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978-0-521-60479-6 - English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980 -
Second Edition

Martin J. Wiener

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ENGLISH CULTURE AND THE DECLINE OF THE INDUSTRIAL SPIRIT, 1850–1980

Second Edition

England was the world's first great industrial nation. Yet the English have never been comfortable with industrialism. Drawing upon a wide array of sources, Martin Wiener explores the English ambivalence to modern industrial society. His work reveals a pervasive middle- and upper-class frame of mind hostile to industrialism and economic growth. From the middle of the nineteenth century to the present, this frame of mind shaped a broad spectrum of cultural expression, including literature, journalism, and architecture, as well as social, historical, and economic thought.

Now in a new edition, Wiener reflects on the original debate surrounding the work and examines the historiography of the last twenty years. Written in a graceful and accessible style, with reference to a broad range of people and ideas, this book will be of interest to all readers who wish to understand the development – and predicament – of modern England.

Martin J. Wiener is the Mary Jones Professor of History at Rice University. His previous books include *Between Two Worlds: The Political Thought of Graham Wallas* (1971), *Reconstructing the Criminal* (Cambridge, 1990), and *Men of Blood: Violence, Manliness, and Criminal Justice in Victorian England* (Cambridge, 2003).

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First edition published 1981

First paperback edition published 1982

Second edition first published 2004

Printed in the United States of America

Typeface ITC New Baskerville 10/12 pt. *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Wiener, Martin J.

English culture and the decline of the industrial spirit, 1850-1980 /

Martin J. Wiener. –

2nd ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-84376-6 – ISBN 0-521-60479-6 (pbk.)

1. England – Civilization – 19th century. 2. Industrialization – England –
History – 19th century. 3. Industrialization – England – History – 20th
century. 4. Industries – England – History – 19th century. 5. Industries –
England – History – 20th century. 6. England – Civilization – 20th century.
7. Industries – Social aspects – England. I. Title.

DA533.W59 2004

942.08-dc22 2004052117

ISBN 0 521 84376 6 hardback

ISBN 0 521 60479 6 paperback

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-60479-6 - English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980 -
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For Julie and Wendy

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The life of nations no less than that
of men is lived largely in the
imagination.

– Enoch Powell (1946)

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Preface to the first edition

“Capitalism,” Fritz Stern has remarked, “is too serious a subject to be left to the economic historian alone.”¹ Such is also the case with industrialism. In the course of writing a quite different book on British social thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I became aware of a distinctive complex of social ideas, sentiments, and values in the “articulate” classes, embodying an ambiguous attitude toward modern industrial society. In the world’s first industrial nation, industrialism did not seem quite at home. In the country that had started mankind on the “great ascent,” economic growth was frequently viewed with suspicion and disdain. Having pioneered urbanization, the English ignored or disparaged cities.

The more I explored these incongruities, the more important they seemed to become. Instead of peripheral curiosities, they turned out to lie near the heart of modern British history. Taken together, they bore witness to a cultural *cordon sanitaire* encircling the forces of economic development – technology, industry, commerce. One could begin to see this mental quarantine take shape in the social changes (and nonchanges) of the Victorian era, watch it give from then on a particular softly rustic and nostalgic cast to middle- and upper-class culture, and finally observe it intertwine with the modern fading of national economic dynamism. To follow the unfolding of this complex of attitudes was to highlight, in a novel way, the importance of the conservative (with a lowercase “c”) frame of mind in modern Britain. What first appeared to me as incongruities, in short, came to provide a key to the reinterpretation of the past century and a quarter of British domestic history.

The complex of attitudes I examine here (as I note in Chapter 1) has not been uniformly demonstrated throughout British society, nor is my attention generally focused on “public opinion” in the statistical sense, as when each individual in the population is taken to be of equal significance. This book explores sentiments, attitudes, and values among the English elite, though that elite is very broadly defined, in the conviction

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that here lies the most important key to unlocking the puzzles of modern British history.

Cultural values and attitudes often reveal themselves in imaginative literature. It is important, however, to make clear that when we examine such literature our purposes are not those of English studies. Cultural history is different from literary history, and an enterprise entirely separate from literary criticism. We shall be examining (among many other nonliterary sources) the public reception and public image of writers and their work – not, as a rule, the subtleties of their art, which are lost on many of their readers. We are dealing here with precisely those aspects of their work that literary critics tend to pay least attention to – what they most share with the widest audience.

All the attitudes and sentiments I examine, and the social developments I link them to, have been previously noted, but only separately. Historians of literature, art and architecture, society, politics, and economics² have all observed aspects of this complex. No one has yet brought all these aspects together to view them as parts of a coherent cultural pattern. My approach, therefore, is synthetic. I draw upon a wide variety of evidence, and also the results of scholarship in many specialist fields. The subject definitions of the specialist fields of historical inquiry are essentially arbitrary divisions of convenience. It is important on occasion to transcend them, to make connections and uncover affinities that might otherwise pass unnoticed. I agree with Raymond Williams, who has argued that “it is with the discovery of patterns of a characteristic kind that any useful cultural analysis begins, and it is with the relationship between these patterns, which sometimes reveals unexpected identities and correspondences in hitherto separately considered activities, sometimes again reveals discontinuities of an unexpected kind, that general cultural analysis is concerned.”³ I hope to reveal some such patterns and to illuminate some of their relationships and consequences.

Williams’s interest in the connections between literature (in a broad sense) and society has been unusual among British scholars, who have inclined to avoid such “vague” areas, making sharp distinctions between ideas and sentiments – the realm of imagination – on the one hand, and “real life” on the other.⁴ This is unfortunate. One of my hopes for this work is that it will contribute to breaking down this artificial barrier and to widening historiographical sensitivities. Ideas are indeed “real” and have consequences.

In the writing of this book I have incurred many debts. A Younger Humanists Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities enabled me to spend a year in London drawing upon the treasure trove of the British Library, and the Dean of Advanced Studies and Research at Rice University helped with research expenses. Julie R. Jeffrey

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assisted in the early research, John Fowler proofread the final version, and Linda Quaidy, Holly Leitz, and Josephine Monaghan typed several drafts. Indeed, Ms. Quaidy and Ms. Leitz bore up cheerfully under a succession of “final” versions. Edmund Stillman, of the Hudson Institute Europe, offered support and an occasion to present some of these ideas for the first time. Members of Eric Hobsbawm’s seminar at the Institute of Historical Research listened patiently to an early version of Chapter 4 and made useful suggestions. Meetings of the Pacific Coast, Rocky Mountain, and Midwest Conferences on British Studies gave me opportunities to spin out other threads of this fabric. The following individuals read all or part of the manuscript and offered valuable advice: Luther P. Carpenter, Thomas Haskell, T. W. Heyck, Francis Loewenheim, Michael B. Miller, Carol Stearns, and Robert K. Webb. Most of all, Meredith Skura’s rigorous, imaginative, and supportive criticism drew out my best efforts.

Martin J. Wiener
October 1980

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This book germinated during a time in which, as never for centuries, British “educated opinion” had lost its confidence about the nation, its state, and its direction. The simultaneous end of empire, re-emergence of Scottish and Welsh nationalism, and loss of economic superiority to its European neighbors placed those who governed and those who formed opinion in Britain in a novel situation of uncertainty. Articles and books appeared with titles like “Whither Britain?” and even a special issue of the influential monthly, *Encounter*, entitled *Suicide of a Nation?* Harold Wilson made the theme of the 1964 election campaign that ended thirteen years of Conservative rule the revival of national dynamism, the “forging of a new Britain in the white heat of the technological revolution,” although his government thereafter floundered in the unfriendly eddies of a swiftly flowing contemporary world. Six years later, Labour was turned out in a campaign in which fresh promises of national rebirth were this time chiefly employed by its opponents, led by Edward Heath. Heath’s Conservative government also failed to deliver on these promises, collapsing in the midst of a world oil crisis, worsened for Britain by a miners’ strike. A decade of political promises had sorely disappointed; national “revival” turned out to be a more complex and elusive goal than a mere change of political parties. By 1974, in a climate of unparalleled gloom about public affairs, a serious rethinking of modern British history was overdue.

Up to this point, the new concerns about Britain’s present state and direction had had little effect on professional history-writing, which even as a more politically radical new generation was beginning to make its mark remained within well-worn “Whig” paths of a “master narrative” of progress. The chief innovation at the time was the establishment, led by Eric Hobsbawm and E. P. Thompson, of “history from the bottom up,” shifting attention downward to the working classes as the central figures of the story of advance and the casting of trade unionists and working-class political activists, rather than middle-class radicals and enlightened Whigs and even humanitarian imperialists as the “heroes.” The “forward march

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of Labour” rather than the advance of free and democratic yet orderly social and political life became the new central theme in the writing of the history of the previous two centuries. However, the energetic debates among historians in the 1960s and early 70s had yet to really take notice of the kind of drastic questioning of the nation’s current situation then prevalent in the discussion of public affairs.

While the Heath government, and the country, went through the turmoil of that *annus horribilis*, 1973–74, I was in Britain on sabbatical leave, studying twentieth-century thinking in Britain about national “modernization.” The current troubles and this century of thinking seemed to need each other as context. I had been trained primarily in intellectual history, and I found the terms in which economists argued about questions of economic growth and retardation too narrow. I firmly believed that, as J. M. Keynes once remarked, contemporary “practical” men of affairs owed more than they ever acknowledged to the ideas of men no longer living. Yet I had become, along with many other intellectual historians of my generation, dissatisfied with a narrow and elitist focus on a small number of exceptional minds. My angle of vision was broadening, to embrace the far less sophisticated and rigorous ideas, and sentiments, held by large numbers of persons, which formed more a framework for thinking than a specific set of ideas – what Germans call the “Zeitgeist,” or the “mental climate” of a period and place. I had come to believe that, as the controversial politician Enoch Powell had once put it, “the life of nations no less than that of men is lived largely in the imagination.”

Was there a gradually formed “imagination” that lay behind the British public troubles of the 1970s? While writing an earlier book on the late-Victorian and Edwardian thinker and socialist activist Graham Wallas, I had become aware of a change in the character of the nineteenth-century “bourgeoisie” as it was triumphing (as the conventional histories had it) over the old aristocratic order: it was taking on many of the trappings – material and mental – of that order. No sooner had they “triumphed” than business, industry, and urban life seemed to be again indicted for their many failings. At the same time, a newly intense concern with national identity emerged, a concern in which the past and its imagined virtues played a central role. What did all this mean, and did it have something important to say about Britain’s contemporary problems?

At this juncture I encountered the writings of the young generation of Marxists around the *New Left Review*. Beginning in the 1960s, writers like Tom Nairn and Perry Anderson had been asking why the expected transformation to Socialism had failed to come off. In seeking an answer to this political question, they offered a model of British history that resonated with my perceptions. Because of the unique timing of its industrial revolution, Britain, they argued, had never really had a full

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“bourgeois revolution” – the powerful existing ruling class had been able to accommodate and absorb the new bourgeoisie. The result was a peculiar state, less “modern” than it pretended to be. If Nairn and Anderson’s model were taken in a broader, more than merely political sense, it could provide an explanation for both present-day socioeconomic “stalemate” and the flourishing over the past century of a surprisingly anti-modern middle-class culture.

My emerging picture of an “industrial spirit” that was tamed and contained over the previous century of British cultural history, along with some of the political and economic consequences of such containment, was set out in two talks delivered in the spring of 1974: one to a scholarly seminar directed by the Marxist historian E. J. Hobsbawm, the other to an audience of business and political leaders at a conference at Ashridge Management College organized by the Hudson Institute Europe. In these talks, particularly the latter, I sought to bring the worlds of historical scholarship and public policy discourse into fruitful contact, suggesting recent implications of historical developments and historical roots of present dilemmas and perhaps planting some seeds of thought to germinate later.

Thereafter, I returned to teaching in America, and to a number of academic and personal obligations that slowed progress on the writing of the book, which was not published until the beginning of 1981. By the time it appeared, another Labour government had bogged down in social stalemate, and its Conservative replacement was itself entering a crisis period. Margaret Thatcher’s government was coming under increasing pressure to reverse its radical new policies of tighter money and freer markets. It was an opportune moment for reappraising the basic lines of modern British history, and the book received a good deal of notice from journalists and politicians as well as the more expected complement of professional historians. As Richard English and Michael Kenny observed, it was “the first major ‘declinist’ text to be taken up by both an academic and a wider audience.”¹ It was cited by both members of the government, as an account of a century-old wrong direction that it was seeking to rectify, and by some of its critics, as a basis for their indictment of the government’s “betrayal of British industry” (the title of a 1982 television special based on the book). Each side naturally took from the book that which best suited its immediate agenda, but both were responding to a genuine effort on my part to write a history that made current dilemmas more comprehensible.

English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit proposed that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries a cultural reaction against

¹ Richard English and Michael Kenny, eds., *Rethinking British Decline* (2000), p. 25.

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the disruptive force of the industrial revolution “inoculated” the rapidly growing middle and upper-middle classes with values and attitudes resistant to economic innovation and growth. National identity became associated not, as it appeared by the mid-nineteenth century that it might be, with industrialism, technology, capitalism, and city life, but with values rooted in slow-changing “country” ways of life. This reaction was nurtured by institutions like the public schools and Oxbridge and by the opportunities available to adopt quasi-aristocratic lifestyles. As a result, the rise of “industrial values” was contained, and the status of industrial and technological careers remained decidedly inferior to that of careers in government or the professions. The broad outcome was an economy less dynamic and a polity less supportive of economic development than would otherwise have been the case.

Beyond (but not unconnected to) the immediate interest in its implications for current policy issues, the book also stimulated a great deal of scholarly discussion and investigation. Indeed, one of its contributions has unquestionably been to accelerate the development of business history, technological history, and the study of the social and cultural influences on economic behavior in British history. For twenty years critics have focused on the specific question of economic behavior and the supposed influences of educational institutions and aristocratic lifestyles on it. Could national economic growth have been significantly faster? Did public schools and old universities in fact retard such growth? Were industrialists and potential industrialists “gentrified” in their attitudes and way of life, and insofar as they were, did that clearly retard economic development?

Here there was certainly much open to criticism. The product of an intellectual historian, the book, it can be argued, credited ideas with more power than they merited, and in plowing new ground, it had often to work with an insufficient evidentiary base. Questions like the future careers of public school graduates or the country estate-buying propensities of industrialists had yet to be thoroughly studied, and in such matters the book of necessity painted a broad brush, elucidating themes and selecting examples rather than quantifying large amounts of evidence. As F. M. L. Thompson, the book’s most recent critic, observed in 2001, “culture is a fickle guide, so flexible, anxious to please, and so easily moulded to suit any one of a range of preconceptions, that it is unwise for historians to trust it beyond the limits of independent corroboration from other types of more objective witnesses.”² Among other things, Thompson, like some previous critics, questioned whether there had ever been such

² *Gentrification and the Enterprise Culture: Britain 1780–1980* (2001), p. 160. Besides Thompson’s, the leading critical works are Bruce Collins and Keith Robbins, ed., *British Culture and Economic Decline* (1990), W. B. Rubinstein, *Capitalism, Culture and Decline in Britain*,

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a thing as an “enterprise culture” (a term that does not appear in the book; it was coined by some of the book’s Conservative admirers) or whether the process of “gentrification” (the adoption by businessmen and industrialists of “gentry” or “aristocratic” styles of life) had had, in fact, measurable deleterious consequences on economic growth. As a result of the industrious scholarship of the book’s critics and other historians, much more is now known about these issues than was the case in the late 1970s, when this book was composed. No doubt, it would be quite a different work if it were undertaken today. Yet it still conveys some important things, both about the climate of thought in 1970s and 80s Britain and about the long sweep of British history. For a century and more, technologists and businessmen have expressed their sense of being denied the social status accorded to those in the professions or government. Many such persons, after reading the book, wrote the author during the 1980s repeating such sentiments. These have been too widely shared and too persistent over generations to not be telling of something important, however merely “cultural.”

Furthermore, not only did most critics go rather overboard in their reaction to a work that was soon closely associated with the hated Thatcher government, they also tended to misread the book’s argument as more drastic than it actually was – not as a partial but as a full explanation for British economic retardation; and even in its chosen specific territory of culture, as a portrait not of the containment or “domestication” of industrial values but of their defeat. In addition, nearly all critics focused on one half of the book’s portrait – the economic behavior of the business class – and ignored the other half – the influence of counterindustrial values and attitudes on political discourse and policies (in which the long-lasting effects of empire played a crucial role, one that the book did not credit as much as it should have).³ The book concluded by turning to politics and suggesting that Thatcher’s greatest challenge might not be the money supply or the trade unions, both in the forefront of attention in the first years of her government, but the dominant frame of mind of the nation’s political and economic leaders. So, arguably, it proved, and insofar as Blair’s “New Britain” differs from the Britain of Wilson and Callaghan, it owes a debt to the “cultural” agenda as well as to the more concrete legislative and fiscal policies of the “Thatcherite” era in between.

1750–1990 (1991), and Peter Clarke and Clive Trebilcock, eds., *Understanding Decline* (1997).

³ This, indeed, was a point never made by critics, but indeed it should have been explored at some length. In the twentieth century, the possession of the world’s most extensive empire helped support a large bureaucratic-professional class and its pseudo-gentry “custodial culture” oriented more toward preservation of the status quo than toward innovation.

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Thus, even after absorbing the many valid objections of its critics, this book remains a milestone in the historiography of modern Britain, having made several different kinds of contributions. First, of course, because of the interest it stirred, far more is now known about the history of the British economy and, in particular, the “culture of economic behavior” in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain, and, indeed, about the “politics of modernization.” But the work proved both symptomatic and influential well beyond the “relative economic decline” debate. The study of economics as cultural activity has rapidly developed, both within and outside the field of history. Outside, professional economics has become much more receptive to cultural, institutional, and behavioral angles of approach. Inside, business history has in Britain virtually exploded as a field of study, while in particular the study of what might be called the “birth of the industrial spirit” in the eighteenth century is beginning to transform our understanding of the industrial revolution, arguably the most important development in history since the invention of agriculture.⁴ Indeed, one may now speak of a new emerging scholarly consensus on the origins of the Industrial Revolution that gives a greater role than ever before to a set of exceptionally close relations in eighteenth-century Britain between many scientists, craftsmen, and businessmen – what has been labeled a widely diffused “engineering culture.”⁵

Beyond this, this book was one of the first works to highlight the peculiar hybridity of the British elite and how much longer and slower the “decline” of the aristocracy had been than had previously been assumed. It was also one of the first to draw attention to the growing preoccupation with national identity in twentieth-century Britain. The “literature of national identity” first discussed here has since become the subject of a large number of studies. “From about twenty years ago,” Robert Colls observed in 2002, “historians and critics started asking the national question again.”⁶ No cessation seems in prospect.

English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit remains after more than two decades a vivid portrait of one face of modern British history, a stimulant to thought about the relations between culture and society in Britain, and, more generally, a founding text of the study of British national identities and a notable example of a work of history that played a part in the politics and public life of its own time.

⁴ See Margaret C. Jacob, *Scientific Culture and the Making of the Industrial West* (1997), and Joel Mokyr, *The Gifts of Athena: Historical Origins of the Knowledge Economy* (2002).

⁵ Jack Goldstone, “Efflorescences and Economic Growth in World History: Rethinking the ‘Rise of the West’ and the Industrial Revolution,” *Journal of World History* 13 (2002), 374. For the full development of this argument, see Goldstone’s forthcoming book, *The Happy Chance: The Industrial Revolution in the Perspective of World History*.

⁶ Robert Colls, *Identity of England* (2002), p. 4.