terms. But also more generally, he creates a sense of the possibilities of active government, which then also, to some extent, transfers to national governments.

I think now the Conservative Party is slightly haunted by the memory of Joseph Chamberlain, because you've got a Conservative Party that obviously doesn't feel entirely happy with free market economics anymore. And so sometimes the person they look to is Joseph Chamberlain as a model of what they think the state might be able to do at national level.

Andrew: I've been reading a lot about Andy Street as mayor, not just of Birmingham, but of the West Midlands Combined Authority. And he talked about, in one interview I read, how he draws on the lessons of Chamberlain. Did you have any views on contemporary mayors and Chamberlain?

Richard: I'll give the answer that Joseph Chamberlain I think would have given. Obviously, Andy Street's a very nice, well-meaning person. But one has to say that first of all, as you say, Andy Street is Mayor of the West Midlands, not Mayor of Birmingham. He would not have won if he'd been dependent on Birmingham votes. Birmingham's a Labour city now. Secondly, Andy Street was elected on an extraordinarily small turnout, less than half of what you get in a parliamentary election. And, in fact, if I recall correctly, quite a lot of Birmingham people voted against having a mayor at all in a

referendum. I think in fact, the number of people voting against having a mayor was greater than the number of people who voted for Andy Street. As I say, he seems a very sympathetic kind of person, but I don't think he's got the kind of power that Joseph Chamberlain had by any stretch of the imagination.

Andrew: No. There's a new mayor for North Yorkshire announced this morning, and the powers and budgets are fairly limited. In Bristol, we were the only city - when the city-based referenda were held - that voted to have an elected mayor for the city. In May this year the city voted to get rid of that post. I don't know whether you read that. And so the one city that did vote for it – on a very low turnout – has now voted to abolish the post on a slightly increased turnout, but still below 29 per cent. So mayors haven't really captured, I don't think, the population as much perhaps as maybe Chamberlain did through the work that he did.

Richard: Well, I mean, it would be inconvenient for both of us since we want to talk about provincial cities, but one has to admit the place where mayors have captured the imagination is London. Undoubtedly, in my whole lifetime, the one there who really counted was Ken Livingstone.

Andrew: It has been very different there, but of course the powers are very different in terms of the mayor there compared to say in Bristol or what was on offer to Birmingham, or indeed what exists for the Combined Authority mayors.

Richard: I think also it's very important that the idea of municipal politics as something that can mobilise people is much weaker nowadays. Obviously municipal elections mattered in Birmingham once in a way that's less true, I think, especially less true since 1945, when cities are more administered places and less politicised places, if you see what I mean. You're probably coming to this later on, but in lots of ways, the key figure in twentieth

century, especially late twentieth century Birmingham, mid-twentieth century, was Herbert Manzoni, who's not an elected politician at all.

Andrew: I am definitely coming on to Herbert Manzoni, such an important part of the discussion. Just before we do that I wanted to talk about Birmingham industry, and how that's evolved over time, because you had relatively small scale businesses, often, as you said, led by people who were not particularly commercial, or used their money in different ways. I get the impression that there was a much stronger philanthropic tradition in Birmingham than elsewhere – certainly the Cadburys are an example of that; workers that were more skilled, perhaps, than elsewhere; and this belief, although, as you say, it was a belief promulgated mostly by the rich, that social mobility was better in Birmingham than elsewhere. Moving into the twentieth century, you had this huge growth of industrial modernity, scientific management and particularly the motor industry, which we'll talk about with Herbert Manzoni, but perhaps we could talk about the evolution of business in Birmingham before that.

Richard: Yes, you're right, the motor industry kind of transforms Birmingham City and becomes, especially after 1945, associated with Birmingham. I think there's a bit of a link between one industrial generation and the next.

There's a very good oral history of gunmakers in Birmingham, which is a wonderful kind of history, you get this sense of these very highly skilled, rather awkward people working in gun making who, at one time, are great craftsman. Now, Birmingham gun business is in decline. I mean, these are mostly sporting guns, so not necessarily related to the big war industries of the twentieth century. But quite often, these guys then go into car factories and aero factories about late 1930s when you get big, industrial mobilisation. And so you get the old strata of nineteenth century Birmingham industry to some extent surviving into the twentieth century.

I often think the toolmakers at Longbridge are a very important group of people. Derek Robinson, the great shop steward who was sacked in the early ‘80s, is a representative of the toolmakers with whom he doesn't get on very well, I think, because the toolmakers always wanted to be paid more money than other workers, because they're more skilled. And you get the impression that it's this rather tricky group of people, almost like an archaic hangover within a large-scale factory.

And it's a wonderful thought, when, in the late 1930s, they suddenly need lots of workers, all sorts of people are pulled into Birmingham, especially for the aircraft industry, and you feel these group of toolmakers would turn up and say, give me a screwdriver and a tonne of steel and I'll build you a Spitfire. So they're very flexible, not the kind of people you'd normally associate with mass production, though obviously mass production is the key to a lot of what Birmingham is doing.

Sorry, I've ranted so much I can't even remember the question I was meant to be answering!

Andrew: I was talking about how Birmingham's industry had evolved. But let's stick with the twentieth century and particularly the growth of the car industry, because Longbridge is such an important part of this history. As you say, this was the place where not only was there major industrial production of cars particularly, but also the site of troubled labour relations for a long time. One of the lessons from the book, was very much in contrast to when I was growing up. I would see on the television Derek Robinson, known as Red Robbo, who seemed to pull out the workers every minute of the day. But actually him and his predecessor, Dick Etheridge, both of them members of the Communist Party, did seem to have a better relationship with the management than I thought they would have had from the perception that I had. Is that true?

Richard: It’s certainly true of Etheridge, I think. Partly there's a very simple reason for that, which is for these guys, the central experience of their life is the war. Robinson, I think, goes to Longbridge in 1941. I can't remember exactly. Etheridge must start about the same time, he's been working in other areas before them.

Obviously, a key point about the Communist Party after 1941 is they want to increase production. So these guys have actually started out at a time when the aim of the Communist Party was to smooth out all the problems and keep the production line running. And I think that has a bit of an effect on them in the long term. I also think, especially with Etheridge, he's very, very pragmatic. He knows that there are very few communists in Longbridge. He's got this terribly weary phrase, when he's being interviewed in 1981, a wonderful collection of interviews conducted by Steven Tolliday which are really worth listening to – you can get the most of them online – where he says, in this sort of wonderful Black Country accent (I won’t try and imitate it), I know that most of the people at the bloody Austin voted Tory at the last election, meaning they voted for Margaret Thatcher.

So he kind of knows he can't necessarily take people with him, and he's very careful therefore not to get into unwinnable fights. I think he is also very flexible in the sense that he doesn't want lots of disputes about which particular union will dominate one particular kind of production. So in that sense, Etheridge is very keen to keep things running. Derek Robinson is different, I think, partly because Derek Robinson is not as clever as Etheridge – Etheridge is a very, very shrewd man – and partly because the political climate is changing.

Robinson is really stitched up, to be honest. Edwards, who becomes head of British Leyland, actually appointed by the Labour government, but then becomes one of the great Thatcherite heroes of tough industrial management, needs an easy win, and sacking Derek Robinson is an easy win. Although I think it's terribly unfair that Derek Robinson is sacked, he's not

really behind disputes, which have much more complicated roots than the action of any one man. Quite often, he's someone who stopped strikes. And it's a very sad moment. One shop steward said, I was in tears when Derek Robinson was sacked. And not because of some great kind of class war issue, I think just because he thinks it's so personally unjust, what's happened to him.

Andrew: Just talking more about the general period at this time. One of the things about cities now is about precarious work, precarious housing, the housing crisis. You get the impression from reading the book that there was a certain stability here for work, and there was a stability in housing available for a lot of people, not for everyone, that you had these huge companies like Fort Dunlop, which was like a city state as described in the book. People could get married, though often it meant that women were forced out of the workforce and lost their independence. Is that true? One of the ways we're looking at how to improve cities now is how we improve work from precarious work to more secure work. And how particularly we improve housing with the provision of social housing.

Richard: Yes. I think there is a period of stability, and it's a stability above all with full employment. You just can't stress how much full employment was part of Birmingham at one time, '50s and '60s. It was really hard to be unemployed. And I have occasionally read interviews with people saying, I really didn't want a job in the 1960s, but my dad went down the Austin and I was starting on Monday whether I wanted to or not – that kind of thing. So I think full employment has a huge effect.

Now full employment obviously means that people can change jobs if they want to, and so that makes employers a lot weaker. Employers had been strong in the 1930s partly because they could sack trade unionists. In the 1950s and 1960s that becomes much more difficult because these guys can just get jobs somewhere else if they do get sacked. But also, I think it's very striking that workers valued stability. So my sense is that, although men

could have moved around, pushing their wages up a bit perhaps by negotiating and so on, on the whole, they don't.

And one of the big, striking things after 1945 is what tends to happen is once men have become established in a particular factory, they like to stay there, for all sorts of reasons. Because it suits where they live, because they fit in with a bunch of mates. I was really struck by the sense that starting in a factory is difficult. Although I grew up within, as I say, an energetic walk of the Longbridge factory, I'm struck by how little I know and I think how little most historians know about what it's like to work in a factory. And just the sense of ostracism that can go with being a new worker, all those kinds of things. So being established is terribly important.

Now, when I used the word men a while ago, I did mean men, of course, it wasn't just a sexist slip of the tongue. I think this does apply to men much more than other people, much more than women. And also, it means on the whole white men – secure employment is much more available if you're white. There's a big hierarchy of work in the 1960s, with labouring jobs in factories rather than production jobs, so even semi-skilled work, as long as you're actually touching the car, is likely to be a white preserve. Security is very much white, partly because of course the unions negotiate, meaning last in, first out, which tends to discriminate against immigrant workers. And really simple things like night shifts. Night shift work tends to be more non-white than day shift work. So yes, there is this wonderful period of secure employment, but it's secure employment for particular groups of people.

In terms of housing, yes. Obviously, housing is always a big feature of Birmingham. Chamberlain had worried about housing a great deal. There's a big construction of council housing in the interwar period, which isn't always terribly useful for bits of the working class, because council houses are actually quite expensive. And they're very much to do with the respectable working class. Extraordinary things like they have front gardens, and you're meant to keep the front garden proper, and so on and so forth. After 1945,

council housing becomes much more accessible, particularly to securely employed industrial workers.

I think council housing then becomes a transformative thing. Although, as always with these things, I think one of the big problems now with the way we think about Britain is nostalgia, and nostalgia for a certain time, especially nostalgia for the postwar years. And I think that goes partly with the way in which people have reacted against Thatcher. Wicked Mrs Thatcher came in to this arcadian Britain, where everything was working perfectly, and she made everything insecure with her wicked neoliberalism. Now, of course, when you look at what life was like for most people before 1979, in lots of ways it wasn't idyllic. Just really simple things like whether you had an indoor toilet. I'm struck by how much when people talked about moving into council housing they said indoor toilets, indoor bathrooms, these were kind of utopian things to get. And, of course, there's also a slight double edge to this, in that some of the places people were very keen to move to, Castle Vale estate, for example, sometimes estates revolving around high rise buildings seemed very attractive at first, and now, or at least perhaps a bit less now, but certainly for a period in the 1980s, 1990s, were seen as almost dystopian places, examples of what a city ought not to be.

Andrew: I thought as you talk about at the end of the book about Birmingham and nostalgia, it was a really important part of the work. Certainly, we've been looking into this and looking back at things like the Beveridge report and what happened post-Second World War, as well as the work in Bristol that we did in 2019 on the growth of council estates, for example. No doubt, they were very, very important, but there are lessons to be learned from them as well – as you say, the arcadian view is still around.

I remember when I became a student and I went to Bradford University and rented a house, there were still neighbours of mine that had outdoor toilets, for example, and this was 1981. It hadn't changed there at all for some

people. And of course, the points you make about the racism inherent in some of that work is essential to consider, and I will come back to that.

I want to talk about this postwar period, though, and the importance of Herbert Manzoni, and of course this is when the great road infrastructure is built, more council housing built, the growth of the car and the motor city. Tell us about Manzoni.

Richard: Manzoni is an administrator. So he's employed as, I think in the first instance, a city officer for drains and sewers, or something very kind of Chamberlain-ite (Chamberlain was always obsessed with good sewage). And then he becomes city engineer. So he's a very, very powerful man. And he's very powerful I think partly because he's just a man of extraordinary determination and drive. I mean, if you just look at his photographs, you can see that he's not a man you'd want to cross. And partly because Birmingham is changing, especially after 1945.

Before 1945, it's still being dominated by the remnants of the Chamberlain tradition, which means powerful families who are running their businesses in the morning and sitting in the council house in the afternoon, basically. And then after 1945, these families tend to disappear, and Birmingham becomes not exclusively but much more a Labour city. And the Labour councillors of course are much less experienced, they are much less prosperous, and I think they're therefore more vulnerable to someone telling them this is how things get done. I think Manzoni is very skillful at picking people up as they come in. Frank Price especially, who becomes Mayor of Birmingham, is, I think, taken under Manzoni's wing and Manzoni explains, well, this is how local government works.

So I think those things make him very powerful. And he's around for a long time. He's in position for decades, really, as a central figure in Birmingham. And in some ways, he fits the time, his idea of what an urban modernity ought to be fits in with a general mood, I think.

Andrew: He reminded me of a smaller version of Robert Moses in New York, and the work that he did in the creation of roads through communities and so on. It's interesting to remember, though, isn't it, that while there was this big growth of the motor city and the creation of Spaghetti Junction and things like that as the years went by, how important public transport remained for people at that time, particularly for working-class people. You also mention in the book how bicycles remained important for a lot of working-class people; Cadbury had their own full-time person mending bike punctures during this period.

Richard: Absolutely. It's rather touching, actually. I can't remember I said this in the book or not but Adrian Cadbury starts out working - I think he actually starts on the production line for about six weeks or something, [which is] a very Cadbury kind of thing to do. He says he gets to work on a bicycle from his family house. And then he has worked for the company for 35 years or so – again, very touching and typical of the Cadburys, and perhaps typical of the security of what was once Birmingham employment – after 35 years at Cadburys, they buy you a present. How do you work for a company for 35 years? It's like winning the pools. Cadbury asked for a bicycle as his present. Although by this time, of course, he's commuting to his headquarters in London, completely outside this world.

I do remember bicycles very personally, actually. I never cycled in Birmingham. I cycle in London now. Middle Park Road, the street I grew up in, is a very middle-class street, close to the Weoley Castle estate, which is a working-class estate, and not that far from the Longbridge factory. I can remember huge numbers of blokes in overalls cycling down the road at rush hour. The strange thing is you wouldn't get the sense of that from Birmingham's propaganda about itself at all – you'd have thought that everybody was going to work by car. So yes, I think bicycles are important.

I think public transport is incredibly important. Birmingham is a city that kind of lives around bus routes. And because for various complicated reasons, I went to school a long way from my home, I spent much of my teenage years sitting on various buses, so I always saw the world from the top deck of the number 11 bus.

There's a terrific disjuncture between the way in which the dominant people in Birmingham saw the city, and the way in which most people saw the city. There's a wonderful work by a political scientist, mid 1970s, he discovers that most members of the city transport executive – transport committee – have not actually been on public transport in the last four months. Compare that to London where investment bankers commute on the Tube. You realise how divided that makes Birmingham.

I think it also makes the city divided in itself, in that everybody's view of the city revolves around certain bus trips which take them from home to work, but it means it's quite a kind of fragmented city. One of the things I realised is my vision of the city would consist of the 61, -2 or -3 bus that goes down the Bristol Road, leading from the centre of the city to my house, the number 11 bus that goes from Edgbaston to Acocks Green, which is what I used to catch to school which is the outer circle bus – a very important bus for Birmingham imagination – and then the number 182 bus. I can still remember these bloody bus routes, although I haven't taken any of these buses except the 61, -2 or -3 for, I don’t know, 40 years or something. But those are the buses that defined my life. For other people, they'd be a completely different set of bus routes and a completely different vision of what the city actually meant.

Andrew: The way the city was transformed by the car is a key part of the industry. But it wasn't just that that transformed the city, was it? It was the mood of the times. The growth of social housing, industry began to move out of the city centre and where you lived and where you work became much more distant, and there was the creation of the new towns outside of the city. Telford was one of those examples.

Richard: Absolutely. Partly it's a central government imposition. Central government never likes Birmingham. It's almost like the whole of Birmingham's history is defined by central government faintly disapproving of it. They disapprove of it because they think it's too crowded, but also think it's too prosperous in a way, and there's a quite conscious desire to move industry to what they call, by the post-1945 period, 'development areas'. They want industry to set up in the north particularly.

That's part of the drive. It becomes more difficult for industry because people need development certificates if they're going to set up, so for that reason, it becomes harder and harder to establish new businesses inside Birmingham. Also, there's always been a certain tendency to move industry away from the centre, which tends to be associated with the most archaic industries - guns, jewellery, small workshops – those are the industries that tend to be concentrated in central Birmingham.

The Longbridge factory, of course, is actually quite a long way out. Longbridge was initially built outside the city limits – one of the strange things about Birmingham city limits is that they're always expanding, so what Birmingham is changes over time. And I think even now, well, Longbridge doesn't exist now, but even at the last stages of Longbridge, as far as I can tell – I've always found it quite hard to establish exactly where the city limits went – the Longbridge factory was actually divided by the city limits. So what was called the Aero factory – the factory that had been built in the late 1930s – was always technically outside Birmingham, even though it's part of the same big industrial complex. So in that sense, yeah, there's always this kind of movement of industry away from the centre, and also to some extent movement of population away from Birmingham entirely, although sometimes these people then commute back to Birmingham.

Andrew: And of course by the 1980s and onwards a lot of those things we now look on as bad urban planning – kind of reverse of the politics of

nostalgia. And we need to learn these lessons. The talk now is of 15-minute cities where you're only 15 minutes away from work, leisure, education and entertainment. The need to build new social housing, the need to remove cities' reliance on the motorcar and to make sure that people can be much more mobile by mass transit.

Another critical point is about how Birmingham is this city of migrants, and about how newcomers come to the city. You don't just look at, for example, Black people moving into the city, but the Irish communities that were established in the city from, I think, the 1930s onwards and perhaps a bit before then. You talk about the importance of this film that haunts you, as you go through the book, which is *The Colony*, the 1964 film that was on primetime television. We had a similar BBC film about Bristol, *The Newcomers*, in the same year, which was a longer film, in which, interestingly, non-white people play a fairly limited role. There is one episode where they go to a Black church in St Paul's; you see the odd Black person in a pub, for example; and you meet the first Sikh bus conductor, post the great bus boycott in the 1960s, when parts of the community refused to travel on the buses because they wouldn't appoint Black bus conductors.

Tell us about how integration has happened in Birmingham, and how well that has gone and how badly that has gone.

Richard: Well, certainly at a time, Birmingham would have been a notorious centre of racial tension. The two things that I suppose everybody knows about postwar Birmingham are, first of all, the Smethwick election of 1964 – Smethwick is not technically part of Birmingham, although everyone thinks it's part of Birmingham – where a Tory candidate wins with a racist slogan. And Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968. So in that sense Birmingham has a bad rap in terms of race relations. It's obviously partly that Birmingham is simply a city that takes in a lot of immigrants because of economic boom. I think it's complicated in that what people think of integration changes over time.

One of the things that struck me very forcibly was that when you read especially West Indians being interviewed, they very often say, we're not going to stay here, we're only going to be here five years, we're going to go back. And in a funny kind of way, I think that for some of them [that] takes the edge off racism. They think, well, this is not my country, I don't have to care about what's going on. Now of course, almost all of them do stay in the long term.

The other thing that really stunned me was how often racists regard racism as temporary, because oddly enough they do think there's going to be integration. I was amazed by – particularly in a place called Rowley Regis, and again, not strictly speaking Birmingham but effectively Birmingham – a group of people actually had a kind of deal they wouldn't sell to a Black family…and you think, this is outrageous racism. But then one of the people interviewed says, well, of course, we've only got this agreement for ten years because our children, they'll be integrated, and not like us.

Now, in fact what happens is that the 1970s is a particularly bad time, I think, for Birmingham and race. So the early 1970s, I think, are a tense time, perhaps partly because unemployment is beginning and therefore there's white resentment. I also think very strongly that second generation, especially second-generation West Indians, are more pained by racism, and more aggressive in their response to it than their parents, because they do know they're going to stay. Britain is their country, so they very understandably resent attempts at exclusion.

I think Birmingham has become very different now. One of the strange things happened to successive drafts of this book was because of the kind of political climate of publishing now, I realised I couldn't use any racist terms in the book. And I remember one time saying to my editor that writing about Birmingham in the 1970s without using racist terms would be like writing about Oliver Cromwell without using the word damnation. The whole

worldview revolved around racism. As a middle-class white person, I heard terms of racial abuse just being thrown around in the street all the time in the 1970s. I can remember a police constable – a very middle-class encounter with a policeman when he came because my parents burglar alarm had gone off in 1981, during the Handsworth riots – and I can remember him just using these racist terms obviously with no perception that this might not be the way to talk.

I think that has changed a lot now. Birmingham feels to me like a more racially integrated city. Maybe that's just me being naïve and me judging it from my personal business. But one of the things I like about Birmingham now is the frequency with which you ask a Sikh for directions in the street and he replies with an almost incomprehensibly thick Brummie accent. It feels like the city has kind of come to terms with racial diversity.

Andrew: It was similar when I grew up near Wolverhampton in the 1970s. You heard these terms that were almost commonplace, particularly at school. But certainly aren't there now. I think we have become much more integrated as a result. There's a very interesting point in *The Colony* where they're discussing integration, and they're talking about becoming a Black Brummie, and one of them says that it would take three generations to integrate, and maybe it's not taken three generations…maybe perhaps a couple of generations?

Richard: I think the man who probably says that is the signalman, isn't it? From St Kitts. Actually, his grandchildren – I never tracked them down, but I think I know who they are – his grandchildren live in Birmingham. I think one of his grandsons, as far as I could ascertain, is now a chef at a Michelin-starred restaurant somewhere just outside Birmingham. So yes, in some sense, it has been three generations.

I think the other thing to stress is that Birmingham has always been a place of movement. I think one of the things that almost defines it is people

coming out, coming in and leaving. So actually, there are not many Birmingham people who could say they've been here for three generations. I think the idea of kind of deeply rooted white working-class group of people resenting outsiders…. When you look at these people closely, most of them are people whose families came from South Wales in the 1930s, or from Scotland after 1945, or whatever. So I think there's always been a lot of coming and going.

Andrew: And I think that's one of the good things about cities – you do get this renewal of people coming in and bringing different things with them. It certainly would be very hard to ever imagine again, apart from on the fringes of the far right, the kind of language used in the Smethwick election and the kinds of things that Enoch Powell talked about. You talk a lot in the book about the Irish communities in Birmingham, and of course, after the Birmingham pub bombings, that was a particularly difficult time for Irish people in the city.

Richard: Yes, absolutely. Again, it ties in with my own memories quite strongly. So I was, I guess, 11 at the time of the Birmingham pub bombings. And, oddly enough, because of the area I grew up in, I knew hardly any Black people, a few Asian people when I went to secondary school, but I did know quite a lot of Irish people. Looking back, I think we must all have been quite sheltered by our parents and by the school. I wasn't aware at the time of very strong, anti-Irish feeling, but looking at things as a historian, I've come across extraordinary examples of horrible, anti-Irish, something quite close to a pogrom at times. Particularly the Riley family, where two of their sons were killed in the pub bombings, and then the mother is abused in shops because she's got an Irish accent. So there is really a terrible time for Irish people, I think, in the aftermath of the Birmingham pub bombings.

Andrew: The final area I just wanted to talk briefly about – which has been very important for us in recent years because we work mostly in the area of cultural activity – has been the renewal of Birmingham as a cultural centre.

We were rivals with Birmingham – this is Bristol – when we both competed for European Capital of Culture for 2008. We both were eventually defeated, and Liverpool was the successful city. But as I mentioned at the start, what I knew about Birmingham growing up was visiting the theatre, for example, with the school, so I knew that it was a place people went to for cultural activity. But since then, you've had the growth of things like Symphony Hall, you have the new library, and this is built on quite an important culture of the place, isn't it? From the Lunar Society onwards, but more recently Birmingham as a home for refugees from Russia and the Nazis, the strong newspaper culture that existed for a time in the city, even the talk – although you point out that's probably not correct – about a Birmingham School of Literature, J R R Tolkien, and particularly the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham and Stuart Hall. And then of course you've got the music industry, and you've got television, although one would probably dismiss *Crossroads* as a particular example. But more recently, *Peaky Blinders*, for example, and I'm old enough to remember its predecessor, *Gangsters*.

Richard: Have you seen *Gangsters*?

Andrew: I remember seeing bits of it at the time, but to be honest, I can't remember much about it.

Richard: Right. I spent a lot of time on YouTube trying to hunt down *Gangsters,* although I've never been able to watch a complete episode. It sounds a fantastic programme. *Peaky Blinders* – I know this is almost sacrilegious to say, but I can't watch *Peaky Blinders* for more than 10 minutes. I find it arch and fake and annoying. It reminds me of in the 1970s a programme set in Newcastle, *When the Boat Comes In*, and it strikes me in every respect that's better than *Peaky Blinders*, which is just *When the Boat Comes In* with a few *Godfather* homages thrown in.

I'm intrigued by the idea of Birmingham as a cultural centre. I like the idea of culture that kind of comes from below. And it seems to me that one of the attractive things about culture is it ought to be disconcerting, you know? If people in authority like culture, then you should think maybe there's something wrong with it. It's true that there has been for a long time a desire to make Birmingham a cultural centre, and rather earnest kind of mobilisation around the Symphony Orchestra or Birmingham theatres and so on and so forth. Although I always quite like the idea of culture that is not kind of controlled, not goody-goody culture, if you like, like that.

At one point I say in the book – which is a slight remark which perhaps indicates that you might think that Birmingham was not very cultural – when I was growing up the two most memorable theatrical experiences of my life were seeing Ben Kingsley in *Baal* at The Other Place in Stratford, which is this fantastic actor playing in this iconic play in a theatre that was so tiny that basically the sixth form from my school were most of the audience, and seeing John Inman playing the Dame in *Mother Goose*. And I always put a footnote to say that actually, I have to admit that I did much prefer John Inman and *Mother Goose* in this great, vulgar pantomime. I always got the impression it was 2,000 workers from Longbridge spending their redundancy money on taking their grandkids out.

That felt to me like Birmingham, a kind of unapologetic vulgarity, which I rather like. And although Ben Kingsley was undoubtedly brilliant in *Baal*, it was a performance one could have seen anywhere. You could have seen that in New York or Berlin or wherever. Whereas I did feel that John Inman taking the piss in Mother Goose, that somehow felt distinctively Brummie to me.

Andrew: Well, I have to confess, or say – I'm rather proud, actually – that one of the great cultural points in my growing up was the programme *Tiswas*, which came from Birmingham, which was really about throwing custard pies at each other, but featured Lenny Henry, for example, coming out of *The Black and White Minstrel Show* into becoming a major star himself. I also

think that one of the great novelists of Birmingham– well, there are two really: David Lodge, when he wrote about Birmingham, and Jonathan Coe.

Richard: I think Jonathan Coe is less of a Birmingham novelist now, and really, he seems to me to be a novelist of King Edwards, of one school. I do think *The Rotters' Club* is a wonderful book, but in a way it's just a book about clever boys at a grammar school – it could be a book about clever boys in a grammar school anywhere. David Lodge, again, I think he's a wonderful novelist, and I suppose *Changing Places* is the novel that everyone cites about 1970s Birmingham. Although two things about David Lodge: one of which is that a lot of his novels are rather kind of post-modernist and actually slightly distanced from being set in any particular place. I did meet David Lodge a few years ago – not to do with Birmingham, to do with another book – and I met him at his flat, which is just off Shaftesbury Avenue, and he did have this wonderful expression. He looked out the window – I said, you know, it's nice flat you've got here – and he pointed out of the window and said, 'Everything one could want is within five minutes of here.' I got the distinct impression that he wouldn't say that about his Edgbaston house. So I think David Lodge actually remains a rather London figure, even though he's still so often associated with Birmingham.

Andrew: Just a final point about the politics of nostalgia. I once heard someone you write about in the book present at a conference, Carl Chinn. He's professor of community history, he's written a lot about Birmingham, and he started his talk by recreating the sounds of Birmingham's industry, I remember. I found that quite powerful, actually.

I know there are lots of issues around this, but when it comes to nostalgia, one of the things that we're looking into is how complacent cities have been. One of the things I took from your book was when it came to things like the motor industry and so on, there was a complacency there, within the industry itself in how it was failing to compete against companies overseas,

but also the idea of complacency in terms of how the city evolves and how it becomes a city for people. Do you think that's the case?

Richard: Yes, I think there can be a complacency. To some extent, it was an enforced complacency on Birmingham, because, as I say, central government policy made it quite hard to establish other industries there. To some extent, there's a complacency of the future, if you know what I mean. It's probably not what you want to hear if you're running a project called future cities, but it strikes me you could almost write a history of Birmingham which would be a history of how Birmingham has conceived the future. There are all these rather science-fiction kind of views about what Birmingham is going to be at some point in the future, which are particularly poignant, because, for some reason, one of the years they begin to focus on is 1981. Lots of projects are what Birmingham is going to look like 1981. Of course, what Birmingham looked like in 1981 was mass unemployment and very severe economic downturn. So I think one should never assume one knows what's going to happen.

And I think also that one should think carefully about assuming that one knows what has happened in the past as well. When you say the sound of industry, I'm not sure I know what a factory sounds like. I spent a lot of time listening to interviews by given by trade unionists, particularly at the Longbridge factory, car factories generally in Birmingham, and occasionally they'd say something which would suddenly pull me up and I'd think, Christ, that was what life was like working in a factory. I remember one of them said, of course, in those days, there were no cloakrooms, we just hung our jackets alongside the production line, and if one of the machines broke down, you'd go home with your jacket spattered in oil. Or one of them said no canteens, we'd be eating our sandwiches sitting on boxes.

So just really basic things like the noise in factories, I think… The noise was sometimes unbearable in factories. I can remember I moved from primary school, which was very socially mixed, but where some of the kids would

have had dads who worked in Longbridge to a posh secondary school where lots of people's dads worked as managers at Longbridge, and I remember people saying at Longbridge they play cards and they bring sleeping bags to the night shift. And one of the things eventually I realised is you'd be bloody lucky to get a night of sleep in the Longbridge factory because of the noise. So I think there are lots of things that one should feel careful about thinking either that one actually knows how they were, or thinking how they were is necessarily something one would want to recreate.

Andrew: I think the noise of the factory sounds is better than the sounds of the factory. And certainly looking at how cities have been planned to be, I've been involved in so many projects which have had titles like Bristol 2020, which was 25 years before 2020, and even Bristol 2050. One of the things I hope to do is at least live long enough to 2050 to see how the city turns out.

Richard, thank you very much for joining us. This is a very welcome book. It's a terrific book to read. It's an important book, as we talked about, because it's important to look at cities other than London. Richard's book, *Second City,* is out now from Allen Lane. Our Festival of the Future City is back in October 2023. Thank you, Richard, for joining us today. Thank you very much.

Richard: It was an absolute pleasure. Thank you.

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity. The full version of the interview is in the recording.