



MODERN BRITAIN 1700-1983



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Geoffrey Alderman

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1700-1983

A DOMESTIC HISTORY

GEOFFREY ALDERMAN

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PREFACE

There are on the market today a number of substantial textbooks covering the political and social development of modern Britain. My purpose in writing the present volume is not to add to them, but rather to present an interpretation of major trends in the domestic history of the United Kingdom since the beginning of the eighteenth century, illustrating my arguments by reference to original source material. My choice of themes is blatantly subjective but not — I hope — outrageously so. I have, in general, omitted any detailed treatment of foreign and colonial policy, partly out of considerations of space but also from a sense of professional inadequacy; I am happy to leave diplomacy to the diplomatic historians.

A work such as this must, perforce, lean heavily upon the researches of others; the works referred to in the Guide to Further Reading comprise those I have found most helpful and their citation will, I trust, serve as an acknowledgement of my debt in this respect.

I should like to place on record my thanks to Richard Stoneman, my editor at Croom Helm, for his patient handling of my drafts, and to Royal Holloway and Bedford College for having granted me a period of sabbatical leave during which I was able to write unencumbered by teaching and administrative duties. Rex Pope read through the entire text, and has saved me from many errors of fact and interpretation; I alone am responsible for any which remain.

Dr Geoffrey Alderman,
Royal Holloway and Bedford New College,
University of London

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The roots of modern British society lie embedded in the eighteenth century. To make this assertion is not to deny that some features of present-day Britain have their origins in earlier periods of history. The obsession with colonies may be traced to the sixteenth century, while the modern tragedy of Irish entanglement began to be written in the seventeenth. However, even these historical developments were given significant new impulses during the Hanoverian period. More importantly, the major social and political formations of modern Britain have grown directly or indirectly out of the Hanoverian age: industrialisation, urbanisation, mass communications, constitutional monarchy, the rule of parliamentary law, and many others. Although, therefore, the bulk of this work is concerned with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its examination of modern Britain begins a century earlier, when the upheavals of civil war and palace revolution had indeed demonstrated that absolute monarchy had had its day, and when the War of the Spanish Succession had indeed shown that Britain had a role to play in Europe. But it was also a period when the precise relationship between monarch and legislature was still unclear, and when the advisability and extent of British involvement in the affairs of continental Europe was still a matter of hot dispute.

Britain in the eighteenth century was a sparsely populated and largely agricultural country. The first national census was not undertaken until 1801, when the population of England was found to be just over 8.6 millions. The best available estimates suggest that at the beginning of the eighteenth century the total population of England was about 5.0 millions, with another half million or so living in Wales and Scotland. But this growth in population was not uniform throughout the century. There appears to have been a rapid rise in population in the first two decades, a decline in the 1720s followed by a modest rise until 1760, and a much accelerated growth of population thereafter, averaging nearly 1 per cent per annum in the closing decades of the century.

It is easier to account for the check in population growth in the

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1720s (a decade marked by smallpox and influenza epidemics) than to explain the rise at other times. It is highly improbable that the rise was due, to any significant extent, to immigration. The increase appears to have stemmed from natural causes, a combination of declining mortality and rising fertility. The proportion of deaths per thousand live births was high at the beginning of the century. Even among the aristocracy the figure was about 170 per thousand; not one of Queen Anne's children survived into adulthood. Among the humbler classes the infant death-rate was truly appalling. Today, in Britain, the death of a child is a rare event: in 1980 there were only 11.2 deaths per thousand live births. In 1715 a parliamentary inquiry into the deaths of babies put into the care of the parochial authorities of St Martin in the Fields, in London, found that three out of every four babies in the care of the parish died shortly after birth. The average life expectancy at birth was only about 35 years. There can be no doubt that these rates of infant mortality fell by the end of the eighteenth century. We know that by the last quarter of the century the mortality rate of abandoned children — 'foundlings' — in London appeared to have fallen to about one in four, and that by 1838 the death-rate of children under one year old per thousand live births, in England and Wales, was only 151 — that is, about one in seven.

The death-rate was also affected by an improvement in medical standards. In 1700 there were only four general hospitals in England and Wales: two in London, one in Bath and one in Rochester. By 1760 there were at least twenty, of which London had six. The incidence of some diseases lessened. Bubonic plague was not known in England after 1667. Inoculation against smallpox was introduced in England about 1720, and was widespread by mid-century; but smallpox had by then ceased to be a killer-disease. After mid-century, epidemics of influenza and typhus also appear to have waned, and quinine and bark were successfully used to treat malaria ('ague').

After 1750 it is likely that rising fertility was much more significant than declining mortality as a cause of population increase. The proportion of the population never marrying fell from 15 per cent to 7 per cent, and the average age at which women first married fell from 26.5 to 23.5 years. Because more women married, and married earlier, the number of births per marriage increased. Contemporary observers themselves agreed

that this was so; the economist Thomas Malthus argued that over-population could be corrected by postponing the age of marriage.

Now marriage was as expensive an undertaking in the eighteenth century as in the twentieth. Couples, once married, were expected to lead financially independent lives. So it was prudent to defer marriage until some resources had been built up. Expanding economic opportunities after mid-century thus encouraged earlier marriages. It is significant that fertility was higher in industrial areas than in the countryside; most of the increase in population in the 1740s and 1750s took place in counties such as Lancashire, Warwickshire and the West Riding of Yorkshire, all areas in which there was growing industrial activity. Moreover, in some industries, such as textiles, children could be sent to work early in life to boost the family income. The more children, the greater was the income derived from them. This greater income could be used to buy better food and fuel. Although, therefore, environmental conditions in towns undoubtedly deteriorated towards the end of the eighteenth century, the people living in them enjoyed — paradoxically — higher standards of living than their forebears. In addition, there was almost certainly a rise, in the second half of the century, in the numbers of children born out of wedlock. We should note, in this connection, that public attitudes towards pre-marital sex became less harsh, and that it was common for unmarried but established couples, bringing children into the world, to be regarded as married *de facto*. Until the passage of Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act (1753), which made a church wedding the test of a proper marriage, even clergymen had been inclined to regard the children of established but unwed couples as legitimate.

In the mid-eighteenth century over three quarters of the population of Britain lived in the rural areas of the country, in village communities so scattered that the population density of most of England was less than 100 persons per square mile (in 1980 the population density of England was over 900 per square mile). In 1750 there were few large towns. London was in a class of its own; with a population of around 700,000 it was not merely the largest town in Britain, but the largest in Europe, and its population grew with such speed that by 1801 it exceeded one million, having doubled its size in the space of a hundred years. Most of the other 800 or so 'towns' were in reality large villages or

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townships with populations of one or two thousand each. Norwich had a population of nearly 30,000; Bristol about 20,000; and Colchester, Exeter, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Yarmouth and York each had between 10,000 and 15,000. Birmingham, Hull, Leeds, Liverpool and Manchester were clearly recognisable as growing commercial and industrial centres even at the beginning of the century, but each had a population restricted to between 5,000 and 10,000. Even by mid-century there were only 14 towns with over 10,000 inhabitants in England and Wales, only two (Glasgow and Edinburgh) in Scotland and only one (Dublin) in Ireland.

London was the centre of the nation's political system, with the monarchy at its head. It was also the centre of England's legal and economic systems, and of the worlds of fashion, arts and science. It was the financial centre of Britain, housing not merely the Bank of England (founded 1694) but also Lloyds (which originated about 1683 in Edward Lloyd's coffee house), where marine insurance could be arranged, and even a number of more general insurance houses, such as the Phoenix (founded 1680) and the Sun Fire (1708), both of which pioneered fire insurance in the capital. When, at the bequest of Sir Hans Sloane, the British Museum was opened in 1759, London boasted the first publicly owned free-entrance museum in Europe; it already possessed a considerable number of pleasure-gardens and commercial theatres. The capital was also the centre of a growing newspaper industry; by 1790 there were 14 London morning newspapers, and one in the evening.

London possessed a geographically located social structure. The fashionable and well-to-do congregated in Westminster (where a third of the inhabitants were domestic servants); 'the City' (the term was already in common usage) was the commercial and business centre, where bankers and financiers had their headquarters; merchants, shipbuilders and the professional classes inhabited the newer 'suburban' areas in the East End, such as Deptford and Islington; and the humbler classes, such as dockyard workers, dwelt along the banks of the Thames, at Wapping and Rotherhithe. Even the artists and craftsmen of the metropolis congregated together: watchmakers in Clerkenwell, mercers and drapers in Lombard Street, shoemakers in Shoemaker Row, brewers and dyers in Southwark. But London was not in the eighteenth century, as it is now, a city of government employees. The most important departments of state — the admiralty, the treasury, and the offices of the two secretaries of state — were

located in Whitehall, close by St James's and Kensington palaces, but they were exceedingly small establishments; in 1726 the staff of the secretaries' offices numbered no more than 24, while the royal household itself only accounted for about 1,000 people, including peers and others performing purely formal or honorary functions.

London was also the greatest centre of consumption in Britain. The nonconformist journalist Daniel Defoe, in his *Tour through the whole Island of Great Britain*, published between 1724 and 1726, argued that in addition to local markets and regional economies the country enjoyed a national economy which originated with and was sustained by the demands of London for consumer goods. 'This whole kingdom', he explained, 'as well as the people, as the land, and even the sea, in every part of it, are employed to furnish something, and I may add, the best of everything, to supply the city of London with provisions.' Corn was imported into the capital along the Thames from Oxfordshire; cattle and sheep were driven to Smithfield on the hoof from the Midlands, Wales and Scotland; vegetables came from Kent; cheese and salt from Cheshire; fish from Devon and Sussex; poultry from Suffolk. Seventy per cent of all Tyneside coal was sent, by coaster, from Newcastle to London. All this activity generated a sub-economy of its own: credit had to be given, bills of exchange negotiated, and long-distance accounts settled by wholesale butchers, corn factors and the like.

Yet the student of eighteenth-century British society would do well not to be mesmerised by London. If it was true that over half the town-dwellers of Hanoverian Britain lived in London, it was also true that London was, spatially and in human terms, far distant from the bulk of the country's population. Turnpike building around London had started in Stuart times, but elsewhere the roads were in a generally poor state, rutted by heavily laden ox-wagons and livestock. The journey by stage-coach from Newcastle to London took nine days, and six from Chester to London. By 1740, turnpikes had been built on the route northwards from London only as far as Grantham; the journey to Edinburgh could still take a fortnight in winter. By mid-century the major trunk roads connecting London with Manchester, Bristol, Birmingham, York and Dover had all been turnpiked, so that by 1770 some 500 turnpike trusts looked after 15,000 miles of road.

Turnpikes certainly improved travelling times. The journey time

from Norwich to London was cut from 50 hours, in 1700, to 40 by 1750 and to 19 by 1800; the journey from Manchester to London took 90 hours in 1700 but only 65 by 1750. Leicester acquired a coach service to London in 1753; by 1765 a 'flying machine' could travel the distance in one day. But road travel was both expensive and hazardous. For an 'outside' passage on the Leicester-London coach the fare (1765) was 12s 6d; the price 'inside' was doubled. Even a petty bourgeois family, on a very solid income of, say, £100 per annum, would have found travel at this price something of a luxury, and it was, of course, quite beyond the means of an ordinary wage-earner supporting a family on £40 a year. For those who could afford the fare, a journey by road was often an unpleasant experience. The agencies of law enforcement were few and far between; the wise traveller carried a firearm for protection. At his trial in 1725 Jonathan Wild was accused of being 'a confederate with great numbers of highwaymen, pickpockets, house-breakers, shoplifters and other thieves'. Nor were the gentlemen of the road any respecters of rank. In 1774 the Prime Minister, Lord North, recorded 'I was robbed last night as I expected . . . at the end of Gunnersbury Lane'.

Although there was a great deal of internal migration, most of it was local, from one village to the next or from villages into nearby towns. The greater part of the population of Britain lived in villages with, at most, a few thousand inhabitants; they worked upon and lived off the land. But they did not own it. Land-ownership in eighteenth-century Britain was a complex mosaic. The peerage accounted for only just over half the 400 great landlords with incomes in excess of £3,000 a year; the rest comprised the ranks of the wealthier gentry — the rich baronets, knights, esquires and gentlemen whose importance in eighteenth-century society had already been recognised in the work of the statistician and civil servant Gregory King at the end of the previous century. The remainder of the gentry, comprising perhaps 20,000 families, enjoyed annual incomes ranging from £300 to £3,000, and there were, in addition, about 150,000 freeholders with incomes under £100. In 1688 King had estimated that there were 150,000 tenant farmers and 364,000 'labouring people and out-servants'; these particular figures (based not merely upon King's own researchers, but also upon the Hearth Tax returns to which he had access as secretary to the Commissioners for the Public Accounts) are remarkably close to the estimates made by Joseph Massie in 1759–60, though Massie indicated a growth in the number of labourers to about 400,000 outside London.

Although the most intensive phase of the enclosure movement did not occur until the end of the eighteenth century, land enclosure was common throughout the century and went hand-in-hand with improvements in agricultural techniques. According to Gregory King's calculations a quarter (10 million acres) of the total land area of the country was uncultivated in 1688; in 1795 the Board of Agriculture estimated that eight million acres were still uncultivated. Judged by the number of enclosure awards sanctioned by Parliament (over 1,000 Acts were passed between 1760 and 1800) the enclosure movement did not gather momentum until the reign of George III. Before 1760 only 130 parliamentary enclosure awards had been passed, encompassing about 337,000 acres. But enclosure by statute was only one of a number of methods by which land enclosure could be carried out; other methods included common agreement, and private agreements enrolled in Chancery. It is probable that, prior to 1760, much more land was enclosed through the Chancery procedure than through statute law, particularly in the Midlands and southern England.

The economic effects of enclosure should not be exaggerated. The mere replacement of a strip system by a field enclosed by a fence or ditch did not itself amount to an agricultural 'revolution'; not every enclosure resulted in technical improvements; and experiments with new crops and rotations could and did take place in unenclosed parishes. But it was widely acknowledged that the strip system enshrined traditional farming methods and dignified the standards of the most inefficient cultivators. Innovation, whether in land use or in animal breeding, could only come with great difficulty; the innovator had to obtain the agreement of those much more conservative in farming techniques. The importance of enclosure lay in the fact that it made possible a far greater degree of innovation in a far shorter space of time.

During the eighteenth century the pressure for agricultural innovation derived largely from the need of landowners to meet interest charges and generally increasing expenditure. The period 1690-1715 had seen land taxation rise to four shillings in the pound (it later fell by half) to meet the cost of foreign wars. This squeezed the profits of the smaller and less efficient estates. Between 1730 and 1750 there was a fall in agricultural prices, leading to arrears of rent. The legal device of strict entail prevented the head of a landed family from selling part of his estate; capital assets (i.e. land) could not be sold to pay debts, except as a whole. The

wealthier landed families therefore tended to buy up the smaller estates. But parallel with this development was the relentless desire of the merchants and businessmen to buy themselves into the landed classes, either by purchasing bankrupt estates or by marrying their daughters (suitably provided with fulsome dowries) to the sons of landowners fallen upon hard times. Daniel Defoe observed that in the home counties there were 'several very considerable estates purchased and now enjoyed by citizens of London, merchants and tradesmen', and he noted that 'the present increase of wealth in the City of London spreads itself into the country, and plants families and fortunes who in another age will equal the families of the ancient gentry'. The purchase of landed estates in this way afforded security as well as status; investment in land — particularly if the land was improved, so raising its capital value and the rent it could command — was relatively safe.

But the injection of commercial instincts and habits into farming activities fuelled the search for ever more efficient methods of husbandry. Land might be 'improved' in a variety of ways, perhaps by exploiting the minerals found underneath it, perhaps by building turnpikes or canals and deriving income thereby, perhaps by using it for urban expansion. However, agricultural improvement usually meant indulging in more intensive methods of farming and adopting the techniques pioneered by agricultural improvers. Foremost among these were Charles (second Viscount) Townshend, who introduced turnips and clover into crop rotation on his Norfolk estates in the 1730s, thus eliminating the need for fields to lie fallow and providing cheap winter animal feeds into the bargain; Robert Bakewell, whose experiments in livestock breeding were designed to produce better quality meat and wool; and Thomas Coke (first Earl of Leicester) who demonstrated how sandy soils could be transformed using marl and manure as fertilisers, how improved strains of sheep, cattle and pigs might be bred, and whose Holkham estates became a byword for agricultural efficiency and innovation. The adoption of agricultural machinery was a nineteenth-century development rather than an eighteenth. But the seed-drill invented by Jethro Tull to replace the wasteful scattering of seed by hand dated from 1701, and Tull also devised a horse-drawn hoe to aid aeration of the soil and eliminate weeds. A machine for the threshing of corn made its appearance in the Scottish lowlands in 1758.

The agricultural revolution thus preceded the industrial, and

was less well advanced by the time George III ascended the throne. Corn output increased from about 14 million quarters in 1700 to over 16 millions in 1760, most of this increase coming after 1740. During the first half of the century, particularly during the decade of the 1750s, there was a brisk export trade in wheat and wheat flour. Increases in output of meat are more difficult to quantify. Probably there was not a great rise in the number of sheep and cattle. But average weights of beasts brought to market increased substantially: cattle from 370 pounds weight in 1710 to 800 pounds in 1795, sheep from 38 pounds weight to 80 pounds over the same period.

Agriculture became a business, in which the large well-endowed units prospered and the less strong did not. Two classes in particular suffered as a result of agricultural change. The small freeholder found it harder to hold his own in a world where economies of scale were available only to those with larger farms and plenty of spare cash. The more fortunate freeholders sold their lands and became tenants on long leases. On the whole, however, the independent landowning peasantry declined both in numbers and income. Moreover, even if the change of status from freeholder to tenant might often have made financial good sense, it could also result in loss of civic influence wherever the right to vote was limited to freehold ownership. Conversely, the great landowners, who became greater still in the course of the eighteenth century, also obtained ever more pervasive political leverage as they acquired freeholds and the political privileges which went with them.

The enclosure movement had a much more immediate and devastating effect upon those who had never owned land, but who had managed to support themselves and their families through the exercise of 'rights of common' over moors, fens, commons, wastes and woodlands. These rights permitted farm labourers to supplement meagre wages by grazing cows or sheep on the common; allowed independent cultivators with few strips on the open fields to search the woodlands for animal fodder and fuel; and enabled squatters, who had never had any share in the open fields, to hunt for rabbits, burn charcoal, and actually live on the common or waste lands. For people such as these, enclosure was a personal calamity. Arthur Young explained that 'By nineteen out of twenty Enclosure Bills the poor are injured and most grossly . . . The poor in these parishes may say with truth,

"Parliament may be tender of property; all I know is, I had a cow, and an Act of Parliament has taken it from me".

There were no significant outbreaks of rural violence in eighteenth-century England. But the fate of those evicted from the land, and unable to find more than casual or seasonal employment, was grim indeed. The Poor Law (Act of Settlement) of 1662 placed a premium upon 'settlement' in a parish; settlement was usually acquired by birth, marriage or residence and, once acquired, entitled the possessor to poor relief if destitute, sick or unable to work — but only in the parish of settlement and no other. An Act dating from the reign of William III gave protection against removal to those who, within 40 days of arriving in a parish, could produce a certificate issued by the officers of a parish where they had a 'settlement'. Nonetheless, the poor, who, as likely as not, could not produce such a certificate, were often despatched from parish to parish in a human game of 'pass the parcel' until their parish of settlement was reached; pregnant women were sent on their way with particular speed.

Yet the cost of poor relief increased by leaps and bounds during the course of the eighteenth century. In 1700 it was about £650,000; by 1776 it had reached £1.5 millions; in 1786 it stood at £2 millions; and in 1803 it was more than £4 millions. In Ireland and the Scottish Highlands holdings could be subdivided to accommodate at least some of the able-bodied poor. But even this far-from-ideal solution was not available in England and Wales. The only alternative to the poor law was to seek non-agricultural work, either industrial work in the villages or, more usually, work in nearby towns, ports or coalfields. It was in this way that the movement of population away from the agricultural countryside began well before the mid-century rise in population.

Industrial change, like agricultural innovation, was the child of the early and mid rather than the late eighteenth century. Abraham Darby established his famous works at Coalbrookdale, Shropshire, in 1709, and there pioneered the smelting of iron ore with coke so as to remove the sulphur content and facilitate the manufacture of thin castings necessary for hollow objects, such as steam cylinders. The Darby method was slow to spread. But it was at the Coalbrookdale works that the cylinders were made for the atmospheric steam engines designed by Thomas Newcomen, which were widely used for draining mines until superseded in 1765 by the superior designs of James Watt. The giant beam

engines of Watt and his partner Matthew Boulton, which pumped the water and sewerage of Victorian London, began to be built at their Birmingham works in the 1770s. In 1781 the partnership produced a rotative steam engine; however, partly on account of technological difficulties and partly for economic reasons (not least, the high charges levied by Watt upon those who used his patents, which did not expire until after 1800), the potentialities of this invention were to be reserved for the nineteenth century rather than the eighteenth.

It was in the textile industry that the eighteenth-century industrial revolution was most evident, triggered by the intense jealousy between the cosseted wool trade and the newer cotton manufacturers. Cotton was first imported from India to Britain at the end of the seventeenth century. In 1701 the woollen interest secured a ban on the import of cotton calicoes printed in India; twenty years later the prohibition was extended to calicoes printed in England for home consumption. Although fustians (a mixture of cotton and linen) were exempted from 1736 onwards, the ban on the home sale of printed cotton was not finally lifted until 1774. So for much of the century the infant Lancashire cotton industry manufactured for export only, and the need to compete with the high quality Indian cottons, produced cheaply and marketed by the East India Company, added urgency to the search for efficient mechanisation. John Kay's flying shuttle (halving the number of weavers needed per loom) made its appearance in the 1730s; James Hargreaves spinning jenny dated from 1765; and Edmund Cartwright invented his power loom in 1784. But the device which had the greatest impact on the organisation of the cotton industry was Richard Arkwright's water-powered spinning frame, patented in 1769. This invention made textile spinning a factory industry and ensured that the production of cotton fabric was the first manufacturing process to be entirely mechanised. Although there were in eighteenth-century Britain numerous examples of large-scale concentration of labour (naval dockyards, shipbuilding yards, coal mines and breweries, for instance) the cotton factories that began to be established in the last quarter of the century represented a new and sinister departure: strict division of labour in a regimented atmosphere, the pace of work determined by a machine.

This was not, however, what can strictly be called a capitalist mode of production, the investment of 'anonymous' wealth in