

**Roger Middleton.** *The British Economy since 1945: Engaging with the Debate.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000. xix + 198 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-22862-0.



**Reviewed by** Alan Booth

**Published on** EH.Net (July, 2000)

This is another textbook treatment of British economic performance since 1945 in a market that, if not nearing saturation point, is certainly crowded. This book is designed for the real beginner, and assumes comparatively little previous knowledge of either recent British economic history or the methods of the economic historian. It is part of a series, *British History in Perspective*, which provides for first year undergraduates an overview of a problem area in historical interpretation, giving a guide to the literature, principal themes and competing interpretations. This is the first volume of the series to deal with an economic topic. Accordingly, the book begins with compelling arguments for studying economic history and tries to establish a basic toolkit with which students can interrogate British economic performance. The author (Reader in the History of Political Economy at the University of Bristol, UK) knows his intended readership and undertakes these tasks with skill. He presents the introductory economics in the text, but the core arithmetical and statistical techniques are relegated to an appendix—one must not frighten the horses! Thereafter, the material is organized in a rather uncon-

ventional way, being extremely state-centered and policy-oriented. There are separate chapters on economic performance, economic policies (more accurately, the goals of policy-makers) and the effectiveness of policy. In truth, the book's design and content would be more accurately described as *British Economic Policy and Performance since 1945* and, for those who know Middleton's work, it is essentially the postwar sections of his *Government versus the Market* (Edward Elgar, 1996), up-dated and in a form accessible to first year undergraduates. In one very important respect, however, it goes beyond the previous book and is more interesting as a result.

Middleton has become much more sensitized to the problems of presenting British economic history since 1945 within the grand narrative of decline and missed opportunities for faster growth and improved competitiveness. He establishes solid performance criteria and emphasizes that Britain's economic record was "poor" only during the 1970s and at other times should be more accurately described as "adequate." This enables him to contrast a "popular" discourse of ab-

ject failure and a "British disease" with a more considered, "academic" picture in which the critiques of Britain's managers, workers, institutions and policy regime are less persuasive and easily substantiated than commonly believed. Indeed, this is an encouragingly post-modern textbook, arguing that a single grand narrative is most unlikely, given the complex web of economic and political interactions that determine national economic performance.

But Middleton has thrown off only some of the shackles of past interpretations. He concludes that Britain's economic performance can be understood in terms of a complex interaction of market and non-market failures. He faithfully reports and endorses the existing literature with its emphases on weaknesses on the supply side of manufacturing and limited convergence towards US levels of (manufacturing) productivity. At the same time, he makes some use of Broadberry's findings that the US and the major European countries "overtaken" the British economy by transferring resources from low productivity agriculture into higher productivity manufacturing and service occupations and by relative productivity advance in services, but that there is no obvious trend in Britain's relative performance in manufacturing. If Broadberry is correct, and the outlines of his argument are very compelling, even the core "academic" literature on British economic performance since 1945 can be questioned more heartily and persuasively than Middleton ventures. Its preoccupation with manufacturing appears excessive and the comparative lack of attention to agriculture and services is quite shameful. The comparative weakness of Britain's service sector does not lend itself easily to Middleton's state-centered, policy-oriented approach, but a more penetrating analysis of agricultural policy could have been expected. Thus, given his attempt to encourage students to engage with the debate, it is a pity that Middleton did not press his post-modern agenda much farther even to the extent of questioning whether the period since 1945 is

really an appropriate one for assessing the national economy.

Copyright (c) 2000 by EH.NET. All rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational uses if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact the EH.NET Administrator (administrator@eh.net; Telephone: 513-529-2850; Fax: 513-529-3308).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <http://eh.net/>

**Citation:** Alan Booth. Review of Middleton, Roger. *The British Economy since 1945: Engaging with the Debate*. EH.Net, H-Net Reviews. July, 2000.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4372>



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