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Introduction

History helps us to understand the puzzles of the contemporary world by exploring how they came about. This book aims to convey the fascination of recent history for its own sake and to assist understanding of the present by offering a clear, reasonably comprehensive account of British history since around 1900 and its contribution to creating the present-day United Kingdom. It seeks to integrate the histories of politics, national and international, the economy, society, ideas, science, technology and culture, some more expertly than others. It is impossible to compartmentalize these or to neglect any of them if we wish to describe, analyse and understand as fully as possible the complex changes, continuities and discontinuities of this fast-moving period. They intersect and they have all mattered. The broadening of perspectives on history as, from the 1920s, economic history, then, from the 1960s, social then cultural history, became prominent alongside political history, has massively enriched our capacity to understand the past and the present. But history, especially recent history, is constantly revised as new sources come to light and perspectives change as events move on. Historical understanding, like understanding of the present, is always provisional and open to challenge. This book conveys how the recent past looked to one historian in 2017.

The starting point is 1900 because important issues and movements became prominent around that time and did not go away but survived to influence future events profoundly. In 1900, Britain was involved in a war to protect and extend her imperial authority in southern Africa, the Anglo-Boer War, in which the mighty British imperial army was in difficulties against relatively inexperienced opposition. It eventually won, but the experience was a warning of growing challenges to the Empire which continued and intensified, leading to intense debates and differences within Britain about the future of Empire and rapid decolonization after the Second World War, with

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considerable impact on Britain's status and influence in the world. Its relations with other European powers were tense in 1900, due mainly to competition for colonial control, but Britain soon judged it wise to ally with two leading European nations, France and Russia, as Germany emerged as a potential threat to them all, a threat realized with the coming of war in 1914. It also sought close relations with the United States, which was emerging as the strongest power in the international economy and politics, and reached an agreement with Japan, the first Asian country to become globally significant, militarily and economically, in the modern world. International economic growth, particularly in the United States and Germany, reinforced British fears of economic decline as the first industrial nation encountered successful competition.

Imperial confidence, and the very unity of the United Kingdom, was further challenged in these years by intensified demands by the Catholic majority of the population of Ireland for independence, resisted equally militantly by the Protestant minority in the north of Ireland. This led, from 1922, to the division of Ireland between an independent state in the south and the north which remained within the United Kingdom, though tensions between Nationalists and Unionists in Northern Ireland continued into the twenty-first century, especially explosively in the final quarter of the twentieth century. Around 1900 nationalism was also growing in Wales and Scotland, as the increasing centralization of power in Westminster threatened their cultural distinctiveness and capacities for self-determination. It led to, and survived, devolution of substantial domestic powers to elected governments in both countries from 1998, to some degree stimulating nationalist sentiments in England. The unity of the United Kingdom was even more in question in 2017 than in 1900.

Contemplating the beginning of the twentieth century from the standpoint of 2017, there are other striking similarities. Both major political parties, Conservatives and Liberals, opposed state 'intervention' in the economy on the grounds that it would undermine free enterprise and hamper economic growth, and resisted state action to improve social conditions because they believed it would threaten the assumed moral responsibility of all healthy individuals to work hard and provide for all the needs of themselves and their families, which was believed to be universally feasible. In the early twenty-first century, similar ideas – now labelled 'neoliberalism' – were again politically powerful, after being seriously challenged from the early twentieth century. In the early 1900s many Conservatives came to believe that Britain's economic power could be protected only by government intervening, as their successful rivals did, to impose taxes ('tariffs') on imports to raise their prices relative to British-produced goods in the home market. Tariffs, as proposed by Joseph Chamberlain, their leading advocate, would also preserve the Empire by including the colonies within a tariff wall. 'Tariff reform' became a major issue in early-twentieth-century politics, pitting the Conservatives against the Liberals who remained committed to free trade.

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Another challenge to classic liberal ideology emerged when the Labour Party was formed in 1900, committed to creating a fair economy and a more equal society through increased state action in the interests of the mass of disadvantaged, hard-working people. At the same time, trade unions made more militant demands for better pay and conditions, leading some to fear imminent revolution, though the unions represented only a minority of skilled workers and had limited influence and no evident desire to overthrow the state. Rather, they helped to bring about the moderate, reforming, non-revolutionary Labour Party.

Classic liberalism was also seriously challenged by the shocking levels of poverty revealed by major poverty surveys conducted by Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree at the turn of the century, including among people in full-time work, in what was then the richest country in the world. Low pay in full-time work and underemployment, that is, the inability of people who wanted full-time work to find anything but precarious part-time jobs, were significant causes of poverty, especially for larger families, resulting in extensive child poverty that seriously limited children's life chances. Another outcome was a desperate shortage of decent housing for poorer families, who, if they could find a home, too often lived in overcrowded, insanitary 'slums' because they could not afford anything better. The revelations, together with pressure from the labour movement and from Liberals, philanthropists and the growing number of women activists troubled by what they saw and heard of social conditions, created demands for state action to support people whose poverty was clearly not their own fault. This led to the unintentional beginnings of a 'welfare state' when a Liberal government from 1906 introduced the first state pensions, together with national insurance and other reforms, including a more redistributive taxation system to fund the extension of state action.

State welfare expanded thereafter, especially after 1945, and was one of the major developments of the twentieth century, which partially survived into the twenty-first century, though it was much attenuated from the 1980s following the international surge of neoliberalism. This also led the state to withdraw as far as possible from regulation of the economy, which had also increased through the century. Successive further poverty surveys from the 1980s into the early twenty-first century showed poverty and income and wealth inequality returning to levels comparable with the 1900s following decades of decline. Again, a high proportion of poverty was among low-paid, full-time employees and insecure underemployed workers not guaranteed minimum weekly hours, often due to what are known, and widely criticized, as 'zero-hours' contracts. About 17 per cent of all children in Great Britain were found to be in poverty in 2015, and the number was rising. Homelessness and inadequate supply of affordable homes for people on low incomes were again major problems after receding from the 1920s to the 1970s. The size and influence of the unions, which had peaked to include more than half the workforce in the 1970s, so enabling them to gain improvements in wage and

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working conditions, dwindled following government restrictions and the decline of manufacturing and they could do little to help. The Labour Party became and remained one of the two major parties, with the Conservatives, after the decline of the Liberals from the First World War. It achieved real social and economic improvement while in government after 1945, but could not, as it hoped, gain consistent support from enough voters to sustain these achievements. Why it could not do so when so many benefited is a central question to be tackled below. In government again, under the neoliberal-inclined 'New Labour' from 1997 to 2010, it again temporarily reduced poverty and improved health and other state services, following cuts by its Conservative predecessors, but inequality between the richest and the poorest continued to expand, and it could not prevent a reversion to welfare cuts and further increases in poverty under its successors.

Income and wealth disparity and their outcomes were not the only inequalities challenged with new and lasting vigour from the first years of the twentieth century. Women campaigned for equality with men ever more outspokenly, especially demanding the vote, believing it would be the key to greater change. They gained the vote and change followed, but so gradually and incompletely that they are still campaigning in the twenty-first century against discrimination and for equal pay and work opportunities, equal legal rights and equal respect with men, among other inequities.

Public antagonism to immigrants was another lasting issue that was prominent around 1900, when it was directed at the largest immigrant group of the period, Jewish refugees fleeing persecution in the Russian Empire. Protests led in 1905 to the first official restrictions on immigration and access to British nationality. Racist intolerance and restrictions on immigration went on growing, especially from the 1960s as an increasingly diverse immigrant community expanded. Racist opposition persisted, as did organized support for tolerance and racial equality, leading to the first laws against racial discrimination in the 1960s. But racial tensions remain at least as powerful in the second decade of the twenty-first century as they were in 1900.

These strong similarities and continuities between the early twentieth and early twenty-first centuries demand analysis and explanation. They suggest profound, lasting divisions and inequalities within the United Kingdom. Exploring the reality and the experiences and perceptions of these and other inequalities, which always existed but emerged into public discourse only later in the century, examining what promoted and constrained them, and the origins and impact of campaigns to eliminate them, is a major theme of this book. The persistence or recurrence of certain inequalities is all the more striking because, as well as the significant similarities, there were also profound differences affecting all aspects of life in the United Kingdom between 1900 and 2017, major changes as well as continuities, progress in some areas followed by regression, and long-term improvement in others.

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The United Kingdom declined as a world power, especially with the loss of Empire, though it remained internationally prominent, as ever more nations competed for influence in an increasingly complex, interconnected world. Tensions with other European countries recurred periodically. It ceased to be the world's wealthiest country, but was still the fifth richest in 2017. Manufacturing, on which its wealth was built in the nineteenth century, dwindled, but finance, in which it was also internationally dominant in 1900, flourished and expanded. Living standards rose for most people to levels unimaginable in 1900. Many were left behind, especially from the 1980s, but even their conditions were rarely as grim as those observed by Booth and Rowntree, though in relative terms their conditions and life chances lagged at least as far behind average standards. Most people lived longer, healthier lives, though the rich lived substantially longer, in better health, than poorer people. Many more people had access to more and better education, though, again, the poorest gained least.

Expanded educational opportunities contributed to the significant growth of research in science and technology, and the application of the resulting new techniques and findings changed many, ultimately perhaps most, aspects of life, with profound economic and cultural effects. It increased British military, naval then air force capabilities, including in both world wars, and brought major improvements in medicine, contributing to longer lives and better health. Communications of all kinds were transformed. The speed, modes and costs of travel over ever greater distances, with the development and steady improvement of sea, motor then air transport, transformed international trade and personal travel for work or leisure. Work was also changed by new technology from typewriters to computers and a mass of new techniques for speeding production. Leisure was transformed by films, radio, TV, recordings and the multiple products of the development of the internet from the later twentieth century, while older leisure pursuits survived, including sports, dance, theatre, literature, though all changing, influenced by new technology and often increasingly commercialized. Home care was revolutionized by a succession of new gadgets including vacuum cleaners, refrigerators and washing machines. So was personal communication as modern transport speeded postal services, then came telephones, first with fixed land-lines then, by the end of the twentieth century, mobile, versatile and omnipresent connections to the internet. Successive technological changes made an ever-widening, internationalizing, range of information accessible, of variable degrees of reliability, first through expanding print media and radio and television until it approached saturation on the internet in the early twenty-first century. Less positively, the internet opened up new opportunities for crime, including raids on bank accounts; scientific research delivered ever more lethal devices, making warfare increasingly destructive and terrifying, and technological change made a major contribution to global warming, the existence of which some deny, but most specialists see as the major threat of the twenty-first century.

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The transformation of the methods, speed and costs of travel was one reason for increased movement between countries, both temporary and permanent, and increased migration to and from the United Kingdom. Immigration created an immensely more culturally diverse society, with the accompanying tensions paralleled by positive interactions and relationships between different ethnic and cultural groups.

Another profound cultural change, not predictable in 1900, concerned attitudes to sexuality and the family. British society slowly became more open, more tolerant of a wider range of behaviours and relationships, more willing to talk openly about issues long recognized but thought shameful and kept secret within families and communities, including mental illness, illegitimacy, transsexuality, and to support those affected. Similarly, rape and domestic violence had always existed and there had been periodic campaigns against them, but only determined campaigning by the women's movement in the 1970s brought them permanently into open public discourse, achieving changes in the law to punish perpetrators and support victims, though they failed to eliminate them and both crimes remained sadly pervasive in the early twenty-first century. It took still longer, until the early twenty-first century, for another ancient crime, child sexual abuse, to be openly acknowledged and punished.

In 1900, homosexuality was a criminal offence and homosexuals lived in secrecy. It was partially decriminalized in 1967 but not fully until the early 2000s. Meanwhile, it became widely acceptable to live openly as a homosexual, though homophobia did not go away. Unmarried couples, straight and gay, lived together openly from the 1970s for the first time, often with children – socially unacceptable in all classes and cultures in 1900 – and marriage declined, while divorce became easier and more frequent. There was continuing resistance to all these 'permissive' changes, especially in Northern Ireland where Christianity remained a force for cultural conservatism, more powerful than elsewhere in the United Kingdom, where religious observance declined over the century. Northern Ireland was the last country in the United Kingdom to extend homosexual rights. In 2017, it was the only country in the United Kingdom still prohibiting same-sex marriage and still has the harshest laws against abortion, which was legalized in England, Wales and Scotland in 1967. These differences further illustrate the divisions within the United Kingdom and inequalities in the experiences of its inhabitants throughout the century.

British history since 1900 cannot be presented as a simple story of progress or decline in any respect. This is illustrated particularly clearly by the complex trajectories of fundamental inequalities over the period. Demands for equality emerging in the early 1900s brought about the gradual extension of state action, both social and economic, especially after 1945 when full employment until the 1970s and a 'welfare state' narrowed income and wealth inequalities and raised average living standards. Women gained more political and legal rights and employment opportunities. Cultural shifts

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towards greater openness and tolerance, supported by laws against discrimination on grounds of sex, race, and later age, religion and disability – inequalities which were real but taken for granted and absent from public discourse in 1900, then identified and the subjects of active campaigns later in the century – carried on into the twenty-first century, though they were still incomplete and faced opposition. But progress in socio-economic equality went into reverse as neoliberalism became hegemonic from the 1980s, leading to inequalities comparable with those in 1900. The main aim of this book is to survey and analyse how these and other conflicting patterns of progress and decline came about, their effects and how individuals experienced them, seeking to describe and explain this complex picture of continuity and change, social cohesion and social division over time, to understand the origins of contemporary conditions and responses to them.

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