Modern Britain, 1750 to the Present

This wide-ranging introduction to the history of modern Britain extends from the eighteenth century to the present day. James Vernon's distinctive history is woven around an account of the rise, fall and reinvention of liberal ideas about how markets, governments and empires should work. It is a history that takes seriously the different experiences within the British Isles and the British Empire, and offers a global history of Britain. Instead of tracing how Britons made the modern world, Vernon shows how the world shaped the course of Britain's modern history. Richly illustrated with figures and maps, the book features textboxes (on particular people, places and sources), further reading guides, highlighted key terms and a glossary. A supplementary online package includes additional primary sources, discussion questions and further reading suggestions, including useful links. This textbook is an essential resource for introductory courses on the history of modern Britain.

James Vernon is Professor of History at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of Politics and the People (1993), Hunger: A Modern History (2007) and Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern (2014), and the editor of Rereading the Constitution (1996), The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity in Imperial Britain (2011) and the 'Berkeley Series in British Studies' for the University of California Press. He is also on the editorial boards of Social History, Twentieth Century British History and Journal of British Studies.
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IV Modern Britain: 1750 to the Present
To my teachers and students
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Preface

There are countless histories of modern Britain but little agreement about what it is, when it was, where it happened, who was part of it, or how it should be told. These histories share similar titles but cover different periods of time, extend across different geographical areas and tell very different stories. This is as it should be. History is about debate and interpretation. What some have recently dubbed the ‘History Wars’ are a set of arguments about how the national past should be understood and taught. As countries become demographically and culturally more diverse, politicians frequently offer increasingly prescriptive versions of their national pasts. In 2015 the British prime minister David Cameron claimed that ‘British values’ of democracy, equality, tolerance and the rule of law were rooted in a national history that stretched back 800 years. Those seeking to become British citizens are tested on a similar version of this national history and it is often proposed that this is the history British school children should be taught through the National Curriculum.

Those who advocate such histories complain that in recent decades an emphasis on economic, social and cultural history has undermined the seamless and self-congratulatory chronological narrative of the past anchored in political history. Once economic, social and cultural historians insisted that the experience of ordinary Britons – women and men of all classes, as well as people of all colours and creeds – had to be included in the national history, the question was to what degree they would change it. Similarly, as historians began to recognize the different roles of Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England in Britain’s history, as well as their entanglement with continental Europe, the British Empire, and the rest of the world, it became increasingly difficult to imagine the national past as an ‘island story’ that stopped on the shores of the British Isles.

While our knowledge of British history is broader and richer in many ways, it remains hampered by two critical absences. The first is any sustained account of Britain’s economic history and its local and global footprint. At a historical moment when the changing forms, locations and injuries of capitalism are painfully evident, they have receded from view in accounts of our national past. The second is the lack of an organizing narrative that can explain not just what changed, but why it did so. The task of the historian is not just to detail many historical events and processes but to explain their causes and relationships to each other within an overarching narrative. Without such a narrative we are all prey to the whitewashed and triumphalist versions of the national history championed by politicians.
Building on these debates, the aims of this book can be summarized as follows:

- To structure the history of Britain since 1750 around an account of the rise, fall and reinvention of what I will call **liberal political economy**. Liberal political economy was a cluster of assumptions about how governments, populations and empires worked best in relationship to each other when markets were made to operate freely.

- To propose that this process in Britain had a global history. This liberal political economy was germinated within the British Empire and had a world system built around it, but events, processes and peoples far beyond the **British world** shaped the history of its rise, demise and reinvention. In this sense Britons did not make the modern world; the world helped to make modern Britain.

- To offer a clear account and explanation of change over time. Accordingly, the book is structured around five chronological sections, each (except the last) with three thematic chapters that move from politics to economy and society. Each chapter contains a timeline of key events and is set up to explain a key transformation that reshaped the lives of Britons and often many others across the Empire and globe.

- To provide an accessible yet challenging book that can be used to teach British history across the English-speaking world. Having taught in Britain and the United States of America, I have tried to write a book that is comprehensible to students in North America with no prior knowledge of British history, while also covering material and presenting arguments that will be unfamiliar to those taught in Britain and the so-called former British world. A glossary of highlighted key-terms is included at the end of the book. Each chapter also contains textboxes that focus on particular people and places that were part of the processes the chapter explores, as well as sources through which the budding historian might conduct research.

- To be teachable as a set text in British history courses that cover the modern period over a semester or an academic year. The thirteen chapters mostly have four sections that may be assigned as introductory readings for two or three lectures a week. The guides to further reading and the additional primary source materials as well as study questions curated on the website provide sufficient material to stretch those taking a year-long class.

### Where is Britain?

This may seem like a strange question given that the British Isles are located in northwest Europe at the easterly edge of the Atlantic Ocean. The Atlantic reaches Britain’s northern coastline that faces a distant Iceland, while its eastern coast encounters the North Sea and looks across to Norway, Denmark and the Netherlands. Britain’s southern coast meets the slim English Channel where Belgium, France and Spain lie in the distance. Already in that description of its location we are forced to confront Britain’s difficult national question.
Even though it is not uncommon for the English, like those who live in other countries, to interchangeably use the terms England, Britain and the UK (United Kingdom), each has its own history and politics. England is just one of four nations in what was called, after Acts of Union with Scotland (1707) and Ireland (1800), the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. England had claimed dominion over Cornwall (which some consider Britain's fifth nation) and Wales since at least the eleventh century, but the alliance with Scotland, as well as the effective conquest of Ireland, required the creation of a single unified nation-state as well as a new sense of British national identity.

This process of imperial integration involved negotiation, compromise and armed conflict. Thus while both Scotland and Ireland lost their own Parliaments, Scotland maintained a separate legal and educational system and gained its own Church of Scotland. Union and English domination also catalysed nationalist reactions in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Cornwall. At some point nationalist groups in all these countries armed themselves to resist English rule, but war actually broke out in Scotland and Ireland. While the Jacobite rebellions in eighteenth-century Scotland were defeated, armed conflict in Ireland continued sporadically for over a century before the Irish Free State was established in southern Ireland. This deeply controversial division of the island of Ireland in 1922 meant that the United Kingdom now represented ‘Great Britain and Northern Ireland’ (see Map 0.1). It also left Irish republicans campaigning, sometimes militarily, for independence for all of Ireland. Always a fiction, the idea of a United Kingdom remains in question today. In the final decades of the twentieth century, nationalist calls for devolution and independence were rewarded with the creation in 1998 of National Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland and the Scottish Parliament, each of which moderates rule from London. While the prospect of full independence for Scotland was defeated in a referendum in 2014, the Scottish National Party remains committed to independence and currently forms the government of Scotland.

Britain was not just a composite nation-state. It was also an imperial state that restlessly expanded its areas of influence and territorial sovereignty throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries (see Map 0.2). Across the political spectrum there were those who characterized this as a natural and beneficial process. The emigration of Britons overseas, they believed, had created a British world or ‘Greater Britain’ of English-speaking peoples that helped civilize the world by entrenching institutions rooted in Anglo-Saxon legal and political traditions. Of course this pattern of British settlement in North America (in what became the United States and Canada), Australia, New Zealand and South Africa depended upon the conquest of indigenous peoples no less than did those colonies in the Caribbean, Asia, the Pacific, Africa or the Middle East that were the product of war, invasion or commercial control. At its zenith in 1919 Britons could claim that the sun never set on their empire. It stretched over a quarter of the globe and included 458 million people, almost a third of the world’s population, spread across 13 million square miles.
Map 0.1 Map of Britain as the United Kingdom of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland after 1922
Map 0.2 Map of the expanding British Empire in 1688, 1763, 1899 and 1920
In Salman Rushdie’s 1988 novel *The Satanic Verses* a character called Whisky Sisodia ruminates, ‘The trouble with the English is that their history happened overseas, so they don’t know what it means.’ Remarkably, although racially diverse Britain was then made up of people from across its former colonies, and London remained the most cosmopolitan city in the world with over 250 languages spoken there, that still rang true. Certainly for far too long historians either forgot Britons’ deep and varied relationships with Europe, their empire and the rest of the globe, or presumed that the relationship ran one way with all the influence emanating from Britain. Now that Britain no longer has an empire, and its role in Europe let alone the rest of the globe is uncertain, most historians acknowledge that Britain’s economy, its systems of government, its understanding of social relations and of cultural hierarchies have all been indelibly marked by the world beyond its shores. Few any longer deny that British imperialism spread little but slavery, violence, disease, economic underdevelopment and political subjugation. Britain’s emergence as the world superpower depended on these forms of exploitation. However, as a history of Britain since 1750, this book does not pretend to be either a history of the British Empire or a history of each of the four nations Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales. As these all demand books unto themselves, it is only their role in forging the history of Britain that I can address in the pages that follow.

**When was Britain Modern?**

Just as histories of modern Britain have different geographical foci, so they span wildly different periods of time. Invariably, especially in a series like this one, historians divide the world into distinct periods and eras – the ancient, the medieval, the early modern and the modern. These categories were largely the product of a European model of history and are generally associated with the end of the Roman Empire, the Renaissance and the French Revolution. Of course, the character and timing of these historical epochs, as well as their location in Europe, are always debated. When the modern age begins depends upon what you think distinguishes it from the early modern period. Historians pick moments to signal the arrival of the modern world depending on when they think the phenomena that best characterize its novelty were first present in the country they study. Historians of Britain variously identify its transition to the modern age with the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in the *Glorious Revolution* of 1688; its emergence as a global power in the *Seven Years’ War* in 1763; the invention of the spinning jenny that revolutionized textile production and ushered in a new form of industrial capitalism from 1764; the consolidation of Britain’s supremacy in Europe at the *Congress of Vienna* in 1814–15; the major reforms of its political system between 1829 and 1835; its hosting of the world’s first major trade fair at the *Great Exhibition* of 1851; or the emergence of new technologies of communication and mass political
movements from the 1870s. The chances are that if you are taking a class on modern British history it will have started at one of these dates.

This book begins in 1750, although its first three chapters look back to developments that mostly began in the late seventeenth century. There was little in 1750 that would seem familiar to us but many of the features of the world we inhabit today began to emerge from that date. And, critically, it was from the 1750s that a growing critique of the old order, of Britain’s ancien régime, began to animate and give force to demands for a more liberalized political and economic order. The book ends at the present for it seeks to show that the Britain of today is a product of the imperial and global relationships that helped forge the rise, fall and reinvention of liberal political economy.

What is the History of Britain Since 1750?

Anyone teaching or writing a history of modern Britain has to decide not just when to begin, how far to reach geographically, but what story to tell. No single-volume history of modern Britain, especially if it ranges over almost three centuries like this one, can include everything. In any case History is not one damned thing after another, it is not about accumulating or remembering as many facts about the past as possible. The historian, whether writing a book or an exam, has to decide how to interpret the past and explain change over time with the available evidence. Although the historian has a duty to assess all the evidence of the past as objectively as possible, she also has to make interpretive choices, and that makes writing history a profoundly interpretive and, therefore, political, activity.

Most histories of modern Britain are surprisingly romantic accounts of how, despite the rapidity of its industrialization, urbanization and imperial expansion, Britain avoided major social conflict and revolution. In this story of Britain as a peaceable and stable kingdom, credit is usually given to its people’s apparent predilection for tolerance and pluralism, or the adaptability of its institutions and ruling class. Until very recently this account even stretched to Britain’s imperial history. The Empire was seen as almost accidentally acquired, an afterthought of emigration and established trading relationships, while decolonization was thought to be no less pragmatic and peaceful. In contrast my global history of the rise, fall and reinvention of liberal political economy in Britain is a largely tragic story. It demonstrates how political economies that promised emancipation and prosperity to Britons, colonial subjects and others across the globe, rarely delivered either, were frequently secured by violence, and have left us facing an ecological crisis. It traces how those who challenge the prevailing forms of political and economic organization invariably do so by appropriating its own terms of reference to highlight their contradictions and injustices in ways that mean the critics of the system often become incorporated within it. It is not all doom and gloom. Above all the book
aims to be a hopeful history that reminds us that change can and does happen; even when all seems lost. It cherishes those who had the imagination and courage to think otherwise, those who challenged the varied and changing forms of inequity and subjugation that the rise, fall and reinvention of liberal political economy produced and depended upon.

What then do I mean by liberal political economy? Today, especially in the United States of America, to be liberal is to think of oneself as open-minded as well as socially and politically progressive. In Britain it is even still possible to be a Liberal; that is, to be a supporter of a political party (the Liberal Democrats) whose origins lay in the Liberal Party formally created in 1859. The liberal ideas of political and economic life that slowly emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are very distant cousins to these contemporary politics. Never the preserve of any one political movement or party, liberal political economy was less a coherent ideology than a pattern of thought and set of assumptions about the relationship between political and economic life. To explain what these were, we have to understand how they emerged in the late eighteenth century, how they operated in the nineteenth, as well as how they were eventually challenged and reinvented in the twentieth century. The book is organized in five chronological sections that tell this story.