

**Brian Harrison, *Seeking a Role: The United Kingdom 1951-1970*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009; pp.658; RRP £37.00 paperback; ISBN 9780199605132.**

**Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role? The United Kingdom 1970-1990*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010; pp.679; RRP £37.00 paperback; ISBN 9780199606122.**

In an address to a West Point student conference in 1962, Dean Acheson, former Secretary of State and a key figure in the post-war reconstruction of the west claimed that “Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role.” (*Seeking a Role*, p.xvii). Out of the nations that had fought in the Second World War, Britain was better off than her shattered European neighbours. Nevertheless, these were years in which the nation had to cope with the final loss of a centuries-old empire and attempt to reposition herself in the Cold War era. Taking Acheson’s line about Britain’s role as his starting point, Brian Harrison has crafted a sweeping assessment of British history across the latest volumes in the *New Oxford History of England* series: *Seeking a Role: The United Kingdom 1951-1970* and *Finding a Role? The United Kingdom 1970-1990*. Comprehensive and thorough, these two volumes will be an essential first step for any student wishing to engage with this era.

The volumes of the *New Oxford History of England* series have been published steadily since 1989, replacing the older *Oxford History of England* series. The original series was published from 1934 onwards, under the editorship of Sir George Clark. Many of the volumes from this series have become, justifiably, classics and are still in print. The new series began in 1989 with the Paul Langford’s volume *A Polite and Commercial People*. As pointed out by new series editor J.M. Roberts, the focus “history of England” had become problematic:

It is hard to treat that development as just the history which unfolds within the precise boundaries of England, and a mistake to suggest that this implies a neglect of the histories of the Scots, Irish and Welsh.<sup>1</sup>

Under the cloak of the general mission statement, authors have been “left to write their own books”, volumes which are now surpassing the original series in their ambition and scope, if at times lacking their personality and readability.

Brian Harrison has undertaken a significant task in writing these two volumes, which are intended to complement one another as much as they are intended to stand alone. This is a first in the history of the two *Oxford History of England* series, and allows Harrison to develop a series of themes across this forty-year period. Both volumes are divided into seven main sections: “The United Kingdom and the World”, “The Face of the Country”, “The Social Structure”, “Family and Welfare”, “Industry and Commerce”, “Intellect and Culture” and “Politics and Government.” The first volume, *Seeking a Role*, contains sections on “The United Kingdom in 1951” and “The Sixties”, with the second volume containing a final section “Perspective and Retrospective.”

“The United Kingdom and the World” takes up Acheson’s point about Britain’s role. The impotence of the post-World War II nation was tested quite quickly into this period with the Suez Crisis, an event that revealed the Britain would have to abandon its previous

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<sup>1</sup> In the Preface to: Gerald Harriss, *Shaping the Nation: England 1360-1461*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, p. vii.

colonial approach, something that Acheson had already criticised in regards to Britain's treatment of Iran in the earlier part of the decade.<sup>2</sup> It was the loss of the empire and the attempt to replace it with a softer, Commonwealth of nations during this era that shaped one strand of Britain's relationship with the world. Other strands emerged, with Harrison pointing out that Britain's foreign interest "lay in participating in three circles of influence – Commonwealth, Europe and with the USA – but without total commitment to any." (*Seeking a Role*, p.9). It was during this era that a "special relationship" was being defined between Britain and the United States, a relationship that was incredibly complex, primarily due to Britain's resentment being reminded that she was the junior partner. Dean Acheson was not the only high profile figure to publicly comment on Britain's impotence. Indeed, the savagery with which the UK fought Argentina in the Falklands War could be seen as a final exertion of the old imperialism, a demonstration that Britain was not to be pushed around. However, Harrison points out that it was American intelligence that "may well have enabled Britain to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat." (*Finding a Role*, p.43) As recent years have shown, this relationship is hardly likely to become less complicated, but Harrison shows that the controversies surrounding Blair's relationship with Bush merely echo the controversies of other relationships between British PMs and American presidents, notably Reagan and Thatcher, and earlier, Wilson and Johnson.

The other defining element of the United Kingdom's interaction with the world has been the relationship with Europe. The enthusiasm for the EEC, and later the EU, waxed and waned depending on leadership both within the British polity and without. Harold Macmillan's enthusiasm, for example, was mitigated by de Gaulle's opposition during the 1950s. In the 1980s, Thatcher's distaste for the EEC was matched, in Harrison's mind, to her distaste for the Commonwealth. Her dislike for both was linked to her mindset as a "practical politician", who was:

impatient with time-wasting, pretentious, and empty formulations, unafraid to confront an assembly of critics. Self-righteous herself, she had no time for self-righteousness in her critics, and still less for gesture politics (*Finding a Role?* p.44)

At the same time, the scepticism was tempered by the UK's role in Europe during these years, having joined the EEC in the 1970s.

For the sections "The Face of the Country", "The Social Structure", "Family and Welfare", this era, particularly the 1960s, was a time of change. Homosexual and abortion law reform emerged, as did relaxed attitudes towards sexuality. The social structure was changing as well, and there is a witty passage on the declining prestige of debutante balls in which young women made their society "debut" before the Queen. Ability to pay one's way in had replaced older upper class connections, leading Princess Margaret to exclaim: "We had to put a stop to it. Every tart in London was getting in." (*Seeking A Role*, pp.189-190) But it was also an era that saw a "lively market" for Christian apologists such as C.S. Lewis, and a counter-revolution amongst Conservatives, best exemplified by Mary Whitehouse and the Festival of Light in 1971. More alarmingly, the rising concerns about levels of immigration to the UK from former imperial possessions in the early to mid 1960s fuelled the rising popularity of Enoch Powell, whose famous "Rivers of Blood" speech defined the late 1960s as much as anything the Beatles or the Rolling Stones did. Indeed, as Harrison points out in *Seeking a Role*, plenty of British people did *not* participate in '60s "counterculture". In this regard, Harrison echoes the work of Dominic Sandbrook, who has also argued that in many

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<sup>2</sup> James Chace, *Acheson: The Secretary of State Who Created the American World*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1998, p.351.

ways the 1960s and early 1970s were far more conservative than pop culture trends would have one believe.<sup>3</sup>

The “Politics and Government” section, between the two volumes, provides a narrative of change in governments from Conservative in the 1950s to Labour from 1964 onwards until the early 1970s, and a breakdown that brought the United Kingdom to the brink. In the post-war period, there was a reasonable degree of consensus between the two parties about central planning and the role of the unions in the economy. Union domination of the economy in the 1970s led to Thatcher’s victory in 1979 and a permanent reshaping of Britain’s political landscape. In this sense, the wide scope presented in these two volumes assists the narrative greatly, as Harrison can show in *Seeking a Role* that Enoch Powell’s views on the economy (neglected by most of his Conservative colleagues at the time) would later be echoed in the policies of Thatcher, whose political rule saw the smashing of Britain’s union movement and the widespread privatization of government assets.

In writing these two volumes, Brian Harrison has taken some potential risks. The volume in the sister series *The Oxford History of the United States* that covered the same period, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore* suffered (through no fault of author James T. Patterson) from a dearth of secondary source material essential to the historian’s craft.<sup>4</sup> In other words, time is needed before a proper perspective can be presented on a period. Harrison has ended his analysis at 1990. In one respect, this is a logical place to end, with the line drawn at the end of the Thatcher era with her ousting by John Major. But Harrison skips ahead, discussing elements of both the Major and the Blair years. This glance forward is entirely understandable, but does leave the reader wondering about the choice of periodisation across the two volumes. Certainly a greater uniformity might be achieved with the first volume spanning 1945 to 1979, and the second 1979 to 1997, or even a little further. Such divisions would make sense in terms of post-war economic and political scenes, as Britain moved from the post-war, central planning consensus of the two major parties to the decisive break of Thatcher’s “revolution” in 1979. Even Harrison admits at the start of *Finding a Role?* that “1970 does not mark a major break in British history.” (*Finding a Role?* p.xv) Then why choose to draw a line there? The use of the term “United Kingdom” is not without its problems either. Harrison does some justice to the other parts of the UK, with insightful comments on Welsh and Scottish nationalism in *Seeking a Role* and some good commentary at the start of *Finding a Role?* about the need for balance. But this struggle has been at the heart of both the *Oxford History of England* and the *New Oxford History of England*. It is difficult to see how it could be otherwise. These critiques are, however, minor ones. Harrison has undertaken a monumental task in writing about this period. Scholars wanting a more lively, more readable narrative might want to delve into Sandbrook’s books.<sup>5</sup> However, Harrison’s two volumes, like the other in the Oxford series, will be the definitive starting point for any student or academic wishing to engage with this complex and fascinating period.

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<sup>3</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles*, Abacus Books, London, 2005; and *White Heat: A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties*, Abacus Books, London, 2006. Harrison makes reference to Sandbrook’s work in his useful and extensive bibliographical essay.

<sup>4</sup> James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States from Watergate to Bush v. Gore*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005. It is worth noting that, like Harrison, Patterson wrote two back-to-back volumes in the United States series.

<sup>5</sup> Volume three, *State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain 1970-1974* was released in 2010. A final volume, taking events up to 1979, is forthcoming.

Sir Brian Howard Harrison FBA (born 9 July 1937) is a British historian and academic. From 1996 to 2004, he was Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford. From 2000 to 2004, he was also the Editor of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. Harrison was Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford from 1996 to 2004. He was additionally the editor of Oxford Dictionary of National Biography from January 2000 to September 2004 (succeeded by Lawrence Goldman). Since 2004, he has been an emeritus fellow of Corpus Christi College, Oxford.[1]. Seeking a Role: The United Kingdom 1951–1970 (2009, paperback with revisions 2011); online[2]. Finding a Role? The United Kingdom 1970–1990 (2010, paperback with revisions 2011). online. The United Kingdom 1970-1990 (New Oxford History of England). See all 2 brand new listings. Brian Harrison, Emeritus Professor of Modern British History at Oxford, has published widely in British social, political and cultural history since the 1790s. His first book, *Drink and the Victorians* (1971, second edition 1994), was followed by books on British reforming movements, feminism, and anti-feminism, Oxford University's history, and - in *The Transformation of British Politics 1860-1995* (1996) - on how our political institutions have evolved. United Kingdom Paperbacks. *Finding a Role?: The United Kingdom 1970-1990* (New Oxford History of England). Brian Harrison. 4.0 out of 5 stars 1. Paperback. Brian Harrison is Emeritus Professor of Modern British History at the University of Oxford. He has published on many aspects of British history from the 1790s to the present. His books include *Drink and the Victorians* (1971, second edition 1994) and *The Transformation of British Politics 1860-1995* (1996).