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0521651727 - British Society, 1680-1880: Dynamism, Containment and Change - Richard Price

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British Society, 1680–1880 Dynamism, Containment and Change

Richard Price here offers a sweeping new interpretation of modern British history. He challenges the dominant assumption that the nineteenth century marked the beginning of modern Britain. *British Society* argues, on the contrary, that nineteenth-century British society was the extension of an earlier era of which the main themes first appeared in the late seventeenth century and which continued to shape the social, economic and political history of the country until the end of the nineteenth century. It is a book which casts a new light on economic, political and social history; it offers new interpretations on questions and issues that are central to the history of modern Britain. It follows in the great tradition of works such as Briggs's *Age of Improvement*, and Perkin's *Origins of Modern English Society*, and will be of enormous interest to all students and scholars of the period.

RICHARD PRICE is Professor of History at the University of Maryland, College Park. He has written widely on British history; his books include *An Imperial War and the British Working Class* (1972), *Masters, Unions and Men* (Cambridge University Press, 1980) and *Labour and British Society* (1986).

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Preface

When I have been asked to describe this book I have found myself saying “it is a general history, but it is not a textbook.” By “a general history” I mean a book that makes an argument about a particular phase of a society’s history, but (unlike a textbook) a book that contains no ambition to offer a survey of social experience. I also mean that I have endeavored to produce a work that could be read with profit by persons with differing degrees of knowledge about the period the book covered. This is a book that I hope will interest experts in the many subspecialties of modern British history. Yet the book has not been written only for them. I have tried to make it accessible to less specialized audiences of students and others who might have the inclination to read what is undeniably an “academic” history.

The “general” character of the book was determined by the argument that developed in the course of its writing. The book presents the argument that the years from the end of the seventeenth century to the end of the nineteenth century composed a distinct stage in the history of modern Britain. This perspective presents the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in a very different light than most of the historical writing about those centuries. Yet it is a perspective, I would maintain, that provides a fuller understanding of both centuries than most conventional accounts; it illuminates more historical fact.

In order to make this argument I have engaged with much of the historiography of modern Britain. In addition, I have offered my own reckoning about large swathes of that history. I have done so through themes that are common to much of the historical writing of the period. Thus, I have endeavored to make coherent arguments about the structure of the imperial and domestic economies, about the organization of civil society, about the spatial distribution of administrative power between region and nation, about the stabilities and instabilities of gender relations, about the animating forces of the political order and about the dynamics of class and social relations. In doing this I have ventured across a historical landscape well traveled by those who have preceded me. My aim has been to shift the contours of that terrain a bit.

Acknowledgments

I have acquired many debts in the writing of this book. The University of Maryland, College Park, has been most generous with research leave and support without which the book could not have been started, let alone completed. I received a sabbatical term from my College in 1992 and Dean Robert Griffith generously awarded me a semester research leave in 1993. The Graduate School General Research Board awarded me a semester leave in 1996 which Acting Dean Ira Berlin generously complemented with an additional semester research award. These awards came at a critical time; they made it possible for me to complete a working draft of the whole manuscript. The semester research award was made in connection with my service as acting director of the School of Music and, although it would be hard to tie directly anything in this book to that year, I like to think that the delay it imposed on the completion of the manuscript allowed a more mature work to emerge. In other respects, too, that was an important year for me and it is a pleasure here to thank Ira Berlin and the talented faculty of the School of Music for the opportunity to work with them during the academic year 1995–96.

I was very honored to hold a Visiting Fellowship at the International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, in 1992–93. I want to pay a special thanks to the staff of the Institute for their generous provision of research facilities. Dr. Erich Fischer, who was then the director of the Institute, and the person most responsible for projecting the Institute into its current centrality to European social history, was kind enough to issue me the invitation to be a visiting fellow. I was extremely fortunate to work closely with two excellent Dutch scholars: Dr. Marcel van der Linden, then head of the publications division, and Dr. Jan Lucassen, head of the research division. Both Dr. van der Linden and Dr. Lucassen did more than offer a professional welcome. They smoothed my way into Dutch society, provided personal support, included me in scholarly conferences and seminars at The Hague and in Paris, and integrated me into the Institute's community of scholars, archivists and researchers for the year.

Other members of the Institute staff also extended themselves in many

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In addition to its remarkable holdings across a wide range of historical fields, the International Institute for Social History houses the Kashnor Collection, a little-known collection of British books, pamphlets and periodicals. I used it extensively in researching this book and it is a collection that deserves to be more widely appreciated. In range and coverage, the Kashnor Collection is second only to the combined resources of the Goldsmith and Kress Libraries for original printed sources in British social and economic history of the early modern and modern periods.

The furthest public origins of this book lay in a paper I gave at the Western Canada Victorian Studies Association in Vancouver, BC, in 1988. I delivered subsequent versions at conferences or seminars at the University of Southern California in 1989, Bielefeld University in 1993, Gothenburg University in 1993, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, also in 1993, Trinity and All Saints' College, Leeds University, 1997, and at Wayne State University, Detroit, 1998. I would like to thank Klaus Tenfelde, Birger Simonson, Burt Alteena and Martin Hewitt in particular for their invitations and generous hospitality and the participants at those meetings for the helpful criticisms and comments they made.

Over the years I have received considerable help from my various summer research assistants. In particular I would like to thank Yong Ook Jo, now of Seoul, Korea, and John Loukedelis, now of Toronto, for their work in identifying bibliographical and other tasks central to the research for this book.

I would also like to acknowledge my editor Richard Fisher of Cambridge University Press: he was an attentive, intelligent and very helpful editor and it has been a pleasure to work with him. Richard Fisher was not responsible for the opinions of the three anonymous readers he secured. But he was responsible for choosing them, for which I was very grateful. Their comments were generally approving of the book; more important was the intelligence of their critical responses.

Criticism and commentary are absolutely essential to any academic enterprise and I owe a special debt to the many friends and colleagues who over the years have commented upon early versions and various pieces of this work. Without exception, the following colleagues gave generously of their time to read and critically respond to the material I sent them: Ted Koditschek, Peter Mandler, Terry Parsinnen, Laura

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Particular notice must be made of the following friends whose work went beyond the demands even of friendship. They read the completed work at least once, and their comments were essential to its current shape. The responses of James Cockburn, James Epstein and John Belchem to my efforts were the best one could hope for: constructive, critical, supportive and encouraging. My good friend Robert Cohen also read the manuscript. As a historian of nineteenth-century French music, Robert Cohen brought to the manuscript the reading of the well-informed non-specialist. His recommendations were all the more important for that. I owe all of these friends and colleagues a considerable debt. Naturally, I remain entirely responsible for the final product.

Finally, and most important of all, this book is dedicated to Adele Seff. Her contributions to this book are too many to detail. Yet one must be recognized. She read the manuscript not once but twice, and her editorial assistance and commentary were absolutely fundamental to its final shape. She prodded me to clarify my arguments and to render lucid my prose. Her assistance has strengthened enormously any virtues the book may possess; for that and for much else besides, this book is dedicated to her.