



# Rethinking Britain: a matter of interpretation

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If there is one overarching problem with how we understand twentieth-century Britain it is that we are so sure that we do understand it. School and university curricula suggest that there is basic agreement over what happened and what was important, with evaluations only differing a little. What are in fact very partial stories stand authoritatively for the whole. Curricula are to an astonishing degree based on a national domestic story focused on (though not restricted to) the rise and fall of something called ‘the welfare state’. Furthermore, there is a notable lack of debate between interpretations – where such debates exist they have largely been skirmishes over particular cases. There are serious interpretative works on twentieth-century Britain, but they are not the subject of extended debate as to their conclusions or their merits. This essay will argue that they should be.

## Interpretations and assumptions

The histories which British scholars have written of modern Germany or Russia are very different to those they have written of modern Britain. Every country doubtless tells its national story differently to the way it tells the story of foreign countries. But perhaps the difference for Britain is that its national history is often thought to be free from the distortions of those of less fortunate nations. British histories are not regarded as interpretative.

We need then to make visible the core assumptions which undergird histories of modern Britain. The first assumption is that there is a distinct history of a nation, called Britain. This is rather odd for many reasons, not least in that there is no legal entity called Britain, though there was a United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (later just Northern





E.E.1.



FOR FREEDOM

**CADETS LEND A HAND TO THE R.A.F.**

YOUNG MEN in cadet units are not content with waiting until they are old enough to fly. During their school holidays they visit R.A.F. aerodromes and help to load up bombers. The truck is full of incendiaries to be dropped on Germany by the "Stirling" bomber in the background. In addition huge high-explosive bombs are carried.

Ireland), and importantly, until at least 1948, it was in some sense part of something called the British Empire. The second assumption is that this national story is one of continuity rather than discontinuity, something which is both celebrated and criticised. Britain is celebrated in some circles, and criticised in others, for being exceptional when compared to continental Europe, which it has failed to be like or fully a part of. Third, in the majority of versions of school and university curricula the central story concerns the development of the British welfare state, driven initially by the Liberals and then by Labour; accommodated at first then, after 1979, rejected by the Conservatives. Some of the peculiarities of this national history are very clear in a standard central topic: the Second World War. This tends to be treated primarily in terms of the Home Front, within which the key story is that of 'Blitz to Beveridge', the war as creating the welfare state.

Another way of thinking about these assumptions is through the clichéd keywords of modern British history, of which there are many. One could start with 'new liberalism' and proceed via 'the people's budget' to 'the war to end war', to appeasement and rearmament, to 'Britain alone', consensus, welfare state, post-war settlement, social democracy, affluence, Keynesianism, 'stop-go', 'decline' through to 'Thatcherism', monetarism and neo-liberalism (that is *new-liberalism*). These clichés embody very particular analytical frames, and indeed very particular periodisations, both of which should be regarded as open to serious challenge.

It is also worth noting the role played by the books which stand as national histories in cementing these assumptions and clichés. These histories are broadly of two sorts. First, what are misleadingly called political histories are in fact histories organised by administration, one government after another, and focused on the actions of the sequence of prime ministers

Advert recruiting nurses to the new NHS medical service, 1949

*Go home and sleep  
Mrs. Jones . . .*

**your baby's  
getting better!**



Just a phone call in the night . . . but what a load Nurse has lifted from a mother's mind! It doesn't require much imagination to understand the satisfaction a Nurse gets from giving such comfort to others—and this is repeated, in some form or another, day after day. No wonder a Nurse is happy in her work! Wouldn't you be happy too?

*There's a future in*  
**NURSING**  
*under the National  
Health Service*

- Training allowances start at £200 a year.
- Superannuation for all.
- 28 days paid holiday.
- Conditions now negotiated through Whitley Council.
- Opportunities for promotion at home and abroad.

**Train to be a  
NURSE**

*Please send me, without obligation, details of the free Nursing training.*

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_  
(if under 18)

Post to Ministry of Labour (Dept. N.R.)  
(P.P. 28) 23, Portman Square, London, W.1





and selected senior ministers. Second, are the more important shapers of the standard curriculum – so-called social histories, whose central focus is British society, and within this the rise of the welfare state. Economic histories of the nation have been much less important. ‘Declinist’ histories (those that tell a story of failure and self-inflicted decline) have been very influential in shaping general understanding of British society and politics. There are, to be sure, some other examples that fall into neither camp and which have made their way into US textbooks on British history, and many British curricula too. They tend to stress the domestic significance of empire, thought of primarily in terms of race. The idea is that empire left a poisonous legacy of racism, and led to an immigrant non-white community.

### Alternative perspectives

This leaves a lot missing: serious consideration of the British elite beyond the political elite, most economic history, military history, the history of British capitalism, the history of ideas (including political ideas), the relationship between the UK and places overseas, its longstanding and obvious relations to Europe, the impact of the Cold War, and the warfare state. How different might elements of British history look, were we to adopt a more critical perspective and take on board these neglected aspects?

What could the history of the Second World War look like? It could be refocused on the fighting forces rather than the home front. It would need to be recognised that the war was an imperial one, but that the British Army was the largest of the imperial armies, and they were engaged and died

overwhelmingly not at Dunkirk, but in north-western Europe, long after D-Day. In the air, it was more a story of bombing than being bombed. The war was not fought by expanding the welfare state, but by mobilising the economy, which depended on a global distribution of effort, and without which the UK could not have fought as it did. The rationing of food did not mean dire shortages at home – rationed foods were expensive imports brought long distances by sea without interruption. In contrast to continental Europe, the wartime UK was a land of plenty. As far as women were concerned the main development was not so much that women moved into men's jobs, but rather that the war threw open lots of new temporary jobs which were designed specifically for young women.

How different might the story of the welfare state look? The core story is that the Edwardian Liberals started building it with the Old Age Pension and National Health Insurance, and that this work was taken up again in the Second World War by William Beveridge, who laid the foundations for the great work of the 1945 Labour administration in creating the welfare state. This story was a central element in the post-war consensus which lasted into the 1970s.

What this story misses is the extraordinary development of the welfare state in the inter-war years, notably the 1920s. It was only then that National Insurance unemployment benefit covered most of the workforce, and only then that National Insurance pensions for workers were introduced. Beveridge and Labour expanded and rationalised this system rather than created it. There were, furthermore, vitally important reforms to welfare in the 1960s and 1970s that rejected the key Beveridgean principle of the flat-rate contribution and benefit to make welfare more generous. The generosity and completeness of the welfare state peaked in the 1970s. However, total welfare spending as a proportion of GDP peaked later, and indeed is historically at a high today.

In short, the story of welfare is rather different from what it is taken to be and rather less important to the public finances before the 1970s than is often implied. Indeed, welfare spending should not be allowed to stand in for state spending in any period except the very recent past. Before 1914, the warfare state loomed very much larger than the proto-welfare state. In the inter-war years, interest on war debt, and pensions for war widows and war wounded, were, especially in the 1920s, much larger categories of spending. After 1945, an expanded warfare state bulked large, with defence taking more than either the NHS or education well into the 1960s and 1970s. Only as the warfare state declined from the 1950s did the welfare state expand. One needs to wonder why it is that the Cold War has hardly figured in accounts of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, while the welfare state has been so prominent.

### A changing Britain

The upshot of the above is that we need to challenge the assumption that progressive change came from first, the Liberal Party and then, the Labour Party. In this story the Conservatives merely accommodated to progressive politics. However, the Conservative Party was a reforming and powerful party too, not least when it came to welfare, most notably in the 1920s. The fundamental differences between Liberal and Labour need to be stressed too – they were different parties with changing but different priorities.

One neglected priority and political reality was that the Conservative Party was not just a unionist party, but an imperialist party, and specifically a protectionist imperialist party. This was its great project for half a century. It was a failed project in the sense that the empire was never a single economic entity, nor would the dominions let it become one. From the 1950s the party changed radically. It lost its imperialism and switched to free trade and to seeking entry





to the Common Market (1961). By contrast, the Labour Party, once free trading, became the party of national protection, hostile to the Common Market in the name of nation and sometimes the Commonwealth.

British history has been particularly insular in relation to comparisons with the rest of Europe, despite its centrality in terms of alliances and enemies. Implicit comparisons are often made, many of which are dubious. The differences between Britain and Europe were particularly significant at the beginning of the twentieth century, but some similarities were also of significance. The United Kingdom was the great importing country, with half its food (when food really counted) coming from Europe and from much further overseas. In this it was quite unlike the mass of continental Europe and would remain so for most of the century. Only long after the Second World War, in the 1980s, did it achieve the near self-sufficiency in food characteristic of continental Europe. In other respects too, for example, in its politics and its military stance, it became much more European. It became 'European' in character before it entered the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973.

The story of immigration needs retelling too. The largest immigrant communities came from Ireland and elsewhere in Europe. The 1940s saw an influx of European workers much larger than the numbers of new arrivals from the Caribbean. Furthermore, the people who came from the Caribbean were not technically immigrants – they were citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies, as British as Londoners, and more British than citizens of the Commonwealth. They came from the oldest parts of the empire and not from the later invented category of the 'New Commonwealth'. They were relegated from empire to commonwealth in terms of immigration when the Caribbean colonies got their independence in the 1960s, after which they were controlled alongside other commonwealth migrants. In any case, the UK saw net emigration from 1945 into the 1980s. There was more outward movement on ships such as the *Dominion Monarch* than ever came in from the Caribbean on the likes of the *Empire Windrush*.

Finally, something needs to be said about decline and declinism. The idea that the economy has declined is now

rarely entertained. However, there is perhaps not enough of a recognition that there has been a spectacular *relative* decline, in that in the past the British economy was a very much larger part of the world economy, and especially of world trade, than today. 'Declinism' may be defined as the erroneous belief that this relative decline was due to British failure rather than the success of others. We need to be aware that declinist explanations of decline (ranging from the supposed anti-scientific educational system to the non-entrepreneurial elite, to too many historians in the civil service) have had a longer influence in the study of the British elite than the notion of decline in economic history, despite being mostly very dubious indeed.

In short, British history in the twentieth century can no longer be taken to rest as solidly as it did on its foundations, which were dug mainly in the 1960s and 1970s in a very particular context. We need to look afresh at the genuinely global and liberal United Kingdom of 1900, as well as to the imperial, European and national histories of the United Kingdom, to integrate not only social, economic and cultural history, but also a political history which includes more than administrations.

### Further reading

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