

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.

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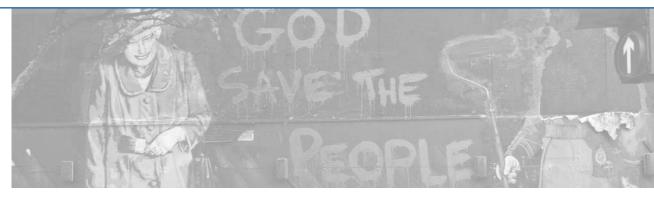
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Modern Britain 1750 to the Present

James Vernon





CAMBRIDGEUNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314-321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi - 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107031333
10.1017/9781139381611

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First published 2017

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Names: Vernon, James, author.

Title: Modern Britain: 1750 to the present / James Vernon.

Description: Cambridge, United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University

Press, 2017. | Series: Cambridge history of Britain; 4

9781107686007 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Great Britain – History – 1714–1837. | Great

Britain – History – Victoria, 1837–1901. | Great Britain – History – 20th

century. | Great Britain – History – Elizabeth II, 1952– | $\tt BISAC:$ $\tt HISTORY$ /

Europe / Great Britain.

Classification: LCC DA470 .V37 2017 | DDC 941.082-dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016041645

ISBN 978-1-107-03133-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-68600-7 Paperback

Additional resources for this publication at www.cambridge.org/CHOB-vernon

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.



To my teachers and students



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Acknowledgements

This book has my name on the cover but it is really the product of my conversation with generations of scholars as well as my teachers, students and colleagues. I hope all of them will see their influence at work. Caroline Ritter, Katie Harper, Trevor Jackson and Sam Wetherell actually wrote some of the book. They checked facts, tidied my prose, found images and produced those textboxes with their initials at the end. Brandon Williams marshalled the images and permissions. Elizabeth Friend-Smith somehow convinced me to write the book and Rosemary Crawford helped me finish it. It all begins and ends with Ros. Our family, near and far, kept me in the present. I never could have imagined writing this book without those who taught me at school and university. Since then my students have been the inspiration and my teachers. Thank you all.



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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.



xxii 💴 PREFACE

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.

6

Where is Britain?

This may seem like a strange question given that the British Isles are located in north-west 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.



PREFACE 🗯 xxiii

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.

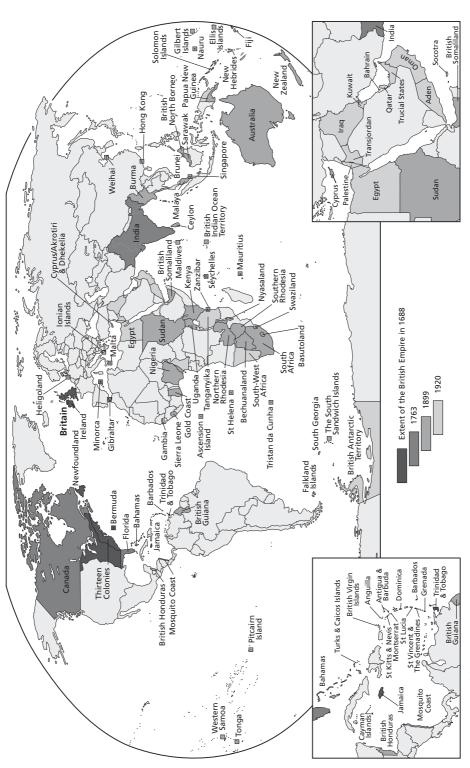


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Map o.1 Map of Britain as the United Kingdom of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland after 1922





 $Map\ o.2\$ Map of the expanding British Empire in 1688, 1763, 1899 and 1920



xxvi 💴 PREFACE

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