

OTHER REVIEWS

The heritage crusade and the spoils of history. By David Lowenthal. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. Pp. xvii + 338. ISBN 0-521-63562-4 (paperback). £12.95 (US\$17.95). (1st publ. in hardback, New York, 1996.)

When Rab Butler was appointed education secretary in 1941 his prime minister told him the history that he wanted to see taught in schools: ‘tell the children that Wolfe won Quebec’. He went on to reassure Butler that he was talking about influence and persuasion rather than instructions. A successor prime minister would have no such inhibitions. Mrs Thatcher wanted such items in her National Curriculum for History because they were part of our ‘heritage’.

Historians have been sniffy about ‘heritage’, and sometimes for good reason. David Lowenthal offers a fresh perspective in his fascinating study. ‘Heritage’, he argues, is not just ‘bad’ history. Two different ends are being served: one is an inquiry into the past and the other is a celebration of it for present-minded purposes. Heritage differs from history, not in being biased, but in its attitude towards bias (p. 122). What is for one a virtue to be nurtured, for the other is a vice to be reduced, not eliminated (‘objective’ history against ‘subjective’ heritage is a false polarization). To his task Lowenthal brings erudition, wit, and an extraordinary breadth of reference. One day, one suspects, his card indexes will be part of our national heritage. Here are just a few of the insights, epigrams, and anecdotes which are scattered throughout the text. 1993 saw the first opening of a heritage museum for a living American vice-president. We learn that Dan Quayle’s apotheosis coincided with a plastic duck race, ‘the annual highlight of “Heritage Days” in Huntington, Indiana’ (p. 17). Childless Locke argues that the true parent is the one who forms the child’s mind; childless Washington becomes the first ‘Father of His Country’ (pp. 32–4). Lincoln was ‘not mourned because he was a national symbol; he became a hero by being mourned’ (pp. 59–69). Heritage gentrification for the market often has populist roots: the best-selling *Country diary of an Edwardian lady* was the work of a left-wing Birmingham school teacher (p. 93).

The book is more than a series of such arresting vignettes. They are woven into a serious theme which culminates in a warning: ‘to embrace heritage as *history*, disguising authority as authenticity, cedes it a credence it neither asks nor deserves’ (p. 250). Was this what led Mrs Thatcher astray? Lowenthal believes that it was: ‘chiding the Cassandras who defame “our heritage and our past” she found Britain’s history wholly laudable and vowed to “keep the best of the past”’ (p. 153). One answer to this is to embrace the pluralistic potentialities in the concept of ‘heritage’. It is the answer that Lowenthal gives in the rest of his book; it is the answer that inspired many essays from the pen of the late Raphael Samuel. Lowenthal’s history is very much Samuel’s: the same delight in the seeming trivia and the same scepticism about reification of ‘heritage’. Samuel, for instance, rejects Asa Briggs’s history of the BBC for its C. P. Snow-like concern with committees and career advancement. The BBC heritage which he wants to celebrate would include band leaders, the Third Programme, Toytown, and L. du Garde Peach. When Lord Skidelsky follows Mrs Thatcher in arguing for the Battle of Trafalgar on ‘heritage’ grounds in the National Curriculum,

Samuel counters by advancing the claims of the Married Women's Property Act of 1882. They both may have missed the point.

What was the response of the National Curriculum History Working Group to either of these claims? Correctly, they resisted any attempt to insist that attainment targets for history pupils should be based on possession of facts. Lowenthal, however, has a good comment on why, in his words, it would be 'impossible, perhaps inconceivable, certainly self-defeating' to purge heritage from what is taught as history. This is not because of the sacredness of the content – which he spends the rest of the book in any case subverting – but for another reason: 'to paraphrase Caroline Walker Bynam's 1997 American Historical Association presidential address, teachers of history must above all strive to astonish, students aspire to be astonished' (p. xi). The History Working Group could be perfectly happy with *both* Trafalgar and the Married Women's Property Act in a school curriculum, but they would have to win their spurs, not by being part of 'an unalterable state of being' called 'heritage' (Skidelsky's or Samuel's), but by their capacity, as part of our heritage, to *astonish*. That goes for Wolfe and Quebec too. I once saw the worst ever opening to a history lesson from a student: 'We all know – let's face it – that Wolfe captured Quebec.' Not much room for astonishment after that. It is a reminder – grasped by the History Working Group – that heritage claims on history are *alienable* rights. By all means tell children that Wolfe won Quebec, but whether they listen or not depends in the end on the teller, not the tale.

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

WILLIAM LAMONT

Contours of death and disease in early modern England. By Mary J. Dobson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. xix + 647. ISBN 0-521-40464-9. £65.00

Readers of Dr Mary Dobson's earlier works, notably her 'The last hiccup of the old demographic regime', in *Continuity and Change*, 4 (1989), p. 395, will welcome her major study of the demography of S.E. England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Her work marks a major change in the direction of English historical demography. For it is now clear that the 'macro' approach to population history on a national scale since 1600 has gone as far as it is likely to go in this generation in Tony Wrigley and Roger Schofield's classic work of 1981, *The population history of England, 1541–1871: a reconstruction* (revised edition 1989). (The sixteenth and earlier centuries, however, still need more work to be done at national level.) Indeed, Wrigley and Schofield's *English population history from family reconstitution, 1580–1837*, of 1997, itself marked a shift towards a 'micro' approach to regional population which is continued in Dobson's present work. Especially if we wish to move beyond establishing what happened when, to investigate why it happened and what effects it had, a regional approach is essential, linking detailed knowledge of local and regional population movements to intensive study of the local and regional environment. It is a first instalment of this programme that Dobson has triumphantly accomplished.

Dobson lays stress on the importance of the local environment as a major determinant of population change, and in Part I she elucidates the differing landscapes of S.E. England, distinguishing between notably healthy areas – the North and South Downs and the High Weald – and unhealthy regions, notably the coastal area of W. Sussex, Romney Marsh and the low-lying estuarine areas of the Thames Basin. Indeed, she points out that the senses too often ignored by historians, notably those of smell and

taste, help to separate healthy and unhealthy landscapes, and these senses were recognized by contemporaries as important in that regard. As a result of detailed geographical analysis, the three counties of Essex, Kent, and Sussex are divided into thirty-eight geographical units. Part II sets out to study the differing demographic experiences within these units, which constitute twenty-three distinct demographic 'regimes', showing that statistical measures such as the burial:baptism ratios derived from parish registers correlate strongly with the comments of contemporary observers, notably topographers, clergymen, and doctors, about the state of local health. This leads on in Part III to a detailed study of mortality and its causes, again shown to be inextricably linked to the local environment. Thus we are told (p. 223) that infant mortality could vary from below 100 deaths per 1,000 births to above 300 deaths per 1,000 births, and average life expectancy at birth in the early nineteenth century could range from the 20s and 30s to the 40s or even 50s. In particular, chapter 6 recurs to the peculiar unhealthiness of the marshlands which is attributed partly to endemic malaria. Chapter 7 widens the analysis to consider all diseases, epidemic as well as endemic: the core of this is a superb annual 'Chronology of Epidemic Disease and Mortality' in S.E. England between 1601 and 1800 (pp. 383–449) which I am sure will be quarried by many other researchers. In chapter 7 Dobson draws together the results of her previous chapters in delineating the 'epidemiological landscapes' of her chosen region. Her work is throughout illustrated by numerous plates, graphs, tables, and figures, is frequently enlivened by telling quotations, and is solidly based on a statistical database of 112 parish registers from the three counties studied, buttressed by a wide range of other historical source materials. Her register sample is both relatively and absolutely a large one, since 637 parishes in S.E. England had surviving registers during the period: it was carefully selected both for continuity of data and its representative character.

Dobson's work is a model study which one very much hopes will in due course be emulated by similar studies of other regions: it would, for example, be extremely interesting to see a comparable analysis of regions undergoing early industrialization – the West Midlands, Lancashire, the West Riding – or of 'mere' agricultural counties such as Hampshire and Dorset. The net gain to our understanding both of the economic and social history and of the demographic development of early modern England will be enormous: but such future studies will be hard to put to excel the standard set by Mary Dobson. My only cavil is that she quite deliberately omits London from her study: whilst in one sense this is understandable because of London's sheer size and complexity, as well as the existence of the excellent work of Landers and others, it does perhaps underplay the role of the urban sector in early modern England, which itself needs rather more emphasis in Dobson's analysis. It is not that towns in S.E. England are neglected by her, rather that her discussion of towns is scattered throughout her text and as a consequence the urban–rural distinction is not brought out as well as it might have been. The bibliography and the index are excellent. Finally, it is pleasing to note that an author has been well served by her publisher: the book is an admirable addition to the 'Cambridge Studies in Population, Economy and Society in Past Time' series which fully maintains the exemplary standards of the Cambridge University Press. Dr Dobson ends her book with the lapidary sentence 'Fresh currents of change were blowing across the contours of death' (p. 539): this aptly stands also as a judgement on the enduring value of her achievement.

UNIVERSITY OF BRISTOL

JOHN S. MOORE

The mid-Victorian generation, 1846–1886. By K. Theodore Hoppen. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998. Pp. xix + 787. ISBN 0-19-822834-1. £30.00.

Theodore Hoppen's volume in the New Oxford History of England, the third to be published, is a qualified triumph. In the General Editor's preface to the book and series, John Roberts reminds readers of the intrinsic difficulty of the task before his authors in an era of increasingly specialized scholarship and of a more fragmented readership for serious history. These remarks provide the context for any judgement of Hoppen's book, and there can be little doubt of its success when measured against them. Such problems as remain are as much intrinsic to the genre as to the author's treatment of the period. Hoppen writes with remarkable clarity, fluency, and compression. This is a triumph of synthesis in which words are never wasted and well-turned paragraphs brim with relevant matter. Hoppen summarizes results or the kernel of arguments in a few deft sentences and simultaneously relates findings in one area of historical research to those in cognate (and sometimes quite different) fields. The result is stimulating and fresh, as the findings of a generation of scholarship are carefully assembled and Hoppen elegantly but firmly sets the new configuration before the reader. When it is necessary to judge between competing ideas or results, Hoppen does so in robust fashion. Where the answers to our questions remain obscure, he honestly admits that we remain unsure. He has rendered a signal service in simplifying (without diluting) the results of the new economic history of the nineteenth century and integrating them into the overall pattern of the period. Complex econometric concepts and data are rendered intelligible and many sacred cows are slaughtered unmercifully along the way. This sure grasp of economic history is the foundation for the strongest parts of the book where Hoppen demonstrates the linkages between economic interest, social position, religious denomination, and political affiliation. This shows to particular advantage in lucid essays on the political economy of the Welsh, Scots, and Irish at mid-century, each an excellent summation of much recent work probably unfamiliar to students of specifically English history. Meanwhile the political history of the era, essentially divided by Hoppen into two parts, before and after 1868, has a real narrative swing to it, and if the pace is just a bit too brisk and takes too much for granted during the earlier age of Liberal dominance, it slows nicely in the treatment of the 1870s and 1880s, building to a climax inevitably focused on Ireland and Home Rule. While Hoppen sometimes adopts the dismissive and slightly cynical tone that has infected the writing of Victorian high politics in recent years as historians affect an unwarranted omniscience and judgmentalism, he is generally fair-minded in his treatment of political leaders grappling with the problems of power. Hoppen has presented if not a new interpretation then a new synthesis, which, in line with recent scholarship, emphasizes national and religious questions over and above class identity as central to the period.

There is a danger, however, that the baby has been thrown out with the bath water. There is little room for standard components of a more traditional interpretation. The institutional and political history of the working class after Chartism is discussed only occasionally, for example, and there is surprisingly little on the history of social institutions, social policy, and social thought. The halting development of an educational system is treated only as an aspect of political history; penal policy in the era that saw the end of transportation and consequent public disquiet is hardly mentioned; if the health of the people is considered, the public health movement is not.

The sense of many contemporaries that, especially after Palmerston's death in 1865, they were living through an era of institutional renewal is not communicated. The most obvious omission, which Hoppen acknowledges, is any focused discussion of the social and political position of women in the age which saw the birth of a women's movement, and this after so much challenging writing on women's history in the period. Other chapters seem unbalanced. Hoppen's discussion of literature and art is a fascinating study of patrons, publishers, and prices, but with only the slightest treatment of the characteristic themes of the age: gothicism and medievalism are not explained or probed. Meanwhile the chapter on science takes the opposite approach: a wonderful discussion of the implications of the idea of evolution sits on its own, without wider consideration of the institutions and organization of natural science. Yet the most obvious omission is of an overarching view of the period. Hoppen explains in his introduction that to impose one on the contradictory currents of a dynamic era would falsify the past, and it could certainly be argued (though Hoppen does not) that any interpretation that might fit the 'age of equipoise' down to the 1860s would probably not suit the more troubled years after 1874. But to employ the term 'mid-Victorian generation' in the title excites expectations that the book will attempt to characterize the age as a whole through the experience and consciousness of a specific cohort. For all Hoppen's powers of synthesis, this is not accomplished, though, in fairness to the author, nor is it attempted. We are left, then, with episodes of brilliant exposition and historical insight. This is not so much a reflection on the author's abilities as an oblique commentary on the extreme difficulty of writing a broad and definitive volume. We should praise Hoppen for the rich menu he has produced rather than criticize him for the dishes left for others to prepare.

ST PETER'S COLLEGE, OXFORD

LAWRENCE GOLDMAN

Understanding decline: perceptions and realities of British economic performance. Edited by Peter Clarke and Clive Trebilcock. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997. Pp. xvi + 313. ISBN 0-521-56317-8. £40.00.

This collection differs from the usual festschrift, not least because it includes a paper by the commemorated scholar. That Barry Supple's contribution, reproduced from the *Economic History Review*, is the richest in the collection is a noteworthy compliment. His introduction (the editors provide only a preface) is in itself a useful review of the book. But the book, which aims at thematic coherence, lacks a systematic review of the main 'declinist' and indeed 'anti-declinist' historiographies (the introductions to individual chapters do not serve that purpose). This is unfortunate given that it could be argued that the undermining of declinism involves a radical reconsideration of many aspects of twentieth-century British history, of which there are often no more than echoes in the papers collected here. For, explaining the 'decline', and commenting on its effects, has itself declined from being the great staple of the historiography of twentieth-century Britain, to being a symptom of an embarrassing inability to distinguish between absolute and relative changes; an inability to recognize that the major determinant of relative changes in Britain's position was what foreigners, and not Britons, did, and to compare the British straightforwardly and realistically with these foreigners. (Jay Winter provides a nice instance of a properly controlled comparison in this volume.)

Supple's article, and indeed some other work on declinism, takes the phenomenon not

merely as a crass error, but as a collection of particular and important ways of thinking. Indeed, one of the most original points in Supple's own paper, not taken up in this collection, was that declinism could be, perhaps was, in itself a cause of economic underperformance, especially in its resistance to structural change. Indeed, such ironic inversions should have an important place in analyses of declinism. Thus imperialists argued that loss of empire meant economic as well as geopolitical decline, when in fact the empire was economically marginal (as shown in the papers by Charles Feinstein and Tony Hopkins), while many later declinists argued that empire itself was a retarding force. To take another example: in considering the arguments of Correlli Barnett – the greatest of the declinists, and, like a majority of the contributors, associated with Cambridge – both Peter Clarke and Jose Harris present pictures of Keynes and Beveridge 180 degrees out from Barnett's own. Indeed they appear almost as Barnett's *avant la lettre*.

One of the great strengths of Supple's paper is its recognition of the importance of particular political economies in declinist arguments, a theme elegantly pursued by Donald Winch for Adam Smith. Put too unsubtly, declinists have tended to be hostile to liberalism, to be protectionist, interventionist, and often imperialist too. Unfortunately, the other contributors do not take up this theme. David Cannadine takes Joseph Chamberlain, Winston Churchill, and Margaret Thatcher as the great declinist politicians, without drawing out the point that if the above analysis is correct, Mrs Thatcher in particular was, given her commitment to *laissez-faire*, a distinct kind of declinist. That there is something to the general thesis is evident in some of the contributions. Those who tend to criticism of liberalism, and argue for state intervention, and for Britain to have been more like Europe (Patrick O'Brien, Simon Szreter, Bernard Alford), come closest to seeking an explanation of some sort of decline focused on the nature of the British state. Clearly the politics and implicit economy of declinisms is worth investigation.

The analysis of declinism is thus not merely an exercise in debunking. It is very much about understanding the assumptions made in the analysis of modern British history, assumptions which are not readily mapped on to conventional political labels, and are often powerful precisely because they are regarded as obvious. Such analyses surely lead to fresh understandings of twentieth-century British ideologies, and in particular of liberalism. Breaking out from declinism's grip, it could also be argued, has provided us, and will continue to do so, not only with fresh histories of businesses and the British economy, but also of what Barry Supple calls the 'broader uplands of Britain's history in its varied aspects'.

IMPERIAL COLLEGE OF SCIENCE,
TECHNOLOGY, AND MEDICINE

DAVID EDGERTON