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Britain since 1830

JAMIE BRONSTEIN and ANDREW HARRIS

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Empire, State, and Society

Britain Since 1830

Jamie L. Bronstein and Andrew T. Harris

WILEY-BLACKWELL
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2012
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Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Bronstein, Jamie L., 1968–
Empire, state, and society : Britain since 1830 / Jamie L. Bronstein and Andrew T. Harris. – 1st ed.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 978-1-4051-8181-5 (cloth) – ISBN 978-1-4051-8180-8 (pbk.) 1. Great Britain–History–19th century. 2. Great Britain–History–20th century. I. Harris, Andrew T. (Andrew Todd), 1968- II. Title.
DA530.B75 2012
941.08–dc23
2011033730

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 11/13pt Dante by Aptara Inc., New Delhi, India

First Impression 2012

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Acknowledgments

Both authors wish to acknowledge and express gratitude to Peter Stansky, who guided us through the pleasures of modern British historiography in graduate school. Tessa Harvey and her colleagues at Wiley-Blackwell proved adept, constructive and flexible editors. The three anonymous reviewers of the final manuscript corrected many mistakes, and we take responsibility for any that remain.

Andrew Harris thanks his students at Bridgewater State University for their curiosity and excitement about that other England new to them, for many wonderful conversations, and for the opportunity to think through some of the ideas incorporated here. His colleagues in the history department and the university offered stimulating and supportive collegiality, especially Ann Brunjes, who has been close friend, colleague, co-teacher and conscience. Howard London and Dana Mohler-Faria supported work on this project while the author undertook administrative positions in their respective offices, and Ron Pitt has been friend and mentor extraordinaire. Bob Woods first showed how historical study could be rigorous, exacting and fulfilling as a temperament as well as a discipline. Deepest gratitude goes to Ted and Gilda Harris, and to Laurie and Eli, without whose love and support such an undertaking would have been impossible.

Jamie Bronstein would like to thank colleagues and friends who made helpful suggestions or read chapters of the manuscript, including Ken Hammond, Chad Martin, Andrew Muldoon, Dawn Rafferty, and Mark Walker. She would also like to thank the students in her classes at New Mexico State University, who provided a sounding-board for many of the ideas that were incorporated into these chapters. Finally, she would like to acknowledge Mike Zigmond, who read chapters, made suggestions, and participated in many one-sided conversations about nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, with great patience and humor; and Evan Zigmond, for being an unending source of comic relief.

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Introduction

Why write a history of modern Britain? In the nineteenth century, Great Britain was the world's recognized superpower, with a daunting formal empire, networks of trade and investment outside its empire, and a formidable military. The geographical extent of British power was rivaled only by the opinion that the British had of themselves: as first in industry, first in culture, first in democratic institutions. By the twentieth century many of these points of pride had proven transitory. The story of British expansion and contraction is a rich and complex tale for the Western industrialized world. Whether it is also a cautionary tale will depend on one's politics as much as the historical record.

For American students of history in particular, British history continues to hold great interest. Britain is, after all, one of North America's distinguished ancestors, the source of many of its juridical and political institutions, its historically dominant language, and much of its literature and culture. In the twenty-first century, Britain remains one of America's staunchest allies, the fruits of the "special relationship" which developed during the Second World War. American students remain fascinated by modern British culture: the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, the royals and Monty Python, England's green and pleasant land, literary period dramas via BBC America, and the general "historicity" of an older society.

Modern British history reveals as much by its departures as its similarities. How was an abolitionist movement different in a country that contemplated no domestic institution of slavery? How did oversight of a vast and diverse empire interact with the formation of racial identities at home? How did demographic patterns and the environmental impact differ when industrialization took place on a small island rather than a large continent? The United States is often considered a country in which considerations of "class" have been irrelevant and white men were enfranchised from the 1820s onward. How then did workers' experience

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differ in a more hierarchical society in which they were specifically deprived of, and struggled for, the vote? Britain two centuries ago continues to fascinate because it was a country grappling with modernity in a language that we share, but with beguiling and dissimilar problems. The people who populated that world are enough like us to be accessible and yet different enough to raise fascinating historical questions.

The field of modern British history has undergone a transformation in the past generation. There is more material available than ever from which to draw – thick description about political culture, about the multifaceted experiences of people within Britain and within its empire, about the nature of national and regional identity. Long cognizant of class, historians have come to appreciate that a modern story of British culture cannot be told without weaving gender and race throughout the narrative rather than relegating them to boutique chapters. The story of empire took place not only in the seat of government at Whitehall and in the colonies themselves, but also impacted the lived experiences of ordinary Britons and influenced how they interacted with their state. Recent historical writing has broadened what we know about religion, gender, science and technology, transatlantic movements of ideas and people, and the interaction between people and their environment. We have tried to integrate these into a meaningful narrative from which students and faculty can derive both a coherent story and useful points of further exploration.

Empire, State, and Society proceeds chronologically and thematically. Within each broad time period we have divided material into separate chapters on politics, on society and economics, and on intellectual beliefs and cultural forms, varying between two and three chapters in each period according to the historical coherence of the resulting narrative. In the twentieth century the two world wars so demarcate their age that each receives a comprehensive chapter.

In contrast with the United States, where a weak federal system diffused power, Britain had a strong locus of power in Parliament – but it was far from being the only important site of power. Thus, our political narrative includes not only ministerial changes and Acts of Parliament, but also foreign affairs, political culture, the changing nature and institutions of local government, the relationship between Britain and various colonies, and notable shifts of emphasis within Britain's own regions. Looking broadly at political culture enables us to address larger interpretive questions: Was Britain relatively calm in the mid-nineteenth century because struggles to define nationhood or to retrench economically could be absorbed by the Empire? To what extent was Britain in the late twentieth century torn between its roles as special friend of the United States and as leader of a new European coalition? Our treatment of each period's social and economic history also engages the changing nature of class, families, work and leisure, of leisure culture and people's interaction with their changing environment and with the law, and of the different experiences of women and children and immigrants, providing readers with a rich appreciation of what it felt like to live through the period in question.

We also explore the intellectual and cultural reactions to and sensibilities within each period. How did the British think about and understand the paths they took through Utilitarianism, Evangelicalism, science, religion, and socialism? How did they construct or respond to modern art, Fabianism, decolonization, or economics? How did they generate ideas, how did they create cultural norms, and how did they criticize the assumptions of their own times?

This work begins in 1830, which does not align precisely with the commencement or conclusion of any major historical epoch. The Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815; the industrial revolution started much earlier and continued into the nineteenth century; Victoria's reign began in 1837; the first great Reform Act was not passed until 1832. This frees the book from having to begin with the beginning of an actual event, which is just as conceptually challenging as beginning in the middle. Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for both the structures of British society and politics in 1830, and provides a brief overview of the history leading up to our beginning. Readers interested in further exploration of the period before may wish to consult the excellent volume preceding ours in this informal series, *Imperial Island*, by Paul Kleber Monod.

1

Britain to 1830

In 1830, King George IV died and was succeeded by his brother the Duke of Clarence, who became William IV. William's rule was short – only seven years, and was flanked by powerful royal personalities both before and after. George IV (r. 1820–1830) had been a wonderfully disliked philanderer and decadent dandy. Queen Victoria's rule (1837–1903) spanned over six decades and represented the highest point of British industrial and imperial strength. Yet in his apparently timeless ceremonial coronation as king of Great Britain, William reminds us just how paradoxically new the kingdom of Great Britain really was. In 1830, it had existed only 30 years.

Great Britain signified an area of land encompassing one large island off the northwest coast of Europe, a smaller island further west (Ireland), and a host of still smaller islands scattered nearby (the Orkneys and Shetlands to the north, the Hebrides to the northwest, the Isle of Man to the west, and the Isle of Wight due south, among others). The total land mass was just over 120,000 square miles: slightly larger than the combined New England states, less than half the size of Texas, smaller even than France or modern Germany. Great Britain was neither geographically coherent nor, as a nation, very old, having been created by unifying Ireland with England, Wales and Scotland by legislative act in 1800. Scotland itself had been similarly united with England and Wales in 1707, and Wales in 1536. The United Kingdom in 1830 was thus already a state that had been absorbing its neighbors for three centuries.

Even in 1830, Great Britain was more than the sum of these small islands in the North Atlantic. In terms of population, the British Empire theoretically encompassed over one-fifth of all the world's inhabitants in 1815 – and this was even *after* the loss of 13 of the American colonies. What then did it mean to be "British" in 1830? Who governed Britain? Who worked, who spent, and how

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did people live? This chapter attempts both a static picture of the governance, landscapes, and societies of Britain in 1830, as well as an exploration of the many changes in politics, economic production, and ideas in the decades leading up to William's coronation.

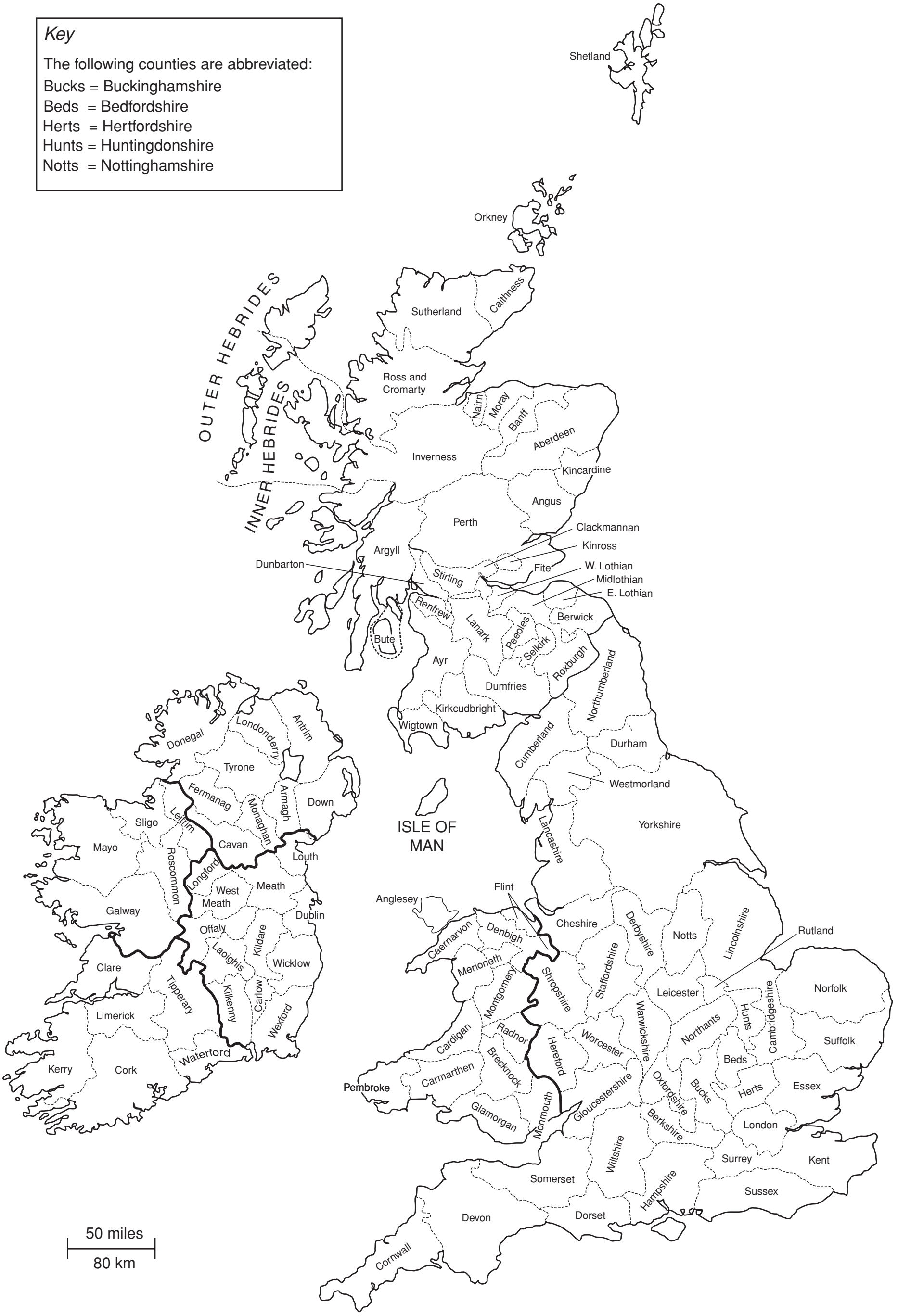
Geography

The defining feature of British geography as a set of islands navigable by internal rivers and canals is its proximity to and reliance upon water. Water protected Britain from European conquest in this period: the most recent successful invasion from Europe had occurred in the Middle Ages.[1] Separation by 30 miles of water from continental Europe encouraged the British, perhaps more than most people, to explain their temperament with reference to accidents of geography. They saw themselves as different from Europeans in spirit, in culture, and in politics. One cannot read too much into this assertion of difference, since Britons also traveled abroad, had extensive commercial relations with European states, sometimes sent their children to be educated abroad, and had numerous cultural connections and exchanges across the English Channel, and across many other bodies of water besides. That they *saw* themselves as different is more telling than the possibility of difference itself.

The British Isles possessed a long coastline and many port cities. With extensive internal waterways, enhanced by eighteenth-century canal building, this meant ease of access to water transport – and transport by water was, in the age before railways, always less expensive and faster than transit over land. No point in Britain is more than 70 miles from the ocean, and most are far less distant from major rivers and canals.

Britain has extensive variations in its landscape. The North of England, north of a rough and imaginary line from Durham to Exeter, is relatively mountainous, rainy (over 40 inches a year), and less agriculturally productive than the South, due to the rockier soil. It is also where much of the mineral wealth resides: the iron, coal, tin, clay, lead, and copper that have been crucial to modern industrial development.

South of this imaginary line, the land is more gently rolling, with less but still considerable rainfall, enough to make portions of it still essentially swampland in the eighteenth century. Better drainage techniques had by then already begun converting these boggy areas into cultivable farmland. Wales and Scotland are more mountainous, and Scotland consists of both rocky highlands and hilly, agriculturally fertile lowlands. In both Wales and Scotland by the early nineteenth century, geography had influenced settlement patterns: population concentrated in coastal areas, in valleys, or on plateaus. Separated from Britain by water in some areas wider than the English Channel, Ireland has fewer large mountain ranges and


Key
The following counties are abbreviated:
Bucks = Buckinghamshire
Beds = Bedfordshire
Herts = Hertfordshire
Hunts = Huntingdonshire
Notts = Nottinghamshire
Shetland
Orkney
OUTER HEBRIDES
INNER HEBRIDES
Sutherland
Caithness
Ross and Cromarty
Nairn
Moray
Banff
Aberdeen
Inverness
Kincardine
Angus
Perth
Clackmannan
Kinross
Argyll
Fife
Dunbarton
W. Lothian
Stirling
Midlothian
E. Lothian
Renfrew
Berwick
Lanark
Peebles
Bute
Selkirk
Ayr
Roxburgh
Dumfries
Northumberland
Kirkcudbright
Wigtown
Donegal
Londonderry
Antrim
Cumberland
Durham
Tyrone
Westmorland
Fermanag
Down
Armagh
Monaghan
Sligo
Leitrim
ISLE OF MAN
Yorkshire
Mayo
Cavan
Louth
Lancashire
Roscommon
Longford
Meath
West Meath
Flint
Anglesey
Galway
Dublin
Cheshire
Rutland
Denbigh
Offaly
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Oxfordshire
Essex
Pembroke
Bucks
Herts
Gloucestershire
Glamorgan
Monmouth
Berkshire
London
Wiltshire
Surrey
Kent
Somerset
Hampshire
Sussex
Dorset
Devon
50 miles
80 km
Cornwall

Map 1.1 Counties of Great Britain and Ireland in 1830.
Source: Paul Kléber Monod, *Imperial Island: A History of Britain and Its Empire, 1660–1837* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

more rain than most of Britain. Its temperature range is even milder than that of southern England, with warmer winters and cooler summers.

Britain's climate is unusually moderate given how far north most of Britain actually lies – Britain's latitude is about the same as Calgary in western Canada. In fact, warm air from ocean currents coming out of the Caribbean generally gives Britain a milder climate than many northerly continental European countries. This could lead to metaphorical overexertion, as an enthusiastic poet of the 1780s endowed Britain's climate with powerful attributes:

> Thy Seasons moderate as thy Laws appear,
> Thy Constitution wholesome as the year:
> Well pois'd, and pregnant in thy annual Round
> With Wisdom, where no fierce Extreme is found.[2]

Whether Britain owed moderate, wholesome, well-poised, or wise government to its weather is a fine point on which scholars may disagree, but the moderate climate certainly meant long growing seasons, mild winters and relatively cool summers.

Governance and Political Culture

Although in theory Great Britain was ruled by a monarch who headed the executive branch of national government, the governing structures had several layers with power diffused among them. To contemporaries British government presented several paradoxes: a strong state with a weak and limited monarchy; a ruling oligarchy that nevertheless paid lip service to public opinion; a nation that prided itself on a wide range of political and civil freedoms, yet was still in 1830 anything but democratic. Historians have called Britain since 1689 a "constitutional monarchy," yet there is no written constitution to be found, rather a set of political practices with legislative and customary boundaries of action.

Great Britain's national government consisted of the monarch and two legislative bodies making up Parliament: the House of Lords and House of Commons. The monarchy's powers had been dramatically reduced in the seventeenth century, and its range of operations came to rely on consensus. In 1830 the monarch needed parliamentary approval for all expenditure, which placed significant limitations on the ability to conduct foreign and military affairs freely. Only Parliament had the power to tax. The monarch appointed the Prime Minister, whose mission was to manage the crown's affairs in Parliament; but in practice, a Prime Minister could only govern if he could attract a majority of votes for key government legislation. And less formally, Parliament had made clear in the previous century that in times of extraordinary political instability, it could even presume to decide who would be the next king or queen.

Other areas of authority were implied: no monarch had vetoed legislation since Queen Anne in the early eighteenth century, though it was still theoretically possible to do so. The crown appointed new peers, which gave it influence over the House of Lords. The crown also controlled and appointed offices throughout the executive branch, including the civil service and armed forces, and granted all royal pardons (the only kind there were). Finally, the crown could dismiss a Prime Minister fallen out of favor, but still had to work through Parliament for fiscal resources. King and Parliament worked together, and though there were fears of *growing* executive power as late as the 1770s, the crown was by then quite circumscribed in what it could accomplish on its own.

The House of Lords comprised a varying number of hereditary peers, 26 bishops, and two archbishops. Peers inherited their titles of (in order of descending rank) Duke, Marquis, Earl, Viscount, and Baron.[3] To be a peer allowed but did not require one's attendance to government business in the House of Lords, so there was no absolute number of seats in that body; it depended on how many chose to participate at a given time. Some 360 peers voted on one of the most significant pieces of legislation in the 1830s, but most of the time far fewer sat in deliberation. The Lords often represented politically and socially conservative positions throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which meant that at many key points they could delay or obstruct legislation proposed by more liberal governments.

The House of Commons served as the more representative body, though it was representative only in an abstract and tenuous sense. Its 658 members represented the people of Great Britain "virtually." This meant in its eighteenth-century context that members of the Commons (or MPs, for Members of Parliament, a misnomer as nobody called a peer by that abbreviation) embodied all the different perspectives of the British people without actually being accountable to or elected by most of them. Indeed, contemporary politicians often boasted of their independence of electoral influence. Lord North claimed in 1784 – in Parliament – that members did not represent constituencies at all:

> To surrender their judgments, to abandon their own opinions, and to act as their constituents thought proper to instruct them, right or wrong, is to act unconstitutionally . . . They were not sent there . . . to represent a particular province or district, and to take care of the particular interest of that province; they were sent there as trustees, to act for the benefit and advantage of the whole kingdom. (Quoted in Briggs 1965: 98)

This was one position among several, however, as members often brought forward locally relevant legislation and acted on behalf of regional, local, and even personal interests.

Of the 658 total members, 489 held English seats; Scotland elected 45, Wales elected 24, and Ireland elected 100. English members came from counties (each of 40 counties returning two members), boroughs (ranging in size and legitimacy from cities and towns to deserted marsh, as in the case of Old Sarum which had no inhabitants at all, its residents having left for Salisbury centuries before due to bad drainage), and the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, each of which returned two members.

Voting rights were a patchwork in Britain before 1832. Generally, county residents paying 40 shillings per year in rent were eligible to vote. In some boroughs, nearly all taxpayers could vote; some were called "pot-wallopers" because anyone owning a pot in which to boil water could vote; in others, adult men earned the "freedom" of the borough and the right to vote there whether resident or not. On the other end of the spectrum, some borough seats were owned outright by individuals of wealth who sold seats to those sharing their sympathies and willing to pay. Nor was this last practice particularly secret; until 1807 such seats were still publicly advertised in newspapers. Many urban areas that had seen considerable population growth in the previous century had no representation at all until 1832.

Who served in the Commons? While it was an elected body, great landholders still dominated politics in the early nineteenth century, controlling the House of Lords, exercising direct influence over some two-thirds of all seats in the House of Commons, and serving in Cabinet posts. In urban constituencies, though, with less local influence deriving from landownership, this may have been less the case. In constituencies in London or Yorkshire, the "middling sort" might make their voices heard.

Nonvoters were not completely excluded from political participation. Through municipal politics, petitioning movements, voluntary associations, or the ability to finance (or withhold from financing) government debt, the middling sort had growing informal political influence that reformers increasingly sought to transform into a formal political role from the 1770s forward. In 1832 they achieved some measure of success. Locally, in areas such as poor law policy, policing, and parish government, even those without property at all could participate. In contested Parliamentary elections, the people arrayed in their numbers were essential: to raise their hands to nominate candidates at the outdoor "hustings"; to light their windows with candles, to wear symbolic colors and participate in parades through town; and even to eat roast beef and drink toasts at election-related banquets. In such ways political symbolism mattered.

By the early nineteenth century Britain's political leaders had developed a loose party system of Whigs and Tories, though these affiliations were so unstructured as to be only fair guides to political ideology. The monarch was supposed to be above party politics, but this was rarely the case in fact. Both party affiliations grew out of the late seventeenth century, and referred originally to those politicians in the 1670s and 1680s who either opposed the succession of the Catholic James, Duke of York (Whigs), or supported him (Tories). While both Whig and Tory politicians came primarily from the landowning gentry, over the eighteenth century these early party labels had come to accrue other generally applicable meanings. Tories favored a less aggressive foreign policy, lower taxes, a powerful monarchy based on divine right rather than constitutional legitimacy, and a more exclusive Anglican Church. Whigs favored a more aggressive foreign policy in the service of commercial and colonial power and the taxes to pay for it, a constitutional monarchy, were less attached to the Anglican Church and more willing to tolerate Protestant religious dissent.

The wars with both the American colonies and revolutionary France altered these loose party alliances, so that by the early nineteenth century, Whigs had taken on the mantle of political reform, civil liberties, and increasingly, free trade. Tories, who had been in power during most of the wars with France, had cast themselves as protectors against revolutionary radicalism abroad and at home, and had become the party of order and repression in the course of their long period in office. A quarter-century of war against revolutionary France had both catalyzed British radicalism and its response: a series of laws both during the wars and in the years immediately following that curtailed civil liberties and stifled any possibility of Parliamentary reform. Tories also stood against free trade and for a system of protective agricultural tariffs. Even so, neither Whigs nor Tories had a developed party structure in 1830 that could ensure consistent votes on legislation or highly concerted political action, and it was not uncommon for individuals to start their career in one party and end it in another. A number of Parliamentary gadflies considered themselves "independent Radicals" and belonged to neither party, and party membership was not yet essential to a political career.

What did government mean in the early nineteenth century? How did most people feel themselves governed? The British state had for the previous century concerned itself primarily with war, foreign policy, and the means to pay for it: tax collection, trade policy and maintaining vast and intricate systems of credit and debt maintenance. In times of war in the eighteenth century (effectively over 45 years between 1700 and 1815), military and naval expenditure, combined with service on the national debt, averaged 85 percent of total expenses. More telling is how little by modern standards the state spent on civil government even in peacetime: approximately 18 percent in the early eighteenth century. Even that had fallen to 11 percent by the 1820s. Overall spending on civil government rose, but military spending and debt service rose even faster as wars became longer or more costly to prosecute.

As this budgetary breakdown suggests, domestic social legislation aimed at national issues remained a low priority, though this had begun to change, slowly, by the 1830s. "There was little expectation even as late as the 1840s that the central government should use a very significant proportion of national resources to attempt to ameliorate social injustice or even to promote economic growth; an expensive state was still usually equated with 'extravagance' and the perpetuation of unfair privileges" (Harling and Mandler 1993: 69). Relative to other European states at the same time, Britain's national government played only a modest role in the daily lives of its people. And yet relative to other European states, Britain managed to extract a considerable amount of tax revenue year after year: 20 percent of national output went into the state's coffers in various forms of taxation, twice the percentage squeezed out of its subjects by the French state.

The increasing cost of government, primarily through the high cost of waging war throughout the eighteenth century, brought changes in how the political orders saw the state once the long wars against France ended in 1815. Both Whigs and Tories now argued with varying enthusiasm that the structures of state government needed to become more efficient, more centralized, and less expensive. Historians once thought that this drive to modernize government in the early nineteenth century was driven by the new social pressures of industrialization and the new and more vital energies of middle-class men from industry. Recent work suggests that the movement to modernize government came instead from a very old-fashioned source: a desire to reduce the cost of government to taxpayers, especially to the wealthiest landowners who paid the largest share of taxes.

Similar movements to make local government more efficient, centralized and professional (against the decentralized, corrupt and amateur governance of the eighteenth century) took place, and often for similar reasons: the cost of social policy drove demands for efficiency and centralization, since those were the only conceptual ways to claim better services without raising taxes. In the early nineteenth century, and crucial to our story, this subtle shift, and the prioritizing of efficiency and frugality in expenditure, meant that the state remained poorly equipped, and not really inclined, to respond to the social, economic and demographic challenges of industrialization.

Despite the prominence of national events like wars in shaping our understanding of early nineteenth-century British history, most Britons came into contact primarily with local government rather than with the British state. Each county had a lord-lieutenant, appointed by the crown, and usually one of the most prominent landowners in the county. He led the militia in times of civil unrest, dispensed patronage in the form of minor offices, and served as a conduit for information between the county and the central government. The Justices of the Peace (JPs), also crown appointees and often local landowners as well, licensed ale-houses, decided bastardy cases, oversaw the capture of runaway apprentices or servants, fixed prices and wages in a number of trades and agricultural products, decided the interpretation and implementation of poor law policy, oversaw markets, appointed constables, assessed tax rates, and negotiated riots large and small until troops could be summoned. And those responsibilities were in addition to their more recognizably judicial roles as judges of the criminal law: hearing cases, deciding punishments in cases where they acted as judge and jury, and convening juries for serious crimes. Both lords-lieutenant and JPs came from wealthy families, and to serve in such positions was a recognition of one's local authority as well as a tacit claim that those with the greatest property had the greatest interest in preserving social stability.

Britain's Empire

Britain was more than just a disorganized collection of ancient nationalities and local governing bodies held together by a few strands of central government. It was also the center of an empire, and this had profound implications for its trade, its politics, its identity, and its culture. Even after the loss of the American colonies, Britain remained at war's end in 1815 the greatest imperial power in the world. Imperial concerns had played an increasing role in drawing Britain into military and naval conflicts throughout the eighteenth century, as imperial commercial connections came to be seen as more and more important and worth fighting for. Throughout the eighteenth century, Parliament, newspapers, magazines and public commentary focused on imperial topics: trade, war, governance, imperial architecture and foodways, and the racial, cultural and ethnic difference of "natives" everywhere.

But the term "empire" meant not a single kind of colony, a uniform system of governance, or even similar motives for acquiring and developing different plots of land. It did not mean in this period that all imperial subjects spoke the same language or received the same attention from London. The defining feature of the empire was its variability. There were the colonies of primarily white settlement: British North America, and later Canada; Cape Colony; and the colonies that would later combine to form Australia. There was the collection of states, governed partly by the British government and partly by the privately owned East India Company, that would become India. And there were acquisitions through previous centuries' war and piracy in the West Indies, the Caribbean islands dedicated to agricultural production through slave labor: Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and numerous smaller islands.

Colonies provided significant amounts of some goods, usually raw materials; but they also provided Britain with the financial and shipping resources to do business in other parts of the world. Of the ten largest British imports in the late eighteenth century, half were from Europe and only three were colonial in origin: sugar (primarily from the West Indies), raw cotton (also primarily from the West Indies in this period), and manufactured cotton and silks (from India – though this was changing rapidly). Fifty years later, Britain still imported most of its second largest import, sugar, from the West Indies, but its largest import, cotton, now came from the United States. Another significant import was timber, one-third of which came from British North America, primarily Canada. Some 30 percent of British exports went to colonial possessions in the first half of the nineteenth century, primarily to the West Indies but also significantly to Canada and India. Britain also did a large export business with the former American colonies, and with Latin America, which had never been part of the British colonial sphere.

A network of legislative acts – the Navigation Acts of the 1650s – defined that sphere economically as much as politically, binding Britain and its colonies with protective tariffs to ensure that colonial goods flowed more cheaply to Britain than elsewhere, and that British goods flowed more cheaply to the colonies than goods from other nations. The tariff system broke down in the early nineteenth century under the twin challenges of both ineffectiveness and the new political economy of free trade. In any case, by then British manufactures had become relatively less expensive globally, and so could flourish without tariff protection.

Along with iron and finished textiles, a different kind of export made its way from the British Isles to the British colonies: people. In the quarter century before 1815, about 180,000 people left England, Wales and Scotland; between 1815 and 1850, this number soared to 600,000 (with many emigrating from Ireland as well, particularly in the famine years of the 1840s). One-fifth of these emigrants traveled to imperial lands, the other four-fifths making their way to the United States.

The most controversial migrants were not voluntary, however, but forced. British imperial energies in the eighteenth century lay in the Atlantic: particularly in the vast network of shipping, finance, agricultural production, import and export underwritten by African slave labor. An average of 60,000 slaves crossed the Atlantic each year, bound primarily for the Caribbean in the early part of the century and, by its close, shifting focus to North America. They grew sugar, rice, indigo, cotton and tobacco, and served as domestic servants and even in some skilled trades. The British did not invent slavery, and indeed were part of a succession of European nations dominating the slave trade following the Portuguese, Dutch and Spanish. Still it was under the expanding Atlantic colonial economy, increasingly controlled by Britain, that slavery and the slave trade expanded most dramatically, up to its eventual abandonment under the pressure of the British anti–slave-trade movement in the early nineteenth century.

Colonies had been settled, acquired or won in such various ways and under such different kinds of British government that colonial rule remained haphazard in the early nineteenth century. Many of the Caribbean islands had self-governing assemblies, as had the American colonies before the revolution. Canada had institutions of representative government after 1791, as did Australia, which had been settled as a penal colony in 1788. Colonial governments always had a governor appointed in London, however, and local assemblies' legislation could always be overturned by the British Parliament. In 1815 this arrangement was formalized with the creation of the "crown colony," an entity ruled directly by the British state without need of local validation. This distinguished settler colonies from others, such as India, in which local rulers still ruled, and in which there was no need to introduce British styles of representative government as there were few British settlers to represent.

The Indian states had begun as purely commercial ventures with no thought of settlement in the seventeenth century. The East India Company, a joint-stock company chartered with monopoly trading privileges, owned its own ships, paid its own employees, and financed its own military protection, and in this peculiar manner carved out significant portions of India as British colonies by the late eighteenth century. The Company engaged in both peaceful and hostile trading actions that looked little different from local wars. Its employees made trading agreements with Indian princes that looked little different from treaties signed between sovereign states.

The Company collected taxes on Indian property for local rulers as part of these agreements, and so grew from a commercial operation into a vast administrative structure involved also in tax collection. It imported textiles from India, pepper from Sumatra and china, silk and tea from China. From the 1760s the Company began expanding its territory in India considerably, and its leaders expanded their responsibilities to include courts of law, armed forces, and many of the trappings of a state itself. In Britain, the Company and its leaders, with the great wealth they accrued, were often viewed as corrupt and beyond British control, and in 1773 Britain began to install government oversight on Company activities. Over the following decades, chartered company rule gradually gave way to direct government control, a process not completed until the state took over Company operations in their entirety in 1858.

Social Orders

In 1814, the Scottish author, magistrate and criminologist Patrick Colquhoun attempted a snapshot of British society in his *Treatise on the Wealth, Power, and Resources of the British Empire*. His statistical methods and accuracy leave much to be desired, but his numbers will do for a rough sense of who earned what and how in the early nineteenth century. Below the royal family and aristocracy (the "Highest Orders" comprising nearly 600 families) were the "Second Class," composed of non-titled gentlemen of considerable wealth (47,000 families), the "Third Class" of affluent clergy, lawyers, doctors, merchants, large manufacturers, and bankers (12,200 families), the "Fourth Class" of minor clergy, less notable lawyers and doctors, more modest manufacturers and merchants, prosperous shopkeepers and artists, and modest but independent farmers (233,650 families), the "Fifth Class" of small farmers, middling shopkeepers, and inn-keepers (564,800 families), the "Sixth Class" of artisans, agricultural laborers, and "others who subsist by labour in various employments" (2,126,095 families), the "Seventh, or Lowest Class" of paupers, vagrants, and criminals without any fixed labor (387,100 families), and a category of menial servants, separated out because the nature of their occupation precluded having families (1,279,923 individuals).

Colquhoun's remarkable precision should not be taken as accurate, but it provides us with a general analysis based on some of the widely shared assumptions of his era. He assumed that society was a hierarchy – an assumption few then would have questioned – and that the top of this pyramid belonged to people who had inherited titles and the land to go with them, implying also the income that derived from land. But this was not a society in which wealth or status was determined entirely by land or title, as the other "classes" make clear. The second class consisted of "gentlemen," a broad category in which income could come from several sources; the third and fourth classes were based partially on land but also on commerce or profession. British society then was a society in which few clear lines separated people and families in terms of status, but one in which status was if anything more important because of this very lack of clarity. It was not a polarized society of rich and poor, nor were wealth and status static; but it was a society of many layers shading into one another. Individuals possessed some social mobility, in that merchants could acquire titles, land and landed status, and their offspring could marry into nobility; yeoman (small farmers) could become tradesmen; tradesmen could become merchants. There existed large numbers of people between the mighty and the poor, and these, called the "middling sort" by contemporaries, themselves recognized many gradations of wealth, status, profession, and influence. Colquhoun also points out that many people were quite poor. The very poor worked as laborers or servants, in agriculture and manufacturing, or in whatever low-skilled or unskilled labor was locally available.

Given a society of many permeable layers, there was still the general belief that wealth carried with it obligations: to one's family first, of course, but also to one's civic environment (you were expected to pay taxes and serve in local offices), and to the less affluent around you. The other side of this was the deference and respect accorded to and expected by the wealthy. It is important not to overstate the degree or impact of this paternalism, or the exclusive monopoly of the affluent over civic or philanthropic activities. There were aristocrats who shunned responsibility, and conversely, there were many poor Britons who saw no need for deference – or who simply did not come into contact with the great families of the county. But the concept of a paternalistic ruling class retained force into the nineteenth century, well after actual paternalism had in fact greatly diminished.

Industrial and Other Revolutions

The starting point of this volume – 1830 – used to be regarded by historians as the endpoint of the industrial revolution. The first "industrial revolution" was seen as a collection of transformations in productivity, working conditions and power sources with dramatic results for urban change, population growth, wealth distribution, the landscape of political power and the physical landscape of industrialized Britain. At the end of the revolution, many people worked in factories rather than at home or in the fields, they lived in cities rather than the country, they derived power from steam rather than their own or their animals' labor, and vast wealth and poverty was created that shaped the contours of countless individual lives and also the very power of the British state. Without industrial change, Britain would not have become the great global military, imperial and economic power of the nineteenth century.

Contemporaries saw these changes as revolutionary as well. One author heralded in 1827 the massive consequences of the recent spread of steam power:

> To enumerate the effects of this invention would be to count every comfort and luxury of life. It has increased the sum of human happiness, not only by calling new pleasures into existence, but by so cheapening former enjoyments as to render them attainable by those who before never would have hoped to share them. Nor are its effects confined to England alone; they extend over the whole civilized world; and the savage tribes of America, Asia and Africa, must ere long feel the benefits, remote or intermediate, of this all-powerful agent.[4]

Alexis de Tocqueville, visiting the rapidly growing northern manufacturing city of Manchester in the 1830s, wrote in more mixed tones that "from this foul drain, the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilize the whole world." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels based much of their early model of class conflict on what they observed in Manchester as well.

These observations capture the themes well and also several partially submerged truths: that contemporaries did not agree about the ultimate meaning of industrial change, though many thought it momentous enough; that it altered the patterns of human consumption by changing systems of production; that it had effects not confined to Britain but acting on a global scale; and that it would have long-term impact on the world's "savages" – as many Britons thought of peoples outside Europe – as well. Within these major themes and questions, what we know about and how we discuss industrial change have themselves been under constant revision since historian Arnold Toynbee coined the term and concept of an "industrial revolution" in 1884 (Toynbee 1961). In order to make sense of the concept, it is important to separate out several different transformations and take each in turn. For what at first glance looks like one process is really at least four: increased agricultural yield, changing patterns of population growth, expanding domestic and international consumption, and increased productivity in manufacturing. These four have led historians to argue that what we once saw as unified process taking seven decades now looks like a series of interconnected changes starting early in the eighteenth century and, in many ways, still only in its early stages by 1830.

Agriculture

A necessary precondition for increased manufacturing productivity was, in the eighteenth century, increased agricultural productivity – to feed more people at a lower cost, with fewer hands working the land. Yield on land rose dramatically, and for several reasons. Farmers traditionally left some land fallow each year to replenish soil nutrients, and began introducing clover and root crops such as turnips to those fields that both returned nutrients to the soil quickly and provided feed for livestock. As the agricultural yield per acre fell in some parts of continental Europe in the early eighteenth century, production actually rose in Britain.

Tight profit margins in grain led to economizing wherever possible, and while this meant lower food prices for consumers overall, many of the means of such economizing also had negative effects on less affluent farmers. Landholders wealthy enough to hire farm laborers had for centuries employed them by the year; now they employed by the week or even the day, allowing them to lay off when business was slow. Most dramatically, between 1760 and 1815, Parliament enacted over 3,400 Enclosure Acts, as landowners purchased common lands throughout the country, and purchased parcels of land from their neighbors as well to create larger holdings. Smaller plots meant less room to experiment with new crops or production methods. As a tangible sign of this, in the century after 1750, 200,000 miles of hedges were planted in England, as much as in the previous 500 years. With larger properties, farmers could experiment and increase productivity. Farmers also applied new fertilizers like seaweed, lime and guano, and drained marshlands to bring new fields under cultivation. Fields produced more for man and beast, and both increased their numbers as a result.

Population

In 1798 Thomas Malthus, a clergyman, published *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, arguing that population growth inevitably happened more rapidly than growth in the means to sustain a given population. This, he proposed, led to misery, hunger and early death for most people – and suggested certain limits to population growth as well. What Malthus did not know at the time of writing was that the population of Britain had been expanding at a fast rate for much of the previous century. About 13 million people lived in the British Isles in 1780, rising to 15.7 million in 1801 and 24 million in 1831 – close to doubling in a half-century. The population had begun to rise in the 1730s, and spurred on by low food prices and early marriages, increased more rapidly throughout the century. As the food supply supported greater numbers of people, the economy supported their employment as well. Had it not done so, cheap food would have been meaningless.

There were social consequences to this population increase. As coal and iron deposits were found in the North, and industries developed to extract and process them, the growing population found employment in new industries by shifting through migration from south to north. With shorter agricultural labor contracts, poor and landless farm laborers were less tied geographically to one place, and moved about the country more than in the past, placing strains on the system of poor relief that relied on a more stationary workforce. The nation was also becoming increasingly urban. In 1650, only one in ten English people lived in towns larger than 10,000; in 1800, nearly one in four did so. The growth of towns resulted not from improved medical care (they continued to be seen as places of ill health, deaths exceeding births until the 1770s), but from in-migration as the rural population grew faster than rural employment. By 1700 London eclipsed Paris as the largest city in Europe, and continued to grow rapidly. In the eighteenth century one-sixth of all English men and women lived in London at some point in their lives – a far higher incidence of metropolitan living than elsewhere in Europe.

Consumption and markets

More food supported more people, and people required more than food alone to live – much more to live well. Domestic demand for manufactured goods of all kinds thus rose throughout the century, and internal trade flourished with road improvements and construction of numerous canals that sped goods around the country faster than before. For example, the Leeds and Liverpool canal began construction in 1770 and finally opened in 1816. At 127 miles, it served as the primary mode of coal transport from east to west, cutting transport costs by 80 percent between Yorkshire and Lancashire. Around mid-century more durable and smoother roads were laid down, speeding up land transport for people, produce and manufactures alike. The trip from London to Manchester by coach took 80 hours in 1750 and only 30 hours in 1821 – and this was before railways. The quantity of traffic also increased: in 1756 one coach ran daily from London to Brighton, and by 1811 there were 28 coaches every day on the same route. All this pointed to greater domestic consumption. The average family purchased £10 of British-made goods a year in 1688, £25 in 1750, and £40 in 1811. Affluent families purchased far more. Foreign trade also increased, as British North American colonies became more populous and Britain gained access to vast new colonial markets in India, particularly after mid-century. British exports to the Americas grew 687 percent, for example, from 1700 to 1770.

Contemporaries remarked often on how this massive increase in consumption and prosperity was unique to Britain, and on the social implications it brought in its wake. Fortunately there was little agreement about these. Henry Fielding, writing at mid-century, blamed crime on increasing consumption of the wealthy, which inspired the poor to ape their betters and steal to do it right. Foreign visitors remarked more positively on the relative luxury of all the classes and the dispersal of wealth throughout the nation. And Samuel Johnson claimed that easy consumption put the British in thrall to fashion and novelty, so much so that they even wanted to be "hanged in a new way."[5]

Naturally the wealthy spent the most, but such was the nature of English society that every layer might aspire to the layer above, and conspicuous consumption was one way to appear to have gotten there. The closeness of different economic