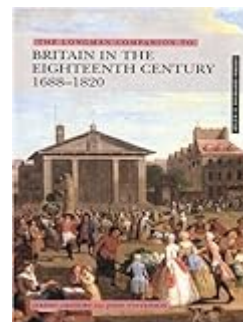


Jeremy Gregory, John Stevenson. *The Longman Companion to Britain in the Eighteenth Century 1688-1820*. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited, 2000. x + 571 pp. \$75.95 (cloth), \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-27989-6.



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The Dull Century?

Whereas “dictionary” and “encyclopedia” are stern, solid, and perhaps even intimidating terms, “companion” has a softer, friendlier ring. What do we expect of a “companion”, apart from it being a work of reference? Oxford University Press publishes a celebrated and doubtless profitable collection of companions to almost anything and everything, from birth to death, from work to sport. Some of the earliest, like P.A. Scholes’s classic *Oxford Companion to Music*, which first appeared in 1938, were amazing feats of solo scholarship. The preface to the tenth edition (1969) tells us that “the actual work of writing this encyclopedia, rather longer than the Bible, was Dr Scholes’s own. The only articles farmed out were those on the tonic sol-fa, which he could never quite manage to his own satisfaction, and the plots of the operas, which he found too boring to engage his attention” (vii). But most Oxford companions commissioned today are collaborative edited works. And whereas the contributors were once anonymous drudges wholly overshadowed by their editor, today their actual responsibility for producing the bulk of the text is emphasized by the initials or full name by-line which follow most articles. But the work under review, like other Longman Com-

panions to History, reverts to an earlier model, having been put together by its two authors, rather than based on the commissioned contributions of a team of subject specialists.

Another feature which distinguishes Gregory and Stevenson’s book from not only the Oxford companions but most other dictionaries and encyclopedias is that its contents are arranged thematically and chronologically, rather than in alphabetical order. The sixteen main sections or chapters are entitled as follows: 1. Political chronologies; 2. The monarchy; 3. Ministries and office-holders; 4. Parliament, elections and parliamentary reform; 5. Foreign affairs and empire; 6. Military and naval; 7. Law and order; 8. Religion; 9. Financial and economic; 10. Social and cultural; 11. Biographies; 12. Glossary; 13. Select bibliography, and 14. Maps.

Most of these main sections are further subdivided: thus Section Four includes separate sub-sections on the House of Commons, the House of Lords, the Irish Parliament (but not, incidentally, the Scottish parliament from 1689 to 1707), Elections, and Parliamentary Reform. Within the sub-section on the House of Commons we

find a chronological list of Speakers 1685-1817 (including full name and title if any, dates of birth, death and election to office, and constituency returned from); a table with a page of notes summarizing the changing size and composition of the House between 1688 and 1826; a table showing the enormous expansion in the numbers of public petitions received between 1785 (when 298 petitions were presented) and 1833 (when the total figure was 10,394); a ten-page section on the franchise, including lists of constituencies (English, Welsh and Scottish) showing numbers of members returned, type of franchise, estimated size of electorate and population on the eve of the First Reform Act; and finally two tables giving contemporary estimates of the proportion of MPs returned by the influence of patrons (peers, commoners and the Treasury) in the 1790s and immediately following the Napoleonic Wars, together with Namier's figures for the disbursement of secret service money as printed in *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (London, 1929), p. 242.

Although four of the ten substantive sections are devoted to high political events and institutions, these together account for only some 120 pages, or under a quarter of the total extent of the book. Biographies constitute the longest single section (with just under a hundred pages). While most entries here are very brief lives or mini-biographies of some 6-8 lines, giving only the subject's name, vital dates, and main claim(s) to fame, a few provide more expansive treatment for, among others, G. F. Handel, Hannah More, Sir Walter Scott and Sir Robert Walpole. This welcome indication that the authors' criteria of significance are not narrowly or solely political is reinforced by the provision of a very comprehensive "Cultural and intellectual chronology, 1688-1820", as part of Section 10. Nevertheless both the placement of this section and its miscellaneous content, spanning population size and structure, education, poor relief, friendly societies, charitable and philanthropic societies, hospital foundations, the press and newspapers, major social legislation and developments, trade unions, and local government, are redolent of a residual category, if not of history with the politics left out. The impression is strengthened by the often thin and patchy quality of data provided in this section, including a one-page national population table based on pre-Wrigley and Schofield sources.

Although lists and tables dominate, they are interspersed with occasional passages of coherent prose, for example a page and a half on the abolition of capital offences 1800-30 (pp. 228-9), and the brief but informative introduction to a chronological account of elections

(p. 100). The bibliography, which extends over more than fifty pages, also takes the form of an essay, or series of essays, providing guidance in the form of brief annotations to works cited, both primary and secondary sources, books and articles. The discussion of recent historiographical trends, and its generally comprehensive and up-to-date coverage (including items published as recently as 1999) make this a particularly useful component, its value barely diminished by a number of unfortunate typographical slips, including some mangling of the names of American authors (cf. "Levak" at p. 483 and "Linenbaugh" on p. 520). While the range of topics covered largely follows the preceding text, there are a number of welcome additions, notably women's history and gender history, as well as intellectual history and the history of education. It is not clear why these subjects are deemed worthy of inclusion in this form, but not as part of the appropriate substantive section, or as additional sections. The author's annotations are overwhelmingly positive, encouraging the reader to go further rather than warning him or her off particular items; this is in truth rather a series of reading lists than a bibliography properly so-called.

Those readers earnestly cautioned to "beware of taking an oversimplified view of James II and the Revolution settlement" and "Make sure you pay particular attention to the period from James's flight to the accession of William and Mary" (p. 484) are presumably envisaged as British A level and undergraduate students in the throes of preparing essays or exam topics. For a certain traditional kind of political-history rich curriculum, this *Companion* could undoubtedly provide a useful factual security blanket, although it is a little hard to imagine what use even the most conscientious swot might make of the lists of Welsh bishops (pp. 260-1), or the information that a convention concerning the herring trade was concluded with Hamburg on 8 February 1719 (p. 130). (This and other dates are presumably new style, but despite several references to the adoption of the Gregorian calendar in 1752, the authors provide no explicit indication of the calendrical convention they have adopted). It is to be hoped that many students of various nationalities, not to mention their hard-pressed teachers, will indeed find this work "a pleasure to read, consult, and browse through" (as its back-cover blurb optimistically claims). But I confess to some scepticism as to whether the *Longman Companion to Britain in the Eighteenth Century 1688-1820* will help convince them that this period should no longer "be known as the 'dull' century in British history" (to quote the blurb again).

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