
**Reviewed by** Nan H. Dreher

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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 unfamil-
iar to students are clearly explained (the gold
standard, the balance of payments system), but
others (stagflation, the stop-go cycle) are not. Stu
dents with a background in economics would be
best prepared to understand this book. Discussi
ons 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 al
ways incorporated into the textual discussion, so
that students might simply skip over them. The
authors have generally done a good job of inte
grating their separate contributions, but smoother
editing might have made the book more accessi
ble 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 excel
lent 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 ap
proach which would be provocative for graduate
students but, again, likely to frustrate many un
dergraduates. Indeed, so cautious are the authors
about appearing impartial that they carefully dis
cuss 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 fol
low this chronology do not offer the same degree
of historiographical analysis on every issue.[2]
Professors whose courses follow a 1919-1996 peri
odization 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 politi
cal 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 ar
icles by multiple authors with numerous illustra
tions, provides more balanced coverage of social
and cultural issues and is written in more accessi
ble language.

In conclusion, Modern Britain offers a valu
able and balanced review of the major debates in
twentieth- century British economic history suit
able 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 Eco
nomic and Social Policy: Lloyd George to Mar
garet Thatcher (Oxford: Phillip Allan, 1985), and
Sidney Pollard, The Development of the British

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