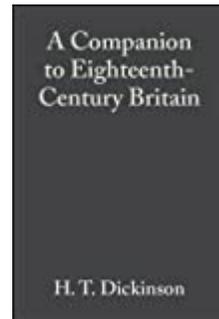


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



H. T. Dickinson, ed. *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002. xviii + 550 pp. \$124.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-631-21837-1.



Reviewed by James Caudle (Yale Editions of the Private Papers of James Boswell, Yale University)

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This *Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain* is one in a series devoted to providing “sophisticated and authoritative overviews of the scholarship that has shaped our current understanding of British History .., to synthesize the current state of scholarship from a variety of historical perspectives and to provide a statement on where the field is heading” (dust-jacket). [See, for example, the H-Albion review of Barry Coward, ed. *A Companion to Stuart Britain*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003. <[http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-albion&month=0401&week=c&msg=UGkZkdDfQUNfs8pMsvgZpA&user=&pw=\\$](http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=h-albion&month=0401&week=c&msg=UGkZkdDfQUNfs8pMsvgZpA&user=&pw=$>): Editor.]

The high cost of this book will likely discourage many people who should buy this excellent compilation for their own personal collections. Until the arrival of what one hopes will be an affordable paperback, I suggest you badger your institutional librarian into purchasing the book, and then convince him/her to place at least one copy on borrowable status rather than only on a restricted reference shelf. This *Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain* (hereafter *Companion*) is a book which deserves to be read for its essays, and which deserves a slow and contemplative reading rather than a quick flip-through for a fact-checking expedition in the research

shelves.

All of the thirty-eight essays in the *Companion* were especially commissioned for the volume.[1] Essayists were asked to provide a narrative or structural analysis of the *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, the events and personalities—or trends and phenomena—of the era. At the same time they were also responsible for summarizing and explaining the state of scholarship within the specialist subject through both authorial comments, as well as providing a list of fifteen to twenty-five essential books on the subject.

The scope and ambition of the *Companion* are daunting: the idea of summing up eighteenth-century Britain and its global context in five hundred pages is in itself daring enough. Perhaps an orthodox Baconian or Comtean might have imagined in 1952 that the increasing exactitude, accuracy, and hyper-specialization of eighteenth-century British Studies over the past half-century would have led to increasing clarity and ease in creating overarching general theories of the way Georgian Britain worked. As Dickinson points out in his brief introduction, however, the exponential increase in specialist scholarship between 1952 and 2002—the flood of factual information, archival findings, and much elegant theory as well—poses as many problems as it solves, making the work of summary and generalization more diffi-

cult, rather than easier.

Dickinson begins the volume by claiming that “[f]ifty years ago historians studying eighteenth-century Britain would probably have agreed on what were its most important features.” One might dispute such a claim: the actual consensus of historians in 1952 was not entirely in favor (as is implied) of a placid landscape view of Britain as a world of “aristocratic nature,” “landed elite,” a non-interfering “limited monarchy,” a modernizing and secularizing and tolerant materialist emerging power characterized by “aristocracy, stability, improvement and growing prosperity” (p. xv). Granted, a tradition reaching from Macaulay, Trevelyan, Lecky, and Stephen, and continued by Plumb (though not entirely by Namier), did argue skillfully and often hegemonically that eighteenth-century Britain was *really* about a secular and oligarchic world of enlightened wealth, power, comfort, and progress, and the defenders of this viewpoint at times thuggishly beat down anyone who dared to argue otherwise. But already in 1952 the cracks in the edifice had been revealed by Sykes, Laski, Petrie, Broxap, the early historical materialists, and many others. The period from 1952 to 2002 merely saw the cracks in what came to be called “Plumb’s century” grow until the solid belief in an age of stabilitarian elegance collapsed into shards. The postmodern attempts by Simon Schama and Annabel Patterson to restore a broad-brush Whig interpretation to the period have largely fallen on unsympathetic ears among eighteenth-century specialists, and attempts to bring in poor old Habermas (thirty years after the fact) to put the old paradigm back in its place under a new name (“bourgeois public sphere”) have generally been greeted with a well-deserved scorn. In retrospect, standing amidst the ruins, it seems that self-consciously revisionist writers of the 1980s and 1990s such as J. C. D. Clark, Linda Colley, and Jonathan Scott did not so much break through the old orthodoxy as exploit the already obvious gaps in its defenses. If there ever was a “Grand Narrative” of the Long Eighteenth Century, such a Grand Narrative is now dead. Hence the problem of trying to present a volume explaining it all to the seeker of a fairly quick explanation. Does a volume of carefully researched and thought-out, well-informed, justifiably tentative, and pragmatically trimmed essays all headed in different and often mutually exclusive directions add up to a unified vision of the period? And ought we to care if it does not?

Dickinson is on far more solid ground in his claim that “today, historians of eighteenth-century Britain are much more sharply divided over what they regard as its central features.” Which is to say the least. As

Dickinson points out, “Ancien R=gime” theorists arguing for Church and King and Nobility as dominant forces now co-exist alongside theorists advocating eighteenth-century Britain as “the most dynamic and modern society ... in the world” (p. xvi). Believers in “stability and cohesion” face competition from those who vaunt “almost constant instability and the continual tension between the traditional forces of order and the abiding threat” (p. xvi). Those who stress “major political and economic developments” among the more traditional fields from 1903 to 1953 face rivalry from those who argue that the “most interesting features” are “intellectual, social, and cultural.” Religion is “restored to a central position” (after Sykes), as are “intellectual discourse” (among the post-Skinnerians), the “role of gender and women” (in the wake of the rise of history of women as a departmentalized field as well as a special subject), and “crime and disorder” (especially after the jocularly-called “crime wave” of new works). According to Dickinson, the only thing to be sure of is that all is in flux. Expanding the predicament of Johnson’s *Rasselas*, we *begin* from the problematic of “A Conclusion in Which Nothing is Concluded.” Readers of this volume are not even allowed an initial illusion of a century of stability, equipoise, and taste before we are exiled from it. From the editor’s introduction onwards, throughout the book, we are confronted by the prospect of a set of workable (albeit professedly provisional) specific theories on aspects or areas of eighteenth-century societies, yet without the possibility for a convincing macro or general grand theory of everything in the era. Even within the specialist sub-fields of each article, the authors are (correctly) tentative about making generalizations about the totality of the era, and most acknowledge or even celebrate the divergence of opinion on the subject-matter. I am confident of the excellence of the individual components of this volume, but remain unclear as to whether they were meant to present a coherent picture of the long eighteenth century. Dickinson seems to think they should not all gibe and, although I agree, this aspect may vex some few readers who may take the unlikely approach of reading through a book obviously designed to be consulted hodge-podge as the need arises.

The task of compressing all of the above-mentioned ferment in recent scholarship and dividing it neatly into no more than forty topics is even worse when compared to the more specialized and (at least superficially) more compact and feasible agendas of certain other Blackwell “Companions” on somewhat narrower subjects such as early-twentieth-century Britain, contemporary Britain, American foreign relations, the American Revolution, or

the Vietnam War.

The first effort to bring order to the chaos is through a division of the book into six major segments. Part 1, which is allotted nine essays, is on politics and the constitution. High politics is “privileged,” or at least is offered precedence in the procession, in the *Companion*. Part 2, which is given seven essays, surveys the economy and society, a segment which in a *marxisant* account would have been the structure on which the rest of the book was built. Part 3, granted five essays, examines religion. Part 4, another six essays, offers aspects of culture. Part 5, “Union and Disunion in the British Isles,” brings in five essays on Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. The logical final part, “Britain and the Wider World,” contains six essays.

One might quibble over the allocation of many of the essays to certain “parts” of the *Companion*. Presumably in order to avoid imbalancing the volume towards the already top-heavy (albeit excellent) section on politics and constitution, several essays which seemed to have a natural home therein were moved strategically into less populated parts of the book. High “Political Ideas,” while as much a part of “Politics and the Constitution” as any topic in that section, are placed in “Culture” rather than adjacent to their cousin “Popular Politics and Radical Ideas.” The national Church of England is not treated in the same section as its conjoined twin, “The British State,” but shunted to a general discussion of religion of dissent and establishment reserved into its own little segment; this likely unintentional ghettoization of the subject matter seems to exacerbate the general failure of scholarship on this century (as opposed to that on the seventeenth) to understand the integral nature of the church-state nexus. The essays on Army and Navy seem somewhat forlorn and bereft in the “Britain and the Wider World” segment, and again seem to have as much reason to be in part 1 on foundational institutions. This problem is not exclusive to displaced residents of part 1. The role of religion in Scottish and Irish nationalism is eroded by sticking Scottish and Irish religion in the “Religion” section rather than under “Union and Disunion in the British Isles,” a trend in which religion was such a motive force. Does the “Slave Trade,” here found in “Britain and the Wider World,” not have as much cause to be read by students of part 2, “The Economy and Society”? And why is “Crime and Punishment” not part of the general “Economy and Society,” or in the overloaded “Politics and the Constitution” segment, rather than being construed as a form of “Culture” akin to Morris-Dancing or Rhymed Couplets?

Admittedly, taxonomical cavils are not at all severe

criticisms of the book’s quality and integrity, nor are they intended to be. The question of categories does, however, suggest the ever-increasing difficulty in the twenty-first century of pigeonholing sub-fields into “proper” places and apportioning pieces of the pie to the increasing number of specialist seats at the table, and leads to questions of allocation of space. Given that all of these topics are worthy and are invariably given less space than their writers deserved, why, for instance, did the politics of England and Ireland each require two chapters (both dividing the halves at 1760), but the politics of Wales and Scotland can be bunged into one chapter each?

There are also questions of topical overreach. The rationale for including part 6, “Britain and the Wider World,” is pedagogically, politically, and (on grounds of relevance to Blair’s postmodern Britain) unimpeachable. At least in the next quarter-century, issues of Britain’s role in the EU and within the Atlantic community of Atlantic Oceania, dominated by the United States as hegemon, demands historical examination of the roots thereof. The strongly vital influence of history of the empire, Atlantic history, African diaspora studies, and history of enslavement in current historical studies is unquestionable. However, in the already overloaded agenda of a *Companion* which begins by admitting the increasing difficulty of being all-encompassing, one wonders if part 6, however daring, laudable, and sociopolitically necessary, is not a bridge too far. Without being accused of “Little Englandism” (or in this case, “Little Britainism”), it could be argued that the *Companion* might have benefitted from a tighter focus on understanding the “B” in *Eighteenth-Century Britain*. The book might have maintained a tighter focus by adhering fairly closely to the impossible agenda of describing Britain 1700-1800 rather than appending other impossible agendas such as synthesizing Ireland, the thirteen colonies, India, and continental Europe. Especially with an entire *Companion* on “Colonial America” in the works, Speck’s interesting essay on “Britain and the Atlantic World,” though it suggests, in tandem with most new Atlanticism, that we must transcend the narrowness of focus on thirteen colonies which would form the future United States, seems less central. It is not simply pedantry or eurocentrism to suggest that a companion to eighteenth-century *Britain* which includes three important essays on Ireland before the Union (nearly 8 percent of the total essays) is actually properly a *Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland*, and ought to signal to Blackwell the need for a *Companion to Irish History* if one has not already been commissioned. Nor

is it too much to suggest that Blackwell ought to consider competing against Oxford's immense *History of the British Empire* by creating a *Companion to the British Empire* which could include essays such as Bruce Lenman's on "Britain and India" to as great or greater effect than they have in this compilation.

As for the balance of "trad" to "rad" topics, the book is based on a fairly conventional and familiar set of categories, and since the book is designed as a reliable companion for a broad audience which includes novices and experts, this fairly unadventurous approach to taxonomy is to be expected, if not lauded. The most trendy segments are those on the radicals, women and the family, and popular culture as well as the pieces on class-consciousness, class conflict, and national and ethnic identity. However, the traditionalism of the approach is evident even in these combinations. Women and children are inexplicably dumped together rather than having separate segments on women and another on children. The dichotomy between "Elite Culture" and "Popular Culture" presented seems somewhat of a relic of the false dichotomies of politically activist writing in the 1970s. And why divide elite culture from literature and drama? Another false dichotomy is that between "Radical Ideas" and "Political Ideas from Locke to Paine"; why should Paine "double-dip," being both a "real" political thinker and a radical partisan ideologist? (The treatments of these topics by the essayists are themselves able to transcend the limits of the taxonomies in many cases.)

As there are thirty-eight essays in the collection, it is impossible to offer, even in the generous expanse of an H-Net review, a complete examination of each of the essays. The self-discipline exercised by the authors as a group was laudable. The page-length allotted to each essay was fairly strictly regulated; the average page length granted to each essay is just over twelve pages. The shortest twelve of the essays run a brisk seven to ten pages; the most expansive of the essays are only fourteen to seventeen pages. The essays are generous in length, especially when compared to Jeremy Black and Roy Porter's *Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century World History* (1994) whose very brief entries suffered from being too bitty and too succinct to provide much but the bare bones. They are long enough to manage a fairly comprehensive view of the subject matter. However, they are brief enough to be assigned to undergraduates for a quick introduction, which is an excellent rationale for Blackwell to promptly find a paperback publisher for the volume (just as Penguin issued the paperback of the *Dictionary of World History*) to make it assignable for classes. These essays will

no doubt be made very good use of by candidates preparing for graduate oral and written exams, or by those reviewing for undergraduate comprehensive exams in need of a rapid and reliable boost. They may even get guilty shufflings-through by specialists caught off topic in preparing lectures.

The essays are also generally notable for being actual *essays*, complete with distinctive and controversial theses and points of view, not simply compendia of undisputed facts nor a trudge through some dry-as-dust narrative. They are always informative, but more surprisingly quite often a pleasure to read. The authors were not required to feign a disinterested or perspectiveless objectivity in the manner that so many encyclopedias, guides, and companions demand of contributors. Furthermore, the styles were not rendered down by Dickinson into some imagined plain style, an authorial vanilla, as so often happens in large-scale institutional works. Those readers familiar with the other works of the more-published authors, or even of the eccentricities of the conversational styles of the various contributors, will recognize their various distinctive turns of phrase and habits of argumentation. In some cases, although it will not have been intended for reading in leisure (fireside, night-table, or beach) several chapters could satisfactorily be read in those settings.

Dickinson's self-control as editor is considerable. It might be thought a venial sin that he alone contributes two essays to the book, and a slightly worse one that his own interests in high politics exert a strong gravitational force on the book's contents, but overall the authors are allowed to go their separate ways. The selection of contributors is not simply confined to an Oxbridge cabal, but, as promised, includes authors from the United Kingdom, continental Europe, the United States, and Canada. Based on current location of employment rather than nativity or surname origin, there are twenty-nine U.K. authors (sixteen from England, eight from Scotland, four from Wales), five from the United States, and one each from Canada, Ireland, and Germany. The volume also contains a mix of well-known and authoritative names within eighteenth-century studies, juxtaposed alongside new voices in the profession whose contributions here will be important entries in their emerging specialist publication. The vast majority of the commissions were given to veteran scholars whose names are by now almost instinctually associated with their subfields. If one were to ask a period specialist as a trivia quiz which of the chapters Dickinson, Hellmuth, Hill, Szechi, Bushaway, Mingay, Rogers, Borsay, Brown, Harris, and Downie (to choose a random sample) had written, the guesser would

have a high likelihood of matching acknowledged expert to subject matter.

One does occasionally wish that there had been a more consistent editorial policy on whether the essays were honor-bound to address historiography of the topic, and if so, how much of the article to devote to it. After all, as Robin Winks's volume on the historiography of the British Empire and other such auxiliary books demonstrate, it is possible to occupy the entirety of a guide simply with field surveys. The articles on crime and the Church of England, for example, frame their topics in terms of the changes in historiography and prevailing models, whereas other articles conceal their knowledge of the changes in secondary scholarship within the narrative and are more Rankean or Baedekerian in their view of the job at hand in offering a brief overview of what happened. Given the "twenty-five-year" rule on scholarly fashions, one is not certain that the field survey is the approach most likely to yield an article that will last for the long haul.

Nor was it clear whether the authors were encouraged to go at their topics gloves off. The genre demands that the essays be correct and modest in their claims, not overwhelmingly or daringly revisionist. That is as must be, but knowing some of the authors' other, bolder works, one wishes to have seen them cut loose a bit more in their contributions here, and take some more risks in redefining their specialist subjects and even the long eighteenth century as a whole. Nonetheless, the volume is likely more lasting and reliable due to this spirit of caution.

The question of how many companions and handy-books any field actually *needs* or wants is a final consideration as Blackwell charges into the field full-tilt. The *Companion*, as I have argued above, is an exemplary instance of the genre; and given that this sort of book must be produced, and must be done well if done at all, this is a fine example of the type, with good editorial guidance, with extremely high and consistent overall quality, authoritative and often adventuresome essays, and in the final estimate is enjoyable not only to consult but to keep on the nightstand as well. However, the economics of publishing in the current reality mean that publishers are

likely to assume that such companion and guide books, rather than specialist works by single authors, are the future of the presses. The bottom-line consultants ought to consider whether the world is not already overloaded (or at best about to be overloaded) with these sorts of rough guides to the subfields. Fortunately, the *Companion* manages to distinguish itself so as to seem likely to survive the impending glut.

Note

[1]. The chapters are: H. T. Dickinson, "The British Constitution"; Eckhart Hellmuth, "The British State"; Patrick Karl O'Brien, "Finance and Taxation"; David Eastwood, "Local Government and Local Society"; Brian Hill, "Parliament, Parties and Elections (1688-1760)"; Stephen M. Lee, "Parliament, Parties and Elections (1760-1815)"; Daniel Szechi, "The Jacobite Movement"; H. T. Dickinson, "Popular Politics and Radical Ideas"; Emma Vincent Macleod, "The Crisis of the French Revolution"; John Rule, "Industry and Commerce"; Gordon Mingay, "Agriculture and Rural Life"; Richard G. Wilson, "The Landed Elite"; Nicholas Rogers, "The Middling Orders"; John Rule, "The Labouring Poor"; Peter Borsay, "Urban Life and Culture"; John D. Ramsbottom, "Women and the Family"; Jeremy Gregory, "The Church of England"; Colin Haydon, "Religious Minorities in England"; G. M. Ditchfield, "Methodism and the Evangelical Revival"; Stewart J. Brown, "Religion in Scotland"; Sean J. Connolly, "Religion in Ireland"; Bob Harris, "Print Culture"; Pamela Edwards, "Political Ideas from Locke to Paine"; Maura A. Henry, "The Making of Elite Culture"; J. A. Downie, "Literature and Drama"; Bob Bushaway, "Popular Culture"; J. A. Sharpe, "Crime and Punishment"; Colin Kidd, "Integration: Patriotism and Nationalism"; Alexander Murdoch, "Scotland and the Union"; Geraint H. Jenkins, "Wales in the Eighteenth Century"; Paddy McNally, "Ireland: The Making of the 'Protestant Ascendancy,' 1690-1760"; Martyn J. Powell, "Ireland: Radicalism, Rebellion and Union"; H. M. Scott, "Britain's Emergence as a European Power, 1688-1815"; W. A. Speck, "Britain and the Atlantic World"; Bruce P. Lenman, "Britain and India"; Stanley D. M. Carpenter, "The British Army"; Richard Harding, "The Royal Navy"; and John Oldfield, "Britain and the Slave Trade."

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