

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Chris Cook, John Stevenson. *The Longman Handbook of Modern British History, 1714-1995*. London and New York: Longman, 1996. xv + 543 pp. \$21.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-29304-5.

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One thing the British love to do is to collect facts about themselves. The fact-collecting tradition in British historical writing began with the anonymous nineteenth-century originator of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. This work listed events and kingships in the history of Anglo-Saxon Britain and was subsequently continued, for several centuries, by monks labouring in obscurity in a number of monasteries scattered around England. Admittedly the *Chronicle* produced some pretty boring history, but the whole fact-collecting genre emerged in a recognizably modern form with Gregory King's *Natural and Political Observations and Conclusions upon the State and Condition of England* (1696). King was secretary to the Commissioners of the Public Accounts, and employed statistics to portray a highly stratified English society. Other noteworthy contributors to the genre included Patrick Colquhoun, whose *Treatise on the Wealth, Power, and Resources of the British Empire* (1814) used official census statistics to provide a somewhat more sophisticated analysis of British society. One could imagine that these early fact-collectors were vaguely patriotic in their motives. 'This is who we are, this is where we came from,' they seemed to be saying.

A new twist in fact-collecting emerged in the nineteenth century. Social reformers took to using facts and statistics to demonstrate the need for dramatic reforms. The Fabians of the early twentieth century perfected the new form, but practically everyone did it. In undertaking the research for *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) George Orwell felt it absolutely essential to get his facts straight. The fact-filled Beveridge report of 1942 changed the course of British history. Social reformers knew what was wrong with Britain, the facts proved it, and the solutions were obvious.[1]

Readers would be hard pressed to find a reformist agenda in third edition of *The Longman Handbook of Modern British History, 1714-1995*, though in fairness to the editors they make no such claims for their book. However, the cover illustration on the paperback version (showing a crowd of flag-waving children at a V-E street party awaiting the arrival of the Prince of Wales) suggests a resurgence of patriotism in the fact-collecting genre. Perhaps aware of their lineage, the editors have included tables from both King and Colquhoun (pp. 202-204).

It would be almost cliché to say that this book should stand as an indispensable reference work, but so it should, and deservedly so. If unlikely to completely displace earlier contributions to the genre,[2] it certainly ranks as the most up-to-date and user-friendly of such volumes.

The editors have not made many substantial changes in overall organization since the first edition. The book is divided into four sections dealing with political history, social and religious history, economic history and foreign affairs and defense. Three additional sections follow, a section providing capsule biographies of prominent British historical figures, a glossary of terms and the ever-valuable topic bibliography. Naturally, all tables and chronologies have been brought 'up to date', meaning to the end of 1995. The book was published prior to the most recent general election, but Tony Blair does make an appearance in the biographies, with the editors noting that Blair's adoption of a 'right wing agenda' and 'centrist policies' has 'aroused undercurrents of hostility to his style of leadership' (p. 345). There are some interesting and welcome new additions. The political history chapter now has a sub-section providing the results of the European elections. The sub-section titled

'Famous by-elections, 1918-95' makes for hugely entertaining reading, and should probably be re-named 'The history of British political giant-killers.' There is a new, three-page sub-section on environmental history, dealing mainly with legislation, royal commission reports and disasters. The chapter on religious history contains a very, very short table giving the numbers of practicing Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Sikhs in Britain, 1970-1993. Finally, the sub-section dealing with the grim history of 'Other parties' in Britain has been expanded.

This book is valuable for a number of reasons. The amount of information is immense, while the layout and format are accessible and logical. There is very little that cannot be found in a matter of minutes. In addition to all the obvious items (a list of prime ministers, lists of principal ministers, treaties, chronologies of events, tables of exports and imports, breakdowns of religious affiliation) there are the sorts of nuggets that are always needed but often difficult to find. Need to know how many people could vote in Britain in the 1860s? You will find the answer on page ninety, conveniently expressed in overall numbers, portion of the adult male population and percentage of the adult population. Similarly, the sub-section recording the results of general elections (pp. 93-108) gives not only the results of the elections (expressed both in terms of numbers of seats for each major party and percentage share of the popular vote) but also a capsule summary of events leading up to each election. A particularly valuable section of the book is the topic bibliography. A total of thirty-two topics are covered, ranging from the reign of Queen Anne to the Thatcher era. The number of topics dealing with Britain since 1945 has been increased. The editors have provided a brief overview of each topic, suggested essay questions, plus lists of secondary works, articles, sources and documents.

At times readers might find themselves wishing for some context to accompany the tables and statistics. This is particularly true of the economic history section. The editors provide capsule definitions for the Schumpeter-Gilboy price index, the Rousseaux price index and the Sauerbeck-Statist index (pp. 256-58), but what explains the fluctuations in numbers from year to year? Similarly the table 'Crimes known to the police, 1857-1994' (p. 190) apparently shows a fairly horrific increase in crime in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s. The table cer-

tainly explains why crime has been such a constant topic of political debate in Britain lately. But what accounts for the increase? Have crime reporting procedures improved? Are the police getting better at their job and catching more criminals? Or can the problem be traced to deeper, social and political problems? The editors obviously want to present the information and leave interpretations to the reader, but readers might have found a few words of context (as in the 'General elections' sub-section) useful.

This book is most valuable for university instructors, graduate students and upper-level undergraduates. Given the overall price of textbooks these days, I would be reluctant to recommend it for first to third year undergraduates.

There is something reassuring about seeing historians down in the trenches, digging for facts, trying to get the story straight. The zeal for reform may have temporarily disappeared from the fact-collecting tradition, but Cook and Stevenson have provided an organized and accessible volume in an era of information overload, and the rest of us should thank them.

NOTES

[1]. Some of the works cited here include: D. White-lock, D. Douglas and S. Tucker (editors), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, (New Brunswick, N.J., 1961); P. Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Wealth, Power and Resources of the British Empire*, 2nd edition, (London, J. Mauman, 1815; New York, Johnson Reprint, 1965); G. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1962); and *Report of the Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services (Beveridge Report)*, (H.M.S.O., 1942).

[2]. Many compiled by the editors of the volume under review. See: C. Cook and J. Stevenson, *British Historical Facts, 1688-1760*, (Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1988); C. Cook and J. Stevenson, *British Historical Facts, 1760-1830*, (Hamden, Archon, 1980); C. Cook and B. Keith (editors), *British Historical Facts, 1830-1900*, (London, Macmillan, 1975); and D. Butler, *British Political Facts, 1900-1985*, 6th edition, (London, Macmillan, 1985).

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