United Kingdom

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Map of the United Kingdom

Preface

All historians are influenced by the times in which they write, especially so when those times are unusually dramatic. It would be foolish to pretend that this book has not been shaped by the political convulsions surrounding Brexit, and the unprecedented shutdowns forced by the Covid-19 pandemic. I have tried hard not to fall into the trap of writing a history that is defined by an inevitable contemporary endpoint, whether it be the departure from the European Union or the economic and welfare challenges posed by the new strains of coronavirus, but I'm sure that my analysis will have been informed and inflected by recent events. In one sense, though, my approach to this project is a very conscious response to what has been happening. One of the striking features of the extended public debates about Brexit and Covid-19 has been the prominence of simplistic and often inaccurate narratives about the United Kingdom's history – from celebrations of the global trading relationships that underpinned Victorian prosperity to invocations of the public spirit exemplified during our 'Finest Hour', the Second World War – and their use in suggesting lessons for the future. The populist historical-political discourse of recent years has reaffirmed my belief that we need more complex, multi-layered narratives about our recent past. There is no one story that we can tell that fully encapsulates the United Kingdom's post-Second World War history, not least because one central element of that history is the emergence of a more diverse, pluralistic, and mobile society. That is why I have chosen not to add to the pile of chronologically based histories, many of which are excellent. Comprehending our present situation, I would suggest, requires us to understand how different types of change – from broad

shifts in global geopolitics and the structures of the world economy to social and cultural developments in localities and regions – have operated and intersected to shape everyday experiences and give individuals very different perspectives on the country they live in. It also involves explaining how the legacies of the UK's past have both shaped the present and, at times, complicated or obstructed attempts to create a better future. These two preoccupations – examining different layers of change, and addressing the tensions between past, present, and future – have determined the structure and content of this book.

A quick note on terminology. This book covers the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and I have consistently referred to the 'UK' and 'people of the UK' other than when I am specifically focusing upon the constituent nations of England, Scotland, Wales, or Northern Ireland. This can lead to some jarring notes when quoting others given that, in the early part of the period especially, it has been commonplace to refer to 'Britain' (or sometimes just 'England') when actually meaning the UK. There is also a risk of inelegant prose because the terminology of the UK does not offer an equivalent to 'Britons' to describe the citizens of the nation. Nevertheless, I have decided that accuracy and inclusivity favours use of the UK.

I would like to thank Louise Knight and Inès Boxman at Polity for their support when the writing of this book was repeatedly disrupted. My colleagues and students in the Department of History at the University of Sheffield have always provided me with a conducive environment for research and writing, Head of Department duties notwithstanding. Most of all, though, my love and thanks go to Felicity, Anna, and Thea: home has been a real haven while the pandemic has turned the world upside down.

Introduction

In 1959, Hugh Thomas, a well-connected 28-year-old with literary ambitions, published a book called *The Establishment* despairing how the United Kingdom was dangerously stuck in the past. Nations which had achieved global success, he argued, became ‘deeply and permanently marked’ by their period of greatness. They invariably rested on their laurels and resisted innovation. The UK had followed this pattern, and its leaders – the ‘Establishment’ of the book’s title – were now determined to defend the institutions of the glorious Victorian era with all their ‘prejudices, ignorances and inhibitions’. Governments had been lured into ‘supposing that, because Britain was once the greatest power, she must still aspire to the trappings, if not the facts, of continuing greatness’. This ‘anachronistic frame of mind’ spread into the cultural sphere so that people in other countries were ‘far more intellectually and aesthetically alive’ than those in the UK. Even the moral judgements of the previous century remained in place. Men were granted more freedom than women as long as they were discreet, but ‘anything more blatant, more modern’ was not permissible. ‘To those who desire to see the resources and talents of Britain fully developed and extended,’ he concluded with a flourish, ‘there is no doubt that the fusty Establishment, with its Victorian views and standards of judgement, must be destroyed.’[1]

Thomas was no marginalized radical, jealous of the elites he railed against. The son of a British colonial officer based in what is now Ghana, he was educated at a top private boarding school, read History at the University of Cambridge, and then moved into a role at the Foreign

Office. He resigned in 1957 in protest at the government's actions in the Middle East, but otherwise he was an insider in the very establishment he attacked. Thomas's polemic certainly resonated in some circles, and his was one of several books of the period agonizing over the 'state of the nation'. Yet it hardly captured the mood of the UK as a whole. The year *The Establishment* was published, 1959, also saw Prime Minister Harold Macmillan lead the governing Conservative Party to its third consecutive election victory, successfully appealing to voters not to endanger the unprecedented prosperity that was visible across the UK. Two years earlier, Macmillan had famously remarked that 'most of our people have never had it so good', and his party's election slogan in 1959 was 'Life's Better with the Conservatives, Don't Let Labour Ruin It'. The claim that 'life's better' seemed eminently plausible. With rising real wages, very little unemployment, and a housing boom that allowed many to move into more comfortable surroundings, it was easy to believe that a more modern and affluent UK had arrived.

There were plenty of signs of the future for those able to spot them. The first section of the M1 motorway opened in November 1959, catering to the 30% of households that now owned cars. Some travelled in the recently released Mini, a small two-door car that would become an icon of forward-looking British design. The same year, Barclays became the first bank to use an electronic computer. In a nod to the emerging power of youth culture, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) launched the television programme *Jukebox Jury* to assess new popular music records. In St Pancras Town Hall, London, meanwhile, the Trinidadian writer and activist Claudia Jones organized a 'Caribbean Carnival' to showcase the vibrancy of the culture of the many people who had travelled to the UK from the West Indies. This event would become the

forerunner of the long-lasting Notting Hill Carnival. When viewed from this perspective, the UK did not look like a nation stuck in the Victorian era, or resting on its laurels. Thomas was no more than half right. The UK was indeed uniquely shaped by legacies of past greatness, but these were not strong enough entirely to constrain the powerful forces of change that were creating a very different society. The result was a nation of many contrasts, with pageantry and tradition co-existing alongside innovation and a yearning for the modern.

This book tells the history of the UK since 1945 by exploring these tensions between the past, present, and future. At one level, the UK has had no reason to be anxious about the future. By almost any measure, it remains one of the world's leading nations. It is one of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and a founder member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank. In 1952, it became the third country with nuclear weapons, after the United States and the Soviet Union. Its economy has stayed within the top six in the world by size, and the City of London is a leading financial centre. The UK's (former) empire ensures that it has connections and interests around the globe, and it is the home of the world's predominant language, English. The stability of its political system, and its respect for individual rights, are widely admired. It boasts some of the world's most prestigious universities and a highly advanced science and technology sector. Its popular culture – the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, James Bond and Harry Potter – is consumed far and wide, and its football clubs have larger fanbases than any others.

But these very real strengths do not necessarily live up to the expectations created by the past, and, as a consequence, the UK since 1945 has been haunted by a

sense of decline. In the nineteenth century, the UK had emerged as the first industrial nation and the world's greatest power, the centre of an empire more extensive than any previously seen. This global success cast a hallowed glow over its institutions, particularly its parliamentary and constitutional structures, many of which dated back hundreds of years. In a time of racialized thinking, many regarded military victories and economic prosperity as a reflection of the superiority of UK citizens, especially in relation to colonized populations. Others believed that the UK's Protestant virtue ensured it was favoured by divine grace. Even if the strategic and economic environments became much more competitive in the twentieth century, victories in the First and Second World Wars reinforced the narrative of the UK's exceptionalism and further legitimized its democracy. Winston Churchill, the UK's prime minister between 1940 and 1945, was steeped in evocative tales of the nation's heroic past, and presented the exploits of wartime as the next episode – indeed, the 'Finest Hour' – of a glorious history.

After 1945, and certainly after 1956, it was very difficult to maintain the celebratory rhetoric. The United States and the Soviet Union emerged as unrivalled superpowers as the UK struggled to support its imperial commitments. As we will see in Chapter 1, the failed intervention in response to Egypt's nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 exposed the UK's inability to act as an independent great power without the blessing of the United States. Even if Macmillan could plausibly tell voters that 'life's better', Thomas's concerns about economic stagnation were by no means unfounded by the late 1950s. The UK's productivity and growth rates lagged behind its main competitors, and the industries that had underpinned Victorian prosperity were on a downwards trajectory. At the same time, the

significant expansion of the West Indian and Asian communities in the UK ensured that older nations of racial superiority were fiercely challenged. By the early 1970s, most of the former empire had secured independence, and the UK was routinely being described as the ‘sick man of Europe’. Much political debate was focused on how to recover former glories, and what elements of the past needed to be taken forward into the future. Many solutions were proposed, from joining the European Community to reforming the state and reshaping the UK economy. It is interesting to note that by the 1980s, Hugh Thomas, now an acclaimed historian, had come to see a reforming Conservative prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, as the best means of reviving the UK’s fortunes. His personal reward was to be ennobled as Lord Thomas of Swynnerton, and indisputably become a member of the establishment he had once sought to destroy. Individual stories, and aspirations, were intimately intertwined with these wider debates. This was certainly the case thirty years later, when Boris Johnson, another expensively educated writer and politician, rose to the premiership by channelling Churchill and Thatcher and offering Brexit as the means of providing the UK with a better future.

All nations, of course, are shaped by the tensions between past and present, but these pressures were unusually intense in the UK because of the country’s period of unprecedented global power, and the speed with which this power unravelled in the years after 1945. An empire accumulated over centuries was virtually gone within twenty-five years. Industries that had powered the economy for over a century declined precipitously. Equally important was the strong sense of continuity that governed political life in the UK. Unlike almost all European nations, the UK did not experience a decisive moment of rupture in the modern period: there were no revolutions, no moments of

constitution-making, no invasions or significant military defeats to usher in a new regime, conspicuously alter political dynamics, or dramatically change the balance of social forces. The UK experienced its civil war in the mid-seventeenth century, and the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of 1688–9 confirmed the primacy of parliament over the monarchy. After that, its political system developed incrementally and relatively peacefully. The important exception here was Ireland, which did witness political violence, civil war, and partition, but this was routinely marginalized from accounts of national history, and indeed was a central reason for the focus on Britain rather than the United Kingdom as the imagined community. It could be conveniently explained that the Protestant mainland was not beset by the same sectarian tensions and social problems that Catholicism had supposedly generated across the Irish Sea.

In the absence of these moments of rupture, many of the institutions, practices, and symbols of the past remained conspicuous – most obviously in the form of the monarchy, royal household, and privy council, but also in the rituals of parliament and court room, in the traditions of the first-past-the-post electoral system, in the secrecy that cloaked many of the operations of the central state and the military. For the champions of this history, it was precisely the wisdom accumulated in this stable political system that explained the UK’s successes; the adaptability, moderation, and pragmatism of its governing structures prevented the crises and extremism that beset many of its European neighbours. As the UK’s circumstances changed after 1945, though, critics like Thomas could point to these legacies as signs of backwardness and a failure to come to terms with modernity. For these observers, the UK needed a codified constitution, a proper separation of powers, a more representative parliamentary system, and an end to the

fawning over an outdated monarchy. The battle between past and future ran through the heart of UK politics.

The UK: A Brief History

Before turning to the years after 1945, it is worth saying a little more about the UK's longer history. The UK itself was formed in 1800, and is by no means as old as many of the institutions which it now incorporates. The coming together of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland into one political unit was not an inevitability, but rather the result of an interplay of political, economic, and military factors over several centuries. The expansionist ambitions of the English monarchy were evident in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries through significant incursions into Ireland and Wales, although Scotland managed to retain its independence. By the mid-sixteenth century, Wales was incorporated into the English state and run from London, while Ireland was forced to accept Henry VIII as king and was subjected to attempts at colonization. England and Scotland were joined dynastically when James I (of England) and VI (of Scotland) came to the throne in 1603, and this became a political union in 1707 when England and Wales signed the Act of Union with Scotland to form the Kingdom of Great Britain. The separate Scottish parliament was prorogued, and Scottish MPs sat in a united parliament in the Palace of Westminster in London, although distinctive religious and legal structures remained. While England, Wales, and Scotland became Protestant during the Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the bulk of the Irish population remained Catholic, setting up an ongoing tension with Protestant colonizers from the British mainland. The ambitious British state could not countenance the strategic uncertainty posed by this difficult situation and in 1800

imposed an Act of Union with Ireland. On 1 January 1801, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland came into being, and 100 MPs from Ireland took their seats at Westminster.

By 1801, the United Kingdom was already a global power. Explorers and adventurers from England travelled to North America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia from the late sixteenth century in search of glory and gold. The first lasting overseas settlement was established in Jamestown (in the modern US state of Virginia) in 1607, and over the coming decades further colonies were established in North America, Bermuda, Barbados, and Jamaica. Jamaica would become a hub of the lucrative slave trade, which Britain dominated in the eighteenth century, until ending the practice in 1807. Manufactured products were taken from Britain to West Africa to be sold for slaves, who were then transported, in appalling conditions, to the plantations of the West Indies and North America; sugar, molasses, and other goods returned to British ports such as Bristol and Liverpool. It is estimated that Britain transported around 3.1 million Africans; some 400,000 did not even survive the journey.[2] From the mid-seventeenth century, English trading posts were also established on the Indian subcontinent under the umbrella of the East India Company, and by the second half of the eighteenth century this was becoming a substantial territorial empire. In the 1770s and 1780s, Britain made claims on New Zealand and Australia. This expansion was always contested, both by local rulers and by rival European empires, and there were defeats along the way, most notably in North America when the thirteen colonies successfully asserted their independence as the United States and, with French support, defeated the British military operation (although Canadian territories were retained). But the underlying strength of its economy, and the associated power of its

unmatched navy, ensured that Britain was hard to contain. Between 1793 and 1815, Britain/ the UK waged a global war against France, its main imperial rival, and eventually won a decisive victory, establishing maritime dominance for the next 100 years. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the UK consolidated its position in India, South Africa, Australia, the Caribbean, and Canada, extended its claims into Singapore, Hong Kong, Cyprus, and new parts of Southern and Eastern Africa, and used its military and economic muscle to open up trade with countries that were not part of the formal empire, notably in South America and China. The empire would reach its fullest extent immediately after the First World War, when the UK acquired the West and East African colonies previously held by Germany, as well as being given League of Nations mandates for Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine. In 1920, 413 million people, nearly a quarter of the world's population, lived under the UK flag.

These global connections, the resources that were extracted from them, and the market opportunities that they delivered helped to sustain, and were in turn sustained by, the rapid industrialization of the UK from the late eighteenth century. The UK economy was transformed by the introduction of machine power to supplement human or animal labour, the emergence of more specialized and standardized workplace roles, and the concentration of labour in factories which could benefit from economies of scale. The technological innovations of the spinning mule, the power loom, and the steam engine enabled cotton goods to be produced with far greater efficiency, and Manchester and the surrounding area became the global hub of the textile industry. Steam power also revolutionized coal production and iron manufacture, often found in the same areas, including Tyneside, South Yorkshire, South Wales, and central Scotland. The UK raced into a

significant lead over its economic competitors: by the middle of the nineteenth century, it produced around half of the world's cotton and pig iron, and some two-thirds of the world's coal. In the second half of the century, the UK achieved similar success in the fields of steel production and shipbuilding: by 1911, it constructed about 70% of the world's sea-going ships. Coal production continued to rise, peaking in 1913, by which point around a million people worked in mining. Industrialization was underpinned by rapid population growth and urbanization, and it altered the internal dynamics of the UK: cities such as Glasgow, Swansea, Cardiff, Manchester, Sheffield, and Newcastle all emerged as densely populated industrial powerhouses, and the ever-expanding railway network ensured faster connections between them.

In many respects, the First World War marked the end of the UK's period of global dominance, despite it emerging victorious from four years of bloody mechanized conflict. As well as causing the loss of nearly three-quarters of a million UK citizens, the war effort put an immense strain on the nation's finances and disrupted its global trading patterns. The industries that had powered Victorian prosperity were now experiencing fierce competition, and in the 1920s and 1930s there was mass unemployment in regions dependent on coal mining, textiles, iron and steel, and shipbuilding. The war also exacerbated the worsening tensions in Ireland. The nationalist Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 was brutally suppressed by British troops, but sweeping victories for the nationalist Sinn Féin party once the war ended created an unstable situation that was only resolved by partition. The 1920 Government of Ireland Act, and the subsequent Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, created Northern Ireland from the six, predominantly Protestant, north-eastern counties (Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, and Tyrone), while the other twenty-six

counties formed the Irish Free State as an independent dominion within the British Empire. (In 1949, this would become the entirely independent Republic of Ireland.) The UK henceforth became the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Despite these pressures, the UK successfully managed the transition to a full democracy, and did not fall prey to the political extremism that marked most European nations in the inter-war period. After gradual extensions of the franchise over the nineteenth century, in 1918 all men, and most women over 30, were given the vote. Ten years later, women won the vote on the same terms as men, at the age of 21. The Labour Party emerged to champion the interests of trade unions and working people, but the Conservative Party, alone or in coalition, was the dominant political force in the two decades after 1918. The UK's long-standing and flexible constitutional arrangements survived the Irish crisis and the economic depression of the 1930s, and a Conservative-dominated National Government, led by Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, reluctantly took the nation to war with Germany in September 1939 to counter the expansionism of Hitler's Nazi regime.

The UK's experience in the Second World War was very different from that in the First. Rather than extended attritional warfare in the trenches, the focus for UK efforts between 1940 and 1944 was in the air and at sea, and military losses were about half of those suffered in the previous conflict. This time, however, sustained German bombing brought the UK mainland into the front line, with significant civilian losses and urban destruction during the 'Blitz' of 1940–1. Criticisms of the UK war effort led to Winston Churchill becoming prime minister in May 1940, and he sustained UK morale while an alliance was built with the United States and the Soviet Union that was capable of defeating Germany, Italy, and Japan. The victory

that was celebrated in May 1945 seemed to vindicate once again the UK's institutions and democracy – this had been framed very much as a 'People's War' – but it would become clear over subsequent years that it would be increasingly difficult for the nation to sustain the global role that it had enjoyed for over a century.

Writing the History of the UK

How should we tell the complex history of the UK after 1945? The obvious answer is to construct a chronological narrative, and there are many fine works that adopt this approach. While this can lead to a compelling and comprehensible story, however, there are several downsides too, especially in a shorter book such as this. Chronological national histories tend to focus attention on the actions of political leaders and central government, and to identify general elections as key turning points; it is far harder to integrate changes driven by longer-term economic, social, cultural, and technological developments, or to bring out the experiences of ordinary people. This is a particular problem, I would argue, when one of the main features of the UK since 1945 is the emergence of a more pluralistic and diverse society in which different individuals have had very different experiences. UK politics and culture are already saturated with simplistic popular historical narratives, and there is much to be gained by writing the national story in a less familiar and potentially more challenging way.

This book is therefore structured thematically, and will examine in turn six layers of the UK experience, moving scale from the macro (UK in the world) to the micro (the individual within the UK). This will allow the book to explore, and integrate, different processes of change, and consider how power is exercised, and challenged, at