REVIEW ARTICLE

THE STATE OF MODERN BRITISH POLITICAL HISTORY?

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The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800-2000. Edited by David Brown, Robert Crowcroft, and Gordon Pentland. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. xiv, 626 pp. £95.00. ISBN 9780198714897.

Modern British political history is impressively well served by historiographical anatomies. Numerous essays track the leading developments of the last thirty years: most prominently the emergence of the 'new political history', and the seemingly more durable category of 'political culture', radiating outwards from the meteorically impactful 'linguistic turn'. Students of popular politics have proven particularly self-reflective, driven by a compulsion to relate their core preoccupations to wider debates in social history, while scholars are now paying increasingly close attention to the intellectual origins of work on 'high' politics as well.[1] Nearly all this writing, however, is specialised in one way or another.[2] Individual pieces almost invariably address particular sub-periods, or specific political parties, or given

1 Miles Taylor, 'The Beginnings of Modern British Social History?', *History Workshop Journal*, xliii (1997), 155-76, and Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914* (Cambridge, 1998), part I, cover popular politics; on 'high' politics see the increasingly seminal article by David Craig, '"High Politics" and the "New Political History"', *Historical Journal*, liii (2010), 453-75.

themes or 'turns', or the contributions of individual historians.[3] They are also scattered far and wide between journals and edited collections. No standard volume exists which provides a reliable and up-to-date picture of the trajectories of modern British political historiography.

Into this breach steps *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800-2000*, edited by David Brown, Robert Crowcroft, and Gordon Pentland.[4] The volume is an ambitious attempt to assess the current state of the field, to explore where it has come from, and to indicate where it might be going. It pursues these historiographical and prospective goals across six hundred pages and thirty-three chapters. Most of these are contributed by relatively senior historians, supported by a few residents of Politics departments. The editors pitch this heavy tome into a field which they describe as being 'in a curious state', wider and more diverse than ever, but at the same time lacking in coherence

2 Partial exceptions include the two most widely cited recent assessments: Susan Pedersen, 'What is Political History Now?', in *What Is History Now?*, ed. David Cannadine (Basingstoke, 2002), 36-56; Jon Lawrence, 'Political History', in *Writing History: Theory and Practice* (2003), 213-31.

3 Examples of each category, which of course overlap, include: Philip Harling, 'Equipoise Regained? Recent Trends in British Political History, 1790-1867', *Journal of Modern History*, lxxv (2003), 890-918; Kit Kowol, 'Renaissance on the Right? New Directions in the History of the Post-War Conservative Party', *Twentieth Century British History*, xxvii (2016), 290-304; Michael Bentley, 'Victorian Politics and the Linguistic Turn', *Historical Journal*, xlii (1999), 883-902; Philip Williamson, 'Maurice Cowling and Modern British Political History', in *Philosophy, Politics, and Religion in British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism*, ed. Robert Crowcroft, S.J.D. Green, and Richard Whiting (2010), 108-52.

4 From this point on the volume is referred to as *Handbook*.

and confidence. Brown, Crowcroft, and Pentland do not aspire to erect 'an impermeable sub-disciplinary wall' around the subject, but they do aim to bring questions about its identity into focus, and to provide a significant resource for teaching and research.[5] They particularly emphasise the close relationship between the writing of British political history and contemporary politics, and indeed the shadow of the 2016 EU referendum looms menacingly over a number of the contributions.

The *Handbook*, then, presents itself as both an introduction and an intervention. In fact, it presents a whole series of interventions, as the editors have deliberately left the authors to their own devices, making no attempt to impose structural or chronological unity. The result is an extraordinary patchwork, which succeeds handsomely in avoiding the 'tiresome rigidity' which might have been the consequence of a firmer editorial steer.[6] The trade-off is that the volume has nothing very definite to say about the bigger picture. The editors are evasive about what they themselves take 'political history' to mean, preferring to emphasise the fluid boundaries of the subject, and their short introduction offers only a cursory attempt to draw out common threads. Instead of a conclusion the book closes, perplexingly, with an 'epilogue' in defence of contemporary history. So there is no attempt here at general synthesis. There is also no cross-referencing between chapters, or any apparent co-ordination between authors. All these choices are defensible, given that most readers will use the volume selectively, and publication timescales are long enough as it is. But it is unprecedented to have this many leading scholars come together to reflect on the state of modern British political history. So it is surely worth asking: how effective a guide is the book to the state of the field, and is it as ecumenical as it claims to be?

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5 Brown *et al*., 'Introduction', *Handbook*, 3-4.

6 Brown *et al*., 'Introduction', 4.

The rest of this review article starts by surveying the structure and content of the *Handbook*, and picks out some of its most valuable chapters. It then considers the position of the volume within its field. The article suggests that the arrangement of the book mainly around political institutions, organisations, and areas of policy, while bringing a clear shape to the project, tends to obscure the significance of vitally important recent developments. This focus also makes it difficult for the *Handbook* to offer as much reflection on the overall unity and health of 'modern British political history' it as it might usefully have done.

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The *Handbook* opts not to get side-tracked by tortuous debate over what might constitute 'modernity' in British politics. It treats its roundly-numbered chronological parameters as self-evident, and forges swiftly forward. This might equally be considered a missed opportunity or a blessed relief. Heavier interpretative lifting is unavoidably involved, however, in the specification and organisation of the chapters. The volume falls into five parts. The first, 'Concepts and Historiographies' (three chapters), outlines methodological issues in the literatures on political ideas, high politics, and popular politics. The second and much the largest part, 'Institutions, Structures, and Machinery' (ten chapters), is rather broader in its subject matter, ranging from the 'The Monarchy' to 'Devolution'. The third section on 'Parties, Doctrines, and Leaders' (seven chapters) focuses on the evolution of the institution of 'party' and on the major parties themselves. Fourth comes 'Elections and Popular Politics' (five chapters), which actually says relatively little about popular politics, and into which the necessary chapters on 'Parliamentary Reform' and 'Women and Politics' are fitted. Finally there are the 'Challenges' (six chapters), explained by the editors as encompassing significant areas of policy but feeling more diffuse, running from 'Democracy'

to ‘Welfare and the State’.[7] Deciding which subjects should be included in a volume of this kind is a delicate and thankless task, and everyone will spot their own gaps. The lack of an entry on pressure groups and lobbies is the most clearly felt, but the editors explain the unfortunate reasons for its absence in the acknowledgements. Ultimately the book touches, at least, on nearly all the major topics which have occupied historians in the field for the last half-century and more.

Balanced coverage of the whole period 1800-2000 is attempted by only a handful of the most dutiful contributors. The overwhelming majority of authors prioritise the period in which they specialise, and within these self-assigned chronological parameters, the content of the chapters varies wildly. Some are based exclusively on secondary literature, some almost entirely on primary sources. Some chapters offer narrative accounts of their subjects, more or less coloured by contemporary political speculation; some present sustained dissections of (parts of) the relevant historiography; some are so closely focused on particular incidents and issues that they would not be out of place as journal articles; while the pieces written by political scientists mostly assume an institutionally-focused and positivist character. The three chapters on the three major political parties of the modern era neatly exemplify this variety (or incoherency) of approach. Ian Packer’s piece on ‘Whigs and Liberals’ sets out to provide a general historiographical account, centred on the question of Liberal ‘decline’, and picks illuminatingly through competing interpretations of different phases of party history. For ‘Tories and Conservatives’, by contrast, John Charmley offers a racy narrative about

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7 It is interesting to compare this organisation with that of the (somewhat longer) *Oxford Handbook of British Politics*, ed. Matthew Flinders, Andrew Gamble, Colin Hay, Michael Kenny (Oxford, 2009), which contains twelve chapters on ‘Approaches’, eleven on ‘Institutions’, and eighteen between sections on ‘Identities’ and ‘Inequalities’, plus another nine-chapter part dealing with ‘Processes’.

successive leaders of the party, with much of the relatively light historiographical gloss drawn from biographies. Lawrence Black takes 'The Labour Party' in a completely different direction again, beginning with the party's post-referendum 'crisis' of 2016, and training its big analytical guns on the post-2010 period. This is all stimulating stuff, but it is not clear that these discussions belong naturally alongside one another.

Nearly everything in the *Handbook* can be consulted with profit by at least part of its scholarly readership. Some entries will offer new perspectives to historians already intimately familiar with the specialist literature, and some will be excellent primers for students who are not. What turns up on any given subject, however, is pot luck. The historiographical chapter on 'Elections' will be useless to anyone who wants to know how elections worked; the narrative chapter on 'The Civil Service' will do nothing for readers looking for orientation in the relevant scholarship. 'War and the State' offers nothing to Victorianists, and 'Parliament' almost nothing to twentieth-century historians. Only a vigorous leaf-through will be able to establish the value of the volume to an individual reader. Some entries, however, transcend these divisions on account of their sheer quality, imagination, or innovation, and deserve to be more generally read. Andrzej Olechnowicz's essay on 'The Monarchy' is a wonderfully creative, agenda-defining piece which takes us from royal biography to oral history to an eye-opening exploration of contemporary 'royalist' websites. Gordon Pentland offers the most economical, effective, and clearly conceptualised historiographical account of the well-worked subject of 'Parliamentary Reform' now available. Henry Miller's chapter on 'Petitioning and Demonstrating', by contrast – dealing with two areas which are not altogether comfortably yoked together – unveils a subject of major significance which had previously flown under most political historians' radar. Finally, Angus Hawkins on 'Party', and James Thompson on 'Democracy', both bring together political theory and political practice to powerful effect, at once synthesising the historiography and pushing it forward.

Suggestions about where the field might go next are among the *Handbook's* most valuable elements. The editors identify a number of shared prescriptions for future work emerging from the book: they see the contributors urging other historians 'to consider and test the exceptionalism of case studies against the validity of wider norms, to interrogate the similarities and differences between perceptions and realities, and to eschew neat simplifications in favour of embracing the tensions and inconsistencies in Britain's political past'.[8] Many historians might reasonably complain that they were already doing these things. But the individual chapters, where they remember to think about the future, are a mine of more concrete new directions. Proposals range from neatly-defined topics which prospective doctoral students will leap on, to recommendations for the deployment of specific methodologies and research technologies, to strident calls for the rethinking of the scope of political history. Luke Blaxill's chapter on 'Elections' neatly summarises the case for the computer-based 'corpus analysis' of impossibly large bodies of texts, which clearly has much wider prospective uses than those to which it has already been put. Jennifer Davey's necessarily highly compressed summary of the vast field of 'Women and Politics' (surely worth more than one chapter), and Philip Harling's equally pithy and immensely learned entry on 'The State', offer particularly intriguing prospectuses for next steps in their areas. David Craig's outstandingly insightful and sophisticated piece on 'Political Ideas and Languages' concludes with some salutary remarks about the failure of recent work on political culture, dealing with 'hitherto unheard actors', to explain 'why some preferences get enacted and others get marginalised': his suggestion that 'an uplifting celebration of the potentially diverse and open-ended nature of history may need to be pulled sharply down to earth by the constraining realism of Weber's "iron cage"' ought to be attended to.[9] The most

8 Brown *et al*., 'Introduction', 8.

9 David Craig, 'Political Ideas and Languages', *Handbook*, 30.

remarkable chapter of all, however, as far as the future direction of the field is concerned, is Robert Crowcroft's on 'The Politician in the Democratic Regime'. Taking magnificent advantage of his editorial privilege, Crowcroft inserts midway through the book – poised unassumingly between entries on fringe parties and parliamentary reform – an extraordinary, freewheeling set of challenges to the limited horizons of much recent political history. He insists that '[t]he highest of which political history is capable has hinged on making a linkage between the particular and the universal', and issues a clarion call to political historians to 'scale up and ask the largest, most compelling questions possible'.[10] On this front as well, then, there is something for everyone.

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The problem with trying to assess the *Handbook* is that it is not, as will by now be clear, a coherent collection. The editors studiously deny reviewers any secure footing. They say almost nothing about the rationale behind the book's organisation, they disclaim any partisan vision, and they are too fastidious to invent retrospectively a specious unity for the essays they have ended up with. They explain only that diversity was prioritised in approaching contributors, and assert that the final selection of authors is 'at least, broadly representative of those currently researching and teaching modern British political history'.[11] All human life, then, should be here. But in their decisions about how to structure the volume, and about which topics qualify for coverage, the editors draw tacit boundaries around what counts as part of their subject. Whether by accident or design, the *Handbook* seems to prioritise certain sorts of 'political' history over others, and to downplay certain seminal recent developments.

10 Robert Crowcroft, 'The Role of the Politician in the Democratic Regime', *Handbook*, 378.

11 'Acknowledgements', *Handbook*, p. v.

We might, first, gently query the editors' assertion about the broad representativeness of the contributors. Clearly they do not mirror the field in terms of gender or geography. Three female authors out of thirty-four is doubtless not the return anyone would have hoped for, and means that the volume includes precisely as many women as it does editors of a recent book reassessing Maurice Cowling.[12] All but two of the contributors, moreover, are based at English and Scottish universities, the exceptions being one independent researcher and one American professor. So we get little sense of thinking about the field in the United States – a country where modern British political history is a specialism in decline, unquestionably, though the reasons for that would surely be worth exploring – and Continental and Irish scholarship are not directly represented at all.[13] These disproportions are striking, even if they do not necessarily point towards any specific conception of modern British politics.

The more important question is whether the *Handbook* effectively reflects the priorities of modern British political history, as a field of research, circa 2018. As we have seen, the volume is a mine of information, insight, and incisive historiographical discussion, and home to several pieces of outstanding quality. It cannot be expected to cover everything. But why does it cover what it does? The closest the editors get to outlining an organising philosophy in their introduction comes in a caveat to their comment that recent years have seen 'a number of innovative studies of space, place, environment, and mindsets as historians have looked to delineate political cultures and assess anew qualities of leadership and engagement': they warn that while '[t]here is always scope to take this work further… as the chapters in this

12 *Philosophy, Politics, and Religion*, ed. Crowcroft, Green, and Whiting.

13 On British history in America see Dane Kennedy, *The Imperial History Wars* (2018), epilogue.

volume suggest, this should not be at the expense of an attention to the institutional frameworks and political structures which shaped that culture'.[14] Insofar as the book has an argument, this is it. Indeed this perspective is baked into its organisation: it is framed, in the main, around the formal, tangible aspects of politics, especially the central state. The vast majority of chapters work outwards from some combination of institutions, organisations, and legislation. Room is made along the way for other issues, and styles of analysis. But the effect of this structural prioritisation of 'hard' politics is that more culturally and (especially) intellectually inflected approaches to political history are not always allotted their due.[15]

What to do with ideas in politics is, of course, an endlessly tricky issue. It is not that the editors do not pay attention to the problem. But it is striking that their invitations to members of Politics departments bring in only scholars interested in institutions, with their colleagues in the history of political thought conspicuously absent. It is even more conspicuous that we hear so little from Cambridge. That university has been closely associated, since the 1970s, with the concerted reinjection of intellectual concerns into the study of modern British political history, having educated or employed many of the most well-known historians associated with this agenda – Michael Bentley, Eugenio Biagini, Boyd Hilton, Jon Lawrence, Miles Taylor, Jonathan Parry, Gareth Stedman Jones, and Philip Williamson.[16] Most of these scholars receive their due in the *Handbook*, and indeed the last three rank among its most copiously cited authorities. But none of them contributes, and the

14 Brown *et al*., 'Introduction', 8.

15 Apart from David Craig's chapter, cited above, the only other entry which focuses mainly on political ideas is Jeremy Nuttall's piece on 'Ideology in Action', which has an extremely specific (and difficult to follow) agenda.

16 Not to mention Stefan Collini and John Burrow, both of whose earlier work was more history of ideas than political history, but was highly relevant on this front nonetheless.

structure of the book makes it difficult for authors to deal at any length with their central insight: that wider constellations of ideas beyond party ideology and advantage – religious, historical, scientific, aesthetic, gendered, economic, sociological, legal, even mathematical – were fundamental to political activity. The *Handbook* also pays little attention to the contexts in which political ideas were forged. David Brown's chapter on 'The Press' is effective in this respect, but the chapters on the civil service, trade unions, and local government all tell stories about evolving institutions rather than about incubators of political languages and programmes. And what of universities, debating societies, bookshops, country houses, think-tanks, clubs, activist groups? Surely putting all this to one side leaves us with a slightly bloodless vision of what 'political history' has meant since the 1980s.

The role that the intellectual contexts of politics should play in a book of this kind is certainly debatable, and to an extent a matter of taste. Some of the *Handbook's* other emphases, however, seem more obviously problematic for an enterprise which aims to reflect the current state of modern British political history and historiography. The first issue is that this is overwhelmingly a volume about England. It is more than forty years since J.G.A. Pocock outlined his agenda for 'a new subject' which integrated the experiences of the 'four nations', and there are now exceptionally rich literatures on the political experiences of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom. The *Handbook* tends to pass lightly over this scholarship. Only James Mitchell's chapter on 'Devolution', which can hardly avoid doing so, pays sustained attention to the experiences of Scotland, Ireland, and Wales. Otherwise the other countries which made up the UK crop up almost exclusively as generators of irritating nationalisms, or as seeming afterthoughts when it comes to suggestions for future research.[17] The editors explain that the contributors were invited to think about Britain as a 'fluctuating

17 Simon Green's chapter on 'Religion and the Churches' is the only one to say much about Ireland itself.

"union-state"', which presumably accounts for the decision not to give the 'other' three nations their own chapters or sections.[18] Evidently, however, most authors were not persuaded. Here, perhaps, the prioritisation of the state and the political centre over more 'popular' varieties of political activity makes it difficult to appreciate the significance of a crucial branch of the literature.

The *Handbook*'s version of British politics, moreover, is surprisingly insular. Among the most important, and spectacular, developments in modern British history in the last quarter-century has been the opening up of its international and (especially) imperial contexts. There is now a mass of scholarship which considers the effects of empire and expansion on British politics, and which explores the political and constitutional impacts of British engagements with different parts of the globe. The *Handbook* squares away the rest of the world in two chapters. Geoffrey Hicks' piece on 'Britain and Europe' is an excellent, pointed, chronologically expansive summary of the relevant literature; Simon C. Smith's entry on 'Imperial Policy' provides a narrative account of selected twentieth-century imperial developments, without reflecting on their possible effects on domestic politics. Smith's chapter represents an obvious missed opportunity, but its title hints at misplaced priorities. Surely 'Empire' or 'Imperialism' would have provided a better platform for considering the complex intersections between 'domestic' and 'imperial' political concerns which have preoccupied historians in recent years. That, in any case, is it: there is no chapter on foreign policy or diplomacy, and nothing which relates to the increasingly popular subjects of internationalism and international institutions. Nor is there any consideration of how global connections beyond Europe and the formal empire might have borne upon British politics – no Latin America, no Middle East, no Commonwealth. Only a small number of individual

18 Brown *et al*., 'Introduction', 7. They also note that there are other Oxford handbooks available on modern Ireland and Scotland.

chapters do anything with any of these themes, which are clearly far more influential ones nowadays than the *Handbook* makes them.

It might finally be questioned whether the editors' assertion that modern British political history is in 'rude health' applies equally to the whole period the book covers.[19] Twentieth-century British political history, by all accounts, seems to be going from strength to strength.[20] But recent assessments of the condition of Victorian political history have tended towards lugubriousness.[21] The *Handbook* seems to confirm that the nineteenth century is not where the action is, with many of the most conceptually innovative chapters focusing on the later period. The strong interest in contemporary history which runs through much of the volume also helps to make the twentieth century appear the more alive. This leads us towards a closing question which the editors of the *Handbook* might have been well placed to reflect on – namely, whether 'modern British political history', over the rough timescale considered, is in fact a coherent object of historical study, as well as a useful chronological label. The answer, on this evidence, seems to be that it is not. This is a volume in which nineteenth- and twentieth-century historians stay mostly in their own boxes, venturing only gingerly into the neighbouring period. Certainly there is no ringing vindication of the analytic unity of modern British political history to be found here.

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19 Brown *et al*., 'Introduction', 6.

20 Paul Readman, 'The State of Twentieth Century British Political History', *Journal of Policy History*, xxi (2009), 219-38.

21 David Craig and James Thompson, 'Introduction', in *Languages of Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Basingstoke, 2013), 1; Jonathan Parry, 'L'histoire politique de l'ère victorienne: nouvelles tendances', *Revue d'Histoire du XIXe Siècle*, xxxvii (2008), 71-86.

But we must remember that the *Handbook* does not set out to provide a 'comprehensive analysis', or a 'snapshot of "current scholarship"'.[22] Its stated task is to offer reflection and suggestion, so most of this criticism will bounce off its handsome hard covers. The point to emphasise here is simply that *The Oxford Handbook of Modern British Political History, 1800-2000* is not an authoritative guidebook, but an intriguing miscellany. It is best understood as a slightly unkempt historiographical labyrinth. You never have the first idea what will be around the next corner, and this makes for an unusual, occasionally bewildering, and often highly rewarding reading experience. There is no historian in the field who will not get something out of the volume, provided they do not step in expecting something different.

22 Brown *et al*., 'Introduction', 7. The implication of the inverted commas is unclear.