EMPIRE, STATE, AND SOCIETY

Britain since 1830

JAMIE BRONSTEIN and ANDREW HARRIS

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Jamie L. Bronstein and Andrew T. Harris

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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 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 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.

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

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).

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