A COMPANION TO CONTEMPORARY BRITAIN 1939–2000

Edited by

Paul Addison and Harriet Jones

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Introduction

In one respect this *Companion to Contemporary British History* is different from the other volumes in the series to which it belongs. The period it covers has only recently come into historical focus, and the historiography of the subject is still in the making. In the 1960s and 1970s, only a handful of historians ventured into post-war British history. When the Institute of Contemporary British History was established in 1986 it was with the aim of stimulating research and debate in a field where they had been conspicuously lacking. Anthony Seldon, who co-founded the institute with Peter Hennessy, was moved to complain:

> We live in an era of the most exciting and rapid change in the country's history, yet few of our schoolchildren, history undergraduates or, dare one say it, university historians, know much about the period, which has witnessed the end of empire, the birth of the welfare state, the emergence of Britain as a nuclear power, and British accession to the European Community, against the background of a generally declining economy and the attempts of successive Labour and Conservative administrations to find a role for Britain in the contemporary world.[1]

Contemporary British history – the Second World War always excepted – is still a neglected subject in schools. In higher education, however, it has become firmly established as an expanding subject area in which teaching and research are sustained by a critical mass of scholars, including many based in departments of social or political science, cultural studies, geography and so on, rather than departments of history. Books, articles and conferences multiply and the boundaries of the subject expand.

The first generation of historians of contemporary Britain was primarily interested in the history of government and public policy. Their sources consisted mainly of the files in the Public Record Office and they advanced in step with the 30-year rule governing the release of official papers. This was history 'from above', but none the worse for that. Whitehall and Westminster might be small worlds riven by intrigue, but they were also mighty factors in the making of post-war Britain. They still compel the attention of many a Ph.D. student, but the past decade or so has witnessed a

broadening of the agenda of research to encompass the economic, social and cultural themes which constitute so much of the historiography of earlier periods. As the editors of this volume we have aimed to reflect as far we can this expansion of the agenda, though limitations of space or other factors have sometimes compelled us to omit topics, such as the history of science, that we would have included in an ideal world.

The first drafts of history are seldom the work of historians. The conceptual framework of contemporary British history was initially the work of politicians, media commentators, economists, social scientists and social policy experts. It is to them that we owe such concepts as the 'relative economic decline' of Britain, the 'missed opportunity' of British participation in 'Europe', the 'post-war consensus', 'Thatcherism', 'consumer society', 'globalization', 'racism', 'gender', the 'decline of the welfare state', the 'permissive society', the 'classless society', the 'North–South divide'. The first challenge for anyone seeking to historicize contemporary Britain is therefore to test the validity of these concepts. Are they still valuable as analytical tools, or best understood as ideological constructs of the period? The contributors to this volume write from many points of view and vary in the extent to which they take issue with the conventional wisdom. The majority, perhaps, are neither conservatives nor iconoclasts in this respect, but revisionists who seek to introduce a greater sense of complexity into narratives that used to look straightforward.

Where, then, is 'the big picture'? In the opening chapters the editors discuss the impact of the Second World War and the Cold War, and the extent to which they can be seen as determining the course of post-war British history. If the Second World War was less of a watershed than it appeared to be in 1945, the Cold War was in some ways a stimulus to change. But these are only two themes among many. In their different ways, all the contributors to this book testify to the transformation of British society between 1939 and 2000. The 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were truly radical in altering structures and values. All these changes were painful for some, generating pessimistic or even apocalyptic views of recent history on both left and right. The chapters in this book suggest that historians are now able to look back at the upheavals of the later twentieth century with greater detachment, and hence also with greater insight into the forces at work. By the beginning of the twenty-first century British society, in spite of all its divisions and flaws, had proved to be more adaptable, more stable, and more prosperous than the pessimists had feared.

Paul Addison
Harriet Jones

NOTE

1 Anthony Seldon, ed., *Contemporary History: Practice and Method* (1988), p. 119.

Chapter One

The Impact of the Second World War

Paul Addison

What difference did the war make?[1] The question is one historians are bound to ask, but few of the answers are certain. Some of the immediate consequences of the war are measurable and the figures virtually beyond dispute: the number of civilians killed in the Blitz, for example. But others, like the emotional and psychological effects of the war, will always be difficult to estimate. Most problematical of all is the significance of the war in the long-term perspective of twentieth-century British history. It is no easy matter to disentangle changes initiated by the war from trends that were evident long before 1939. Would the British welfare state have come into existence without the Second World War? Would Britain and the United States ever have developed a 'special relationship'? There is more than enough evidence to suggest the answers, but never enough to prove them. No less tantalizing is the question of the significance of the war for post-war developments. On the one hand it would be a fallacy to assume that everything that happened after the war was a result of the war. On the other it is clear that the British were confronted in 1945 with new realities both at home and abroad: bridges had been burnt and a retreat to 1939 was impossible.

The impact of war, therefore, is a problem that hinges on probabilities, possibilities, and counter-factual speculation. Add in the bias and preconceptions that all historians bring to bear on the evidence, and a fertile field of argument and debate opens up. There is, of course, a great deal of ground to cover: not only the effects of the war on society and politics at home, but the diplomatic, imperial and military consequences, and a wide range of sub-topics too numerous to deal with in a brief compass. In this chapter the discussion is organized by topic, looking first at aspects of domestic history and secondly at aspects of Britain's international role.

The Home Front: Unity and Division

The academic study of Britain in the Second World War dates back to the war itself and the commissioning by the War Cabinet of a series of 'civil histories' recording the administrative history of the home front. Even today such works as Hancock and

Gowing's *British War Economy* (1949), or Titmuss's *Problems of Social Policy* (1950) are indispensable for an understanding of the war as organized from Whitehall. A new cycle of research began in the 1960s with seminal works on the social history of the home front by Arthur Marwick and Angus Calder,[2] but the introduction in 1969 of the 30-year rule for the release of government papers led most historians to concentrate on the political history of the war years. My own book *The Road to 1945* (1975), together with Corelli Barnett's *The Audit of War* (1986) both stimulated debates over the politics of social reconstruction, and a number of important monographs on the theme were published. By the 1990s, however, academics were beginning to return to the vast but neglected terrain of social history. With labour history in sharp decline there was no longer much interest in the history of the white, male working class. Instead the 'cultural turn' encouraged historians to explore wartime constructions of gender, race, citizenship and national identity.

Although approaches have varied greatly over time, two key issues in the history of the home front have been present almost from the start. One is the extent to which the war unified a hitherto divided society, creating a sense of social solidarity which may or may not have endured after 1945. The other is the extent to which it radicalized a hitherto conservative society and led on to the creation of a new peacetime social and political order. Both questions – separate but closely related – compel us to look beyond the rhetoric and propaganda of the war years to the realities of a diverse nation with a population in 1945 of 49 million.

It was inevitable in wartime that politicians and publicists should strive to present the British as one people, united by a common sense of identity and purpose. Little attempt was made to deny the existence of different classes, but they were portrayed as co-operating for the common good. Owing to the threat of bombing from the air, it was claimed, the whole population was now in 'the front line'. This was a 'people's war' – a phrase that not only blurred the distinction between soldiers and civilians, but also distinctions between the classes and the sexes. The people, of course, were credited with heroic qualities of endurance and civic virtue.

As has recently been pointed out, it was Angus Calder who first presented a more realistic picture in his book *The People's War*, which drew attention to 'panic and defeatism after big air raids; looting of bombed premises; crime and blackmarketeering; evasion of evacuation billeting obligations; class war and town versus country attitudes in the reception areas for evacuees; strikes, absenteeism and low productivity in industry; hostility towards refugees and ethnic minorities'.[3] Historians now increasingly stress the flaws and divisions of wartime society, including such phenomena as crime, the black market and industrial strife.[4]

The number of crimes known to the police in England and Wales increased by 54 per cent between 1939 and 1945, compared with a rise of 21 per cent in the previous five years. Although the increase was partly due to the introduction of new types of wartime offence, such as refusal to comply with the blackout, the figures also indicate an increase in the levels of pre-war types of offence such as breaking and entering (see figure 1.1) or brothel-keeping.[5]

Convictions for juvenile delinquency, meanwhile, rose by 39 per cent between 1939 and 1945. There were several features of life on the home front, such as the blackout, the shortage of goods, the disruption of family life, the ease with which

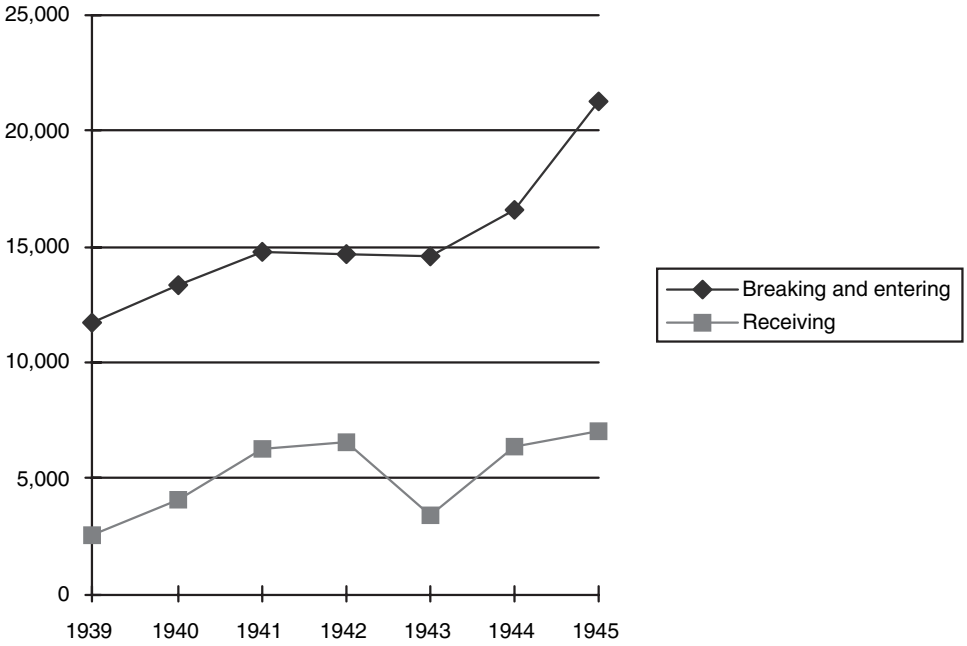

Figure 1.1 Offences known to the police in England and Wales 1939–1945: breaking and entering; receiving

Source: Peter Howlett, ed., *Fighting with Figures: Prepared by the Central Statistical Office* (1995), table 2.11.

items could be stolen ('looted') from buildings damaged in the Blitz, and the presence of millions of British and Allied soldiers, that made petty crime more likely. The war, it appears, did stimulate a crime wave, though it was only a ripple by comparison with the extent of crime in Britain today. In 1945 the number of offences recorded in England and Wales was 478,394: by 1997 the total had risen to 4,460,629.

Under Order 1305 of July 1940, strikes were illegal, and no trade union called a strike during the Second World War. But as labour shortages developed, the bargaining power of workers increased, the number of localized, unofficial strikes multiplied, and the number of working days lost also multiplied. If the figures appear to suggest a war economy crippled by strikes, the impression is misleading. The average number of days lost per year was about a third of the figure for the First World War. Three-quarters of the disputes were concentrated in four main industries – coal, shipbuilding, the metal trades and engineering – and the great majority of them lasted less than three days. Nevertheless the four industries concerned were of crucial importance to the war and the figures suggest a notable lack of solidarity between industry and the armed forces. A 1942 survey by Mass Observation of factories in the north of England concluded: 'One looked in vain for any sign of a unity binding all parties in the fight against Germany.'[6] Nor is there much in the post-war

Table 1.1 Industrial disputes, 1939–1945

Year	*No. of stoppages*	*No. of workers involved*	*No. of working days lost*
1939	940	337,000	1,356,000
1940	922	299,000	940,000
1941	1,251	362,000	1,079,000
1942	1,303	457,000	1,527,000
1943	2,785	559,000	1,808,000
1944	2,194	826,000	3,714,000
1945	2,293	532,000	2,835,000

Source: Robert Price and George Sayers Bain, 'The Labour Force', in A. H. Halsey, ed., *British Social Trends since 1900* (1988 edn), p. 195.

history of British industrial relations to show that the war improved relations between employers, managers and workers over the long run.

Wartime Britain was never a land of social harmony, but an exclusive focus on the negatives yields a distorted picture. Perhaps the best overall measure of social solidarity is the extent to which people in all classes acquiesced in the surrender of their personal freedoms. 'Never before and never since', writes Peter Hennessy, 'has a British government taken so great and so intrusive a range of powers over the lives of its citizens – where they worked, what they did in uniform or "civvies", what they ate, what they wore, what they could read in the newspapers, what they could hear on the wireless sets.'[7] The regulations and restrictions governing civilian life were so extensive that they would have tried the patience of a community of saints, so it is no wonder that ordinary mortals often evaded the rules. But most of the violations were petty and implied no dissent from the war effort. As a recent study of the black market concludes, the public distinguished sharply between large-scale criminal activity, which they condemned, and small-scale violations such as the bartering of coupons or the illicit purchase of a tin of salmon. Lesser violations were widespread but within the bounds of a moral consensus: 'Black marketeers and their customers were convinced that their actions were neither unpatriotic nor wrong; they saw no contradiction between their support for the war effort or the law, and their illegal dealings.'[8] The damage inflicted on the war economy by strikes and the black market was marginal by comparison with the success of the government in mobilizing a people for total war. Between 1939 and 1943 the armed forces were expanded from half a million to 4.25 million. Nearly 2 million workers entered the munitions industries, while the numbers working in less essential industries were reduced by more than 3.25 million.

Evidence of anti-social activities during the war has also to be set against the evidence that altruistic behaviour was more frequent. Looting occurred during the Blitz, but so did courageous or neighbourly acts. The extent of voluntary activity is a significant yardstick. Of the 1.5 million men and women in the civil defence services at the outbreak of war, three-quarters were unpaid volunteers.[9] More than a million men volunteered to join the Home Guard in the summer of 1940. Nearly a million women belonged to the Women's Voluntary Service at the peak of its strength in

1943. The 54,000 members of Bomber Command who were killed between 1939 and 1945 had all volunteered to fly. Blood was freely donated to the blood transfusion service, as was money to such causes as the Spitfire Fund or Mrs Churchill's Aid to Russia fund. The political world also displayed an unprecedented degree of unity. The Churchill Coalition of 1940–5 was united on the main issue of the necessity of prosecuting the war. On post-war questions, the gap between the philosophies of the Labour and Conservative parties could not be bridged, and the White Papers on post-war reconstruction were compromises, but it would have been unthinkable in the 1930s for the leaders of the Labour and Conservative parties to publish joint statements setting out agreed objectives in social and economic policy. National unity was no façade, but it was, of course, the consequence of a temporary external threat, and unlikely to survive long into the peace. The middle classes, in particular, were far more willing to sacrifice their liberties for king and country during the war than for a socialist government after 1945.

War and Social Change

In the Second World War 264,443 British servicemen, 624 members of the women's auxiliary forces, and 30,248 merchant seamen lost their lives through military action; 67,635 civilians were killed in air raids. The suffering inherent in war ought never to be forgotten, but for the British in general the experience was less traumatic than that of the First World War. The war dead numbered less than half the total for 1914–18, and fewer men returned home crippled in body or mind. The dead were mourned and commemorated, but it was generally believed that they had died in a just cause: there was to be no equivalent after 1945 of the 'anti-war' literature of Owen and Sassoon. In the army, boredom was a more common experience than bloodshed, and it was no accident that the war, with the help of ENSA – the Entertainments National Service Association – acted as the forcing house of a generation of great comedians.

The most visible costs of the war were economic. With industry geared to the needs of the armed forces, and imports severely restricted by the Battle of the Atlantic, domestic consumers were subject to a regime of austerity in which petrol, clothes and basic foodstuffs were rationed, and many other goods unobtainable or in short supply. About a quarter of the nation's stock of capital was destroyed, along with two-thirds of the pre-war export trade, and most of Britain's foreign investments. The economic costs were of course social costs as well. The war prevented the creation of wealth and postponed a general rise in living standards from the 1940s to the 1950s.

Conversely the war has often been equated with progress in the sense of a movement towards greater social equality. The sociologist Stanislav Andrzewski put forward the theory of the military participation ratio, according to which the relatively underprivileged were the chief beneficiaries of the mass mobilization involved in total war. In a similar vein Richard Titmuss, the author of *Problems of Social Policy*, a classic volume of official history, argued that social policies in war and peace were determined to a great extent by the need to ensure the co-operation of the masses: 'If this co-operation is thought to be essential, then inequalities must be reduced.'[10] A major flaw in both theories was the omission of the political factors determining

social policy. Titmuss further confused the issue by lumping together social services integral to the war effort with plans for social reconstruction which derived from the inter-war years.

There was nevertheless some truth in the Andrzewski/Titmuss theory. Relatively underprivileged groups did benefit from the need to ensure the welfare and morale of the people as a whole. Ernest Bevin, as Minister of Labour, used his powers to improve the wages and conditions of 6 million workers in factories or undertakings covered by the Essential Work Order. He set up canteens, introduced doctors, nurses and welfare officers into the factories, and encouraged the BBC to put on programmes for the benefit of factory workers.[11] So important was health to the war effort that a comprehensive nutrition policy was developed with the aim of protecting vulnerable groups, notably children and expectant and nursing mothers About 160,000 school meals were provided before the war; by 1945 the figure was 1.6 million, covering 40 per cent of children.[12] Such schemes were social reforms in themselves and continued after the war. Between 1951 and 1964 a series of attempts by the Treasury and Conservative ministers to economize on school meals and milk all came to nothing.[13] The overall effect of food policy, including rationing, was a dramatic reduction in inequalities of diet and nutrition between the different social classes.[14]

Another element in the equation was the coalition government's fiscal and budgetary regime. To counteract inflation the cost of basic foods was subsidized, a measure of particular benefit to low-income groups, who spent a high proportion of their budgets on food. Levelling up was accompanied by levelling down. An excess profits tax of 100 per cent was levied on the profits of war industry, and the highest incomes were subject to a tax rate of over 90 per cent. The most conspicuous exception to the general trend was that of the farmers, who benefited from the strategic importance of home-produced foodstuffs in wartime, and the introduction of guaranteed prices for farm produce. Between 1938 and 1949 they increased their incomes, on average, by a factor of 7.5.[15] The Conservatives after 1951 abolished food subsidies and rationing, and some ministers called for radical changes in the tax system to benefit the middle classes. But, as Martin Daunton writes, 'more cautious members of the government believed it was not politically feasible to roll back the fiscal structure created during the war and confirmed by the Attlee administration . . . The Conservatives achieved little change in the structure of indirect taxes or in the balance between direct and indirect taxes between 1951 and 1964.'[16]

While social and fiscal policy had some levelling effects, changes in the labour market were the main factor in reducing inequalities. Guy Routh's survey of trends in income and occupation reveals a sharp narrowing of the gap between the pre-tax incomes of the professional classes (excluding managers, who were comparatively unaffected by the trend) and the pre-tax incomes of manual workers, between 1935 and 1955.[17] The explanation appears to be that rearmament and the return of full employment increased the bargaining power of labour and facilitated inflation. In the ensuing scramble for higher pay, the professional classes were unable to keep up. In 1949 the average earnings of a manual worker stood at 241 per cent of their 1937 level; for the higher professions the figure was 188 per cent.[18] By the mid-1950s most contemporaries were convinced that a more egalitarian society had come to stay. 'The

lot of the common people has substantially improved', wrote the socialist G. D. H. Cole, 'and the gulf between the classes appreciably narrowed, even since 1939.'[19]

In retrospect the limits of the levelling process are also plain. Although income differentials were reduced, there was little evidence of the redistribution of property. The persistence of class distinctions was demonstrated by the case of the Cutteslowe walls in Oxford, built in 1934 to separate the residents of a private estate from their neighbours on a council estate. In 1938 Oxford City Council had them pulled down. But they were re-erected in 1939, survived 'the People's War', and only finally dismantled in 1959.[20] Peacetime distinctions also continued to prevail in war industry, as the sociologist Mark Benney discovered when he began work at an aircraft factory in 1941: 'The top managerial staff ate in a private dining room; the clerical staff in the main canteen area, but at separate tables embellished with table cloths, water jugs and baskets of bread; the hourly hands ate at bare tables. During the air-raids, three separate shelter systems reinforced these distinctions.'[21]

In the wartime army officers were increasingly recruited from the grammar schools rather than the public schools. But the new type of officer was no less eager to maintain the traditional distinctions between officers and other ranks. As one left-wing officer wrote in 1944:

> The whole daily routine of an officer is far more luxurious than that of his men. He gets up an hour later, he is called by a batman who brings him a cup of tea and hot water, lays out his clothes and cleans his uniform. Throughout the day he eats his meals not in a drab mess-room but in the more comfortable atmosphere of the officers' mess dining room, where he is waited on by the mess waiters . . .[22]

The continuing importance of such distinctions helps to explain why so many social and political commentators of the 1950s and 1960s were obsessed with the topic of class.

Andrzewski maintained that women were among the beneficiaries of the 'military participation ratio'. It was certainly true that female participation in the economy increased. Owing to the shortage of male workers, the total number of women in paid employment rose from 4,997,000 in 1939, or 26 per cent of the labour force, to a peak of 7,253,000, or 33 per cent of the labour force, in 1943. Since about three-quarters of women who were young and single before the war had been in employment already, the shift was not from housework to paid employment, but from various kinds of peacetime employment, including domestic service, to war work. Women were employed in aircraft factories, engineering workshops, shipyards and on the railways,[23] and some of the barriers which had separated men's work from women's were removed. But this did not mean that women achieved parity of esteem. 'As men moved into wartime military roles at the front or just behind it', Penny Summerfield writes, 'women were required to do work previously reserved for men. But since the new roles for men were more highly valued than those now acquired by women, the dynamic of gender subordination was not profoundly altered'.[24] With gender, as with class, the war effort was moulded to fit pre-war structures and values. Some women might be wearing trousers, but beauty was a duty and the demand for cosmetics high and rising.[25]

Although the government campaigned from 1941 to attract women into war industry, officials were reluctant to disrupt the traditional family. Married women

with a child under the age of 14 were exempt, and exemptions were granted to married women who could claim household responsibilities – such as providing a midday meal for a husband. Compulsion, therefore, was applied mainly to young, single women, who were classified as 'mobile' and sent away from home to work. By 1943 the labour shortage was so acute that the government began to direct married women, including women with young children, into part-time employment: 900,000 of them by the end of 1944. In order to facilitate this, the government arranged for the provision of more than 1,500 nurseries.[26] This did mark the beginning of a new pattern in which the prejudice against part-time employment for married women gradually dissolved and the numbers in part-time work rose. By 1961 the number of women in paid employment was 8.4 million, compared with 7.75 million in 1943. But the war, far from diminishing the significance of the housewife, increased it by making her the agent and shock-absorber of government policies such as evacuation, rationing and the drive to economize on fuel. Even at the peak of female mobilization in 1943, as Harold Smith reminds us, 'the number of adult women employed full-time in industry, the armed forces and civil defence was less than the number who were full-time housewives: 7,250,000 as against 8,770,000.[27]

Both employers and the trade unions were bastions of masculinity. Under the terms of an agreement in 1940, women undertaking men's work had the right to progress by stages to the male rate of pay. In practice, women's work was hedged with restrictions intended to maintain the superior status and pay of male employees. In the engineering trades, 75 per cent of women employees were classified as doing women's work and hence ineligible for equal pay.[28] In 1941 the average earnings of adult women in war industry were £2. 4*s*. 2*d*. compared with £4. 19*s*. 3*d*. for men.[29] By 1943 trade unions in many industries had negotiated agreements to ensure that women replaced men for the duration of the war only.[30]

Some 470,000 women served in the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), and the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS). By comparison with factory work they offered more in the way of adventure and opportunity. The diaries of Joan Wyndham, an upper-class girl who joined the WAAFs, are full of wild escapades, hangovers and love affairs.[31] On a more practical level, women were able to acquire types of training not available to them in civilian life. In the RAF some 60 trades were open to them, and by the end of the war 33 per cent of radar mechanics, 45 per cent of radar operators, and 75 per cent of wireless operators were women.[32] For all that, the war reaffirmed one of the most fundamental distinctions between men and women: that men alone were trained to kill. The only exception were the female agents of the Special Operations Executive, and an unknown number of women illegally trained in the use of firearms by Women's Home Defence, an organization which campaigned unsuccessfully for the admission of women to the Home Guard on equal terms with men. The British war movies of the Forties and Fifties in which women appeared fleetingly or not at all, were hymns of praise to masculinity *and* reconstructions of reality.

Oral history confirms that wartime experience gave some women a greater sense of independence and self-esteem. As one woman put it: 'It meant really that I felt capable of doing things that I would normally just have expected men to do. I could do it, I had proven that I could do it, and I had achieved something in that world.'[33] Others, finding little fulfilment, looked forward eagerly to the opportunity of getting

married and making a home. When Mass Observation carried out a survey towards the end of the war, they found that less than 25 per cent of female factory workers wished to remain in their present jobs when the war was over. Another poll found that 66 per cent of single women who were working intended to stop work as soon as they got married.[34]

The war disrupted family life, separating parents from children and husbands from wives. Two and half million married couples were apart for long periods, testing the fidelity of both partners to the limit: in Birmingham during the last two years of the war, one illegitimate child in three was the offspring of a married woman.[35] Yet there were also signs of a revival of the family. The birth rate, which had been falling since the late nineteenth century, began to rise again in 1943, and the war began and ended with a boom in the marriage rate. 'The paradoxical effect of war overall', writes Angus Calder, 'seems to have been that it loosened family ties and moral constraints, while simultaneously creating a yearning for a settled home life.'[36] As the women's magazines of the period demonstrate, the war was followed by a drive to restore the stability of the nuclear family, with woman in the role of guardian of hearth and home.

Rebels and bohemians were, of course, to be found in the pubs of Fitzrovia and other enclaves of dissent, but moral conservatism was the dominant force. Half a century later, when George MacDonald Fraser wrote of the rank-and-file conscripts of the Border regiment with whom he had served in Burma, he recalled them as 'Labour to a man' in 1945. But the Britain they were fighting for was

> a place where the pre-war values co-existed with decent wages and housing . . . they did not fight for a Britain whose Churches and schools would be undermined by fashionable reformers; they did not fight for a Britain where free choice could be anathematized as 'discrimination'; they did not fight for a Britain where to hold by truths and values which have been thought good and worthy for a thousand years would be to run the risk of being called 'fascist' – that, really, is the greatest and most pitiful irony of all.[37]

MacDonald Fraser's lament is a yardstick of the moral and cultural gulf between the 1940s and the late twentieth century. The Attlee governments themselves were conservative on such matters as equal pay for women, capital punishment, fox-hunting, reform of the divorce laws, or immigration and race relations.[38] 'There endured after 1945', writes Kenneth Morgan, 'a powerful civic culture, a commitment to hierarchical and organic values, to Crown and parliament, to law and order, to authority however it manifested itself, from the policeman to the football referee.'[39] Another expression of this was a marked revival in the fortunes of organized Christianity. 'During the late 1940s and first half of the 1950s', writes Callum Brown, 'organized Christianity experienced the greatest per annum growth in church membership, Sunday school enrolment, Anglican confirmations and presbyterian recruitment of its baptized community since the eighteenth century'.[40]

There was also much celebration of the 'national character'. As Richard Weight has shown, the literary intelligentsia, many of whom had been alienated from their own country between the wars, were compelled by the Nazi threat to recognize its virtues, and eagerly enlisted as state-sponsored patriots in the service of the BBC and the Ministry of Information.[41] As writers and film-makers portrayed them, the British

were a tolerant, kindly, inhibited people who loved freedom and hated tyranny. They had invented constitutional monarchy and democratic institutions, started the Industrial Revolution, won every major war, and created the most humane empire the world had ever seen. Such ideas, which had a long pedigree, were pressed into service in 1940 as the script for a national epic. Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain and the Blitz were fashioned into a myth of national identity that flourished in the 1940s and 1950s.[42] It was a self-flattering portrait that omitted such illiberal features of wartime Britain as widespread hostility to conscientious objectors, or the persistence of a mild but insidious anti-semitism.

The War and the Post-War State

To most English people, 'England' and 'Britain' were synonymous. But the Second World War was the culminating moment in the history of a multinational state which ever since the eighteenth century had drawn the English, the Scots and the Welsh into an ever closer union – and the Irish into rebellion. There had always been a risk that excessive interference from London would cause resentment in Scotland and Wales, and the command economy of 1939–45 involved more centralization than ever before. In spite of this, and the presence of undercurrents of nationalism in both countries, there was little friction between the Scots and the Welsh on the one hand and Whitehall and Westminster on the other. This was probably due to an almost universal belief in the justice and necessity of the war. The handful of nationalists who refused to support an 'English' war were regarded by most of their compatriots as crackpots.[43] The Second World War also tended to undermine nationalism by restoring jobs and prosperity to the previously depressed areas of Scotland and Wales, a pattern maintained after 1945 by policies for the promotion of employment in the regions.

The sectarian rivalries and competing nationalisms of Northern Ireland, which continued to be governed as a one-party state by a Unionist government, made it a very different case. To the south, Eire was neutral, and so in their hearts were many of the Roman Catholic citizens of the north. Conscription could not be applied in Northern Ireland, and the economy was less fully mobilized for war. Nevertheless the effect of the war was to strengthen the ties that bound Northern Ireland to the Union. The strategic value of the province in time of war had impressed itself deeply on Conservative and Labour ministers alike.

The Second World War also led to an expansion in the social and economic role of the state after 1945. Here it is useful to distinguish between the legacy of the wartime state itself, and the legacy of the wartime movement for social reconstruction. The wartime state was a command economy run on the basis of emergency powers which enabled officials to exercise extensive control over prices, the rationing of consumer goods, building licences, imports, and the allocation of raw materials to industry. The Labour Party, which had long been committed to the nationalization of industry, saw in the apparatus of 'physical controls' a powerful new means of regulating the private sector of a peacetime economy.[44] Between 1945 and 1951 the Attlee government retained many wartime controls and employed them to enforce its social and economic priorities. Controls, however, were increasingly difficult to justify as shortages disappeared and market forces reasserted their claims. If Labour had won