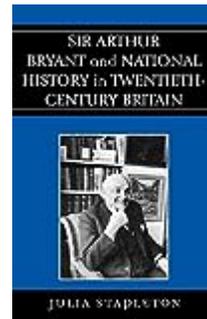




**Julia Stapleton.** *Sir Arthur Bryant and National History in Twentieth-Century Britain.* Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006. 307 S. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-0969-4.



**Reviewed by** Thomas Heyck (Department of History, Northwestern University)

**Published on** H-Albion (December, 2005)

### A Middlebrow Patriotic Historian

This is a thoroughly researched, clearly written study of the attitudes and influence of Sir Arthur Bryant, who is seldom read now but was a very popular historian and man of letters in the mid-twentieth century. Julia Stapleton does not offer a full biography of Bryant, but thoughtfully explores Bryant's efforts to "revive the role of 'national historian'" (p. 4). Bryant spoke to a broad general reading public as both historian and journalist in order to celebrate English national character (in which he resolutely believed) and thus to shore up England's moral and political unity. Stapleton succeeds admirably, showing how Bryant projected romantic conservative views on the past, often to great popular approval, but not always as a partisan of the Tory Party.

It is no wonder that Bryant held conservative views. Born in 1899, Bryant spent his early years in the precincts of Buckingham Palace, for his father was Chief Clerk to King Edward VII. He attended Harrow and, after service in World War I, Oxford. Bryant never rebelled against his privileged upbringing or established English institutions—the monarchy, Church, army, aristocratic tradition, or indeed, cricket, which he regarded as a good

expression of English national character. It was "England," not "Britain," that held his attention and affection; hence Anglocentrism remained one of Bryant's central attitudes.

Between the wars, Bryant became a busy public intellectual, devoting himself to producing patriotic pageants and writing popular histories. He enjoyed historical research but despised academia as too narrow. He loved the pageantry of the monarchy and, in a sense, his histories vividly depicted the past in terms of an unfolding pageant. Stapleton neatly sums up his central attitudes as: cultural conservatism, including a belief in the reality and special virtue of the English national character; opposition to secular, progressive intellectuals like the Bloomsbury Group, Shaw, and Wells; and, a desire to cultivate "middlebrow" opinion—the views of what he called "ordinary people"—both by his histories and by the column he wrote for the *Illustrated London News* from 1936 to 1985. He loved the rural England of country houses and parish churches, and he always believed that pre-industrial England was united by a common culture. Not surprisingly, he vigorously opposed the concept of social

class, insisting that all strata of the population had sacrificed equally for England. These myths about the English past he held as truth. Inevitably, he disliked both modernity and modernism.

Conservative though he was, Bryant was not a good party man. True, in the 1920s he associated himself with the Conservative Party's College at Ashridge and his first book was *The Spirit of Conservatism* (1929). He admired Stanley Baldwin and in the 1930s established the right-wing National Book Association to oppose the Left Book Club. Yet he was out of step with the economic policies of the Party, for he believed in a paternalistic Disraelian notion of a natural alliance between aristocracy and people, which he feared was eroding. Indeed, in the early 1920s, he held mildly socialist views, worked with London slum children through the Harrow Mission, and lectured for the Workers' Education Association and the Oxford University extension. During and after World War II, as Stapleton shows, Bryant was an early convert to social reconstruction and the Beveridge Report.

Yet Bryant in the 1930s was also an appeaser and admirer of Hitler and the Nazis. It is on this point that Stapleton, a particularly patient historian, offers her strongest criticism of Bryant: "Perhaps his greatest failing was to allow his visceral dislike of the Left to obscure his judgment about Germany, prone as it already was to the deceptions of an inveterate romantic imagination" (p. 123). Although he felt concern about the Nazi persecution of the Jews, Bryant nevertheless admired Hitler for his leadership and the Nazis for their restoration of German morale and spirit of self-sacrifice—qualities he felt England needed as well. Thus Bryant supported appeasement even after the German annexation of all of Czechoslovakia.

However, once Britain entered the war against Germany, Bryant turned to writing patriotic histories to shore up British morale. His most notable World War II books were two volumes on the war against the French Revolution and Napoleon: *The Years of Endurance, 1793-1802* (1942); and *Years of Victory, 1802-1812* (1944). These books were immensely popular, for they were stirring narratives of Britain fighting with its back to the wall. In them he asserted that, all along, the English were, to use Stapleton's words, "zealous for one thing above all else: freedom as an end in itself, not just for themselves but for others too" (p. 176). This nonsense was undoubtedly inspirational in the early 1940s.

Stapleton argues persuasively that Bryant's wartime histories brought him into the mainstream of Whig historiography, even though heretofore he had sought, like Disraeli before him, to subvert the Whig interpretation. Both Bryant and the Whig historians were present-minded in their historical writing and concerned to celebrate English political virtues. Bryant won the approval of G. M. Trevelyan, who agreed with him that history was an art, not a social science; and he joined A. L. Rowse, John Betjeman, R. F. Delderfield and a few others in a patriotic intellectual circle. Bryant hoped the Labour Party after 1945 would combine their goals for improving the material standard of living of the British people with his own ideal of reinvigorating aristocratic virtues like tradition, tolerance, and love of beauty.

In these hopes, of course, he was sadly disappointed. In the last two decades of his life (he died in 1985), Bryant not only diverged from the Whig view of history again, but also found his influence waning. Stapleton explains that the reading audience fragmented, and Bryant's kind of romantic popular history lost out to the very different histories of E. P. Thompson, J. H. Plumb, and A. J. P. Taylor—all of whom saw the past in terms of conflict, not consensus. Bryant was a vigorous Cold Warrior and later a strong opponent of British membership in the EEC. He believed that the British "race" was different from Europeans; hence Britain's future lay with "oceanic" nations like Australia and the United States. But even at this late date, when Bryant said "Britain," he plainly meant "England," and his Anglocentrism no longer resonated.

In her conclusion, Stapleton says that Bryant's significance lay primarily "in his sustained representation of a particular cast of Conservative mind in popular historiography and middlebrow journalism, one that was framed by an unquestioning belief in the integrity and unity of Britain" (p. 283). This sensible assessment is amply borne out by her evenhanded and sympathetic exposition of Bryant's views. She might have shown a sharper critical edge, for it is not always easy to distinguish her views from his. Bryant's political and historical ideas expressed an essentialism that he imposed on the past, never mind the facts. Only in the chapter on Bryant and appeasement is Stapleton openly critical of Bryant. However, decorum and clarity in exposition of Bryant's thought are two of Stapleton's strengths, and they help her to make a significant contribution to the history of twentieth-century Conservative thought.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Thomas Heyck. Review of Stapleton, Julia, *Sir Arthur Bryant and National History in Twentieth-Century Britain*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11039>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.org](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.org).