A History of Modern Britain

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Extract

Introduction to the Paperback Edition

One Year On

A year has passed since this book was first published in hardback. How much has changed? How do the judgements stand up? The big theme of the story that follows is the defeat of politics by shopping. The surging consumer economy has been by turns exhilarating, wasteful, liberating and narrowing. Nobody who escaped the grey years of rationing, queues and shortages should snootily dismiss the triumph of shopping; yet nobody who looks at our dead-eyed obsession with buy-and-throw newness can be comfortable either. Britain's shopping economy, shorn of most of its industry, has produced a country which is more crowded, cleaner and richer (far richer) than it used to be, but which is also more vulnerable to shocks from outside. Consumerism has shouldered aside other ways of understanding the world – real political visions, organized religion, a pulsing sense of national identity.

Yet during 2007, the biggest change was a darkening of the national mood. It is not just global warming, but a sense that the good times are not, after all, forever. The decade-long Blair–Brown boom has been based on cheap imports from China, on very high levels of borrowing secured by upward-spiralling house prices, and on cheap, skilled migrant labour from Eastern Europe. None of these things are indefinitely sustainable. As this book shows, our recent prosperity is partly the achievement of politicians who are now almost forgotten. But after ten years in which New Labour had enjoyed the political fruits of strong, low-inflationary growth, many of us think we can see the buffers looming out of the mist.

This is recent. Early in 2007 house prices were still strongly rising. The stock market was at a six year high. Economists and opposition parties were warning about the government being overborrowed, and about private debt. But nobody paid much attention. In the City the

big banks still reported huge profits. There were mysterious characters called private equity investors and hedge fund managers. Few people really understood what they were up to, except that it was all very clever and complicated. The banks were paying astronomical bonuses to their managers. And for the majority, in the shops, clothes and gizmos were ludicrously cheap. A Western economy based on high debt, both private and public, ensured cash was there to keep the spree going. But the intricate and always-shifting tangle of loans, bets, guesses and 80-proof, chill-filtered optimism that is modern global finance, was about to suffer a reality check. And if 'reality check' is an ugly American phrase, then it is perhaps not as ugly as another which entered the Queen's English in 2007. 'Sub prime' is jargon for bad loans – the mortgages and other pricey money offers to ordinary Americans who had no proper security and in many cases no way of paying it back. This overborrowing, mere greed by the banks, had been causing worries on Wall Street as early as February 2007. We have known since the Great Crash of 1929 that a global economy transmits problems from one country to another through the banking system very fast. We are supposed to have a stabler world trading system these days. But what has also changed is that bad debts have been bundled up and sold around like sacks of plastic casino counters between banks so many times that nobody knows just who is in trouble, and for how many billion dollars. In great US institutions like Merrill Lynch, Morgan Stanley and Citigroup, the one-time wizards started to lose their jobs.

Meanwhile back in Britain, its prime minister lost his. Tony Blair carried on working at strategic plans almost until the day he finally left Downing Street. It was as if he was still waiting for a final vindicating victory in Iraq or believed that if he could only nail down one last element of his programme to the cabinet table, his domestic legacy would be secured. But at last he went, in June 2007, telling the Commons: 'I wish everyone, friend and foe, well. And that is that. The End.' Gordon Brown took over without the bloodbath or recriminations that had been so widely predicted. He promised to govern differently, to take the cabinet more seriously, and to be more inclusive, bringing in outsiders with police, military and business careers to advise him – and Liberal Democrats too. To start with, all this was popular. Under Brown, Labour rose sharply in the polls and

many Conservatives were dejected. Perhaps he would not turn out to be the disaster they had predicted. Their new leader David Cameron was attacked for being lightweight, 'the heir to Blair' just when the country had had enough of Blair. There was muttering about replacing him. So there was too about Sir Menzies Campbell, who was attacked not for being in his sixties, but for looking as if he was. A sequence of crises, including terrorist attacks in Glasgow and London, widespread summer flooding and an outbreak of foot and mouth disease, seemed to show Brown as a decisive, rather traditional leader; and his position strengthened further.

Then, in the autumn of 2007, it all started to go wrong for him. By far the most ominous event was the revelation than an adventurous building society, based in the north-east of England, had been forced to go to the Bank of England for emergency support. What had happened to Northern Rock, Britain's fifth-largest provider of mortgages, was the direct consequence of those 'sub-prime' problems in America earlier in the year. Mud and ice were spreading through the Western banking system as banks, wondering how much bad debt others were exposed to, stopped lending readily to one another. The lubrication began to fail, and because Northern Rock had lent so much money so aggressively, it was first in trouble. Its bosses resigned, but not before the world had watched huge queues of people across Britain waiting to get their money out.

It was the first run on a bank in this country for 140 years. The new chancellor, Alastair Darling, promised to guarantee all savers' funds in Northern Rock – though not elsewhere – in order to shore up the stability of the banking system. The Bank of England injected money into the system to provide some more lubrication. A search began to find a private buyer who would take over Northern Rock without being completely underwritten by the taxpayer. And another search began to find who was to blame. The management of Northern Rock? American banks? The Bank of England, which had reacted slowly to the early signs of trouble? Most attention focussed on the prime minister, who had created the new system of banking regulation early in his time as chancellor. In the end, the building society had to be nationalised – a whiff of the Seventies.

The Northern Rock crisis began just when pressure was mounting on Brown to call an early general election. Things came to a head at

the Labour party conference at Bournemouth. Some of the cabinet ministers closest to him were convinced that by going to the country in October 2007, capitalizing on his summer successes, he could win a clear and substantial majority over the Tories. But he hesitated. The following week, as the Tories gathered for their conference at Blackpool, their mood was grim and there was open talk in the bars about forcing out yet another leader. Then came a speech by the shadow chancellor, George Osborne, in which he promised to abolish inheritance tax on estates worth under £1 million and scrap the stamp duty for first time buyers on homes worth up to £250,000. This would be paid for by a new tax on foreigners living and earning in Britain but not paying tax here. It was a brilliantly targeted political counter-strike, which caused an abrupt shift in the polls, confirmed after an assured speech by Cameron. Assuming that Brown really was in a strong position in September 2007, as the polling suggested, and this author believes, then Osborne's speech will go down as one of the most significant moments at a party conference in recent political history. It persuaded Brown not to call an election. Rarely do party conferences have any impact on the real world; this one did.

In a BBC interview calling off the election, Brown repeatedly denied that the opinion polls were the cause, but the impression was given of indecision, or lack of nerve. He was not helped by maladroit political counter-thrusts nor by a series of serious failures which followed. These were, in a weary way, familiar – another Labour party funding scandal, more embarrassing losses of data, above all the personal details of a mere 25 million people involved in applying for or getting child benefit, and 600,000 who had wanted to join the Navy or the marines. The initiative had, for the time being, gone to the Conservatives who were now sounding more traditional on tax and immigration and riding so high in the polls they could dream of a clear victory in a future election. The Liberal Democrat leader was more or less pushed into resigning once it was clear there would be no election for a while. His job was taken by another young and telegenic leader, Nick Clegg. The country prepared for an eighteen-month slog in parliament, over the new European treaty, civil liberties, the problem of violent youth crime and pay – politics as usual, or at least as it had often been during the seventies and eighties. People had grown fed up of Blair, regarding his television skills and vision as lightweight:

remarkably quickly, they seem to have concluded that Brown, welcomed as dour and cautious, was worse. He put his head down and resolved to batter his way back to popularity with hard work and more initiatives.

Many British people would barely have noticed. The papers were obsessed by the disappearance of a young girl, Madeleine McCann, from her parents' apartment during a holiday in Portugal, and an inquest into the death of Princess Diana. A hard-shopping, hard-drinking pleasure economy continued to thrust ahead, even as evidence of a looming recession piled up. House prices slowed, then stuttered, then fell. Rumours about other banking problems flickered and hissed. The stock market has some terrible lurches, including its biggest one-day fall since the attack on the Twin Towers. Only a hard effect on wallets, jobs and security will really make most people think about politics at all seriously. So an obvious question is whether the triumph of consumerism, that big story of British life from 1945 until today, is about to be halted. It seems most unlikely that the country is going to be transformed merely by the economic cycle. Britain and America may well be heading towards recession, perhaps some very hard years by modern standards. But these will feel at worst more like a return to some of the earlier tough times in the seventies, eighties or nineties, than a great change of direction as happened after the war or in the Thatcher revolution. It will teach another generation that nothing goes up forever, that there are no final answers in economics and that, perhaps, we have been a little too smug in dismissing earlier generations of politicians and economists as ignorant.

More important for our shopping economy will be the effects of carbon addiction. Distinguished scientists are beginning to confront the notion that to save the planet, an age of hair-shirted austerity is now necessary. Instead there is a renewed enthusiasm for technological fixes, from nuclear power and offshore windfarms, to electric cars and sun-deflecting mirrors in space. Such optimism is urgently needed because one of the most important effects of the global warming debate is that it has so disheartened people, they simply turn away. We are flinching. This is too big, too frightening to think about. Many people felt just the same way about the rise of Hitler, or the likelihood of nuclear holocaust in the sixties. 'You can't just turn your back,' some say. Oh yes you can. Without hope, without a clear sense that,

beyond the struggle, there are blue skies and a life worth living, then most of us will turn away and try not to look. So far, all the main parties are sending mixed messages (to put it politely) about global warming. One day it is wind turbines on the roof, or new taxes to force more recycling; the next it is a major expansion of airports so we can fly even more often, and promises that cheap holidaymaking overseas will remain a human right. In the end, it may be the scientists, the engineers and the investors who lead the politicians, not the other way about. As a political observer myself, I cannot pretend that the past year has seen politics at its best. But is the challenge ahead so big that it dwarfs the problems already confronted? Absolutely not. The history of modern Britain tells us we have had some narrow squeaks, but also that we have done some extraordinary things – even more extraordinary than going shopping and worrying about house prices. This gives no alibi for pessimism. At the risk of sinking to sales patter, I would say – don't panic about the crystal ball when you can settle down and read the book.

Andrew Marr
2008

Prologue

The play starts on the afternoon of 28 May 1940, at a meeting of the war cabinet in the Prime Minister's office in the old House of Commons. There are only a few players. There is Winston Churchill who has become the nation's leader only eighteen days earlier. He is seen by most of the Establishment and many Conservatives as a rather ridiculous, drunken and dodgy man with a penchant for wild speeches and silly hats. Behind their gloved hands they call him the 'rogue elephant', even 'the gangster'. Among those lukewarm about him becoming the King's first minister less than three weeks before, had been the King. In Labour circles he was widely regarded as an enemy of the working class, the pink-faced toff who, years ago, had ordered in the army against strikers. Now Churchill has just ordered British troops at Calais to fight without hope of evacuation to try to protect the 200,000 left on the beaches at Dunkirk, who might be saved. He regarded it as a stand-and-die order which he said left him 'physically sick'. He had also been trying to barter with the Americans for desperately needed destroyers. So far they had been no help. With thousands of British troops making it back across the channel every hour, there was still some hope of rescuing the bulk of the army. But German invasion loomed and without heavy weapons, that seemed a hopeless prospect. Churchill had just been asked to approve plans for the evacuation of the Government and the Royal Family, as well as the Bank of England's gold, to Canada. Like the King and Queen, he refused to contemplate this.

Around the table with him were two men ever afterwards associated with appeasement. There was the former Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain whose 'peace in our time' negotiations in Germany with Hitler had made him a national hero until, very quickly, Hitler turned him into a national fool. He was dying. There was the Conservative Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, who on earlier visits to Germany had

found Hitler 'most sincere' and Goering 'frankly attractive', a composite character like 'a great schoolboy . . . film star, great landowner . . . party manager, head gamekeeper at Chatsworth.' Much favoured by the Court, a lanky, wry, religious and reactionary man, Halifax had been expected to become Prime Minister himself. But in the Lords, he was the wrong kind of Tory for these dark days and would soon be packed off to be ambassador in Washington. In this government of national unity, along with the Liberal leader Archibald Sinclair, were two Labour men. Clement Attlee had become leader of his party almost by accident and was little known in the country. Terse, patriotic, rather colourless, the idea that he would one day be remembered as a great Prime Minister would in 1940 have seemed outlandish. Then there was Arthur Greenwood, a former teacher who had stood in for Attlee during his recent illness. Greenwood is little remembered today. He was a much-loved Labour figure before the war but proved to be a poor minister. In his lifelong fight with the bottle, the bottle won every round. But many second-rate people find themselves called to a moment when history turns, and this was Arthur Greenwood's day.

In front of the war cabinet was a simple question. After the devastating success of Hitler's armies in slicing through Belgium, the Netherlands and France, was it time to try to cut a deal? Halifax and Chamberlain were both in favour. The Italian dictator Mussolini had been touted as a go-between and various bribes for his good offices had been discussed. The Italians might take Gibraltar, Malta, Suez, Kenya and Uganda as part of their payment to stop the invasion of the British Isles. The terms might be these. Britain would accept Hitler as overlord of Europe but would be allowed to keep her Fleet and the rest of her Empire, including India. Churchill had not yet rejected any deal, on any terms, but he was acutely aware that if talk of talks leaked out, the effect on national morale would be devastating. Churchill also believed that any terms offered by Berlin would include handing over the Royal Navy and the creation of a pro-Nazi puppet government in London. Half American himself, he believed that in the end the United States would come into the fight even if Britain was invaded. Surrounded by dim hopes, fears and question-marks, this was 'make your mind up time'.

Had the gathering been only of Conservative politicians Winston

would have been outvoted. Attlee and Greenwood, however, were solid for fighting on and for refusing to negotiate or surrender. So by a squeak Churchill had his majority. Fortified by this, his mood revived and he quickly summoned the full cabinet, where in true Churchillian English he told them: 'I am convinced that every man of you would rise up and tear me down from my place if I were for one moment to contemplate parley or surrender. If this long island history of ours is to end at last, let it end only when each one of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground.' Or that at least is how he recorded it later. Ministers jumped up, shouting approval and thumped the old man on the back. Later he said he would have been dragged from office if he had tried to surrender; every minister was ready, with his family, to be killed 'quite soon'.

As we have seen this was an exaggeration. Quite a few British politicians would have done a deal. Washington had been privately told by its London ambassador that the British would surrender. Looking back, such a thing may seem impossible – unthinkable. But it was quite possible and it was seriously discussed. This was the moment when Britain was on the edge and her modern story begins. From that decision on that day, everything follows. First, there was the war, from the Battle of Britain, through Pearl Harbor to the final defeat of Germany and Japan. So, second, the world was differently shaped. The end of the British Empire, once the world's greatest, and the rise of the United States as ruler of the free world occurred for complicated reasons. But they can be plausibly traced back to what Winston, Clem and Arthur agreed was the right thing to do on that difficult day in May. That decision made contemporary Britain, with her weaknesses and strengths, which are the subject of this book. Many unexpected and surprising things followed. Neither Churchill nor Attlee got the Britain they wanted. Instead, unwittingly, they made us.

The Second World War was such a shattering, overwhelming experience for Britain that it is tempting to isolate the country we became afterwards from the pre-war Britain, as if a huge blade fell across the national story. In obvious ways this is true. The war changed Britain physically and industrially, destroying city centres; it ultimately changed who lived here by encouraging both immigration and emigration. It changed Britain's political climate and our attitude to government. It even changed, through a subsequent jump in the

birth rate, relations between the generations. Yet in other ways post-war Britain was simply a continuation of the Britain of the thirties. When it was all over, and before Churchill was voted out of power, the Parliament of 1945 was the same one elected in 1935, a Commons frozen from another time. Deference and respect for the Royal Family, belief in the superiority of the white man, a complacent assumption that British manufacturing was still best . . . all that survived seemingly unaltered through the years of danger.

Britain still believed herself to be in her imperial heyday, mistress of the seas. Though we think of it as essentially Victorian, the British Empire, declaring itself the first 'world state' had continued to grow right up until the mid-thirties. At the beginning of the Second World War there were some 200 colonies, dominions and possessions connected to London, covering more than 11 million square miles. The Empire embraced Pacific tribesmen and Eskimos, ancient African kingdoms and the rubble of the great Mughal empire, Australian farmers and the gold-miners of South Africa. It ran from the Scottish Highlands to the Antarctic, from the French-speaking villages of Quebec to the mosques of the Middle East. For a comparatively small nation of fewer than 50 million people to have acquired all this might seem a global absurdity, a large joke in the history of humankind.

Relatively few of those square miles helped the British economy thrive yet the empire was considered the essence of British power, a global financial and trading system independent of the rising might of the United States. 'The Empire on which the sun never sets' was not poetic, but factual. Imperial feeling still suffused the Britain of the forties and fifties. Schools displayed the famous red-splattered maps and taught the history of Clive's battles in India and the achievements of missionaries in Africa. Children's encyclopedias brimmed with information about the calico industries of the subcontinent, or those useful rubber trees in Malaya. Middle-class bookshelves groaned with Kipling, Somerset Maugham, Henty and T. E. Lawrence. The Empire was everywhere, inside the home and out, in street names and statues, to the Indian knick-knacks and elephant-foot umbrella stands, Bombay gin and Imperial Leather soap, the rhododendron bushes from the Himalayas, words like tiffin and bungalows and the eating of kedgeree for breakfast by all those retired Indian civil servants and administrators in the Home Counties. There were the names of the major companies

– Imperial Chemical Industries, Home and Colonial Stores, British Imperial Airways, the Imperial Rubber Company. Empire Day was celebrated until 1958. More seriously there was continuing large-scale emigration from the British Isles to Africa, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Until the sixties, one in five emigrants were heading from the UK to the old 'Crown Commonwealth' countries and more than a million Britons went to Australia alone during 1946–72. On wet days, back home, there were the endless Pathé and Movietone newsreels of Royal visits to New Zealand or some dependent territory.

Twenty years earlier the Royal Navy, like the British Empire, had seemed at its zenith, a world-dominating power. By the end of the First World War, it had no fewer than 61 battleships, more than the American and French fleets put together, plus 120 cruisers and 466 destroyers.[1] Without this awesome force, and the scores of naval bases and coaling stations, all controlled by the superbly organized Admiralty in London, the Empire would have been impossible to defend.

The navy was for the British what the roads and legions had been for the Romans, the thin, steely web holding together many different lands and people. By the twentieth century, with a quarter of the world under British rule, no country had ever claimed power over so many people and so much land. It had been made possible by a centuries-old British love affair with salt water, and by the Victorian enthusiasms for steam power and the appliance of science. In the twentieth century these traits, which had made Britain Great, were in decline. Even so, the navy continued to enthral the British in the first half of that century in ways we now struggle to remember; sea shanties on music-hall stages, the books of Marryat and Forrester for boys, the great Spithead reviews, the Dreadnoughts on cigarette cards, the blue-and-gold uniforms at Court. Drake and Raleigh, Cook and Nelson, were the subjects of ten thousand history lessons in almost every school in the country. To be British was to thrill at the sight of a White Ensign.

Many post-war trends had started long before the war and to understand post-war Britain we must take a bird's-eye view of an earlier, only half-familiar country. One way to do this is to travel with some of the talented writers who set out to discover their own nation between the wars. Part of the aftershock of the First World War, which had made people look again at just what they had been fighting

for, it was a great time for such journeys of reportage. Not since Boswell and Johnson had heaved themselves onto ponies and into jolting carriages to visit Scotland in the eighteenth century, and the great radical newspaperman William Cobbett had set jogging off on his 'rural rides' through the depressed countryside of England in the 1820s, had journeys round Britain been so popular. The twenties and thirties were a golden age of road travel. While most roads had been like thin twists of twine following ancient routes, bumpy, frayed and narrow, now there were new trunk roads with bright 'roadhouses' and restaurants awaiting the traveller. Rural roads, empty by modern standards and almost unpoliced, made car travel for those who could afford it a moderately dangerous delight. For those who could not, the boom in motor-coaches, or buses as we would call them, and in the open-topped charabancs, made rural and coastal Britain available as it had never been before.

Some of the travellers, such as H. V. Morton, who went 'in search of England' in a bull-nose Morris car in 1927, were looking for a lost, green land. He was a little late. The real Britain was heavily industrialized and urban by then, and had been for nearly a century. Morton knew this perfectly well and defended himself by claiming that 'the village and the English countryside are the germs of all we are and all we have become.' In this, he stands for an ancient tradition of English writing, running back through Thomas Hardy, Kipling and Chesterton, right the way to the poets of Jacobean times. The real England is green, remote, local, wild, ancient and with a wisdom of her own. Perhaps, as well as being a little late, he was just in time, for this was before the urbanites had moved in and finally finished off the traditions that reached back to the Middle Ages. His tour matters because it stands for an idea of Britain which keeps its hold on many people well into the post-war period. His book was hugely popular, capturing post-industrial rural Britain before our current economy of supermarkets and super-roads finally killed it off during the seventies and eighties.

Looking for quaintness, Morton finds it everywhere, from old gallows left on remote hills, to ladies taking tea in ancient church premises. He finds the 'Furry', or floral, dancers of Helston in Cornwall, jigging in their top hats, flint-chippers in Norfolk, the last almshouse in England and even the last bowl-turner, making wooden bowls with Anglo-Saxon technology. There are ghosts, cobbles, eaves,

lanes, Roman ruins, ancient pubs serving mahogany-coloured beer and in general more quirk than any normal person could consume at one sitting. Birmingham, where Morton grew up and worked successfully as a journalist, is dismissed without a visit as 'that monster' and Manchester is only distantly glimpsed as 'an ominous grey haze in the sky'. On the rare occasions that Morton is roused to genuine anger it is, like Cobbett, on behalf of the declining and disregarded farming community.

Green England's grip on the national imagination should not be underestimated. Comic novels by P. G. Wodehouse and brain-teasing crime novels by Agatha Christie were set in its timeless villages, peopled by ancient families, vicars and well-educated old maids whose lovers had died in the trenches. The cartoons of *Punch* portrayed England's cricket greens, church halls, peasant-crowded lanes and stables, interrupted by the modern world through charabanc tours, but still somehow essential. At the start of the war the Ministry of Labour sent a group of artists, mainly conscientious objectors, off round the country to draw and paint the barns, parish churches and country houses of old England before the Nazi bombers and housebuilders could destroy them: the scenes chosen look like a visual version of Morton's journey.

Yet British agriculture and therefore the British countryside, an early casualty of the global economy, had been in a long slump which lasted from the 1870s until 1940, with only the interruption of the Great War to lift prices. The opening up of the great prairies of North America, the easier transportation of grain and meat with steamships, refrigeration and railways, and even the use of barbed wire to extend the farms of Canada and New Zealand, all badly hurt home producers. From the middle years of Queen Victoria to the beginning of Hitler's war, two-fifths of arable land had gone out of use, and millions of farm workers left the countryside for ever, a trend mildly ameliorated in the mid-thirties by the arrival of tariffs and labour-saving technology. Much of the upland areas had been abandoned to thistles and weeds and were only returned to productive use, along with abandoned arable land, in the extraordinary circumstances of the Atlantic blockade. Some 7 per cent of the great country houses were demolished between the wars. Many more were converted into hotels, hostels, asylums and schools. The reality was far removed from the nostalgic, muzzy haze

through which Morton blissfully pootled but the haze was what Whitehall thought worth recording when the nation's future was threatened by Germany.

A few years later another prolific successful literary journalist and writer set out on a tour. John Boynton Priestley was brought up in Bradford, and moved south. A large, intensely patriotic, lugubrious-looking pipe-smoking man, Priestley complained that his bestselling novels made people think of him as 'a bovine, hearty sort of ass' producing 'watery imitations of Dickens'. Sneered at and disregarded by university academics and posher writers, Priestley's book about England had a great influence on how people understood their own country. He was loquaciously political and when he set out on his 'English Journey' in 1933 almost a quarter of the British workforce was unemployed; in some areas, nearly everyone was unemployed. Priestley wanted to rub the nose of southern middle-class Britain in the reality of the other nation. Rattling around in buses and trams, the heart of his journey was in places like Wolverhampton, St Helens, Bolton, Liverpool, Gateshead, Jarrow and Shotton, where he searched out slums and blighted shipyards, grim factories and desperate mining villages. He found wastelands, industrial decline so bad that it made him question whether the whole nineteenth-century industrial revolution had been worth it.

No expert in industry, Priestley had a sharp eye. He describes the Blackburn Technical College, full of 'industrious, smiling young men from the East, most anxious to learn all that Lancashire could tell them about the processes of calico manufacture'. They missed nothing, says Priestley, but smiled at their instructors and then disappeared into the blue. 'A little later – for we live in a wonderfully interdependent world – there also disappeared into the blue a good deal of Lancashire's trade with the East. Most of those students came from Japan.'

In the potteries of Staffordshire's Stoke on Trent, Priestley found craftsmen repeating designs which had been fashionable in Victorian times, and still more astonishingly, working on treadles and lathes introduced by Josiah Wedgwood in 1763. Each town in Britain looked different, smelt different and were full of different words, shapes, noises – because they did different things. Leicester was boots and socks, and typewriters; Nottingham was lace (its female workers were also famous for their lack of sexual puritanism); Bradford was wool,

and strongly influenced by German Jews; Coventry was cars; Sheffield, cutlery; Dundee, jute – and so on. In 1933, there was a strong variation, a texture, to the nation that the decline of industry, together with the growth of consumerism and broadcasting, would soon wash away. Priestley understood this. Eventually globalization and capital's search for cheaper labour which Priestley had spotted would wipe out the Britain he knew.

Priestley inspired other writers, notably George Orwell who famously took the road to Wigan Pier (it does not exist) on foot, three years later, as well as photographers and early documentary film-makers who followed him deep into wrecked Britain. The grim condition of old industrial Britain was only tentatively addressed before the war. The coalmining industry, still key to Britain's economy, was a mass of independent, under-invested companies, using technology which was hilariously old-fashioned by American or German standards. Britain's miners worked with picks, wearing only trousers in stifling heat and near-darkness, for low wages and without any kind of job security. Back in the thirties, there seemed neither possibility nor prospect of any real change. This was just how things were. Yet evidence of catastrophic decline was piling up. Once, investment and innovation had been at the heart of British heavy industry. No longer. British ships, two-thirds of the vessels afloat before the First World War, were riveted by hand, outdoors, by a hyper-unionized and strike-prone workforce in virtually the same way as they had been put together in Edwardian times to take on the Kaiser. While other countries had changed, Britain had not. Protection and cheap money, then rearmament, helped in the short term. But the industrial problems of seventies Britain from Japanese competition to under investment were primed well before the Germans invaded Poland.

As Priestley saw films, to his despair, replacing music halls, he predicted a country which would seem much the same wherever you are. Once inside a cinema, he pointed out, you could be anywhere from Iowa City to Preston. But it wasn't just the films. Young people were experimenting with cocktails in the new American bars springing up across England. Old English songs were being pushed out by the American blues. 'This is the England of arterial and bypass roads, of filling stations . . . of giant cinemas and dance-halls and cafes, bungalows with tiny garages, cocktail bars, Woolworths, motor coaches,

wireless . . .' It is comparatively classless, with its cheap and uniform chain stores and its new industries – the electronics, synthetic fibres, light engineering and aircraft factories spreading around London and through the Midlands. Slough, a byword for the new, suburban, light-industrial and rather monotonous country taking shape, provoked one of Betjeman's angriest poems. 'Come, friendly bombs, and fall on Slough / It isn't fit for humans now.' What had he against it? 'Those air-conditioned, bright canteens / Tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans / Tinned minds, tinned breath . . .' Betjeman was a great snob and nostalgist but even J. B. Priestley, the self-described democrat and socialist, found something a bit too cheap about the new Britain: 'Too much of it is simply a trumpery imitation . . . There is about it a rather depressing monotony. Too much of this life is being stamped on from outside . . . this new England is lacking in character, in zest, gusto, flavour, bite, drive, originality.' Priestley calls it a third England and this global-culture England is far nearer the country that survives today.

Many of the same trends were obvious in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland – but less so, since these did not have the fast-growing new industries of southern England and were even more buried in the dirt and stagnation of Victorian industrialism. South Wales with her archaic coalfields and steel industry was as badly hurt by the mid-war slump as anywhere in the United Kingdom, and considerably more militant than most of England. Scotland's decline was equally obvious, from the shipyards of the Clyde to the sudden silence in Dundee's mills. The Scottish poet Edwin Muir bitterly describes the small industrial town of Cathcart, now effectively part of Glasgow, in his *Scottish Journey*. He found 'a debased landscape in which every growing thing seemed to be poisoned and stunted, a landscape which involuntarily roused evil thoughts and seemed to be made to be the scene of murders and rapes'. He comes across abandoned coal pits where along black slag paths 'one would see stunted naked boys bathing in the filthy pools, from which rose a smell of various acids and urine'. In common with Priestley and Orwell, for Muir the answer was socialism and, like Priestley, he notes the Americanizing influence of film and radio on the people of better-off cities, such as Edinburgh. It is a commercial 'bus-driven, cinema-educated' age making the immediate environment – this town, that industry – matter less to how people

behave. 'The inhabitants of all our towns, great and small, Scottish and English, are being subjected more and more exclusively to action from a distance,' he argues. It is a brilliant insight which well describes what will happen to Britain after the war was over.

So, as the travellers of the thirties demonstrate, Britain was changing fast before the war. While the look of fifties Britain, with long 'ribbons' of semi-detached houses spreading out from the old cities, had been set in the age of Stanley Baldwin, American music and films were here long before the GIs arrived. There was a lightness and a brightness about thirties architecture and design that would be picked up, rediscovered and taken forward after the war into the fifties. Teenagers may not have existed as a named group in Britain, though the term was already being used in pre-war America, but people in their teens with money to spend on records and clothes and increasing independence from their parents were already a phenomenon in British cities. Chain stores were selling brighter clothes. Television sets were on sale, and starting to spread among the London middle classes. The texture of the country was changing. Britain was already becoming a slightly flimsier, less varied nation, a little more American and a little less British. This will be a major part of the story to come.

Britain in her imperial heyday was a country which believed in small government, at least at home. Planning was the kind of thing sinister Germans and funny Italians got up to. Despite the pleas from writers the thirties were not a time when the majority really thought government could make things better. It is easy to feel appalled and bemused by the enthusiasm of so many reasonably intelligent British people for Mussolini and Hitler but there was more to it than cowardice and racism. There was an impatient yearning for government that actually worked – that ended unemployment, built big new roads, developed modern industries and, yes, made the trains run on time. Politicians as far apart as the socialist John Strachey, the Tory Churchill, the fascist Oswald Mosley and the old Liberal Lloyd George, all at one time or another found the dictatorial style something to be at least half-admired. The war made such errors so embarrassing they were quickly forgotten. The most fundamental thing the war changed was the political climate: it made democracy fashionable.

But it did more. It convinced the British that their government could reshape the nation too. Like most victorious wars it raised the

reputation of the state. If the government could throw an army into Europe and defeat the most well-organized and frightening-looking military machine of modern times, then what else could it do? Was all the waste and lack of planning and general amateurism really the best the British could achieve? In the first of a series of famous BBC radio broadcasts during the war, given on 5 June 1940 after the chaotic near-disaster and last-minute escape of Dunkirk, Priestley called for the amateurism to stop: 'Nothing, I feel could be more English . . . both in its beginning and its end, its folly and its grandeur . . . We have gone sadly wrong like this before and here and now we must resolve never, never, to do it again.' It was time to 'think differently'. That resolution, to do things differently in future, was the biggest domestic change brought by Britain's victory. As we shall see, it was implemented in the worst possible conditions and had most unexpected effects.

It didn't, however, mean that we stopped fighting. The world after the war was still a world of war. From Greece and Cyprus to Korea and Malaya; from Kenya to the Falklands, Ireland to Iraq, Britain would always be fighting somewhere. The most serious enemy became world communism but shooting wars very rarely involved communist armies directly because of the risk of nuclear conflagration. They were more directed at rival forms of nationalism, liberation armies led by African, Asian or Arab leaders who would be idolized until they turned with depressing regularity into dictators themselves. Many of the colonial wars have almost slipped out of British public memory, though they were bloody enough.

Today the country likes to see itself as a peacekeeper, an armed ambulance service, social workers with machine guns, rather than a natural belligerent in the old way. Yet the fighting has gone on even as the armed forces have shrivelled in size. Some of the 'post-war' wars caused huge political interest and argument, out of all proportion to their size, both making and destroying reputations. Suez, in which British casualties were just twenty-one, is rightly seen as a post-war turning point, proving how dependent and weak Britain had become. Without the reconquest of the Falkland Islands the Thatcher era might have lasted just a few years. The second Iraq war split Britain and ravened Tony Blair's reputation. But Britain's modern military history has been paradoxical. We cut back because the age of warfare is always about to end, yet in practice we keep fighting. We withdraw

to barracks, mothball warships, announce a peace dividend; and then jump back out again. In spite of this, and in spite of the abandonment of National Service conscription in 1963, Britain has spent disproportionately more on defence than other countries of a similar size and economic strength. Only France has rivalled us. Money which could have gone on education, industrial support or more modern infrastructure has gone on aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines and tank regiments in Germany. This has been done to keep Britain as a world player, which she still just is, though in almost every war actually fought, and certainly throughout the Cold War, she fought in the larger shadow of the United States.

Throughout the post-war age Britain maintained an inner 'security state' hidden from public view, a living, unseen structure behind bland brick and stone buildings with a vast electronic ear to the ground at Cheltenham GCHQ. The work of MI5 and MI6 has been of unhealthy fascination to novelists, film-makers and conspiracy theorists, a continuing metaphor for Britain itself. In the late fifties and early sixties it was the uncomplicated pride of the 007 confections, followed by the seedy, betrayal-strewn wilderness of John le Carré's novels and more recently the politically-correct, scrubbed young television drama *Spooks*. Behind the fiction, the secret state kept her counsel through the Cold War and has only recently let the mask slip a little. MPs, BBC employees, civil servants, judges and political activists were monitored, many having filed reports kept about them. The prime ministers, with the monarchical authority inherited from the seventeenth century, kept decisions and information away from cabinets and Parliament. These included the original decision to develop atomic weapons, and the incredibly complex and detailed network of bunkers and tunnels prepared for in case of nuclear attack. Inevitably, from the first atom spies and the first Aldermaston marches to the second Iraq war and the role of intelligence in the 'dodgy dossier', the security state has injected mistrust and worry into public life.

Less often discussed is that the post-war wars also maintained a level of patriotism and an interest in things military among many British people – the 'silent majority', far from the media world. There has been a larger proportion of people connected to the armed forces than would otherwise have happened. National Service involved nearly two million men. The Territorial Army along with the various cadet

corps in schools spread military influence far beyond barracks or dockyards. Something of the atmosphere of the Second World War lasted through decades of blanco'd belts, .303 rifles, air displays and the roar of V-bombers and English Electric Lightning fighters in the skies above us. The tone, the fabric, of life in post-war Britain has been more affected by war than perhaps we like to admit.

History is either a moral argument with lessons for the here-and-now or it is merely an accumulation of pointless facts. The story of the British in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War is a morally attractive one with much to learn from – a time of optimism and energy, despite apparently crippling difficulties. Politicians on both sides of the political divide believe that Britain will be important in the new world to be built and a great force for good. Returning soldiers and millions of civilians are determined to make up for lost time, to live happier lives. Patriotism is not narrow, there is such a thing as society, and the common good is not laughed at. Labour is promising a New Jerusalem and though no one is entirely sure of what that magical city might feel like to live in, it clearly involves a new deal in health, schooling and housing. In British film there is great energy and ambition. Designers and architects have brought over here plans originally drawn in Europe between the wars to create a brighter, airier and more colourful country. In science and technology Britain seems to have achieved great things which augur well for peacetime.

There is a general and justified pride in victory, not yet much tainted by fear of nuclear confrontation to come. If people are still hungry and ill housed, they are safe again. If they are grieving, they also have much to look forward to, for the baby boom is at full pitch. There is much in the Britain of the later forties that would surprise or even disgust people now. It was not just the shattered cities or the tight rations that would arch modern eyebrows, but the snobbery and casual racism – even, despite the freshly shocking evidence of the concentration camps, widespread anti-Semitism. Yet overall, this was a country brimming with hope. In history, no quality rubs up as brightly.

The great debate about the meaning of our post-war history has been, roughly, an argument between left and right. There are historians of the centre left such as Peter Hennessy who are generally impressed by the country's leaders and get under their skin as they

wrestled with dilemmas. Then there are those led by Correlli Barnett who emphasize failure and missed opportunities, at least until Margaret Thatcher arrives to save the situation in 1979. Everyone else struggles between these force-fields. And so what is my view? That we grumpy people, perpetually outraged by the stupidity and deceit of our rotten rulers, have (whisper it gently) had rather a good sixty years. Britain suffered a crisis in the seventies, a national nervous breakdown, and has recovered since. Britain in the forties and fifties was a damaged and inefficient country which would be overtaken by formerly defeated nations such as France, Germany and Japan. But the longer story, the bigger picture, is that Britain successfully shifted from being one kind of country, an inefficient imperialist manufacturer struggling to maintain her power, to become a wealthier social democracy, and did this without revolution.

And shift she did, in the greatest scuttle in the world. British governments, Labour and Tory, duly got rid of the Empire. This meant the deaths of untold numbers in other continents – Muslims and Hindus caught up in ethnic cleansing, the African victims of massacre and dictatorship, civil war and famine for the Arabs, Cypriots and many nationalities of the Far East. Britain, meanwhile, refocused on her new role as a junior partner in the Cold War, close to Europe but never quite European, speaking the same language as Americans, but never meaning exactly the same.

Always, we have been a country on the edge. We moved from being on the edge of defeat, to the edge of bankruptcy, to the edge of nuclear annihilation and the edge of the American empire, and came out on the other side to find ourselves on the cutting edge of the modern condition, a post-industrial and multi-ethnic island, crowded, inventive and rich. The years before Thatcher were not a steady slide into disaster. Nobody has put this relative British success better than an American historian George Bernstein, who called his account of post-1945 Britain *The Myth of Decline* and who said of the years before the crisis of the seventies that 'Britain's performance in providing for the well-being of its people – as measured by employment, a safety net that kept them out of poverty, and improved standards of living – was outstanding.'[2] And this despite ferocious economic conditions.

There is a danger of distorting real history with false endings. If

one decides that the breakdown of the seventies was the single most important thing to have happened to post-war Britain, which shadows everything before and since, then inevitably the story of the forties, fifties and sixties becomes darker. Humdrum events dutifully rearrange themselves as ominous warnings. All the things that went right, all the successful lives that were lived during thirty crowded years, the triumphs of style and technology, the better health, the time of low inflation, the money in pockets, the holidays and the businesses that grew and thrived, are subtly surrounded with 'yes, but' brackets . . . guess what's coming next. But this is a strange way of thinking. In personal terms it would be like defining the meaning of a life, with all its ups and downs, entirely by reference to a single bout of serious illness or marital breakup in middle age.

Does this mean we should cheer our leaders? Certainly not. For most of the modern period politics has served Britain less well than our self-congratulation about parliamentary democracy might suggest. Good people, acting honourably, failed to lead well. We have been run by cliques of right and left who did not understand the direction the country was taking. Hennessy is right: the political class was intelligent and faced terrible choices which are easy to brush aside afterwards when the dangers have passed. But Barnett is also right: we could have had a better country, had we had clearer-minded leaders who did not shrink from telling hard truths, or from treating the voters like adults. So, Labour did not build a New Jerusalem. So, the Tory cabinets of the fifties and early sixties failed to create the restored great power, the New Elizabethan Age they dreamed of. The Wilson and Heath years were supposed to be a time of modernization, a refitted, retooled Britain. They ended with trade unions rampant and the lights flickering out. John Major set out promising to create a country at ease with itself and ended up with a country ill at ease, above all with John Major. Tony Blair's New Labour Britain was never as cool or efficient as he told us it would be, even before the Iraq war. Nor was it whiter than white. Each failure occurred on its own terms.

The exceptions were the Labour government of 1945, which developed a Welfare State even if it did not achieve the social transformation it wanted, and Margaret Thatcher's first two administrations, which addressed the British crisis head-on. Both set templates for what followed. But even these two counter-examples are not

completely clear. Post-war Labour ran out of popularity and momentum within a couple of years, while Mrs Thatcher's vision of a remoralized, hard-working nation of savers and strong families was hardly what the partying, divided, 'loadsamoney', easy credit, big-hair eighties delivered. What follows is a story of the failure of political elites. Often the famous political names, those faces familiar from a thousand cartoons and newsreels, seem to me like buzzing flywheels with broken teeth, failing to move the huge and complex structures of daily life.

If that was all, it would be a depressing tale. But it is not. Opening markets, well-educated and busy people, a relatively uncorrupt and law-abiding national tradition, and an optimistic relish for the new technologies and experiences offered by twentieth-century life all make the British experience generally better than political history alone would suggest. In the more recent decades the retreat of faith and ideology, and their replacement by consumerism and celebrity may have made us a less dignified lot. Yet modern Britain has made great advances in science, culture and finance which have benefited, and will benefit, the world. Among the puzzles facing humanity at the beginning of the twenty-first century are global warming; the mystery of consciousness; and how ageing Western societies adapt to the new migrant cultures they require to keep them functioning. British people have been important in bringing answers, just as they were seminal in the development of the Web, and in creating modern music and television. We have become a world island in a new way. In the period covered by this book, the dominant experience has been acceleration. We have lived faster. We have seen, heard, communicated, changed and travelled more. We have experienced a material profusion and perhaps a philosophical or religious emptiness that marks us off from earlier times.

If, by an act of science or magic, a small platoon of British people from 1945 could be time-travelled sixty or so years into the future, what would they make of us? They would be nudging one another and trying not to laugh. They would be shocked by the different colours of skin. They would be surprised by the crammed and busy roads, the garish shops, the lack of smoke in the air. They would be amazed at how big so many of us are – not just tall but shamefully fat. They would be impressed by the clean hair, the new-looking clothes

and the youthful faces of the new British. But they would feel shock and revulsion at the gross wastefulness, the food flown here from Zambia or Peru then promptly thrown out of houses and supermarkets uneaten, the mountains of intricately designed and hurriedly discarded music players, television sets and fridges, clothes and furniture; the ugly marks of painted, distorted words on walls and the litter everywhere of plastic and coloured paper. They would wonder at our lack of church-going, our flagrant openness about sex, our divorce habit, alongside our amazingly warm and comfortable houses. They would then discuss it all in voices that might make us in turn laugh at them – insufferably posh or quaintly regional. Yet these alien people were us. They are us. The cropped-haired urchins of the forties are our pensioners now. The impatient lean young adults of 1947 with their imperial convictions or socialist beliefs are around us still in wheelchairs or hidden in care homes. It was their lives and the choices they made which led to here and now. So although they might stare at us and ask, 'Who are these alien people?' we could reply, 'We are you, what you chose to become.'