

Seeking a Role: The United Kingdom 1951-1970

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When A. J. P. Taylor undertook the final volume of the old *Oxford History of England*, it was 'England', not 'History', which he found the problematic part of his brief.⁽¹⁾ The volume under review is the latest contribution to the *New Oxford History of England*, and how things have changed since Taylor's day. Back then, we knew roughly speaking what to expect from a 'general history'. Taylor wrote, as he said in his introduction, 'in the form of a continuous narrative, though with occasional pauses for refreshment'. The heart of that narrative, and therefore of the book itself, was, of course, politics: and it was a widespread belief in the primacy of the high-political that made this kind of general history possible, providing a framework over which other concerns could be draped, part of the picture, but not really part of the story. But even as Taylor was writing changes were afoot, and the cultural and social byways where he paused for refreshment have become for many if not most historians the main road, the story itself. As a result, the once-dominant political narrative has been displaced and recontextualised by narratives of social and cultural change. This is more than just a change in subject-matter: these new narratives are multiple and complex, bringing many interwoven historical themes into play, and therefore posing a challenge to the whole possibility of a unitary 'general' history. As if that were not enough, awkward questions have been posed to the validity of 'national' history by a discipline, and a world, which has become increasingly globalised. In these circumstances to undertake not just one but two volumes of what on the face of it is still a general national history series is nothing short of heroic, even from a historian of Brian Harrison's stature.

In the light of all this, it is not surprising that while the titles of the old *Oxford History* series were about dynasties, periods or political eras, the new ones are mostly thematic and often socio-cultural – often with a tell-tale question-mark to signal the theme's tentative status: 'A Polite and Commercial People' (Paul Langford), 'A Land of Liberty?' (Julian Hoppit). Brian Harrison's title may seem suspiciously political –

evoking the loss of empire, Cold War, Europe and all that – but though he deals well with these things, which for a latter-day Taylor would have been the main story, he makes it clear that for him the doings of politicians and governments carry less historical weight than the underlying processes of non-political change: in *Annaliste* terms, the *longue durée* trumps *histoire événementielle*. The powerful concluding ‘Retrospect’ reaffirms that Britons’ ideas (albeit often illusory) about their nation’s role were cultural and moral as much as political and imperial, and, in the political realm, more about traditions of freedom and democracy and experienced statesmanship than about empire and world power. The underlying theme of the book is how a period of relatively rapid social and cultural change destabilised these ideas of the national role and the social cohesion which they fostered – which even so is shown to have survived reasonably intact, shaken but not overthrown, at least up to 1970. This narrative, although it lacks the detailed chronology of the old-style political framework, is strong enough and general enough to allow the author to range widely in his choice of themes and topics without losing coherence.

A history of destabilisation needs to start with a period of relative stability. The introductory chapter on Britain in 1951 depicts a nation with plenty of problems and perhaps rather complacent, but with its cohesiveness and security seemingly validated by wartime experience and historical continuity: though we might ask whether this was the default position for British society, or simply the product of an aberrant historical moment, to be followed by the resumption of business as usual, and if the latter, whether it makes any difference to Harrison’s analysis. Either way, this first chapter is followed by seven thematic chapters exploring the upheavals that were to follow: ‘The United Kingdom and the World’ (Empire, Cold War, migration, Europe); ‘The Face of the Country’ (environment, transport, urban development); ‘The Social Structure’ (monarchy, classes and minorities); ‘Family and Welfare’ (sexuality, gender, youth and age, the NHS); ‘Industry and Commerce’ (corporatism, consumerism, ‘declinism’); ‘Intellect and Culture’ (religion, education, the arts, recreation); and ‘Politics and Government’ (executive, Parliament, the parties). Chapter nine breaks with thematism and returns to another historical moment, rightly named in quotation marks: ‘The Sixties’, that mythic decade in which it all came together, or fell apart. A concluding ‘Retrospect’ draws the themes together, arguing that the stability and cohesion of British society was held together by a collection of props and illusions mostly rooted in vague ideas about the war or in even vaguer ideas about the more distant past, all of which were rapidly losing conviction by the end of the 1960s. ‘There were as yet few signs of the gloom that was shortly to descend’ (p. 546), the book ominously concludes, but descend it surely would: sending the audience into the interval nervously anticipating act two – for, astonishingly, Harrison is doing the same job again for the 1970s and 1980s. The title of the next volume, ‘Finding a Role?’, carries, we should note, a telling question-mark.

The chapter themes are well chosen, and they are explored with the detail and analytical flair we would expect, and which it is impossible to convey adequately in a short review. However, a thematic approach poses structural problems which unless addressed might appear to undermine the book's claim to be a 'general' history. This problem is largely illusory: any way of writing history is arbitrary and selective, and an old-style continuous narrative, while purporting to include everything (that is, everything considered important) is actually the most selective of all. In our times we are apt to be up-front about the arbitrariness and selectivity of the way we write history, an approach which sits uneasily with the tradition of general histories, with their implicit claim to include everything. By contrast, to take one example, Ross McKibbin's *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (1998), while it covers a tremendous amount of ground, can afford to declare its thematic selectivity in its title.⁽²⁾ Harrison addresses this problem in the introduction identifying a half a dozen 'recurring themes' which crop up across the chapters but are dealt with in detail in one of them, and eight 'cross-cutting motifs' which are not given sustained discussion anywhere but picked out in the conclusion to each chapter (p. xx). As well as filling gaps and tying the chapters together, these recurring themes suggest what is almost an alternative chapter structure, another way the material might have been carved up. On the whole this approach works well, although it adds up to rather a lot of themes and motifs, and sometimes those chapter conclusions can seem a bit mechanical, ticking off the motifs as if the whole thing was being plotted on some vast wall-chart. But such are the problems of writing general history for our time, and it would be churlish to criticise Harrison's solution without offering a better one. The only important question is, does it work?

To which the answer has got to be, on the whole, yes. Quite apart from its underlying analysis of the post-war British mentality, there are few corners of national life which do not find a place somewhere in the book, and we invariably learn something new about them. To pick a few more detailed examples at random, passages on the development of archaeology (pp. 126–8), the impact of tourism on the quality of food back home (pp. 84–7), the fate of the canals (p. 143) and changing ideas about death (p. 287ff), all offer concise narrative, lively analysis and illuminating bits of fact. Harrison is adept at picking up unfamiliar details, usually from recondite secondary sources, which not only shed light on a topic but enchant the reader: hands up those who knew that there were only 50 Chinese restaurants in Britain in 1957 (p. 86), or that cycling accounted for ten per cent of passenger miles in 1952 but only one per cent by 1970 (p. 137), or that this period saw a long, slow decline in suicide by drowning (pp. 290–1)? In his sustained analysis of more central issues, Harrison argues that strident class assertiveness in the 1960s and 1970s masked both a decline in the real centrality of class division and the persistence of pockets of poverty (pp. 209–13); although the same section on the working class and poverty goes straight on to discuss crime, in one of several awkward transitions that need more rationalisation. There is an eloquent analysis of the whys, wherefores and problems of high-rise building, which broadens into an exemplary account of architecture, conservation and housing, weaving together social, political and aesthetic concerns into a persuasive history of the rise and fall of the modern movement in housing which has done so much to mould our urban environment (pp. 151–164). The one thing missing here, and this is true not just of this chapter but of much of the book, is the voice of those who actually lived in these flats, new towns and suburbs. This is a significant absence; such individual voices as we hear are almost all from the elite, in well-chosen and illuminating observations picked up from the diaries and memoirs of such luminaries as Macmillan, Coward, Lees-Milne, Crossman or Benn. Perhaps there are no sources for this period equivalent to the late 1940s Mass Observation material deployed by David Kynaston in *Austerity Britain*, or the oral history once used by Paul Thompson to illuminate *The Edwardians* ⁽³⁾, but it is a pity to see people's lives solely through the eyes of outsiders such as sociologists and politicians, however acute their observation.

The political also finds its place in the book, though not the doings of politicians so much as the development of the state and the political process. This is, of course, something Harrison has written about before and so he is on firm ground. There are fluent and persuasive accounts of the machinery of government and its tendency towards what he calls 'pluralistic centralism' – though, driven by the greater responsibilities of the state, more centralising than plural – and of the conflicting traditions within the two major parties. Harrison, unlike some observers, does not seem to regard the British political system as

having been in any kind of crisis, and dismisses constitutional reform as an ‘irrelevant diversion’ (p. 403) and reform of Parliament in particular as equally unnecessary (pp. 420–1); piecemeal rather than root and branch change would take care of any problems,

The climax and in some ways the centre-piece of the book is the chapter on the 1960s. Here, Harrison identifies four key motifs (youth in revolt, relaxed manners, political radicalism and puritanism repudiated) which took root in the 1950s and earlier, but flourished in and have long outlasted the 1960s. Again, the description and detail on specific issues – such as the spread of social informality (491–7), the significance of clothing and hair-styles (pp. 487–91), and the ‘new puritanism’ evoked by the young left’s fierceness of commitment – are strong, and Harrison’s judgements forthright and perceptive. However, the overall impression given of the decade is rather piecemeal, as if getting close to the details of the decade makes us lose sight of why people think it was important as a holistic experience. Those of us who are more lumpers than splitters will be left looking for an embracing explanation of where it all came from and how it all fitted together. One of the strongest parts of this chapter is its discussion of the sexual revolution (pp. 506–13) and the reaction against it (pp. 518–20), although how this relates to discussion of sexual change earlier on (pp. 234–49) is unclear; on the other hand, retired student radicals may feel their aims and motivations deserved more explanation than ‘genuine but misplaced indignation’ (p. 501); and Harrison seems outside his comfort zone when discussing popular music. The chapter follows the currently conventional line that ‘London set much of the permissive pace’ and that sixties trends moved only slowly if at all across ‘the provinces’, as Harrison is apt, rather anachronistically, to call the rest of us (p. 473). This is a widely accepted view, which tends to undermine the idea of ‘the sixties’, but as far as I know nobody has done any research on, say, hippies in Halifax or sex in Sunderland, to test the hypothesis. The same goes for Harrison’s assertion that ‘provincial England’ was rather more in sympathy with Mary Whitehouse than with Hugh Carleton Greene’s BBC (p. 518): the North has a long anti-establishment tradition, and Mancunians surely rejoiced in TW3’s iconoclasm as much as any metropolitan sophisticate, let alone the inhabitants of Surbiton. But my argumentative comments testify to the entertaining and provocative character of this chapter – which would, however, work better as the book’s climactic moment if there was a stronger underlying analysis to draw together the themes of the other chapters.

Those of us who teach post-war history have long felt the absence of a scholarly but readable account of the period which focuses on social and cultural themes. No book of this scope and ambition could succeed in everything it sets out to do, and in this age of RAEs and REFs perhaps only those outside academia or, as in this case, of a seniority and eminence that obviates such mundane considerations, could even attempt it. No one will agree with everything in Brian Harrison’s book, but everyone will find it both readable and scholarly, with an intellectual backbone missing from the entertaining, often illuminating, but under-analytical popular versions, such as Dominic Sandbrook’s, which have come to occupy much of the territory. It deserves a warm welcome, and a wide readership.

Notes

1. A. J. P. Taylor, *English History 1914–1945* (Oxford, 1965). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain 1945–1951* (London, 2007); Paul Thompson, *The Edwardians: the Remaking of British Society* (London, 1975). [Back to \(3\)](#)

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