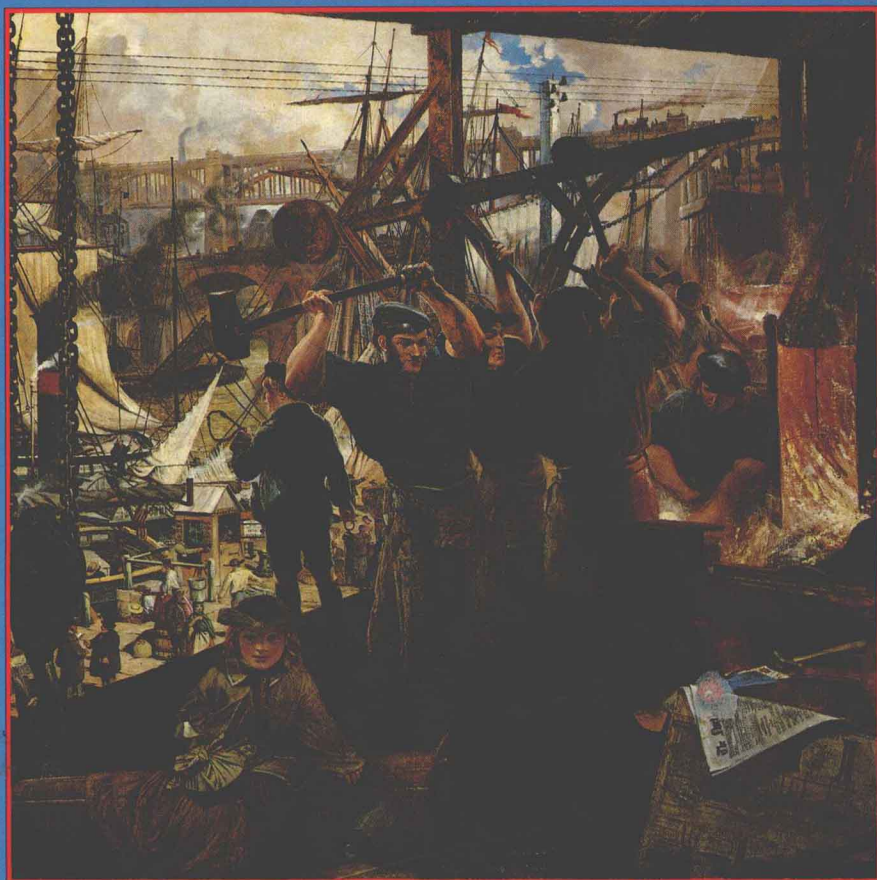


Modern Britain

— A Social History —
1750-1985



Edward Royle

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**A Social History
1750–1985**

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Map 1: Britain: historic countries, with towns over 25,000 population in 1831



Map 2: Britain: modern counties, planning regions and towns over 100,000 population in 1981

Preface

Social history touches upon human relationships in every part of life, and as such is beyond detailed treatment in any single textbook. Three principles of selection have therefore been applied to the subject matter of this volume. Firstly, I have been aware of those topics – such as the standard of living, class, radicalism, the labour movement, the poor law and the welfare state – which are conventionally regarded as ‘social history’ in courses offered in schools, colleges and universities, and by those responsible for examining students in these institutions. Secondly, I have tried to give emphasis to some of those topics which have recently been attracting the attention of scholars working in the broad field of social history – urban history, demography, the family, women’s history, crime, leisure, popular religion and literacy studies. Thirdly, I have attempted to follow some of those themes which are currently of interest to all students of modern Britain in the hope that an historical perspective may lead to a clearer understanding of some of the major concerns about late twentieth-century British society – the environment, immigration, changing moral values, consumerism, poverty, unemployment and the decline of Britain.

The scope of the book extends to society in England, Wales and Scotland, though the three countries are not treated evenly throughout. Many published social statistics bracket England and Wales, and make the task of isolating the separate history of Wales a difficult one. And though Scotland has recently benefited from excellent work on its own history, coverage remains patchy for some topics dealt with extensively in English history. I hope I have nevertheless done enough to show English students that Scotland does have its own past to be appreciated within the overall context of British history.

The approach is thematic, and largely chronological within each theme, although centres of discussion vary in accordance with the principles outlined above. Most themes begin around the middle of the eighteenth century, generously defined in either direction of 1750, and end with the present day. The conclusions reached about the latter are necessarily even more personal and temporary than historical judgements usually are. They are not intended to be party-polemical, though that danger is inescapable. I do not wish to

imply that 'History' suggests any particular course of action for the reorganization of modern social life, for history is inanimate and teaches only those lessons which people choose to attribute to it. What the historian can claim is that a knowledge of the past helps clear away some of the misinformed prejudices on which those who wish to enlist the past in their own cause have frequently built. Those who would honestly seek the wisdom to shape the future, are invited first to understand the past for its own sake and in its own context.

In the preparation of this work I have been helped by many scholars whose books and articles have taught me a great deal about unfamiliar things. The decision not to use footnotes, except for direct quotations and references to historians by name, means I have no means of acknowledging personally all who have made this book possible. The bibliography gives some of their names, but by no means all. I should, however, like to thank my immediate colleagues in the Department of History at York for their encouragement, and especially Dr James Walvin who kindly read through a first draft of this work and gave me the benefit of his experience. Lastly, I should like to thank those many generations of school and university students who have challenged me with their insights and have told me through their examination scripts what it is which they have found hard to understand. I hope this book helps them as they have helped me.

Edward Royle
York, 1986

1988 Reprint

I have taken the opportunity of a reprinting to correct a number of errors of fact and typography, and I should like to thank those readers who have kindly pointed these out to me.

E.R.

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1 The Changing Environment

The Countryside

People, not the environment, make history; yet the conditions under which history is made are circumscribed by the physical environment – mountains, marshes, fertile or infertile soils, access to river transport and coastal waters, climate. Within these limits man has exercised his ingenuity throughout the ages to control, exploit and intentionally or otherwise change his environment for better or worse. When the poet William Cowper wrote ‘God made the country, and man made the town’, he was indulging in a romantic fiction. In fact much of the environment as we know it is the product of human habitation and a part of our social history. During the past two hundred years man has exerted control over his environment in ways undreamt of by his ancestors and emancipated himself from many of the age-old constraints which kept his life – in Hobbes’s celebrated words – ‘nasty, brutish, and short’.

The age of enclosure and improvement, 1750–1830

Figures for land use in the early eighteenth century are scarce and unreliable. According to Gregory King in 1696, over a quarter of the 37.3 million acres in England and Wales was under arable cultivation, with another quarter under pasture and meadow and a further quarter waste and barren land. At the same time, approaching three-quarters of the land area of Scotland was thought to be uncultivable. In 1801, arable acreage in England and Wales remained about the same, but the total acreage under pasture and meadow had increased by some 20 per cent, and there had been a similar decline in the acreage described as commons and wastes. Figures are not available for Scotland, but it seems likely that the same trend occurred, though a larger proportion of Scotland’s 19 million acres remained waste and a smaller proportion was under arable. Much of this waste lay in the upland areas of northern and western Britain, but some land remained to be reclaimed even on the outskirts of London.

The most striking change to the rural environment in many parts of the countryside came with the enclosure of open fields, commons and wastes. The extent of enclosure must not be exaggerated. In

2 The Changing Environment

England, where much land was already enclosed at the start of the eighteenth century, the main areas affected lay in a central belt running north-eastwards from Berkshire and Oxfordshire through the south and east Midlands into Norfolk, Lincolnshire and the East Riding of Yorkshire. Here enclosure could mean both changing field patterns and changing land use. Open strip-fields, radiating from nucleated settlements, were replaced by hedged and ditched fields under single ownership, giving the countryside a chequered appearance.

Crop yields increased by some 40 per cent during the course of the eighteenth century. About two-thirds of this increase can be attributed to the more intensive use of land, but historians are now less ready than were contemporary propagandists of improvement to accept that enclosure was a necessary part of this progress or that the human costs were always outweighed by the alleged benefits. Many of the advantages associated with enclosure could have been secured without it by local co-operation, but during the later eighteenth century Parliamentary enclosure became the norm involving not only legal fees but also the costs of hedging, providing roads, and allowing land in lieu of a commuted tithe, all of which could bring the total costs of enclosure to as much as £12 an acre. Where arable strips were enclosed, those small proprietors who were unable to bear such costs could find themselves reduced to labouring for those who had prospered from the improvements. A more frequent problem, though, was the plight of those who lived off the so-called 'wastes' - common land to which they had no title - who, when the commons were enclosed, found themselves without means of support other than those offered by day labour, the poor law, or emigration to the towns.

In Scotland the situation was slightly different but the outcome was the same. Improvers initially tried to take account of the welfare of the small landholders, who were invariably tenants, not owners as in England. New planned villages were created to act as markets and centres of alternative employment, but this was possible only so long as rural industry was able to compete with the growing specialist production of the towns. On many estates in the Highlands the improvers were reluctant to disrupt settled communities and enclosure took place mainly on commons and in the outfields, but some crofters were driven to seek a new livelihood gathering kelp along the shoreline as an expansion in sheep-farming pushed them off their holdings inland.

Enclosure did not become widespread until the second half of the eighteenth century when grain prices rose with population growth. New peaks were reached in the 1770s, and again during the French and Napoleonic Wars when high prices justified investment in

enclosing and improving commons and marginal or 'waste' land. But the drive for enclosure and general agricultural improvement has been attributed not only to the market but also to fashion and the demands of an increasingly expensive aristocratic life-style calling for a maximization of rent-rolls. These two factors came together in that most striking feature of the eighteenth-century landscape, the enclosed park of which several hundred were designed during the course of the century - nearly two hundred by Lancelot ('Capability') Brown (1715-83) alone. By the beginning of the nineteenth century the results of this work were evident in thousands of acres of rolling 'natural' parkland, liberally planted with trees. Seldom can the indulgence of a few have contributed so greatly to the enrichment of the environment of the many in later generations.

The significance of this agricultural improvement lies not simply in its effect on the environment as perceived in field patterns, drained fens, reclaimed wastes and country parks, but in its economic and social importance for the lives of all the people of Britain. For, without a strong agricultural sector, the economy could not have supported the rapidly growing population, an increasing proportion of which was engaged in non-agricultural pursuits and lived in an urban environment.

The Victorian countryside, 1830-1914

Those changes in the appearance of the countryside which are usually associated with the age of enclosure were largely (though not entirely) completed by 1830, but it would be a mistake to think of the rest of the nineteenth century as a period of stability. Changes continued to take place, the cumulative effects of which were quite as dramatic as those of the earlier period. And though the characteristic land pattern of the nineteenth century was of roughly equal-sized, rectangular fields (easier to plough and convenient for crop rotation), regional variations were still paramount. Change occurred unevenly, and in different ways according to soil-type, distance from markets and local custom. The major natural determinants of land use were altitude and the nature of the soil, whether light chalk or sand, or heavy clay. The great achievement of the agricultural improvers of the later eighteenth century had been to bring the light soils into arable cultivation, especially in the south-eastern part of England. Once suitably cared for with manures, liming, marling and crop rotations, they were by far superior to the heavy clays for growing wheat. The clays, by contrast, were less efficient and always liable to become uneconomic in times of depression such as followed the ending of the wars in 1815. It was to help farmers on these lands that Sir Robert Peel in 1846