

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Frank Trentmann. *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. 400 S. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-920920-0.

Reviewed by Anthony Howe (School of History, University of East Anglia)

Published on H-Albion (June, 2009)

Commissioned by Mark Hampton



Whose Free Trade Nation?

In *Free Trade Nation* Frank Trentmann brilliantly reconstructs the story of the Edwardian peak of popular enthusiasm for Free Trade in Britain (his account is deliberately and emphatically upper case), and the rapid dissolution of the secular religion of Free Trade in the post-1914 world. Whereas earlier accounts have confined themselves to the rise and fall of free trade (lower case),[1] exploring the transformation of free trade ideas from the anti-corn law movement into a popular political language in the 1860s and 1870s, and its efflorescence in the election of 1906, Trentmann identifies Free Trade as central to a distinctive British political culture which embraced democracy, the citizen-consumer, and civil society; he is at his best in depicting the popular political world of the Edwardian period as the modern media, posters, postcards, films, were turned on voters and non-voters, housewives, and seaside visitors, especially in the electoral battles of 1910. This Free Trade Nation was one in which Joseph Chamberlain's campaign for Tariff Reform was necessarily marginalized (although Trentmann says relatively little about the comparative dimensions of the popular movement for tariff reform), and oddly, like Jane Cobden Unwin's *The Hungry Forties* (1904), this is a Free Trade Nation which omits any discussion of Ireland.

While much in Trentmann's account of the Edwardian peak of free trade will be familiar to the specialist, the real innovative weight of this volume lies in providing the most thorough and lucid exploration we have of the erosion of the free trade consensus after 1914. This includes a particularly illuminating discussion of the tran-

sition from the politics of cheap bread to the postwar politics of clean milk as well as a stimulating account of the "new internationalism" of the 1920s as those progressive thinkers, who would in an earlier generation have been enthusiastic Cobdenites, discovered the necessity for the regulation of the international economy. As foreshadowed in his earlier articles, Trentmann traces the gradual abandonment of free trade by the business community and unravels the complexity of Labour's qualified attachment to free trade ideas. His account of the final days of Free Trade is important less for its immediate content but for ambitiously explaining how the space vacated by the secular religion of Free Trade was filled by imperial consumers (as the tariff reform movement attempted to move its appeal from the realm of production to that of consumption), by Labour's promotion of the "Living Wage," and by a congeries of policies, from Right and Left, designed to manage the interwar domestic and international economy.

More generally, the novelty of this account lies in its pioneering attempt to turn the attention of political historians away from elections and parties towards an understanding of consumption and citizenship as central to the nature of political culture in twentieth-century Britain. Trentmann also takes full advantage of the last ten years of public discussion of fair trade and globalization in order to put his research in a complex contemporary context, and in so doing deserves a wide readership. Some readers may question whether his concentration on "Free Trade" is always the most productive

approach, for the history of free trade always included many who adopted a more qualified approach (significantly many contemporary free traders, including some cited here, did not capitalize free trade) and many who simply saw it as preferable to tariff reform or protection; it is therefore too bold to posit that “Free Trade” became “free trade” in the 1930s. Finally, the characterization of Britain as the Free Trade Nation, although obviously true at a state level, perhaps strikes too totalizing a note, and Trentmann might have profitably explained the transition from free trade as a limited epitome of “Liberal Eng-

land” to “Free Trade” as the defining characteristic of the (but whose?) “Nation”: after all, in 1910, the Conservatives promoting tariff reform won over half the popular vote. Even so, such specialist doubts in no way qualify the intellectual pleasure which this carefully constructed, engagingly written, finely illustrated, and suitably well-marketed, book will provide for its readers.

Note

[1]. *Inter alia*, A. Howe, *Free Trade and Liberal England, 1846-1946* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Anthony Howe. Review of Trentmann, Frank, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. June, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24867>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.