

No Turning Back: The Peacetime Revolutions of Post-War Britain

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In bringing his history of Britain almost to the present, Paul Addison is the latest to tackle the problem which Macaulay identified in 1841: English history, he wrote, 'from 1688 to the French Revolution, is even to educated people almost a terra incognita'. For Walter Bagehot in 1876: 'the events for which one generation cares most are often those of which the next knows least. They are too old to be matters of personal recollection, and they are too new to be subjects of study: they have passed out of memory, and they have not got into the books'.⁽¹⁾ Whereas Macaulay consigned half a century to the limbo between past and present, his successors as historians of contemporary Britain have contracted it considerably, sometimes almost to vanishing point.

With her four-volume *History of the Twenty Years' Peace* Harriet Martineau assigned only five years to her limbo: she carried her story up to 1845 and published in 1849–50, and later moved back to 1800 and forward to 1850. She is the first of the six substantial Victorian historians of 'contemporary' Britain to pioneer the journey that Addison now takes; the second, W.N.Molesworth, took his three-volume *History of England from 1830* (1871–3) up to what was then the present. In his six-volume *History of England from the Conclusion of the Great War in 1815* (1878–90) Sir Spencer Walpole was more timid: he stopped at 1856. The first two volumes of his *History of Twenty-Five Years* (1904), however, reached 1870, and Sir Alfred Lyall added another decade with two further volumes published in 1908. At least as industrious was Justin McCarthy, whose much reprinted and much supplemented *History of Our Own Times* had reached a four-volume edition by 1880, carrying his story up to that year; by 1900 it had reached 1897 in five volumes, and by 1905 it had reached its terminus, 1901, in seven volumes. The publishing history of Herbert Paul's five-volume *History of Modern England* (1904–6) was less complex, and stopped at 1895, whereas R. H.Gretton contented himself with only three volumes in his *Modern History of the English People*; the first two (from

1880 to 1910) were published in 1913, and the third (up to 1922) in 1929. The median gap between the period covered and the date of publication for these six histories is eight years. James Franck Bright's much reprinted *English History for the Use of Public Schools* (1875–1904) in its fifth edition (five volumes, 1904) reached 1901, but as it was but one of Bright's several textbooks and began in AD 449, its author was both more and less than a historian of contemporary Britain.

The 11 most influential histories of 'contemporary' Britain published since 1945 are simultaneously more and less ambitious than their six precursors: all are compressed within a single volume, so all are inevitably more selective in their material and more energetic in analysing it. Furthermore, their median gap between past and present is only three years. Less prone to narrative chronicling, their pursuit of objectivity and perspective led the first three of the eleven to leave a substantial period in limbo: C. L. Mowat's pioneering *Britain Between the Wars 1918–1940* appeared in 1955, D. Thomson's *England in the Twentieth Century* and A. J. P. Taylor's *English History 1914–1945* both in 1965. W. N. Medlicott, however, in his *Contemporary England 1914–1964* (1967) left only three years in limbo, adding in 1976 an epilogue which reached 1974, and K. Robbins's *The Eclipse of a Great Power. Modern Britain 1870–1975* appeared in 1983. In his *The People's Peace* (1990) K. O. Morgan carried his story almost up to the date of publication, and in his second edition (1998) did the same again, though P. F. Clarke's *Hope and Glory. Britain 1900–1990* did not appear till 1996. M. D. Pugh's *State and Society. British Political and Social History 1870–1992* (1994) reached 1997 in its second edition (1999), and its third edition (2008) abandoned a terminal date altogether.

The balance of index to text, a rough guide to the author's seriousness of purpose, rises from 0.3 per cent in the six older histories to 0.4 per cent in the 11 newer ones. Medlicott sensibly decided to base his book 'on the published sources, primary and secondary, which are abundant', and 'did not feel that its scale would justify reference to any unpublished documents to which I might have had access'.⁽²⁾ The only practicable alternative is the multi-author volume, of which three since 1945 have been influential. Even with 23 historians at his disposal, however, Paul Johnson's *Twentieth-Century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change* (1994), did not tackle politics and government. Not so with Gourvish and O'Day and their 11 contributors in *Britain since 1945* (1991) and Kathleen Burk with her six contributors in *The British Isles since 1945* (2003). These last two volumes also managed to include Northern Ireland, and in her 233 pages Burk brought her story to the end of the century.

These 11 works by 20th-century 'contemporary historians' differ in other ways from the six such works published before 1945. In both periods all but one of the historians is male, but there are contrasts in political commitment: all six of the Victorian contemporary historians were on the left (two were Gladstonian M.P.s), whereas only two of their 12 20th-century successors have publicized similar sympathies. This is partly because all 12 were university employees, whereas 19th-century universities, in so far as they studied modern British history at all, took care to stop well short of the present. By contrast, five of the six 'Victorian' historians of contemporary Britain had at some stage in their careers been journalists, the sixth (Molesworth) being a clergyman. The affinity between 'contemporary' historian and journalist persists: their skills overlap, newspapers provide contemporary historians with ample raw material, and also help to guide them through it. Just as some journalists (Hugo Young) can surpass the historians in their trade, so some historians (A. J. P. Taylor) can surpass the journalists in theirs. Most academic historians, however, are analysts rather than annalists, if only because they feel relatively distant from their subject matter and have the time and perhaps also the inclination to view it from a wider perspective.

All this sets into perspective the scale of the task which Addison sets himself in deciding upon his book's scope, structure, interpretation, tone, and presentation. Scope and structure are inseparable. Addison knows that synoptic historical works – especially those on Britain since 1945 – can no longer place politics centre-stage with social history as an optional extra. As Herbert Paul pointed out long ago, 'modern England was not erected by Act of Parliament', and 'no Parliament ever yet made a scientific discovery'.⁽³⁾ If anything, Addison's approach to social history is too narrow, with too little discussion of religious and demographic trends, though he is strong on consumerism. Aiming to cover the period from 1945 to 1997 – though his treatment of the years after 1990 is rather thin – he chooses a broadly chronological structure, and locates his sub-divisions at 1957 and 1974. He therefore rightly repudiates the decade as unit of analysis ⁽⁴⁾, and

clusters all his chosen dimensions of British history into his three sections.

Interpretation and tone go together. Addison's non-metropolitan perspective ensures due attention for Great Britain's ethnic diversity and political pluralism, as one would expect from an author schooled in Lichfield, 'finished' at Oxford, and employed for most of his career in teaching and researching at Edinburgh. It seems odd, though, that he lends such prominence to 'administrative devolution' among the causes of revived Scottish and Welsh nationalism; far more important were Scottish and Welsh disillusion with post-war Labour and Conservative governments, and the fading memory of shared achievement when the empire disappears and wartime memories die away. Nowhere more than among Ulstermen did Second-World-War memories deserve emphasis, but Addison excuses his omission of Northern Ireland on the ground that its political culture and social mood are so different. Yet to have included Northern Ireland would have doubly enhanced the book. It is not just that Northern Ireland's inclusion would by contrast have highlighted the essentials of the dominant culture. More importantly, it would have duly emphasized how its warring factions crossed the Irish sea. Such crossings had important consequences for the United Kingdom's political and judicial system, for its relations with the European Union and the United States, and (through terrorism) for its daily life. As for ethnic diversity, there is more to be said for John Stokes when he said (p. 367) in 1976 that 'the ordinary people of England were never asked to vote' on whether they wanted a multicultural society, and it is no rebuttal to say that by then 'the multi-racial character of Britain was by this date irreversible'. Stokes's difficulty is more one of hindsight: nobody in the late 1940s foresaw the scale of the likely immigration and the sheer scope of the ensuing changes.

Addison is surely right, however, to heed his own warning that 'in social history the emphasis usually falls on the new, and it is easy to forget that the new co-existed with the old'. In discussing the 1960s he points out that a higher proportion of men and women were then married than at any other time in the 20th century: 'The young might be swinging in Chelsea', he writes, 'but were they in Slough? And what of Grantham or Peterhead?' He also rightly stresses how frequently the 1960s emancipations were yoked to tightenings up in the relevant areas of the law. Overall, Addison is fair as between Labour and Conservative, but P. F. Clarke will be annoyed to see the Social Democratic Party (SDP) making only the most cursory appearance in the text and excluded from the index altogether. Given how heavily weighted against Thatcherite remedies are the arguments Addison balances on pages 313–4, one might have expected the SDP's solution (if it had one) to feature more prominently. On factual accuracy, Addison can scarcely be faulted. R. A. Butler was not Chancellor of the Exchequer in 1960 (p. 161), and the Consumers' Association appears correctly on page 175 but as Consumer's Association on page 174 and as Consumer Association in the index. Yet for the critic to spot only two errors in a book of this kind testifies to its author's achievement; after all, Henry Pelling detected a huge list of errors in the first edition of A. J. P. Taylor's *English History 1914-1945*.⁽⁵⁾

As for presentation, it is doubtful whether Addison needed, in the preface and in the school photograph he includes, to advance so far into the foreground. And should he have included in his text so many references to secondary sources, all anyway identified in the endnotes? I suspect that most readers prefer to take their history neat, and to be left historiographically uncluttered. As for Addison's style, H. G. Hutchinson said of Sir Spencer Walpole that 'his style was a question of ... much vexation to him', and he used to complain that 'it is so heavy, so dull'.⁽⁶⁾ No such vexation has beset Addison during his career, but *No Turning Back* does lack the sparkle of his *The Road to 1945*. A wider resort to diaries would have introduced more colour; the quotations cited are sometimes too long, and are not always well integrated into the text; and there is a tendency towards cliché – slippery slopes are descended, geese lay golden eggs, sacrifices are made on altars, and gauntlets are picked up and thrown. The publisher makes the book look good: there are ample illustrations, graphs and tables, though footnotes are not on the page and sources are not always clearly identified. The bibliography is reduced to a mere two pages of 'further reading', and although the index is reasonably differentiated, where is the reader who will sweat through 15 entries on 'Conservative party and governments'?

Notes

1. G. O.Trevelyan, 'Life and letters' (2nd. ed.) in *Works*, T. B. Macaulay (Edinburgh ed. 1897) x, p.103; Walter Bagehot, 'Lord Althorp and the Reform Act of 1832' (1876) in *Collected Works*, ed. Norman St.J.-Stevan(1968), iii, p.201.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. W. N. Medlicott, *Contemporary England 1914–1964* (London, 1967), preface.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. H. Paul, *History of Modern England* (1904), i, p.20.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See Brian Harrison, 'Historiographical azards of sixties Britain' in *Ultimate Adventures with Britannia. Personalities, Politics and Culture in Britain*, ed. W. R. Louis (2009), pp. 33-4.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Henry Pelling, 'Review of A. J. P. Taylor's *English History 1914-1945*', *Past and Present*, 33 (1966), 149–58.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. H. G. Hutchinson, *Portraits of the Eighties* (1920), pp. 205–6.[Back to \(6\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

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