

## BACKGROUND BOOKS

### BRITAIN

"Few ideas are correct ones, and what are correct no one can ascertain; but with words we govern men."

So said Benjamin Disraeli, as Gertrude Himmelfarb notes in **Victorian Minds** (Knopf, 1968), a collection of her essays on British men of ideas. British historians also valued word power. Their island nation had seen much change under many leaders, now including 75 monarchs, beginning with Ethelbert of Kent (560-616), and 72 prime ministers, starting with Robert Walpole (1721-42). Perhaps that is why the country's classic historians sought not so much to chronicle events as to influence them.

In dedicating his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (731-32), the "Venerable Bede," Anglo-Saxon England's great eighth-century scholar-monk, pointedly praised the King of Northumbria's "great regard" for his subjects' "general welfare." Sir Walter Raleigh's **The History of the World** (1614; Folcroft, 1978) was an admonition to the fractious Britons of James I's day. Both Thomas Babington Macaulay, in his **History of England**, 5 vols. (1849-61; AMS Press, 1975), and his grand-nephew George M. Trevelyan, in his **History of England** (Longman, 1926; Doubleday, 1974) exalted Victorian ideas of British primacy.

To Trevelyan, Britain's tale was simple. "In early times, the relation of Britain to the sea was passive and receptive; in modern times, active and acquisitive. In both [Britain's island status] is the key to her story."

The modern bibliography is lengthy. **The Oxford History of England** runs to 15 volumes, ending with A. J. P. Taylor's **English History, 1914-1945** (Oxford, 1985). Surveys include Harold J. Schultz's primer **History of England** (Harper, 1980), John Burke's **An Illustrated History of England** (Salem,

1986), and **The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain** (Oxford, 1986), edited by Kenneth O. Morgan.

Like other scholars, Morgan argues with the "seamless, peaceful continuity" that Trevelyan saw. In fact, he notes, Britain's story is "complex, sometimes violent or revolutionary."

In **The History of England** (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), Jasper Ridley observes that while Britain's hilly, cool northwest (including Scotland and Wales) was long "virtually isolated from all of Europe except Scandinavia," the flat, warm—and more prosperous—south was always "politically and culturally a part of Europe."

Some early immigrants arrived from Iberia to farm in what is now Cornwall and Devon (many of whose inhabitants are small and dark-haired). The sun-worshipping European warriors who built Stonehenge brought the Bronze Age to the island. With the Celtic speaking tribesmen from western Germany and France came the Iron Age. Settling in the southeast, the Gallic Celts forced native kinsmen to the Welsh mountains and northern moors, "Celtic fringe" lands that would traditionally resist intrusion.

Foreign traders, notes Ridley, called the islanders "Pretani." The Romans, landing in 55 B.C. under Julius Caesar, "miswrote the name as 'Britanni' and called the country 'Britannia.'" They conquered only the southern part of the island, introducing urban life (London had some 15,000 residents) and, eventually, Christianity.

England got its name—and its largest ethnic group, as well as its language, shires, and political unity—from the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, tribes of strong-willed farmers and seamen from Jutland and northern Germany. The warrior-scholar king, Alfred the Great, contained a ninth-century Danish invasion and built

England's first navy.

The last successful invaders were the Normans, whose victory at the Battle of Hastings (1066) brought William the Conqueror to the throne. During the reign of the Tudor Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603), British mariners began the outward push that finally humbled the Dutch maritime empire, and opened markets for the products of Britain's pioneering Industrial Revolution.

Portrayals of that great surge, and its aftermath, include Eric J. Hobsbawm's **Industry and Empire: An Economic History of Britain Since 1750** (Penguin, 1970), David S. Landes's **The Unbound Prometheus: Technological Change and Industrial Development in Western Europe from 1750 to the Present** (Cambridge, 1969), and François Crouzet's **The Victorian Economy** (Columbia, 1982). Peter Mathias's **The First Industrial Nation: An Economic History of Britain, 1700-1914** (Methuen, 1986), is good on anecdotal detail (e.g., the term "Industrial Revolution" was coined in France), and on such matters as the debate over establishing colonies (opposed by Richard Cobden on free-trade grounds, and by Tom Paine, John Bright, and others for moral reasons).

Britain's economic frailty became undeniable after World War II. It led to much "Whither England" publishing. In **Suicide of a Nation?** (Macmillan, 1964), Arthur Koestler opined that the Briton was a lion-and-ostrich hybrid. "In times of emergency he rises magnificently to the occasion." Otherwise, "he buries his head in the sand," reckoning "that Reality is a nasty word invented by foreigners."

In **The Future That Doesn't Work: Social Democracy's Failures in Britain** (Univ. Press of America, 1983), the American editor, R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr., traced the difficulties in part to the fact that the British government "devours some 60 percent of the na-

tion's Gross National Product."

In **Is Britain Dying?** (Cornell, 1979), editor Isaac Kramnick noted that the "sense that something is wrong" with Britain reflected not only economic ills, but other weaknesses as well: British troubles in resolving disputes between whites and blacks in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), between Greeks and Turks in Cyprus, and between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, where British troops were sent in 1972.

**Britain: A Future that Works** (Houghton, 1978) argued that the nation was no "sick man." It was a "post-industrial" state, said author Bernard D. Nossiter, a U.S. journalist.

Nossiter argued that Britain's poor productivity—e.g., its auto plants built five cars per worker per year, versus seven in West Germany and France, 12 in Japan, and 15 in the United States—mirrored a growing national "preference for leisure over goods."

Further evidence: When industry was put on a three-day week for three months in 1974, because of a coal strike, factory output fell not by the expected 40 percent, but by only six percent. In this "remarkable demonstration that Britain's plants normally do three days work in five," Nossiter saw no support for the many hypotheses for low British productivity, such as memories of the 1930s Depression, class hostility, or high taxes. Britons have simply come to value an "easy work style" over "a more painful expenditure of energy that yields some extra income."

The debate continues. In **The Pride and the Fall: The Dream and Illusion of Britain as a Great Nation** (Free Press, 1987), Cambridge historian Correlli Barnett finds the nation not post-industrial but an "obsolete industrial society." The blame begins, he says, with "men of letters" (e.g., Prime Minister Clement Attlee) who ignored

Britain's economic weakness when they created the Welfare State.

Yale's Paul M. Kennedy, author of **The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000** (Random, forthcoming), reckons that some decline was inevitable. Nations have a "natural" size, he says. Britain, which once held "say, 25 percent of the world's wealth and power," really should have, by virtue of its population and other resources, three or four percent. The United States commanded some 40 percent of the world's wealth by 1945; Kennedy believes that "16 or 18 percent" would be about right.

Other perspectives on Britain include Christopher Hibbert's **The English: A Social History, 1066-1945** (Norton, 1987), which deals with manners and mores. Example: Swimming *au naturel*, once common, ended during the 1870s; Victorian women bathed in serge "with elbow-length sleeves and baggy bloomers concealed by thick, full skirts."

Arthur Marwick's **British Society Since 1945** (Penguin, 1983) examines such matters as reduced church-going, leisure activities (led by TV, of which the average Briton watches 20 hours a week in winter), and crime (rising, but still low: Britain had 653 killings and 2,090 reported rapes in 1985; the U.S. figures were roughly 19,000 and 87,000).

Also rewarding are biographies, notably Randolph S. Churchill and Martin Gilbert's three-volume **Life of Winston S. Churchill** (Houghton, 1966, 1967, 1971). Anthony Sampson's **The Changing Anatomy of Britain** (Vintage, 1984) remains a lucid portrait of who runs Britain and its institutions today.

Many writers deal with British nostalgia for lost grandeur. George Dangerfield's classic about pre-World War I

clamor at home (suffragettes, labor unrest, etc.) and decay in the Empire, **The Strange Death of Liberal England** (Granada, 1984), evokes the persistent popular vision in which "glow, year into backward year, the diminishing vistas of that other England, the England where the Grantchester church clock stood at ten to three, where there was Beauty and Certainty and Quiet, and where nothing was real."

In **Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy** (Bantam, 1980), novelist John le Carré writes of George Smiley, the care-worn British intelligence agent: "Connie's lament rang in his ears. 'Poor loves. Trained to Empire, trained to rule the waves... You're the last, George...'" He saw with painful clarity an ambitious man born to the big canvas, brought up to rule, divide and conquer, whose visions and vanities all were fixed... upon the world's game; for whom the reality was a poor island with scarcely a voice that would carry across the water."

To others, what is gone is less important than what endures. The 19th century, writes Paul Johnson in **A History of the English People** (Harper, 1985), was, for the English, "the high water mark of their fortunes...."

"English ideas, institutions, attitudes, tastes, pastimes, morals, clothes, laws, customs, their language and literature, units of measurement, systems of accountancy, company law, banking, insurance, credit and exchange, even—God help us!—their patterns of education and religion became identified with progress across the planet...."

"For the first time, the infinite diversities of a hundred different races, of tens of thousands of regional societies, began to merge into standard forms: and the matrix was English." To a surprising degree, it still is.