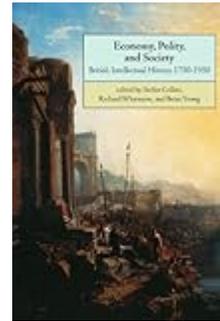


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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, Brian Young, eds. *Economy, Polity, and Society: Essays in British Intellectual History, 1750-1950*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. viii + 283 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-63978-1.



Stefan Collini, Richard Whatmore, Brian Young, eds. *History, Religion, and Culture: British Intellectual History 1750-1950*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. viii + 289 pp. \$64.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-62639-2.

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“Intellectual History” in Britain

These two volumes, successfully defying publishers’ distaste for the *Festschrift*, use the occasion of the retirement of two eminent practitioners, Donald Winch and John Burrow, to celebrate the achievements of what is sometimes known as the “Sussex School” of intellectual history. The University of Sussex, founded in the 1960s, was the first in Britain formally to recognize intellectual history as a sub-discipline. The Sussex School flourished through the synergy of Winch and Burrow, who together with Stefan Collini collaborated on an accomplished study of British intellectual history in the nineteenth century, *That Noble Science of Politics* (1983).

In his “general introduction” Collini is ambivalent about the term “Sussex School,” which was never much more than “a piece of academic shorthand” (p. 13), but which nevertheless provides the rationale for these volumes. In fact he gives a cogent explanation of the distinctive features of the approach to intellectual history with which he and his former colleagues have become associated. For a start, they deliberately used the term

“intellectual history” rather than the older term “history of ideas,” which, they thought, seemed to imply a self-contained history of “autonomous abstractions” and “their self-propelled journeyings through time.” Instead, “the term ‘intellectual history’ signals more clearly that the focus is on an aspect of human activity” (p. 2): it implies a fully historical recovery of “the thought of the past in its complexity” (p. 3). The subjects of this history are not “ideas,” but thinking people of the past. The enemy here is the teleological history of a given modern discipline, which asks what contribution Smith made to the creation of the discipline of economics or Comte to the discipline of sociology, rather than reconstructing the kind of questions they themselves set out to answer.

Intellectual history, on this account, is both necessarily interdisciplinary (because thinkers of the past did not confine themselves within our disciplinary categories) and deeply historical. Both of these characteristics mark these volumes. Interdisciplinarity is suggested by the range of contributors, who hold appointments in English, theology, politics, law, and economics, as well as history; and also by the titles of the two volumes. It is underlined

by some nifty editorial work that emphasizes the connections between the two volumes rather than their disjunction. So Archbishop Whately gets in under the heading of “economy” rather than “religion,” and Ruskin—very much flavor of the month—appears in both volumes. Among the contributors we find a nice mixture of the eminent (Pocock, most obviously) and the younger generation. The eclecticism of the Sussex School is reflected too: this is a school that eschews explicit methodological controversy and has no doctrine to propound, save the postulate that intellectual history is, after all, a sub-discipline of history and must be pursued historically. And while some classic themes previously addressed by Winch and Burrow are revisited with profit, more recent concerns stemming from the rise of cultural history also make their mark, notably in the essays of Peter Mandler and Julia Stapleton addressing questions of national identity.

Such is the eclecticism that it would be pointless for a reviewer to draw out common themes. I particularly enjoyed Mandler’s trouncing of the fashionably postcolonial but commonly unargued belief that Victorian thought was pervaded by a racially-defined national consciousness. William Thomas’ piece on religion and politics in the *Quarterly Review* should whet readers’ appetite for his splendid new book on the Macaulay-Crocker controversy. Dario Castiglione gives us a brilliant and wide-ranging analysis of the concept of liberty

in the Scottish Enlightenment, and shows convincingly that this cannot be adequately grasped in terms of the rather tired categories of “positive” and “negative” freedom. And Jane Garnett provides an astute analysis of the neglected theme of “domestic economy” in Victorian thought.

Collini propounds the view that these volumes demonstrate the coming-of-age of intellectual history in Britain. No longer do its practitioners have to be defensive about the terrain occupied by their sub-discipline. The quality of the contributions that appear here supports his argument, but there is no reason for triumphalism. In the UK, unlike the USA, there are precious few university courses in “intellectual history,” and I know of no designated posts in this field other than at Sussex and perhaps Middlesex. Cambridge has numerous historians of political thought and a graduate programme in Political Thought and Intellectual History; but intellectual history remains the junior partner. At the University of Oxford, the endowment of Burrow’s own post fell victim to a silly campaign by a group of disappointed academics, and the post has not survived his retirement. When the same University advertised a lectureship in intellectual history, it characteristically proceeded to fill it in quite a different field. When it is able to combine the means to create such a post with the will to fill it, the future of intellectual history in Britain will be more secure.

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