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## Unequal exchanges

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In his brilliantly written and thought-provoking book *The History Men*, first published in 1983, the seventeenth-century English history specialist and regular reviewer for the *Observer* Sunday newspaper, John Kenyon, told the story of the development of the historical profession in Britain since the early modern period. He focused above all on the many British historians, especially those based in Oxford or Cambridge, who had contributed to building up the teaching and writing of History over the past few centuries, delivering sharp and acute critical judgments on a number of them as he went along. The core of History teaching and research in England was, and should be, Kenyon thought, English history, and particularly English political and constitutional history. Raising his gaze momentarily from Cambridge (from where he had himself gone into exile to Hull some years before, but where his spiritual home evidently remained), he cast a jaundiced eye across to the new universities that had been established in the 1960s and found, to his disapproval, that many of them included extra-European History on their curricula. He roundly dismissed this as faddish and ephemeral: ‘hastily cobbled-up courses on Indochina or West Africa faded away as soon as these areas ceased to be of immediate current concern’. Kenyon thought that British historians had made no

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notable contribution to this particular field. ‘Nor’, he went on, ‘did the contribution of British historians to European History constitute an important or influential corpus of work.’ So he ignored this too.

Kenyon was not alone in this view. In his book *The English Historical Tradition since 1850*, published in 1990, Christopher Parker similarly assumed that English historians had written overwhelmingly about the history of their own country. A more recent survey, Michael Bentley’s *Modernizing England’s Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism 1870–1970* (2005), also writes as if English historians wrote exclusively about English history. On a broader front, an excellent collection of essays published under the editorship of Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan and Kevin Passmore, *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800* (1999), found historians in Britain, France, Germany and Italy of interest only insofar as they wrote about the history of their own country, focusing on the ways in which they contributed to legitimizing and defending the identity of their own particular nation-state. True, there were, they pointed out, significant transnational and intercultural factors at work in the emergence of the historical profession, most notably the enormous influence exerted on historians of other countries in the nineteenth century by the research methods – lumped together under the general heading of ‘source-criticism’ – and the institutions – such as the research seminar – developed by German historians such as Leopold von Ranke. But when it came to examining what such historians had actually written, it was a different matter. Ranke, for example, wrote histories of England, France, the Papacy, he even wrote a history of

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the world, but it was his history of Germany that formed the object of attention in the essay in the collection devoted to him by Patrick Bahners.

The universality of Ranke's focus was perhaps unusual in the nineteenth century; even before his death, German historians of the 'Borussian school' were turning their gaze inwards, to the history of their own country. Yet in fact some historians have always written about countries other than their own. And nowhere is this more striking than in Britain at the beginning of the twenty-first century. British historiography spans the globe and is astonishingly broad in its coverage. Contrary to what Kenyon claimed, British historians have made a major and distinguished contribution to the History not only, understandably enough, of the British Empire but also of the many parts of the world that at one time or another belonged to it, from America to Africa, India to Australia. University courses on these areas of the world have proved both successful and durable. Specialists in these fields occupy important Chairs in many different universities.

Just as significant, however, has been the contribution of British historians to writing and teaching the history of the European Continent and the many countries it contains. A moment's thought will reveal a dozen or more prominent historians in Britain writing in the past few decades who have published major books about the modern history of Germany (Ian Kershaw, Richard Overy), Spain (Paul Preston, Raymond Carr, Helen Graham), Italy (Denis Mack Smith, Paul Ginsborg, Lucy Riall), France (Theodore Zeldin, Robert Gildea, Olwen Hufton), Russia (Geoffrey Hosking, Robert Service, Orlando Figes, Catherine Merridale), Poland

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(Norman Davies), Greece (Mark Mazower), Romania (Denis Deletant), Sweden (Michael Roberts), Finland (David Kirby), Bulgaria (Richard Crampton), the Netherlands (Jonathan Israel, Simon Schama) and many others while, for many British historians of the medieval and early modern periods, writing about the European Continent is almost second nature. Books on the history of these and other European countries, and of Europe more generally, have frequently reached the best-seller lists in Britain. And these are merely the tip of a considerable iceberg, with substantial numbers of more junior historians writing on the history of various European countries, making their reputations with this work and rising up through the ranks. There are flourishing societies in Britain devoted to Continental history, each with its own academic journal – *German History* for the German History Society, *French History* for its French equivalent. Continental history is taught in the schools, notably at Advanced Level, so much so indeed that a concern is sometimes raised that the school History curriculum is focused too much on Hitler and Stalin and not enough on the past of the United Kingdom. At universities there are lectures on virtually every period of European history, and virtually every part of the Continent.

Does this reflect a broad and long-established tradition of writing on European history, or is it a more recent development? If it is relatively recent, how, when and why has it emerged? What impact have British historians had in the countries they write about? Are British historians unusual in comparison to those based in other countries in writing about countries other than their own? Edward Acton, who teaches Russian History at the University of East Anglia, sees a variety

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of traditions, focusing particularly on specific, cataclysmic events, such as the French and Russian Revolutions or the Third Reich. ‘Strip them out’, he says, ‘. . . and I suspect our attention would have been much weaker. Rather than seeing the tradition as reflective of central features of British society, culture and historical sense’, he adds, ‘I would tend to see it as always a minority pursuit, battling against the studied resistance to explicitly comparative history that so weakens Anglo-Saxon history.’ Sir Ian Kershaw, whose two-volume biography of Hitler immediately established itself as the standard work when it was published in 1998–2000, agrees. He sees British historians focusing particularly on ‘major episodes such as the European Reformation, the French Revolution, the Russian Revolution, the two World Wars, the rise of Nazism, the Cold War, and so on’. But, in fact, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that this has not been the case in recent decades, when British writing on European history has covered a vast range of periods and subjects. True, there are peaks of interest in topics like the Third Reich, but one can find courses in British universities on medieval France, early modern Italy, eighteenth-century Germany and much more besides. The British interest in, and contribution to, European History is astonishingly broad.

Yet the same is not true in reverse. On the European Continent, historians of Britain, as of other foreign countries, have made little impact, apart from a handful of exceptions; there, historians research, write and teach mainly about the history of their own country. Christopher Duggan, Professor of Italian History at Reading University, thinks that ‘the tradition of studying non-British countries does seem one

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of the remarkable strengths of British historiography (very few Italian historians, to my knowledge, work on modern non-Italian history)'. British historians have few if any rivals elsewhere in chronicling and interpreting the history of the UK. They have achieved an absolute dominance of their field that is disturbed only by the contributions of some American specialists and one or two Frenchmen, such as Élie Halévy, author of a classic multi-volume survey of English history in the nineteenth century, or François Crouzet, an economic historian who wrote significant work on British industrialization, or François Bédarida, whose social history of modern England brought new questions and approaches to bear from his background in French historical writing. French historians such as these were particularly interested in Britain when it was at the apogee of its economic and international power. They are exceptions. As Robert Anderson, who teaches European History at Edinburgh and has published widely on modern French history, especially the history of education, says: 'There is no galaxy of French historians of Britain, as there is of British and American historians of France.'

One is perhaps more likely to find influential German and Italian historians of Britain located in British History Departments, such as Frank Trentmann at Birkbeck, or Eugenio Biagini at Cambridge, than in universities in their own country. They are few in number. As Boyd Hilton, whose books, culminating in *A Mad, Bad and Dangerous People?* (2006, in the New Oxford History of England series), have transformed our understanding of politics, society and religion in England in the first half of the nineteenth century, remarks: 'With the towering exception of Halévy . . . no Continental historian has

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had anything like as much impact on British history as (say) Raymond Carr, John Elliott, Richard Cobb, Jonathan Israel, [R. W.] Seton-Watson, Denis Mack Smith, Adrian Lyttelton, et al., et al., et al. . . . have made on the histories of their chosen countries.' Only in the History of Thought is the situation different, but thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke are in effect universal figures whose writings attract scholars from many countries, just as do those of Niccolò Machiavelli, Immanuel Kant or Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

How can we account for this situation? Partly, thinks Leif Jerram, who teaches German History at Manchester University, this is because the study of History in a number of Continental countries is geared towards producing History teachers in the school system, whereas in the UK it has no specific purpose, but is treated as a general education that can provide a broad outlook on life and a set of transferable skills – in critical thinking, writing, debate and discussion, and much more – that will be useful in a huge variety of professions, from advertising to town planning, banking to journalism. For many decades – indeed, since the mid-Victorian era – Historical education at Oxford and Cambridge was geared, among other things, towards providing graduates who could go into the Foreign Office with knowledge of the history of other countries. 'Clearly', he concludes, 'in Britain "the world out there" has expectations of historians that go far, far beyond the formation of the nation. In France, Spain, China, Italy, "the world out there" does *not* have these expectations.'

As Director of European Exchange Programmes in Manchester University's History Department, Jerram was approached by the Universidad Autónoma of Barcelona to

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see if students from each university could spend a period studying at the other. The Spanish – or more precisely, Catalan – university offered survey courses, above all, on the history of Catalonia, ‘highly descriptive, entirely sequential, seeing them as designed for the formation of the appropriate national citizen’. In Manchester, by contrast, the survey courses addressed a dizzying variety of topics – ‘A Gendered History of the United States’, ‘Late Imperial China’, ‘European Intellectual History’, ‘The Cultural History of War’, ‘The British Empire in the Americas’, ‘Diasporas and Migration in the Twentieth Century’, ‘The History of Commodities in Latin America’, ‘War and Politics in the Age of Richelieu and Mazarin’, ‘Gender and Sexuality in Modern Africa’, ‘Cultures of Death and Bereavement in Victorian Britain’ – ‘there was no comparison’, he concludes: ‘Anglophone societies seem to be fundamentally as interested in the pasts of other cultures as they are in their own.’

Julian Swann, who teaches at Birkbeck, University of London, and has published books on the institutional history of *ancien régime* France, concurs: ‘You can just about do a [History] degree in the UK without doing British history’, he says, but ‘the idea in France would be seen as absurd. Similarly, the French can’t get their heads round the idea that I teach French, Italian, even Russian history, but not British; they just don’t have the same possibilities.’ Institutional structures in British schools and universities that divide History initially into ‘British’ and ‘European’, Swann thinks, have up to now been a major reason why ‘we have turned out so many historians of Continental Europe’. It may seem faintly absurd to anyone who thinks that Britain is actually part of Europe,

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but it has for many decades underwritten an international breadth of approach that is lacking from the teaching of History in many other countries.

This breadth of approach has meant that many students from Continental universities have found attractive the idea of studying the history of their own country, and history on a more general, international or comparative basis, at a British university. More than one generation of European students has now enjoyed close contact with British academic life and British intellectual culture through a whole variety of exchange agreements, such as ‘Erasmus’ and ‘Socrates’, both sponsored by the European Union. EU rules oblige students from other member states to be treated on the same basis as students from the UK when they study in a British university, a further incentive to undertake an exchange or even a longer-term stay. Patrick Major, who teaches European History at Reading and before that taught it at Warwick, reports: ‘I have had endless waves of German visiting students wanting to study their own history here, always with the rationale that they wanted the Anglo-Saxon perspective.’ Ignorance of the language in particular prevents a similar trade in the other direction.

The sharp boundary conventionally drawn in British education between Britain and Europe starts to dissolve once one gets back to the Middle Ages. Carl Watkins, Cambridge-based author of *History and the Supernatural in Medieval England*, published in 2007, notes that ‘French, German and Italian historians have, if they deal with Britain, been more concerned to consider it in a European setting rather than as a distinct area of study.’ This is perhaps understandable

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for the Middle Ages, before the nation-state existed and when England was for long stretches of time part of a wider European political entity, whether Viking, or Norman, or Angevin, a feature of European geopolitics that only ended with the English defeat in the Hundred Years' War and was revived sporadically thereafter, most notably after the seizure of the English throne by the Dutch monarch William of Orange in 1688. Thinking about the contribution made to English medieval History by Germans, Watkins notes that German historians, notably Felix Liebermann, did, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, put their skills to work on producing numerous editions of English chronicles and legal texts, perhaps reflecting a widespread German view at the time that the English and Germans were part of a wider 'Anglo-Saxon' community (whether this was defined in racial terms or not was a moot point). Indeed, as another Cambridge medievalist, Rosamond McKitterick, author of a recent biography of Charlemagne, observes, many medievalists 'think that an exclusive attention to early medieval England, or even early medieval Britain, without embracing the Continent as well, is dangerously limited (as well as dull)'.

Nevertheless, it remains the case that very few non-British historians have made any notable contribution to the study of British history in the medieval period, and few, apart from Americans, to its study in the early modern and modern eras. Over the past decades, for example, the German government has invested a good deal of money and effort into the establishment of German Historical Institutes in foreign capitals such as Rome, Paris, London, Warsaw, Moscow or Washington. These act as centres of international historical