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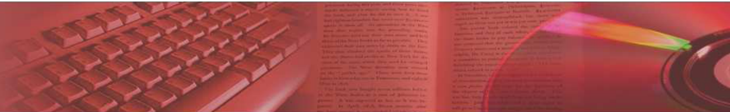

Kenneth O. Morgan, ed. *The Oxford Illustrated History of Britain.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. xiv + 646 pp. $26.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-289326-0.

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Still Relevant After All These Years

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There was a time when the importance of British history was self-evident. Every schoolroom map of the world glowed pink: the color inexplicably chosen to represent the King-Emperor's dominions. On every continent and the high seas Britons brought order, good government, and, not least, high quality consumer goods to the world. In America, constitutional government was a British gift, George III notwithstanding. In a new century, however, these certainties have lost some of their power. The British Empire is no more, and many historians have become dubious about the benefits of British government and commerce. Britain's current role in the world is that of a power of the second rank, whose future many believe lies within the European Union. And yet Britain's current reduced status should not blind us to the nation's historical importance, which is immense. Kenneth Morgan and nine other distinguished historians provide a welcome reminder of this fact in the Oxford Illustrated History of Britain.

First published in 1984 and reissued several times since, most recently this year, *The Oxford Illustrated History* remains perhaps the best single-volume treatment of its subject available. Its ten chapters cover British history from before the Roman invasion to the rise of Margaret Thatcher, and each is written by one of the best scholars in the field. Most books written by committee suffer as successive re-writes squeeze individual prose styles into the most acceptable (that is, most bland) text. That is not the case here; individual styles remain, though they do not jar, and the whole is refreshingly readable. Nor are the authors afraid to challenge old shibboleths, as when John Guy takes on the overblown reputation of Elizabeth I in his chapter. The book's illustrations (including two dozen color plates) are well chosen and do much to enhance the text, as do its clearly-presented maps. This is a volume for scholars interested in the thinking of major historians as well as for the student or general reader who wants to read a fascinating, well-told story.

The history of a nation over the course of two millennia could easily become a jumble of random facts, overwhelming readers with characters as diverse as Boudicca (the female leader of a violent revolt against Roman occupation) to Bevin (the architect of the modern welfare state). But what holds the story together and makes it comprehensible are the broader themes connecting one generation to the next. An obvious one here is continuity: Britons' preference for evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, change. Even the upheavals of the seventeenth century, civil war, Charles I's execution in 1649 and the overthrow of James II in 1688 seem by contrast to the titanic events of 1789 in France or 1917 in Russia hardly "revolutionary." Some historians indeed have argued that there never was a revolution in Britain. John Morrill, in his chapter on the Stuarts, sympathizes with this view. The survival of the monarchy, not to mention the forms and procedures of the common law, add to the sense of Britain's unique nature. The "pomp and circumstance" industry thrives in the United Kingdom today, but even in Roman times foreign visitors commented on the British obsession with ritual and tradition.

This stress upon Britain's uniqueness underlies Morgan's introduction and his own chapter, covering the twentieth century. But British exceptionalism does not, in fact, dominate the volume, and rightly so. British insularity has never prevented the import of foreign customs and ideas, from the Germanic notion of a jury to the American hamburger. Through most of British history, as much of this book shows, Britain did not stand alone. "Splendid isolation" was largely a nineteenth century phenomenon, and, compared to Britain's broader history, quite brief. In the centuries before the Roman occupation, Britain was part of a wider Celtic culture. Between 43 and 84 AD Britain was absorbed within the Roman Empire and Roman culture dominated. As Peter Salway makes clear, Britain was a province of consider-

able importance, contributing precious metals, food and wine to the metropolis. Indeed, by the fourth century Britain was exporting Emperors, as British legions elevated their commanders to the purple.

The next phase of British interdependence was the arrival of Germanic, and then Scandinavian, settlers and adventurers. These invasions pulled Britain out of Rome's cultural orbit and fixed it firmly within what John Blair calls "the same broad culture as southern Scandinavia, Germany, and northern France" (p. 55). The struggles among the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Danes, and Norwegians over Britain created, by the tenth century, "Anglo-Saxon" England.

Cultural, economic, and political ties between England and Europe altered dramatically in 1066, when England became a possession of the Dukes of Normandy. For the next three centuries, Britain's connections shifted south, to France. Though some historians have downplayed the significance of William I's conquest, John Gillingham points out that for the upper reaches of English society, at any rate, its consequences were catastrophic: some 4,000 Anglo-Saxon thegns were displaced by no more than two hundred Norman barons. William's *Domesday Book* of 1087 lists no Anglo-Saxon landowner of any importance. The French language, and French cultural models, dominated English life, and for long stretches during the period from 1066-1450 England was an appendage of a wider empire whose heart was in France. The continental territories of the English kings waxed and waned; in 1204 John lost Normandy, while his descendant, Henry VI, was crowned King of France in Paris. But throughout France remained a powerful presence in English life: in the thirteenth century Edward I spoke better French than English; "Parliament" (a French word) developed at least in part to fund the English presence in France; laws were written in French; and French was (until well into the seventeenth century) the language of the courts.

Paradoxically, it was during England's "French phase" that some of the most important elements of British (English, really) uniqueness appear. Constant warfare drew kings abroad for long periods, and administration had to continue in their absence. As a result, England developed a government more centralized and efficient than most other continental states. The sheriff, later surpassed in importance by justices of the peace, carried out government in the king's name, but served voluntarily and without pay. The result was a government whose reach was long, but whose instruments, serving for no reward save honor, were highly autonomous. In his chapter R.A. Griffiths also stresses the importance of the gradual rise of English in the later Middle Ages as more than merely the vernacular tongue. Here, the work of Chaucer is the preeminent example, but perhaps as important in the long run were the nameless Lollard heretics who copied and passed, hand-to-hand, English versions of Scripture.

Another important part of the puzzle of "Britishness" was related, in fact, to these anonymous heretics: the Reformation. The foundation of the Church of England was, of course, part of a wider European phenomenon. But by Elizabeth I's reign the Church had become a focal point of national identity, a role it continued to play through the eighteenth century. John Guy's contribution, covering the Tudor period, traces the growing importance of the Protestant religion in the British Isles, particularly in England and Scotland.

With the English language and Protestant religion as the bedrock of British exceptionalism, the Stuarts and Hanoverians added its foundation: politics and Empire. The tumultuous seventeenth century, with its civil wars, regicide, and finally the constitutional settlement of 1689, created a unique political structure, further reinforced by the formal incorporation of Scotland into a new Great Britain in 1707. The Hanoverian kings learned to deal with limits set on their powers by the settlement of 1689, and by 1760 they presided over a state whose command of national resources was unprecedented, and the young George III reigned over a world-wide Empire.

Britain's world importance was firmly established in the century from 1760 to 1860. Not even the loss of the American colonies in 1783 seriously weakened British hegemony. Victory over Napoleon, industrialization, and political reform made nineteenth century Britain an international exemplar. Its institutions, business practices, and not least, its ideas spread throughout the world. Paul Langford and Christopher Harvie ably trace the rapid rise of Britain's fortunes from 1688-1851, and the late Colin Matthew had the privilege of describing Britain at its zenith, brilliantly done, all the more so for his ability to convey the factors which would lead to its later decline: industrial competition from abroad, imperial overstretch, and complacency. The Great War put an end to British dominance, though most Britons were slow to appreciate that fact.

Kenneth Morgan's rather depressing job is to explain Britain's twentieth century decline. The Great War undermined British confidence and the Second World War, though it inspired heroism from Buckingham Palace all the way down to the slums of the industrial cities, nev-

ertheless made British weakness manifest. Since 1945 Britain has again conformed to the pattern of earlier centuries: a medium sized power, taking its cues from the continent. Although in Morgan's view, British independence, symbolized by devotion to the monarchy, remains robust, recent years suggest that some of his confidence may be misplaced. The current Labour government, for example, is committed to the European single currency, and now even the Conservatives are led by a pro-European. Moreover, the recent troubles afflicting the Royal family have caused some to question the institution of monarchy itself.

The Oxford Illustrated History is a superb book. Anyone interested in the impact that a single nation can have on the world will find this account a valuable one, describing the rise and fall of a hegemonic power. These chapters tell a compelling story very well, and cannot but remind us of the enormous British contribution to what we call "western civilization." Some of the views it expounds appear dated at this remove (Morgan's account of the popularity of the monarchy being one) and throughout the emphasis is emphatically English. The Celts remain firmly on the fringe. Nevertheless, readers looking for a concise, well illustrated, one-volume history of Britain, can do no better than this.

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