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A Companion to Contemporary Britain, 1939?2000

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Despite the enormous growth in research and writing on contemporary British history, postwar British history is, curiously, lacking a comprehensive textbook which lecturers can recommend to students with complete satisfaction. There are some marvellous books, such as Peter Clarke?s evocative contribution to the new Penguin History of Britain, *Hope and Glory: Britain, 1900?2000*, and Kathleen Burk?s edited collection of six long and penetrating essays, *British Isles since 1945*, part of the Short Oxford History of Britain series, and couple of serviceable political histories: David Childs? oft-updated *Britain since 1945: A Political History* (London, 1997); and the now outdated Alan Sked and Chris Cook, *Post-War Britain: A Political History* (Harmondsworth, 1993).

Spanning thirty chapters, this new textbook?published in conjunction with the Historical Association, and forming part of Blackwell?s series of ?Companions to British History??comes very close to being a definitive textbook for contemporary British history. Its breadth of subjects is compelling, and the quality of its contributions is largely superb, with many subjects dealt with by authors able to pour a career?s worth of groundbreaking research into their introductory surveys. This is not to say that there are not flaws in the

volume?there are, and they are discussed below?but the successful treatment of so many topics compels one to excuse its shortcomings.

Nicely illustrative of the strengths of the volume are the opening essays by the respective editors: Addison on the Second World War and Jones on the Cold War. The former is an example of the sort of chapter which litter the collection, written as it is by the foremost scholar of the home-front experience whose own work has done so much to shape the subject (1). Covering key issues such as the unity of the home front, social change, the shaping of the post-war state, and Britain?s international role, it is a highly-readable piece which covers the key historiographical issues and attempts to get to the heart of the changes in wartime Britain. Jones?s chapter is an equally welcome contribution on something usually absent from general surveys?an attempt to map out the importance of ?the Impact of the Cold War?. ?Historians in Britain?, Jones concludes, ?have been particularly slow in attempting to assess the domestic impact of the Cold War? (p. 37). This chapter, although many may challenge its conclusions, is a promising attempt to introduce a new and expanding area of study. These two chapters serve as an introduction to the thematic contributions that follow them, but in their matching a well-known subject to a supreme expert in the field they establish the plan for this first-rate volume.

On British society and culture there is a long series of strong essays. Pat Thane is typically lucid on ?Population and Family?, Mark Clapson informative on ?Cities, Suburbs, Countryside??although he rather leaves one wishing for a more comprehensive treatment of the housing issue?and the late Arthur Marwick entertaining on class. Of particular usefulness is Wendy Webster?s contribution on ?Immigration and Racism?, in which the reader is taken through the ?racialization? of the immigration debate and reminded that in the early postwar years the influx of men and women from Poland and Ireland far outstripped that from the ?New? Commonwealth. Other issues covered include the sort of topics so often excluded from narrative textbooks such as ?Sexuality? (Lesley A. Hall), ?Sport and Recreation? (Richard Holt?although the only ?recreations? discussed are sporting ones), and a chapter on ?Youth Culture? (Bill Osgerby). This last chapter exemplifies some of the ambiguities of the book?covering a neglected and interesting topic in a manner which communicates a great deal of information, but doing so in a way which fails to make the reader understand what being a ?youth? was like in this period. For example, Osgerby runs through the standard sub-cultures of the time?a progression of Rock and Rollers, Teds, Mods, Hippies, Skinheads, Punks, New Romantics, and so on. The impression is one of a television nostalgia show with fashions and musical styles described, but we are left none the wiser concerning how pervasive these ?cultures? were, or, more importantly, how many youths were left behind. By discussing boutique designers such Mary Quant or the Carnaby Street tailor John Stephen, we left with an account of ?elite? youth culture which leaves out those countless teenagers who lived through the 1960s dressing like their fathers or mothers.

For an understanding of what it was like *living* in Britain between 1939 and 2000, perhaps the best chapter is ?Living Standards and Consumption? by Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska. By describing the changes in living standards?as well as explaining the measurement of relative terms such as ?standard of living? and ?poverty??Zweiniger-Bargielowska charts the impact of affluence as its spread unevenly throughout society.

> In the early post-war years over a third of households did not have a fixed bath, more than half did not have a hot water supply, and almost 8 per cent did not even have a WC. Standards improved dramatically: in 1971 fewer than 3 per cent of dwellings lacked one of these amenities, and in 1996 only 0.2 per cent did so (p. 233).

Such figures speak dramatically of the changes in the quality of life for the poorer sections of British society, although the bounty of affluence did not extend all the way down from the top?homeless peaked in 1992 ?when nearly 68,000 families were housed in temporary accommodation while thousands were sleeping rough? (p. 234). Other chapters on gender, ?the Rise and Disintegration of the Working Classes? (Robert Taylor), Nicolas Deakin?s effective summary of his work on ?Civil Society? (2), and a series of excellent contributions on various aspects of social policy make this collection immensely rich and informative on

many aspects of British society and culture. It certainly deserves to be the first port of call for uninformed students and less-than-well-informed scholars in the future.

There are some fine contributions on the British economy, including chapters on relatively unsung areas. The core of this informal section is provided by chapters by Jim Tomlinson on the idea of ?decline? and by Hugh Pemberton on ?The Transformation of the British Economy?. Tomlinson complements a career?s worth of challenging the notion of decline and marking the concept?s roots and applications, with a fine exposition of the issues (3). Pemberton manfully struggles to make his impressive chapter on the changes within the economy comprehensible to the student, and largely succeeds where others have failed. P. W. Daniels on ?The Geography of Economic Change? and Catherine R. Schenk on ?Britain in the World Economy? are both interventions of real quality.

Schenk?s chapter also begins a run of five pieces on the loose theme of Britain and the world, and they are a set of particularly fine examples of the craft of introducing complex issues in a readable and stylishly scholarly way. Bill Schwartz?s chapter on ?the End of Empire? may well be the single best short introduction to the thorny question of decolonization. Michael F. Hopkins and John W. Young are particularly well suited to deal with the perennially popular subject of Anglo-American relations, and James Ellison?s contribution on ?Britain and Europe? is admirably pitched towards students? needs, covering the historiographical debates, pithy accounts of key events in the integration story, and, intriguingly, a section on where the subject is heading. Ellison sees writing on his subject broadening out from the traditional diplomatic and political discussions of ?missed opportunities? to cover the consequences of membership of the European Community/Union on British life. Simon Ball?s chapter on defence policy reminds the reader of how unfashionable defence history has become in some quarters, and how little has been written about the post-1945 history of the armed forces, especially the army. It is a welcome contribution and provides an easily accessed source for some key ideas and information. The overall treatment of this broad ?Britain and the World? theme is an important strength.

As a textbook, however, the volume has unfortunate weaknesses alongside the undoubted strengths outlined above. These include a rather curious lack of political history, an overall focus on what is of interest now, at the expense of what was considered important at the time, and a problematic index. In their brief introduction, Addison and Jones stress that the Public Record Office-based ?top-down? political history, which has so dominated postwar British historiography, has been supplemented in ?the past decade or so? by ?a broadening of the agenda of research to encompass the economic, social and cultural themes which constitute so much of the historiography of earlier periods?. It is their expressed aim that this ?expansion of the agenda? be reflected in the chapters of their book. In this they have certainly succeeded, but surely some space could have been reserved for a treatment of the developments in British politics over the period. Certain vital areas of political activity are treated in other chapters?such as the economy, devolution, and Northern Ireland, or the decline of two party politics?but the reader is left with no overarching understanding of changes in political culture, or how the issues discussed in the book were contextualized at the time. For example, in addition to a fine survey chapter by Addison on ?The Impact of the Second World War?, why not a chapter on the equally important?in terms of the way the British state and economy were organized in the subsequent quarter of a century?the Attlee Governments, or on the Thatcher Governments?

This is not to suggest that this excellent book should have included chapters on every postwar British Government, but to draw attention to a couple of important consequences of excluding political history in its broadest sense. Surely a list of election results and administrations should be present in such a ?companion? to a particular period in a nation?s history. There is a list of *votes cast* in British general elections, but that is, of course, not the same as the politically more important *seats won*. An undergraduate with a less than perfect knowledge of elections might well come away with the belief that Labour ?won? the 1951 election and the Conservatives the first of 1974. The table itself is perfectly admirable, and used scrupulously well by Stephen Fielding in his chapter on the fragmentation of two-party politics, but it?and Fielding?s own contribution?cannot make up for the lack of information on the ebb and flow of British politics. British teachers of contemporary British history cannot suppose that new students are aware of the ins-and-outs of elections and governments simply because it is the relatively recent past of most of the students? country of

birth. For example, due to the vagaries of my GCE A Level syllabus, on my first day as an undergraduate I myself knew rather more about the German imperial chancellors than I did about postwar British prime ministers. It certainly cannot be expected that new undergraduates will know who Sir Alec Douglas-Home was, when Harold Macmillan was prime minister, or which party was in power in 1973 (although from recent enquires amongst first year undergraduate students, they will know a great deal about the Third Reich and Elizabethan foreign policy). Even one chapter on the general narrative of politics would have enabled readers to locate the various debates, initiatives, and setbacks in their original context. A second consequence leads on from this?one simply does not get a sufficient understanding of how these disparate elements came together in any individual government?s programme. For example, the ?modernization? programme of the Macmillan government had important consequences for the issues of economic decline, European integration, and the welfare state.

This general ambivalence to political history may be the reason behind some other omissions. Naturally, even in a book with some thirty contributions and containing the best part of 600 pages, not all aspects of the period receive the treatment they deserve. The editors are candid in admitting that ?in an ideal world? other topics would have been included: they specifically cite a history of science. Others could have included the development of the state and chapters on a few issues of enormous consequence throughout most of the volume?s timespan but of lesser interest now: housing; the nationalized industries; and the trades unions. Although it is a major strength of the volume that it avoids an over-concentration on the period before 1970, which understandably dominates the research output of historians of contemporary Britain, it would be immensely useful to have lucid analyses of these issues readily available to students. One of the challenges of teaching this subject is enabling students to conceptualize the *differences* between Britain today and, say, 1970. The role and power of the unions, and the active role of the state in industrial and incomes policy, are relics of a lost world and characterize a great deal of the period between 1939 and 2000.

The index is nothing less than shocking. A potential reader, if he looked at the index alone, would be left with the impression that there is no mention of, to give a few examples, Enoch Powell, Peter Thorneycroft, Nigel Lawson, or Michael Heseltine. Apparently forgotten Labour figures include Denis Healey, the leaders Hugh Gaitskell, Michael Foot, John Smith, and Neil Kinnock (the relevant part of the index jumps from ?kidney dialysis? to ?Kissinger, Henry?), and Roy Jenkins (?Japanese-style industrial policy? to ?Jewish refugees?). Indexing is a declining art, as publishers naturally seek to reduce costs in a hostile climate, but in a volume of this sort?a ?companion? that is so obviously designed to be a reference or textbook?usability needs to be a priority. If students cannot find what they want in an index, they will go elsewhere for information.

These criticisms are not meant to detract from the real qualities of this volume. The contributions are of a very high standard. All students of contemporary British history would benefit from reading the book, and many of its chapters seem destined to become ?required reading? for many an undergraduate survey course on this period. It covers more issues in more depth than any of the existing textbooks mentioned at the beginning of this review. It deals with the important issues superbly, introduces many under-explored areas, and gives space to some interesting emerging topics. Its lack of political history, however, does mean it would be difficult to recommend the book to students as their sole purchase?although combined with something like Clarke?s *Hope and Glory*, students would be more than adequately equipped with initial reading for most courses. But far from criticizing the volume as a lost opportunity, praise must be given for a consistently informative volume, which places so many interpretations and discussions in one place. Overall, Addison and Jones can congratulate themselves for editing a superb collection, one that can reasonably lay claim to being the foremost textbook on contemporary British history.

Notes

1. P. Addison, *The Road from 1945: British Politics and the Second World War*, second edn (London, 1994). Back to (1)
2. N. Deakin, *In Search of Civil Society* (London, 2001). Back to (2)

3. See especially J. Tomlinson, ?Inventing ?Decline?: the Falling Behind of the British Economy in the Post-War Years?, *Economic History Review*, 49 (1996), 731?57; J. Tomlinson, *The Politics of Decline* (Harwell, 2001). Back to (3)

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