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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sean Glynn, Alan Booth. *Modern Britain: An Economic and Social History.* London and New York: Routledge, 1996. ix + 374 pp. $42.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-10473-9; $105.00 (library), ISBN 978-0-415-10472-2.

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Sean Glynn and Alan Booth's authoritative new textbook is essentially an economic history of Britain since World War I, with brief discussions of social issues. The book is divided into two sections, one on the interwar period and one on the period since World War II. Each section contains detailed chapters exploring Britain's international and domestic economic policies, industrial development, social policies, living standards, unemployment, and the labor market. A chapter on the World War II economy bridges the two periods. These fourteen chapters offer different perspectives on the authors' central theme, Britain's relative economic decline in the twentieth century. While accepting that a degree of economic decline was inevitable, the book investigates two questions related to that decline: whether Britain's economic leadership could have been maintained into the twentieth century, and whether British living standards could have kept pace with those of the rest of the industrial world.

Glynn and Booth remind readers throughout the book that if Britain's performance were considered in isolation rather than in comparison with other industrialized countries, "Britain's material and social progress since 1914 would surely be regarded as something truly remarkable" (p. 2), and this is an important point. But after a lengthy review of policy choices and external constraints, the authors tentatively conclude that the British economy could have done even better. In particular, they identify inadequate training and skills among managers and workers, as well as a shortage of technological expertise, as factors that restrained the ability of British firms to compete internationally, and therefore this also limited economic growth. Furthermore, they find that government efforts to overcome these obstacles were only "intermittent" and never completely successful (p. 326).

This work is presented as a textbook for entry-level college students and advanced high-school students. Based on my experience teaching American students (and I realize that there are important differences in the British market), this book might pose some difficulties for the typical American undergraduate. The language is often fairly technical. Some terms likely to be unfamiliar to students are clearly explained (the gold standard, the balance of payments system), but others (stagflation, the stop-go cycle) are not. Students with a background in economics would be best prepared to understand this book. Discussions of social policy contain mouthfuls of acronyms (NAB, SBC, FIS and SERPS all appear in pages 210-212, for example) whose referents might be quickly forgotten. In addition, the book's numerous statistical tables and graphs are not always incorporated into the textual discussion, so that students might simply skip over them. The authors have generally done a good job of integrating their separate contributions, but smoother editing might have made the book more accessible for undergraduate use: four chapters contain useful summaries at the end, but the other ten do not, and there is no overall conclusion to the book.

That said, however, I think this book would be very useful for graduate students, many of whom need a rigorous introduction to the major debates over Britain's economic performance in this period, or for any historian wanting to brush up on recent literature. The authors do an excellent job of presenting all the current debates with a wide range of arguments and explanations for every question, then critiquing those arguments one by one. They have clearly done an exhaustive review of the relevant literature. This does, of course, often result in the sort of conclusion in which not much can really be concluded, an approach which would be provocative for graduate students but, again, likely to frustrate many undergraduates. Indeed, so cautious are the authors about appearing impartial that they carefully discuss even the arguments of their own previous books in the third person, with no indication of any connection. Since both authors have written extensively in this field, I would have welcomed a stronger expression of their own opinions here.

Modern Britain is unusual in its chronological parameters, and it therefore fills a noticeable gap in the existing literature. Most economic histories either adopt a much longer time frame (from the eighteenth century up to the present) or cover only half the twentieth century, either before or after World War II.[1] Those surveys that do follow this chronology do not offer the same degree of historiographical analysis on every issue.[2] Professors whose courses follow a 1919-1996 periodization and want a strong economic emphasis will find few competitors to this work.

But to go back to the book's title, social history gets short shrift here. Someone wanting a book for an undergraduate course in British economic and social history, or as a complement to a political text in a more general course, might well look at another recent offering, *20th Century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change.*[3] Though I have not used it in class, that book, featuring articles by multiple authors with numerous illustrations, provides more balanced coverage of social and cultural issues and is written in more accessible language.

In conclusion, *Modern Britain* offers a valuable and balanced review of the major debates in twentieth- century British economic history suitable for graduate students and possibly advanced undergraduates.

Notes

[1]. One longer-run survey is R. Floud and D. McCloskey, eds., *The Economic History of Britain since 1700*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1994). There are numerous books dealing with either the interwar period or the period since World War II.

[2] Examples include G.C. Peden, *British Economic and Social Policy: Lloyd George to Margaret Thatcher* (Oxford: Phillip Allan, 1985), and Sidney Pollard, *The Development of the British Economy, 1914-1990* (London, 1992).

[3]. Paul Johnson, ed., *20th Century Britain: Economic, Social and Cultural Change* (London: Longman, 1994).

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