

Britain Yesterday and Today

1830 to the Present

Walter L. Arnstein



FIFTH EDITION

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University of Illinois,
Urbana-Champaign



D. C. HEATH AND COMPANY

Lexington, Massachusetts Toronto

Cover painting: "The Derby Day," (1856–58, detail) by William Powell Frith (Tate Gallery/E. T. Archive)

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Published simultaneously in Canada.

Printed in the United States of America.

International Standard Book Number: 0-669-13424-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 87-81187

Foreword

Carl Becker once complained that everybody knows the job of the historian is "to discover and set forth the 'facts' of history." The facts, it is often said, speak for themselves. The businessman talks about hard facts, the statistician refers to cold facts, the lawyer is eloquent about the facts of the case, and the historian, who deals with the incontrovertible facts of life and death, is called a very lucky fellow. Those who speak so confidently about the historian's craft are generally not historians themselves; they are readers of textbooks that more often than not are mere recordings of vital information and listings of dull generalizations. It is not surprising, then, that historians' reputations have suffered; they have become known as peddlers of facts and chroniclers who say, "This is what happened." The shorter the historical survey, the more textbook writers are likely to assume godlike detachment, spurning the minor tragedies and daily comedies of humanity and immortalizing the rise and fall of civilizations, the clash of economic and social forces, and the deeds of titans. Anglo-Saxon warriors were sick with fear when Viking "swift sea-kings" swept down on England to plunder, rape, and kill, but historians dispassionately note that the Norse invasions were a good thing; they allowed the kingdom of Wessex to unite and "liberate" the island in the name of Saxon and Christian defense against heathen marauders. Nimble the chronicler moves from the indisputable fact that Henry VIII annulled his marriage with Catherine of Aragon and wedded Anne Boleyn to the confident assertion that this helped produce the Reformation in England. The result is sublime but emasculated history. Her subjects wept when Good Queen Bess died, but historians merely comment that she had lived her allotted three score years and ten. British soldiers rotted by the thousands in the trenches of the First World War, but the terror and agony of that holocaust are lost in the dehumanized statistic that 750,000 British troops died in the four years of war.

In a brief history of even one "tight little island," the chronology of events must of necessity predominate; but if these four volumes are in any way fresh and new, it is because their authors have tried by artistry to step beyond the usual confines of a textbook and to conjure up something of the drama of politics, of the wealth of personalities, and even of the pettiness, as well as the greatness, of human motivation. The price paid will be obvious to anyone seeking total coverage. There is relatively little in these pages on literature, the fine arts, or philosophy, except as they throw light upon the uniqueness of English history. On the other hand, the complexities, the uncertainties, the endless variations, and above all the accidents that bedevil the design of human events—these are the very stuff of which history is made and the "truths" that this

series seeks to elucidate and preserve. Moreover, the flavor of each volume varies according to the tastes of its author. Sometimes the emphasis is political, sometimes economic or social; but always the presentation is impressionistic—shading, underscoring, or highlighting to achieve an image that will be more than a bare outline and will recapture something of the smell and temper of the past.

Even though each book was conceived and executed as an entity capable of standing by itself, the four volumes were designed as a unit. They tell the story of how a small and insignificant outpost of the Roman Empire hesitantly, and not always heroically, evolved into the nation that has probably produced and disseminated more ideas and institutions, both good and bad, than any state since Athens. Our hope is that these volumes will appeal both individually, to those interested in a balanced portrait of particular segments of English history, and collectively, to those who seek the majestic sweep of the story of a people whose activities have been wonderfully rich, exciting, and varied. In this spirit this series was originally written and has now been revised for a fourth time, not only to keep pace with new scholarship but, equally important, to keep it fresh and thought-provoking to a world becoming both more nostalgic and more impatient of its past.

Lacey Baldwin Smith

Preface

This book is the product of thirty years of teaching courses—at Roosevelt University, Northwestern University, the University of Chicago, and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign—that surveyed the history of modern Britain. More distantly, it reflects the influence of my own teachers, among them Professor Emeritus Oscar I. Janowsky of the City College of New York and the late Professors Herman Ausubel and J. Bartlett Brebner of Columbia University. More immediately, it is the product of much—if never quite enough—reading of relevant books, articles, and reviews; of impressions gathered during several lengthy sojourns in the British Isles since 1956; and of the imaginative suggestions of Professor Lacey Baldwin Smith.

The decision to produce a second, a third, a fourth, and now a fifth edition has allowed me to correct factual errors, to rethink and to rephrase numerous paragraphs and chapter subsections, and to retile and rearrange several chapters. I have also taken into account the explosion of historical work in various facets of the social and economic history of Victorian Britain and in numerous aspects of twentieth-century history generally, the relevant cabinet and personal papers of which were still closed to researchers twenty-five years ago.

For the fifth edition, I have made minor changes on numerous subjects throughout the volume, ranging from religion and education to local government, from the changing roles played by women to popular culture, from the nature of the British involvement in World War II to that of British policy toward South Africa and Hong Kong. I have altered the time periods encompassed by Parts IV, V, and VI of the volume; and I have added Chapter 22, which carries the story up through the general election of 1987.

The book rests on the assumption that, even in the final years of the twentieth century, students may still benefit from reading the national history of a political and geographical entity other than the one to which they belong. The framework remains chronological, and political history retains a significant, but by no means predominant, place. Social and economic developments are clarified by charts, tables, and photographs, as well as by words, and political and diplomatic events are enlivened by cartoons. Analogies drawn from American history are deliberately included. The volume may therefore serve as an appropriate companion to the student of English literature or as a guide to the tourist wishing to put places and events into context. The completely revised bibliography is intended to provide interested students with sources in which they may learn more about virtually every theme, event, or person mentioned in the book. The aim has been to provide balance without excluding

controversy. The names and dates of modern British history are not in dispute, but interpretations often conflict, and I have made no attempt to disguise that fact.

I am in debt to the late Professor William B. Willcox of Yale University, Professor Emeritus Charles Mullett of the University of Missouri, the late Professor Robert Zegger of Northeastern Illinois State University, and Professor Jean Reeder Smith of Northwestern University for their suggestions. Two University of Illinois colleagues made helpful comments—Professor Paul W. Schroeder on Chapters 4 and 6, and Professor Richard W. Burkhardt on Chapter 5. Dr. Alan E. O'Day of the Polytechnic of North London provided useful suggestions on Chapter 9. Dr. Prudence Ann Moylan and Dr. Randall E. McGowen aided me with the second and third editions while serving as University of Illinois graduate research assistants. Dr. James Filkins assisted with the fourth edition and Mr. Chet DeFonso with the fifth.

My wife did much of the typing for the original edition and spotted many a fuzzy thought and long-winded sentence. Prior to proofreading the fifth edition, she made numerous useful suggestions, including the reminder that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Scottish experience differed significantly on occasion from that of other parts of the United Kingdom. In appropriate, if utterly conventional fashion, however, I take full responsibility for what ultimately appears on the printed page.

W. L. A.

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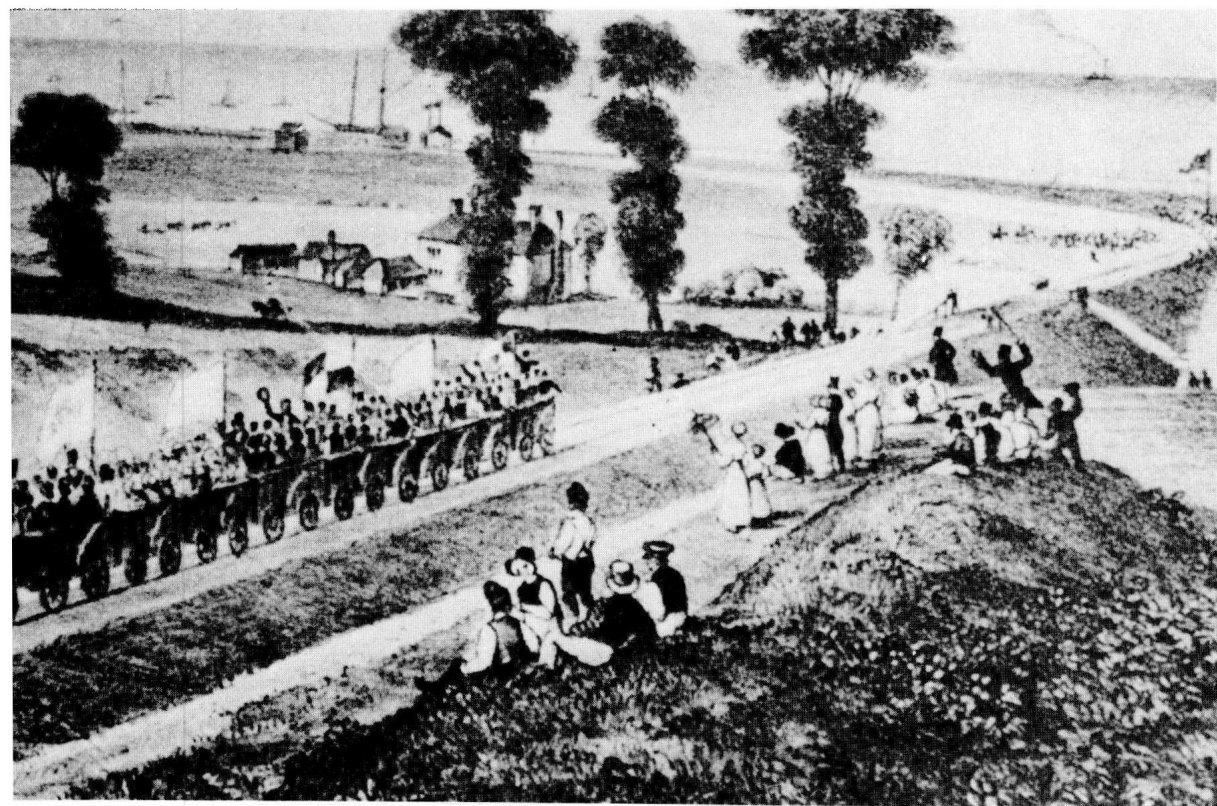
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I
The Age of Improvement
1830 to 1851



Reform or Revolution?



Change and continuity are the contrasting shades of the historian's spectrum, and any society at any time contains some elements of each. The Britain of 1830 was the product of a heritage receding into the mists of early Anglo-Saxon and Celtic times and of the ferment created by dramatic population growth as well as by the blast furnace, the steam engine, and the factory town. The age of Augustan placidity and unquestioned aristocratic predominance was only yesterday. The age of the iron horse was just beginning. The age of mass production, mass housing, mass transportation, and mass destruction was yet to come.¹

Alexis de Tocqueville and the Britain of 1830

Most of the people of Britain were too close to the momentous forces of their age, which found nineteenth-century industrialists competing for pride of place with eighteenth-century squires, to perceive the full import of the change or to provide a balanced appraisal of their own society. That task was taken on by a shrewd and perceptive Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville, who was soon to immortalize his name with a classic description and interpretation of the United States of Andrew Jackson's day: *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville never wrote a similar study of the British Isles, but the notes he took on two trips across the Channel during the early 1830s provide a revealing, if partial, account of British society in transition.²

¹ Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement* (1958), remains a reliable general account of Britain in the first half of the nineteenth century. Eric J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State, 1783–1870* (1983) is largely topical in approach. Norman Gash, *Aristocracy and People: Britain 1815–1865* (1979) stresses politics at the national level.

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Journeys to England and Ireland*, trans. by George Lawrence and K. P. Mayer, ed. by K. P. Mayer (1958).

Tocqueville surveyed an England still largely rural and unaccustomed to the roar and clatter of the steam locomotive, but he sensed that the future was being molded by the extraordinary changes taking place in commerce and industry—not by the apparently sluggish growth in farm production. Consequently he concentrated his attention on London and a number of provincial cities. He was fascinated by the forces that continued to attract the rural populace to the cities and the factories and by the boundless energy displayed by industrialists and workers alike in expanding cities like Birmingham. “These folk never have a minute to themselves,” he reported. “They work as if they must get rich by the evening and die the next day.” Although appalled by the housing conditions in some of the growing industrial towns and depressed by the number of English people dependent on poor relief, Tocqueville appraised the average standard of living in England as superior to that of his native France.

England was for Tocqueville a bustling commercial country; at the same time, it remained intensely aristocratic and conscious of differences in social status. It was clear to the Frenchman, however, that the English aristocracy differed markedly from that of pre-Revolutionary France. It was smaller yet more accessible and, as a consequence, more highly respected. Because a wealthy merchant could hope one day to become a peer himself, he did not distrust the aristocracy en masse. Analogously, the custom of primogeniture—in which the younger children received allowances but only the eldest son inherited his father’s titles and estates—resulted in a continual seeping down of aristocratic sons and daughters into the middle classes, bringing to English upper-class society a cohesion that did not exist in France. Certain professions had become the traditional preserve of the younger sons of the aristocracy. In the case of Tocqueville’s friend, Lord Radnor, the eldest son inherited title and fortune, the second son became canon of Salisbury Cathedral, the third a captain in the navy, and the fourth a banker in London. Had there been additional sons, they might well have found comparable openings in the law, in the army, or as administrators in India. Tocqueville ultimately was struck less by distinctions between classes based on heredity or law than by differences based on wealth. Material gain seemed to him a primary motive among all classes.

Although he considered the English a “naturally religious” people, Tocqueville described the established Church of England as “immensely rich, very badly organised and full of great abuses.” Its bishops seemed to be the staunch defenders of government of and by the well-off and well-connected. Such people felt at home amid the carpets and upholstered pews of many Anglican churches. They also were accustomed to observing family prayers at home, with both male and female servants assembled in hierarchical order of precedence.

Although many of the English were used to receiving spiritual truths from their social superiors, others paid little heed to an established church that, in the words of Archbishop William Howley, left the slum-dwellers of cities like Manchester and Leeds “in a state of heathen darkness.” The dissenting denominations—Presbyterian, Congregationalist, and Baptist—