

# **A History of the British Isles**

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# Preface

In some respects this has been the most interesting and most difficult book that I have attempted. Most interesting because I have had to read so widely, most difficult because of the discipline of writing in accordance with particular guidelines and to a tight word-limit. What has been discarded in endless redrafting could have made several books, which shows not only the richness and variety of the history of the British Isles, but also the different ways in which it could be approached. Any history inevitably invites suggestions about different approaches, contrasting arguments, divergent conclusions. The history of the British Isles is the history of the English, Irish, Scots and Welsh. Britain itself has a shorter history as a united state and it is important to place due weight on separate and diverse national traditions. Particular emphasis has been placed on the history of Wales, too often subsumed into accounts of English history but an area of great interest because it was the 'Celtic' area most exposed to English pressure and rule. At the risk of anachronism, terms such as England, Wales, Scotland, Ireland, France and East Anglia are used throughout so that modern readers can better understand the areas they refer to. Britain is generally used to denote England, Wales and Scotland. It is sometimes termed Great Britain. The British Isles is the term used for Britain and Ireland. Ireland refers to the geographical area currently divided between the Republic of Ireland, and Northern Ireland which is a part of the United Kingdom, the state otherwise comprised of Britain.

This book is dedicated to my son Timothy, but while writing my thoughts have often turned to those who taught me English history, to David Griffiths at Haberdashers', and to Tim Blanning, Martin Brett, Marjorie Chibnall, John Morrill, Jonathan Riley-Smith and John Walter at Cambridge. Many thanks to Paul Hammond, Michael Jones and Kenneth Morgan for letting me quote from their work. I am most grateful to Ian Archer, Stuart Ball, Chris Bartlett, Sarah Black, John Blair, John Bourne, George Boyce, Richard Brown, Duncan Bythell, Tony Carr, P.J. Casey, Rees Davies, John Davis, John Derry, Grayson Ditchfield, Sean Duffy,

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JEREMY BLACK



# Introduction

That the past, our past, can be seen in so many different lights adds to its fascination. There is not only the question of what to discuss, but the problem of how best to do so. If it is difficult enough for us to establish the course of history, it is even harder to assess causes. This is particularly a problem with a book of this scale. There is a powerful tendency, when writing a history that stretches over more than two millennia but relatively few pages, to shape the past into patterns and to stress the beneficial nature of the changes that have occurred. This Whiggish approach to British history was particularly dominant in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; it emphasised a Protestant identity for the nation, respect for property, the rule of law and parliamentary sovereignty as a means to secure liberty and order, and a nationalistic self-confidence that combined a patriotic sense of national uniqueness with a xenophobic contempt for foreigners, especially Catholics. The positive contribution of Protestantism and liberty to prosperity and social development was stressed, but a very partial account of the latter was offered, concentrating on the growth of a strong middle class.

In modern academic circles Whig history is apparently dead, displaced by the scholarly developments of the last sixty years. At the popular level, however, traditional history and historical images are still popular, generally reflect Whiggish notions and often have little to do with academic developments. In addition, the academic works that sell best and are most accessible to the general reading public are generally those that are written in a traditional fashion. Biographies and narratives are at a premium. Narrative history is especially popular. This can be seen in child, adolescent, and adult reading patterns, and there is a parallel in literature, where continued popular preferences defy powerful academic literary fashions. The persistent popularity of the detective novel, with its stress on the role of the individuals and chance, and with a strong narrative structure, and, in most cases, its strong

moral element, is especially noteworthy. The genre offers exciting, often exemplary, stories, which are precisely what are sought by most readers of history. In combination, narrative and the Whig approach offer a readily accessible means to produce a clear account of a highly complex subject: human history.

This book, however, seeks to avoid an emphasis on inevitability. It is important to appreciate that choices have always existed, that policy was not pre-ordained by the 'structures' of economic or other circumstances, that contingencies and the views of individuals were of consequence. It is necessary to grasp the uncertainties of the past, the roles of chance and perception; to restore a human perspective to an historical imagination too often dominated by impersonal forces. If this can lead to greater difficulties in posing and answering questions of the relationships between change and continuity, the short term and the long, it is appropriate to point out that history is not an unbroken mirror reflecting our views, but a fractured glass turning in the wind, with pieces missing or opaque and a general pattern that is difficult to distinguish and impossible to do so to general satisfaction.

The selection of central themes is therefore in large part a personal response to the multifaceted nature of the past. Two emerge clearly: first the political relations both between the constituent parts of Britain and between them and the rest of Europe; and secondly the impact of technology. The latter is particularly important and becoming more so. The impact of man on his environment has been far more insistent in the age of industrialisation and urbanisation than hitherto. People no longer have to live by the sweat of their brow; they are more likely to sit in an office, manipulating electronic machinery, whether manufacturing goods or working in the financial or service industries. They do not face starvation if they fall ill. They take longevity, perhaps even prosperity, for granted. People themselves have changed. Inoculations to prevent serious diseases are now universal. Mechanical and chemical contraception has led to the replacement of earlier patterns of sexual activity and procreation. Technical and medical advances have led to the ability effectively to replace parts of the body, such as hips. Much work is currently under way on creating artificial knee joints, a far more complex task. People look different: they are taller than in the past; teeth have been filled or crowned or replaced by dentures; the water is fluoridated. Clothes are made from man-

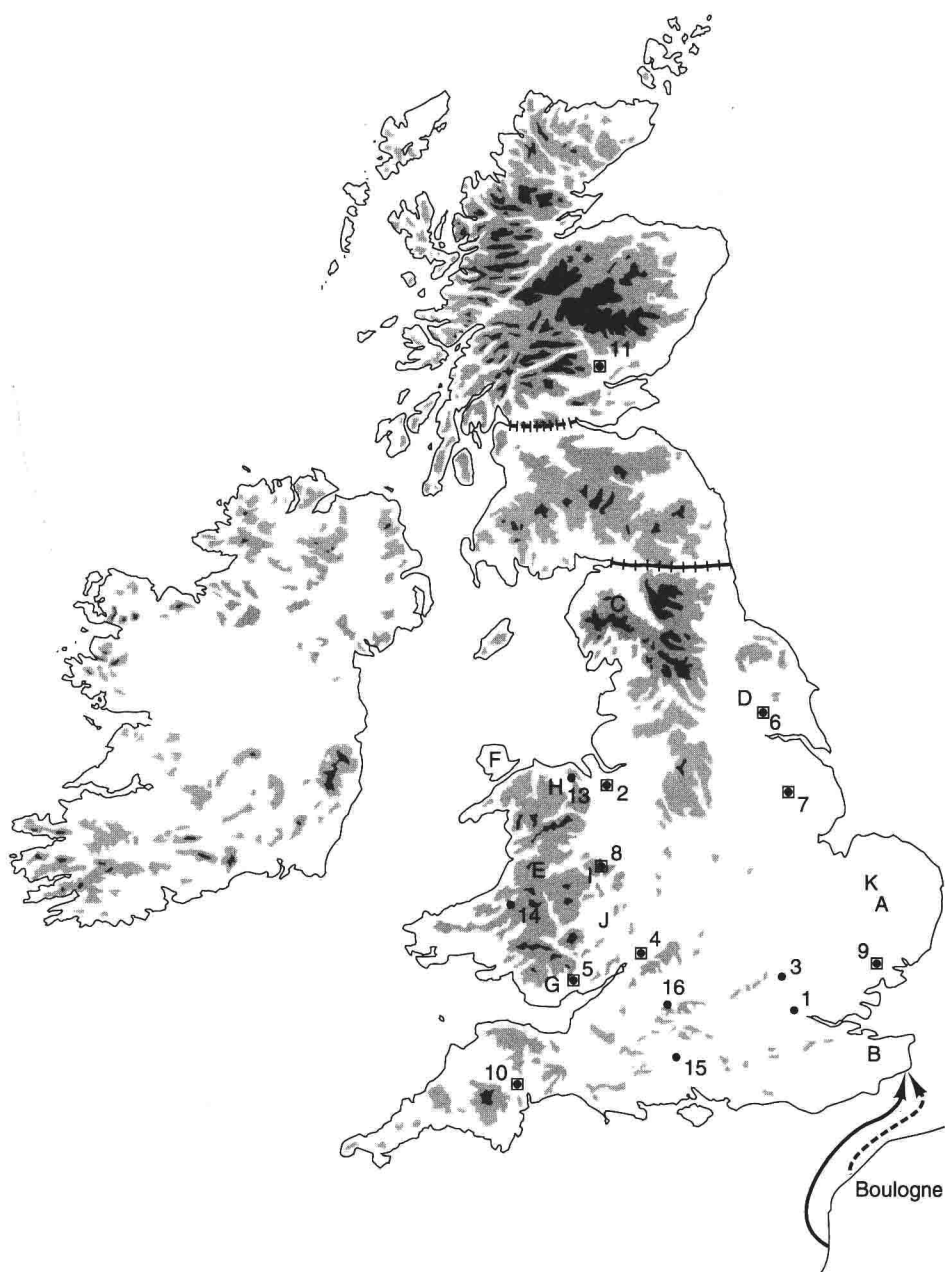
made or enhanced fibres; food is processed, coloured and preserved as a result of the combination of modern science and mass-production techniques.

These changes are emphasised in the chapter on the twentieth century, but they are, of course, more general, as have been shifts towards a more immediate 'mass culture'. Widespread literacy in the nineteenth century, followed by the spread of new media in the twentieth, led to a dynamic, constantly renewed relationship between the producers and consumers of information and images. This was subversive of earlier means of disseminating and inculcating ideas. A vastly expanded press, and new media such as the television, did not necessarily lead to the spread of radical ideas – they could equally serve to reiterate conservative views – but, by regularly providing information and stimuli, they played a major role in a democratisation or equalisation of society that has been a predominant theme over the last century and a half. In the nineteenth century the newspaper became an accepted means for the pursuance of disputes, possibly contributing to a more peaceful and public means of conducting political, social, economic and religious disagreements. Democratisation was not the same as democracy, publicity did not entail the public nature of all politics, but in the twentieth century the information presented to the public has become more extensive and its impact more insistent. Whereas Edward VIII's relationship with Mrs Simpson (later the Duchess of Windsor) in the 1930s was known only to a restricted circle, the same has not been true of the activities of his grand-nephew, Prince Charles. Politicians today press avidly for equal exposure on television, but there are also worries about privacy.

This book itself is a testimony to changing circumstances. Technology is all-pervasive: the use of a word processor permitted frequent redrafting. There is also the clear sense that it is necessary to produce a work that is accessible to a wide audience. Consumer choice is crucial, and censorship, or the need to follow a 'party line', is not a factor. Indeed, it is the freedom with which this book has been written that is the most encouraging feature of this work. In Britain it is possible to write a book of this type without the problems and fears that an author would experience in much of the world. There is no room for triumphalism: the position may not last. The situation in Northern Ireland scarcely offers encouragement about the use of the past. Nevertheless, it is part of the

strength of much of British society that it can look at itself and its past without complacency or the need to reiterate national myths. Would that that were true more widely.

JEREMY BLACK



## ROMAN BRITAIN

### • Places

1 London	6 York	11 Inchtuthil
2 Chester	7 Lincoln	13 Halkyn
3 St Albans	8 Wroxeter	14 Dolaucothi
4 Gloucester	9 Colchester	15 Stonehenge
5 Caerleon	10 Exeter	16 Avebury

### Areas

A Suffolk	E Wales	I Shropshire
B Kent	F Anglesey	J Hereford
C Cumbria	G Glamorgan	K East Anglia
D Yorkshire	H Clwyd	

- ☐ Legionary fortresses  
not all occupied at once

+++++ Antonine Wall

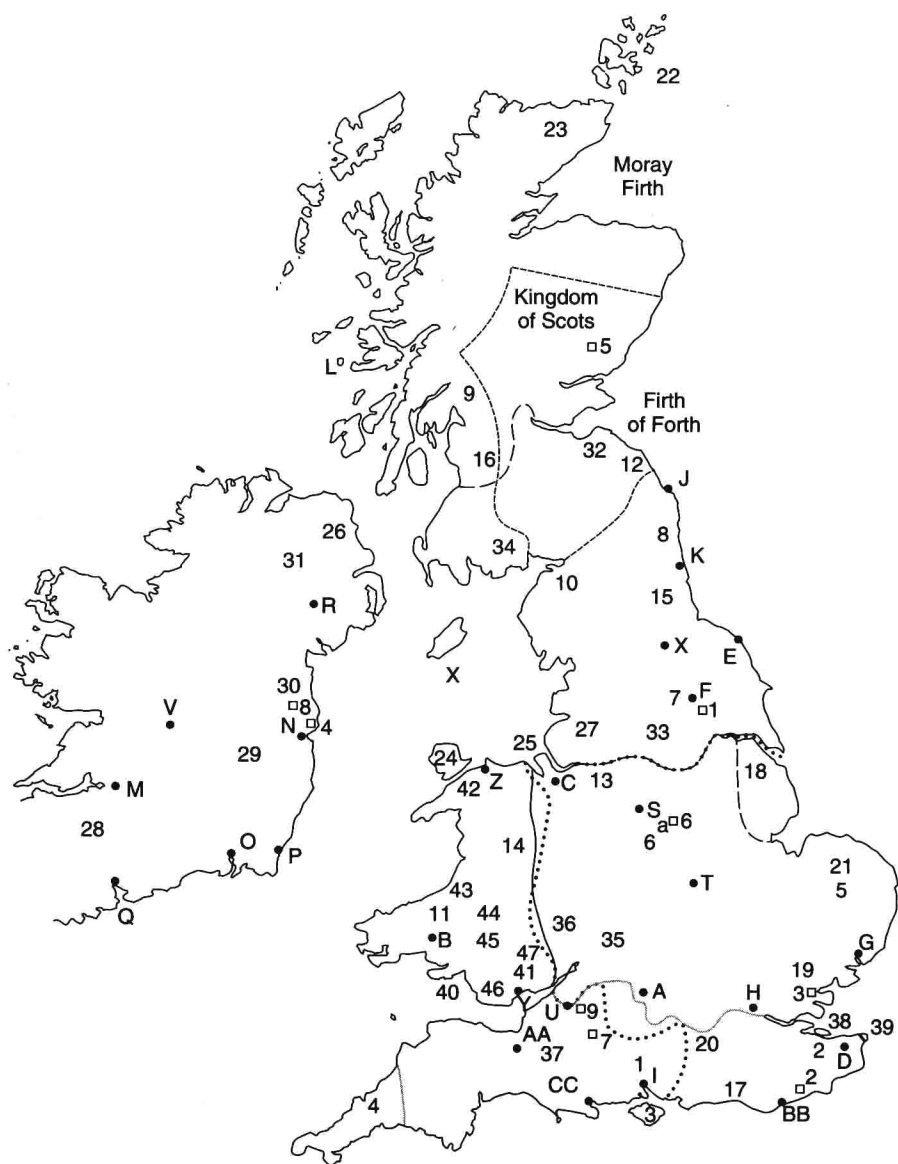
+++++ Hadrian's wall

→ Caesar's invasion route in 55 and 54 BC

--→ Claudius's invasion route in 43 AD

 Over 200 m

 Over 500 m



## ANGLO-SAXON BRITAIN

### • Places

A Dorchester-on-Thames	H London	P Wexford	Y Caerleon
B Carmarthen	I Southampton	Q Cork	Z Degannwy
C Chester	J Lindisfarne	R Armagh	AA Athelney
D Canterbury	K Jarrow	S Derby	BB Pevensey
E Whitby	L Iona	T Leicester	CC South Cadbury
F York	M Limerick	U Bath	
G Ipswich	N Dublin	V Clonmacois	
	O Waterford	X Catterick	

### Areas

1 Hampshire	13 Cheshire	25 Wirral	37 Wessex
2 Kent	14 Powys	26 Antrim	38 Sheppey
3 Isle of Wight	15 Northumbria	27 Lancashire	39 Thanet
4 Cornwall	16 Strathclyde	28 Munster	40 Gower
5 East Anglia	17 Sussex	29 Leinster	41 Gwent
6 Mercia	18 Lindsey	30 Meath	42 Gwynedd
7 Deira	19 Essex	31 Ulster	43 Ceredigion
8 Bernicia	20 Surrey	32 Lothian	44 Builth
9 Argyll	21 Norfolk	33 Elmet	45 Brycheiniog
10 Cumbria	22 Orkney	34 Rheged	46 Glywysing
11 Dyfed	23 Caithness	35 Hwicce	47 Ergyng
12 Gododdin	24 Anglesey	36 Magonsaetan	

### □ Battles

1 Stamford Bridge	6 Repton
2 Hastings	7 Edington
3 Maldon	8 Tara
4 Clontarf	9 Wroughton
5 Nechtansmere	

..... Boundary of Mercia in 800      — — Boundary of Northumbria in 650

—— Boundary of Wessex in 830      ----- Kingdom of Scots in 1018

—— Offa's Dyke



