

Modernity Britain: Opening the Box, 1957-1959

Review Number:

1544

Publish date:

Thursday, 13 February, 2014

Author:

David Kynaston

ISBN:

9780747588931

Date of Publication:

2013

Price:

£25.00

Pages:

432pp.

Publisher:

Bloomsbury

Publisher url:

<http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/modernity-britain-9780747588931/>

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Malin Dahlstrom

Modernity Britain marks the third part of Kynaston's *Tales of a New Jerusalem* series. The first volume – *Austerity Britain 1945–51* – covered the immediate post-war years of the Attlee government, while its successor, *Family Britain 1951–57*, took the story up to the end of the Eden administration. Interestingly, *Family Britain* was supposed to encompass the two years covered in this book: the back page of *Austerity Britain* shows four projected volumes, with *Family Britain* looking at 1951–9. (The other two projected volumes incidentally were *Opportunity Britain*, covering the 1960s, and *Crisis Britain*, taking in the 1970s.) As things now stand, *Opening The Box* is the first of two projected volumes covering the period 1957–62 – both *Austerity Britain* and *Family Britain* also made their debuts as two-parters before being collected into one volume. Confused? You will be.

The years covered in *Modernity Britain* begin with Harold Macmillan succeeding Anthony Eden as PM, and end with the former's triumph at the 1959 general election. During the period in question Britain saw its first major race riots; the emergence of its first major rock 'n' roll star in Tommy Steele; the introduction of, among other things, Ready Brek, Old Spice, and Fry's Turkish Delight; the tragedy of the Munich Air Crash; and the start of the *Black and White Minstrel Show*. It saw the publication of *Which?* Magazine; the launch of Sputnik; the debut of Judi Dench; and the beginning of the television broadcast of the Queen's Christmas message. In addition, 1959 saw a Hungarian rag-salesman win the rights to distribute Levi's jeans in the UK. For Kynaston, these years marked the beginning of modernity. Granted, this notion 'may have meant different things to different people, and the pace of change varied considerably from place to place, but by 1957 it was unmistakably becoming the dominant (albeit top-down) zeitgeist' (p. 46).

Some aspects of Britain in the late 1950s are still with us today; complaints about the country being little more than America's poodle on the international stage and the idea that government welfare encourages people to be lazy scroungers are just as prevalent now as they were then. Additionally, there is still a gap between what the viewing public and television critics rate highly – not to mention the presence of Bruce Forsyth on prime-time television. Those who think that the emergence of the English Defence League is a purely contemporary phenomenon may be surprised to read of the White Defence League marching through London in 1958 parading banners with slogans such as 'Keep Britain White', while students chanted opposing slogans (p. 309). Meanwhile, a BBC report on how television influenced children showed that teenagers still expressed little inclination towards politics, on the grounds that 'they cannot see how 'politics' impinge on them, or what they have to do with their lives ... We found a widespread disenchantment with politicians. "It's sort of corrupt."' (p 323) Then again, some things have changed – an Andy Capp cartoon in which he takes satisfaction in thumping his wife would have no place in today's newspapers – well, one would like to think so anyway (p. 74).

One of the key planks of Kynaston's argument is that a lot of progressive changes were taking place in the idea of the 'built environment' – the desire was 'to dump the past, get up to date and embrace a gleaming, functional, progressive future' (p. 46). The spring of 1957 saw the start of the building of Birmingham's Inner Ring Road, the Park Hill development in Sheffield, and the Bradford Development plan. The last of these was proclaimed by the City Engineer as making Bradford one of the few cities in Britain 'not only worthy of the 20th century, but also proud to look the 21st in the face' (pp. 46–7). Later in the year, the Saxton Gardens development began in Leeds, with the opening of a ten storey block of flats, with six further blocks of between five and nine storeys to come.

The future seemed to consist of flats and high-rise housing; but as the well-known housing consultant Elizabeth Denby pointed out, although architects delighted in the new approach, 'I have still yet to find one who lives in such a block himself!' (p. 48) Although some councils attempted to reduce the gulf between the planned and the planners, more often than not a gulf remained. In Wolverhampton more than 14,000 council house tenants turned down the offer of moving into luxury flats being built in an eight storey block, citing high rents, lack of gardens and a lack of privacy as their main reasons for rejecting a move (p. 135). Another key plank of late 1950s town-planning – moving people out of the cities into 'overspill' estates – also provoked mixed reactions. A *Birmingham Mail* reporter investigating the Kingshurst estate just outside Castle Bromwich saw 'pleasant homes, with bright paint and neat curtains, wide roads and rural street names'. But talking to the residents, he heard a 'tale of bewilderment, disinterest, loneliness and dislike' (p 293). The moral of the story was that it was hard to form a community when the majority of its members saw themselves as exiles from somewhere else (p 293).

Other developments in the period included the trial of parking meters in Westminster; the beginning of the building of the M1 near Luton, and the construction of the Chiswick Flyover – the first major two-level highway to be built in London since the war. Kynaston argues that 'the sense in 1959 was of being on the eve not only of a new decade but also of urban change of a fundamental nature with unknowable consequences' (p. 320).

The late 1950s also saw something of a consumer boom, fuelled by a combination of the end of hire purchase restrictions and reductions in purchase and income tax as well as by a general feeling of optimism. By the summer of 1959, television sets were owned by roughly two out of every three homes, while one in two owned a telephone. However, only one in four homes owned a washing machine, and the ratio for refrigerators was one in ten (p. 337). Most television sets had a 17-inch screen, but a 21-inch screen had recently been developed, which more people were now buying as a result. Other buying trends that indicated a move away from the past included the increasing availability and use of electric razors; the increase in sales of filter-tipped cigarettes compared to untipped cigarettes; and Bronco's coloured toilet paper going national. Meanwhile, the Mini – 'fatally underpriced at just under £500, including purchase tax' – was launched in April 1959. (Oddly enough, the car was a direct result of Suez: petrol rationing during the crisis inspired the BMC's Leonard Lord to demand that his chief designer come up with a small car that had a low fuel consumption.) Teenage consumers – the term was coined by Mark Abrams in 1959 to describe those between 15 and 24 – spent their money on, among other things, 'Clothing, footwear, drink, tobacco, sweets, soft drinks, slacks, pop records, gramophones, romantic magazines and fiction paperbacks, the cinema [and] the dancehall' (p. 341).

The worry was that the working classes were being swept along 'in a degrading consumer frenzy' (p. 344). Willmot and Young, in their *Family and Class in a London Suburb*, collected much evidence to suggest that consumer durables were the latest weapons in the class war. The middle-classes were somewhat censorious of the working classes' new-found affluence – 'The working class is better off, which is a good thing *if* they know how to use their money. Which they don't, I'm sorry to say' (p. 298). The working-classes, understandably, saw such disapproval as the hallmark of snobbishness; 'The middle-class people here are snobs. They put on airs and graces. They are all out for show – nothing in their stomachs, but [with] nice suits on' (p. 298). No doubt this 'Keeping up with Joneses' scenario being played out in Woodford was being repeated elsewhere across the country, but not necessarily everywhere. For many, it wasn't a case of buying something because of 'the green-eyed monster' – 'It's because we're all reaching up for the same sort of thing at the same sort of time' (p. 345). Furthermore, not all were convinced by the new appliances available: a survey of working-class men in 1959 revealed that many didn't possess a washing machine on the grounds that 'my wife is my washing machine'.

The late 1950s also saw the rise in the popular consciousness of the idea of meritocracy. The mid 1950s had seen the appearance of Kingsley Amis' titular hero *Lucky Jim*, who became 'a literary-cum-social phenomenon' (p. 203). In the words of Philip Oakes, he was the first 'hapless hero to climb from the crib of the Welfare State ... His bones are reinforced by Government dried milk. His view of the world is through National Health spectacles. And he looks back – not in anger – but with surprise that he has been allowed to barge through the privileged ranks of bores and phonies, towards some kind of success' (p. 203). Oakes was writing in early 1957, a year that would see the publication of John Braine's *Room at the Top*; the book's hero, Joe Lampton, quickly replaced Jim Dixon as 'the symbol of new, meritocratic social forces dynamically and hungrily on the move' (p. 203).

Was there any evidence for the rise of meritocracy outside of fiction? The team that produced the world's first controlled fusion reaction in 1958 were grammar school boys, while James Drake, Britain's first motorway creator, was born in Burnley. Meanwhile Denis Rooke – son of a South London commercial traveller – headed the team of the *Methane Pioneer* that transported liquefied gas from the Gulf of Mexico to Canvey Island during a perilous 23-day journey in 1959. In the city, Frank Kearton at Courtauld's and Gordon Richardson at Schroder's were at the head of the post-war revival of the Square Mile. And meritocrats flourished in the media and the arts; Harold Evans, Malcolm Bradbury, Keith Waterhouse, David Bailey and John Thaw to name but five. On the other hand, for all the talk of meritocracy, all but two of Macmillan's Cabinet had gone to public school, and all but four had gone to Oxbridge; both opposition leaders had gone to Oxford. A study in 1958 entitled *The Boss* concluded that 'while some men have managed to get to the top without special advantages, the odds were heavily against them ... The men who were most likely to succeed were those with family connections in business, and those who had been to public school. Most likely of all were the Old Etonians' (p. 218).

For many of the meritocrats, a grammar school education had given them the chance to rise as they had. Reminiscences of the grammar schools are understandably mixed; for Roy Greenslade, his grammar school experience was 'a five year course in how to succeed without understanding why' (p. 212). Other accounts were more benign, although exasperation about the enforcement of petty rules seems to have been a common complaint. In any case, the position of the grammar schools in the late 1950s was being threatened by two factors beyond their control. The 11-plus exam which decided who was eligible for a grammar school spot – assuming the parents of the child could afford to send them if they did pass it – was coming under fire as the result of a debate over intelligence testing in general. As well as doubts over its efficacy, the 11-plus was seen as inherently cruel and divisive. The other factor was the poor reputation of secondary modern schools, which were seen as a dustbin for those not bright enough to get into grammar school. Manchester's chief education officer summed things up: 'it has seldom been possible to persuade parents or children that they [secondary moderns] offer a reasonable alternative to the grammar school' (p. 230). Or as A. J. P. Taylor put it, 'Run away to sea rather than go to a secondary modern' (p. 230).

In terms of social unrest the Notting Hill riots marked the most serious civil disturbances of the decade. There had been racial unrest in the area towards the end of August 1958, and Monday 1 September marked the climax of it. In the evening a large number of white youths – some estimates put the number at 2,000 – 'smashed their way through a large swathe of Notting Hill' (p. 171). The local blacks, fortified by reinforcements of Jamaicans from Brixton, fought back. Another night of violence followed on Tuesday, before rain temporarily bought a halt to proceedings on Wednesday.

Racism was still widespread in Britain. In June 1958, local magistrates in Wolverhampton renewed the licence of the Scala ballroom despite the fact it operated a colour bar. Racial prejudice was fairly widespread, with many small ads for furnished apartments being bookended with phrases like 'no coloured people' or 'sorry, no coloured'. The troubles led to the question being raised of whether a cap on immigration should be introduced. However, the last thing Macmillan wanted a year before a general election was hugely divisive debate on immigration, and the Cabinet agreed it was paramount to avoid any major pronouncements on the subject. Most Tories took the line with regard to the riots that 'there was fault on both sides'. A few MP's spoke out in favour of immigration controls, but they were in the minority. With regard to public opinion, the evidence seems to be that the veneer of racial tolerance was rather a thin one, but at 'least that thin veneer existed, and arguably owed something to a widespread underlying decency on the part of a still very conservative population' (p. 178). Oswald Mosley stood as a candidate at the 1959 general election, warning an audience against cheap coloured labour; 'no matter how skilled you might be, you can't compete with a man who is prepared to live upon a tin of Kit-E-Kat a day' (p. 357). Hearteningly, he ended up losing his deposit.

Politically these might be described as the 'never-had-it-so-good' years, as Macmillan famously put it at a meeting in Bedford during 1957. The Conservatives made a solid recovery following the Suez debacle, although they were largely aided by a Labour Party that was struggling with its defence policy, specifically

its commitment to unilateralism. The shadow cabinet knew they would need to jettison it to be electorally credible, but this went against the wishes of much of the rank and file. The former unilateralist Aneurin Bevan came under heavy fire at the party's 1957 conference, telling the floor that a unilateralist government would have to send its foreign secretary figuratively 'naked into the conference chamber'. In response to heckling from the floor, he referred to unilateralism as 'an emotional spasm.' For many Bevanites, it was a moment of 'deepest betrayal' – yet more than one Bevanite would, in later years, tie themselves in knots trying to square Bevan's post-Attlee views on nuclear disarmament with his former opposition to the bomb. (1) The 1957 conference is largely seen to have marked a turning point, when 'Labour and radical sentiment as a whole started to become increasingly detached from each other' (p. 76). In particular the period saw a gulf open up between Labour and the unions over unilateralism. At the July 1959 TUC conference on the Isle of Man, Frank Cousins declared that 'I have never believed that the most important thing in our times was to elect a Labour government. The most important thing is to elect a Labour government determined to carry out a socialist policy' (p. 324). Given that everyone was now expecting an autumn election, this was the last thing Gaitskell needed.

The sequel to this was the birth of the CND movement. After months of meetings, Good Friday 1958 saw the start of a four day, 45 mile march from Trafalgar Square to Aldermaston in Berkshire. The emergence of the CND provided more problems for the Labour Party, which as the future Tony Benn put it, 'was at sixes and sevens' over its nuclear policy. But the problem was that CND was largely 'a movement of eggheads for eggheads', in the words of A. J. P. Taylor (p. 126). Opinion polls seemed to show that the general public's view of the nuclear issue was generally somewhat fatalistic – 'There'll be a war if there's going to be one' (p. 127).

The biggest crisis the Conservative government faced was undoubtedly the resignation of three ministers from Macmillan's government in early 1958. The cause of the crisis was the clash between Macmillan and his Chancellor, Peter Thorneycroft, over spending cuts. At a cabinet meeting on 3 January, Thorneycroft demanded that in addition to a previously agreed £100 million cut in civil and defence expenditure, a further £50 million of savings, including the abolition of family allowance for the second child, was required. Macmillan stood his ground, and Thorneycroft resigned on 6 January, along with Treasury ministers Enoch Powell and Nigel Birch. The next day Macmillan was due to head off on a long planned Commonwealth tour, and at the airport uttered another one of his *bons mots* that would pass into the history books, referring to the resignations as 'a little local difficulty.' The Conservative press – and indeed the party – were not inclined to make too much fuss over the resignations, and when Parliament reassembled on 21 January, Thorneycroft delivered a resignation speech which was heartily cheered, and followed by a solid vote of confidence for the government for the principles which he had been prepared to resign over. As one reporter put it, 'if this sounds bewildering, that was just about the way it seemed' (p. 109). Some historians have invested the episode with significance by reading Thorneycroft *et al* as proto-Thatcherites heroically standing up to a Keynesian spendthrift. But despite the existence of the Institute of Economic Affairs, which would lay much of the intellectual ground for Thatcherism, those advocating small-state-free-marketeering were a very small minority in 1958; the up-and-coming generation of economists were very much Keynesians. There might be something in Ted Heath's laconic verdict that the only thing historic about the episode was that it amounted to a failed challenge to Macmillan (p. 110).

The 1959 general election saw the Conservatives running on their campaign basis of 'never had it so good' – in the spring of 1959 they had adopted the slogan 'Life's Better With the Conservatives: Don't Let Labour Ruin It', and remorselessly drove it home – accompanying posters often depicted a family washing a car, or gathered around a fully-stocked table. Macmillan himself was rapidly becoming the Conservatives' biggest electoral asset, appealing to a broad cross-section of society. By contrast, Gaitskell came across as more cerebral, and more difficult for voters to warm to – although ironically, of course, in private Gaitskell was fond of parties and extramarital activity, whereas Macmillan preferred to sit down with a book by Austen or Trollope. The star of Labour's campaign was undoubtedly Wilson, who accused the Tories of selling the Prime Minister like 'a packet of tablets', and never tired of pointing out in his broad Yorkshire accent that there were '13 Old Etonian ties' in the cabinet (p. 349). Bevan looked tired in comparison, and railed against

the PLP as being 'rotten through and through: corrupt, full of patronage and seeking after patronage: unprincipled' (p. 349). Among others Margaret Thatcher, Shirley Williams, Jeremy Thorpe, Tony Crosland, Robert Maxwell and (of all people) John Arlott contested seats. Technically it was the first 'TV' election, but the small-screen had little impact on the hustings; though it was perhaps one of the few areas where Labour outshone the Conservatives. Gaitskell's TV appearances galvanised Labour's campaign for a while, but on 28 September he gave a speech in which he ruled out tax rises under a Labour government. Lord Hailsham's response was that 'The Lord hath delivered them into our hands', while less biblically, Bevan's reaction was, 'He's thrown it away. He's lost the election' (p. 357). Indeed, the result was a Conservative majority of 100 – 'an astonishing triumph for a government already almost eight years old' (p. 364).

What gave the Conservatives such a conclusive victory? Richard Crossman wrote in his diary that it boiled down to the fact that 'Tory voters are far more afraid of another Labour government than Labour voters are afraid of another Tory government' (p. 364). For Kynaston though, it was more a case that 'whatever the attractions or otherwise of Labour's case, the electorate just did not want to change horses at a time of such prosperity' (p. 364). In the words of more than one contemporary, many voted for their stomachs in the 1959 general election.

The problem with *Modernity Britain: Opening The Box* is that one doesn't come away from the book feeling that Britain in the late 1950s was on the verge of a social revolution; the reader unaware of what happened next will be in for something of a surprise. Some seeds of change were undoubtedly present: but many had not yet germinated. The 'satire-boom' hadn't begun; the Beatles and the Stones had still to form, and Sundays were still a by-word for boredom. In the 1960s Harold Wilson would go on to associate himself with the white heat of technological revolution; but at this point in his career one of his primary concerns was that the music of Gilbert and Sullivan was about to go out of copyright. Social attitudes showed little sign of loosening: after two pages devoted to the downfall and conviction of rising Tory MP Ian Harvey for committing a homosexual act and the kicking of the Wolfenden report into the long grass, one can hardly expect the reader to be convinced by a succeeding paragraph or two claiming that 'to an extent sometimes unappreciated, there were clear signs in the late 1950s of the hold of 'respectable' morality starting to break up' (p. 255). Kynaston is more on the mark when he states that 'more bleak years lay ahead' for homosexuals (p. 254). (Incidentally, there is no mention in *Modernity Britain* of the famous Devlin-Hart exchange over the Wolfenden report, a large oversight surely?)

Kynaston employs the same style in *Modernity Britain* as in the previous two volumes in this series: a blizzard of quotations from contemporary diaries and letters adorn most pages, and Phillip Larkin rubs shoulders with the likes of Florence Turtle and Harold Macmillan. Kynaston is also fond of the tactic of giving readers who know the history of the period a nod and a wink; for instance, March 1957 saw a young RADA graduate named Brian Epstein arrested for soliciting a homosexual act; while in July a 'tousled sixteen year-old wearing a checked shirt and tight black jeans' played at a village fete in Woolton: the young man in question turns out to be John Lennon. *Modernity Britain* might be described as an old-fashioned work of narrative history. It is a very readable book; but those looking for analysis will more often than not look in vain. Kynaston's technique is to pile up varying viewpoints from contemporary sources without ever really trying to distinguish between them. Those who know their E. H. Carr will remember his chapter on causation: the 'candidate who, in reply to our question, was content to set out one after the other half a dozen causes of the Russian revolution and leave it at that, might get a second class, but scarcely a first; "well-informed, but unimaginative" would probably be the verdict of the examiners' [\(2\)](#) Kynaston, of course, is a historian of some repute – but even so, he remains open to the charge of neglecting the *why* of history in favour of the *how*. There is on the whole a severe lack of analysis in *Modernity Britain*, perhaps best typified by his treatment of the Notting Hill riots. Kynaston describes, but fails to offer any kind of final word on the subject, instead devoting the rest of the chapter to living standards. In a sense this is quite a difficult book to review, since that in many places one has to do Kynaston's analysis for him. Moreover, the lack of analytic rigour in *Modernity Britain* means that it compares unfavourably with another recent account of the same period, Dominic Sandbrook's *Never Had It So Good*.[\(3\)](#)

Kynaston's style of organising his material might also be described, perhaps a touch unkindly, as somewhat

scattergun. In particular he is guilty of using sport as filler; random football or cricket results will be interpolated into chapters at various points, but there is no systematic treatment of either as a whole. (For instance, Kynaston notes the nationalisation of the previously regional Football League Divisions Three and Four; but doesn't explain why this took place.) Kynaston's response to the 'scattergun' charge might be that he is trying to give us a feel of life as it unfolded; it is a historical fact that, for example, Manchester United's 5-4 victory at Arsenal occurred in the same week as the debut of the BBC's arts program *Monitor*. But nonetheless, Kynaston's writing style does lay itself open to the famous Eltonian charge of history being little more than 'one damn thing after another'.⁽⁴⁾

In conclusion then, while the author of *Modernity Britain* has provided another readable addition to his *Tales of a New Jerusalem* series, the jury remains out on the case he makes that the period in question marked a turning point in post-war British history. One suspects that the second volume of *Modernity Britain*, which will encompass the years 1960–2, will make a much stronger argument. But in that case, why split *Modernity Britain* into two volumes in the first place? Commercial reasons were undoubtedly behind this, but it leaves us with the task of reviewing what is essentially half a book, which is not a particularly fruitful exercise.

Notes

1. Most famously, Michael Foot in *Aneurin Bevan: a Biography, vol. 2: 1945–60* (London, 1975).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London, 1962), p. 54.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London, 2006).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Geoffrey Elton, *The Practice of History* (London, 1967), p. 36.[Back to \(4\)](#)

Other reviews:

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/book-review-modernity-britain-opening-the-box-19571959-by-david-kynaston-8720950.html> [2]

Guardian

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/23/modernity-britain-david-kynaston-review> [3]

New Statesman

<http://www.newstatesman.com/2013/06/land-hope-and-stories-social-history-smile> [4]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1544>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/66951>

[2] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/book-review-modernity-britain-opening-the-box-19571959-by-david-kynaston-8720950.html>

[3] <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/23/modernity-britain-david-kynaston-review>

[4] <http://www.newstatesman.com/2013/06/land-hope-and-stories-social-history-smile>