

North East England, 1850–1914

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This examination of economic and urban linkages, networks, and patterns of development in the industrial districts of Northumberland, Durham, and the Middlesbrough district of North Yorkshire, or in the territories surrounding the estuaries of the Tyne, Wear, and Tees, is more convincing as an exercise in ‘maritime-industrial’ history than as an analysis of a ‘region’. The ‘dynamics’ of the title are essentially economic, revolving around the carboniferous capitalism of coal, railways, shipping, iron, steel, and shipbuilding that stamped an enduring identity on this ‘North East’ of England. The regional label was current in some circles before the First World War, as evidenced by the introductory map showing the ‘North East Coast (electrical) power system’ in 1911; and companies or other organizations supplying goods, services, or media content to defined areas can, and do, help to develop a sense of regional identity or even of that tenebrous, shifting entity that John Marshall called ‘regional consciousness’ (1). But a recent report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development underlines that even in 2006, although this ‘medium sized metropolitan area’ or ‘city region’ (the phrases are used interchangeably) ‘sees itself as well defined’, it is necessary to recognize that ‘the North East has at least two urban economically functional regions, with extremely weak economic links between them’, as well as an extensive rural hinterland; and the report clearly envisages Newcastle as the hub of this economy, while remaining unsure about the role of County Durham or Middlesbrough and district in it (2).

Regional historians working on the North East England History Institute project, which has produced a cluster of scholarly publications on the North East, including the book reviewed here, have recently concluded that although ‘the North East’ was used as an economic descriptor in certain contexts from the

late-nineteenth century onwards, ‘a North East regional identity did not fully emerge from the many overlapping identities that characterized its constituent counties until after the middle of the twentieth century’, catalysed in part by the introduction of the Tyne-Tees commercial television franchise in 1959 (3). This resonates with my own parallel finding that the concept of North-West England as a regional entity did not become current until the end of the 1960s (4). So the North East of Dr Milne’s book is at best a geographical expression, or an umbrella under which several smaller economic and cultural identities offer opportunities for comparison and contrast at the level of the individual river and its ‘foreland’ and ‘hinterland’.

Dr Milne is well aware of these issues and the problems they pose. His introductory chapter locates an emergent interest in the idea of British regions as economic and political entities ‘from the bottom up’ in the early-twentieth century, calling as witnesses Patrick Geddes and Victor Branford, and regretting the subsequent preference for imposing regional structures from Whitehall rather than paying heed to circumstances and preferences ‘on the ground’. He provides a clear territorial definition of his own version of the region, while coming out firmly against attempts to derive the character of Tyne, Wear, and Tees on the basis of an imagined Geordie hegemony. He makes very brief comparative comment on other British regions, and emphasizes the importance of the North East’s maritime links with northern Europe, as well as London, as part of an international North Sea economy. But he prefers to sustain a focus on the economic aspects of regional development, applying a self-denying ordinance to exclude or marginalize the analysis of culture, politics, or, indeed (in most respects), social history; and his focus is emphatically on the North East as he defines it (paradoxically, perhaps, as imposed ‘shape on the ground’ rather than as a response to the expressed preferences of the locals) to the exclusion of other concerns.

As Dr Milne reminds us, regions exist in time as well as space—and may therefore be thought to expand and contract over time (5). His chosen region was, between the mid-nineteenth century and the First World War, in the process of forging a set of industrial identities and associated myths by which it was to live until the last third of the twentieth century, based on coal mining, heavy industry, and a cluster of related export trades. This distinctive image was for export as well as for domestic consumption, and neighbouring onlookers from outside the charmed industrial circle sometimes looked on with undisguised envy while any measure of prosperity or apparent comparative advantage endured, as the twentieth-century history of Whitby makes particularly clear (6). It was a strongly gendered, masculine image, and it is a pity that the book fails to pursue this significant dimension of regional identity (7). Since 1970, the industrial North East has been perpetuated in probably the most successful of the open-air industrial museums of the later-twentieth century, at Beamish in County Durham; and the difficulties inherent in creating and perpetuating a sense of shared cultural identity across the imagined region are well expressed in the political history of the museum itself, which had to juggle the local prejudices and political susceptibilities of a shifting spectrum of local and county authorities in order to achieve and sustain viability. One of the Beamish museum’s themes is the re-creation and representation of everyday life across the North East in 1913, at the end of Dr Milne’s chosen period; and it may be thought ironic that this historical representation of the region as a whole, on a contested site close (on most definitions) to its geographical centre, exists and exerts influence largely through the diplomatic skills of the museum’s founder, Frank Atkinson, in reconciling and massaging the collective egos of the component parts of what he preferred to think of as ‘the North of England’ (8).

Dr Milne makes no mention of these issues, choosing to sustain his focus on the regional articulation of economic, business, and local government relationships across the estuaries and hinterlands of the Tyne, Wear, and Tees. He does this convincingly, finding interesting evidence of business linkages within and beyond the region (including Liverpool and the Manchester Ship Canal, as well as Northern Europe) while emphasizing the continuing predominance of Tyneside, the importance of the North Eastern Railway as a regional deity that pulled the localities together (but also had to be placated by its customers), the enduring preference for dealing with neighbouring concerns based on or around the 'local' river where at all appropriate, and the lack of local government articulation beyond the city and town, apart from the important sphere of river and estuary management. This is valuable, clear, detailed analysis, firmly grounded in primary sources, and would alone make the book a worthwhile purchase.

Chapter 4, on 'Making and managing the maritime landscape', is particularly interesting and innovative, although it would have benefited from more engagement with the burgeoning literature on environmental history, which would have added extra dimensions to the analysis (9). But this chapter, above all, raises another problem about the limited ambitions of this book. It is very firmly grounded in primary research in local and regional (Tyne and Wear) archives, and in the minutes of evidence as well as the reports of parliamentary commissions of enquiry; but it ignores the extensive resources of the National Archives and the manuscript records of Parliament. These are important omissions, especially for a book that lays emphasis on its maritime history dimension. The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the Ministry of Trade files in the National Archives, dealing with (among other things) port and harbour investment and administration (including the important question of dredging) and commercial fisheries, would have raised new questions and provided information not available elsewhere, and it is hard to believe that nothing of relevance would have been found in the extensive archives of the North Eastern Railway. The parliamentary archives contain minutes of evidence on contested local bills involving river management and navigation, urban improvements, and railway extension, in which the strategic intentions behind railway promotions often come to light (10). There is also surprisingly little, to an outsider's eye, on the role of landed estates in regional economic development, whether as coalowners, railway promoters, county magistrates, county councillors, or in other guises. This is another area of archival research that the author has chosen not to pursue, as with the history of the trade union movement within and across the region. Newspapers, meanwhile, are used very selectively indeed. A further indication of the limits to the range of this study is the failure of techniques of statistical analysis to go beyond the basically descriptive, as with the occupational classification of 'major North-East towns' in 1891—presented as Table 5.1 on p. 124—which offers an unduly long and complex set of categories (several of them too small to be worth including), puts men and women together in the same table, and fails to deploy the basic location quotients which would help to make comparative sense of the material.

The author is clearly most at home in dealing with business history and business networks, especially with a maritime dimension and including aspects of the relationships between business and urban politics. As a book on these themes, this is a major contribution to our understanding of the peak period of industrialization in the North East; and this is no mean achievement. However, it is a pity that Dr Milne was unable to go the extra mile not only in extending the agenda of his primary research, but also in looking comparatively at other regions in a fuller and more systematic way, in Britain if not beyond. Obvious comparators, from the perspective of this reviewer, might have been Lancashire (a good 'compare and contrast' exercise with plenty of existing published research to draw on), South Wales, and that Basque country of northern Spain which played its own part in the development of the economy of North-East England, as Dr Milne usefully demonstrates (11). And the absence from the bibliography of Dave Russell's excellent recent work on 'the North in the national imagination' represents a missed opportunity to slot this project into a wider comparative context of interpretations of northern England (12).

On its own terms, this book is a valuable contribution to the economic, business, and urban history of the three river basins of North-East England and their relationships with internal hinterlands and international trading partners. It does not meet the wider expectations aroused by its title, and its ambitions are limited by

the range of sources used and the failure to pursue wider issues of comparative identity, as well as the decision not to engage with wider cultural and social issues. But it is a very worthwhile addition to its literature.

Notes

1. J. D. Marshall and J. K. Walton, *The Lake Counties from 1830 to the Mid-Twentieth Century: a Study in Regional Change* (Manchester, 1981), Introduction. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. OECD Territorial Reviews, *Newcastle in the North East, the United Kingdom* (November 2006), especially Chapters 2 and 3. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Commentary by Dr D. Newton on the findings of ed. A. Green and A.J. Pollard, *Regional Identities in North East England c.1300–2000* (Woodbridge, forthcoming 2007), at [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. J. K. Walton, 'Imagining Regions in Comparative Perspective: the Strange Birth of North-West England', in *An Agenda for Regional History*, ed. N. Vall and D. Newton (Newcastle, forthcoming 2007). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. F. Musgrove, *The North of England* (Oxford, 1990), provides a particularly mechanistic and inappropriate rendering of this concept. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. J. K. Walton, *Tourism, Fishing and Redevelopment: Post-War Whitby, 1945–1970* (University of Cambridge: Institute of Continuing Education, Wolfson Lectures, Occasional Paper No. 5, 2005), pp. 8–9. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. E. Knox, "'Keep your feet still Geordie hinnie": women and work on Tyneside', in *Geordies: Roots of Regionalism*, ed. R. Colls and B. Lancaster, (Edinburgh, 1992), pp. 92–112. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. F. Atkinson, *The Man who Made Beamish: an Autobiography* (Gateshead, 1999); G. Cross and J. K. Walton, *The Playful Crowd* (New York, 2005), Chapter 6. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. J. Sheail, *An Environmental History of Twentieth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2002); J. D. Porteous, *Environmental Aesthetics* (London, 1996); L. E. Breeze, *The British Experience of River Pollution, 1865–1876* (New York, 1993); S. Mosley, *The Chimney of the World* (Cambridge, 2001). [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. J. K. Walton, 'Fishing communities and redevelopment: the case of Whitby, 1930-1970', in *Bridging the North Sea: Conflict and Cooperation*, ed. David J. Starkey and M. Hahn-Pedersen (Esbjerg, Denmark, 2005), pp. 135–62; A. Delgado and J. K. Walton, 'La pesca y los pescadores en Inglaterra y el País Vasco, siglo XIX-1930: los casos de Whitby y Bermeo', *Itsas Memoria: Revista de Estudios Marítimos del País Vasco*, 4 (2003), pp. 563–82; J. Simmons, *The Railway in Town and Country, 1830–1914* (Newton Abbot, 1986). [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. J. K. Walton, *Lancashire: A Social History, 1558–1939* (Manchester, 1987); L. Castells and J. K. Walton, 'Contrasting identities: north-west England and the Basque Country, 1840-1936', in *Issues of Regional Identity*, ed. E. Royle (Manchester, 1998), pp. 44–81; R. C. Watson, *Rhondda Coal, Cardiff Gold* (Cardiff, 1997); P. Cooke, *Flexibility in the Periphery: Regional Restructuring in Wales and the Basque Country* (Regional Industrial Resources, 1989). [Back to \(11\)](#)
12. D. Russell, *Looking North: the North in the National Imagination* (Manchester, 2004). [Back to \(12\)](#)

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