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# BOOKS & WRITERS

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## Taylor's Own Times

By Asa Briggs

A FULL JUDGMENT on this scintillating survey of 20th-century English history<sup>1</sup> will take time to mature. Certainly it makes an immediately powerful impact. Like R. C. K. Ensor, the author of the previous volume of the Oxford History of England, Mr. Taylor looks at the events and the people of his own time in an unashamedly committed, often exuberant, sometimes idiosyncratic way. If nearness does not always lend enchantment to the view, it certainly encourages Mr. Taylor to rely on his own distinctive angle of vision. His approach is through narrative history, not through analysis, and it is his individual assessments and generalisations—many of them in the form of quips—which illuminate the narrative, rather than quotations from the personalities or the documents, still only partially accessible, of the period. There are fewer direct quotations from contemporary sources than in most history books of this size on this or any other century. Even the footnotes, bibliography, and index have an engagingly whimsical side to them, although the shock element in the first bibliographical footnotes on George V (p. 2), Asquith (p. 3), and Lloyd George (p. 5), is not sustained in later footnotes, even when characters like Morrison and Greenwood (p. 279), or Kingsley Wood, Hore-Belisha, and Wavell (pp. 459–60) offer equally tempting opportunities. The bibliography is as much an anthology of opinions as a list of references, many of them trenchant and unequivocal:

It is often said that civil servants should be protected from publicity during their life-time. Why? The official military histories name generals, who are equally public servants, and distribute blame or even occasionally praise. Civil servants deserve the same treatment. The rule is in fact an unworthy survival from the time when government was a "misterie," reserved for the Crown and its servants. Such rigmarole has no place in a community which claims to be democratic.

Prime ministers escape no more easily from the bibliography than civil servants. "C. R. Attlee, prime minister at the very end of the period, wrote *As It Happened* (1954), certainly a funny thing, and Francis Williams recorded for him *A Prime Minister Remembers* (1961), which shows how much a prime minister can forget." Perhaps the most memorable index reference refers to Keynes—"misses the multiplier, 288"—although there are many others that will stick, like "BBC, model for regulated capitalism, 278n," "Liberal Party, seems to have been proved right, 440," or "Eden, given access to archives, 604."

It is central to Mr. Taylor's purpose to strip history of its "misteries." This, indeed, is at the core of his "radicalism," and it drives him not only to deflate the pompous but to explode the myths of our own time. Very frequently, of course, he has to go back over his own tracks (in describing once again, for example, the origins of the Second World War as he, if few other of his immediate contemporaries, saw them), but he has lots of new characters to juggle with—Archbishop Lang, for example, or T. E. Lawrence and Charlie Chaplin—and lots of new themes, including sex and religion, on both of which he gets very near to general theories. For the most part, however, theories appeal less to him as a historian than human follies and achievements. He conceives of the historian's task as the unbaring of the true history of events in the order in which they happened and as the fullest possible exposure of those transactions between individuals which influenced the course of public policy. While he recognises that "the greatest decisions are nearly always the ones most difficult to explain simply," he does not probe deeply into individual motives. This means that he often fails to convince. He is brilliant on Lloyd George, but impatient with Asquith, balanced on Baldwin but, in my view, too kind to MacDonald. The difficulty with this highly personalised history is that it often provokes not a debate but a retort. Mr. Taylor is always the complete non-

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<sup>1</sup> *English History, 1914–1945*. By A. J. P. TAYLOR. Oxford, 45s.

organisation man, not only "more interested in people than in institutions," but not very well disposed towards institutions. Some institutions either get left out of his history altogether, or are dismissed briefly—there is very little, for example, about business organisations or trade unions—and the builders of new institutions receive short shrift for their labours, usually being condemned, like Trenchard or Reith, for fundamental fallacies in thinking or feeling. Problems of "class," "profession," or "organisation" are touched on only briefly or not at all, although at least from Graham Wallas onwards these problems along with more general problems of scale have rightly been felt to be central to 20th-century society. In relation to all these themes Mr. Taylor's view of history limits him, as it has limited his prodigious reading. The historian for him is a quite different kind of being from an economist or a social scientist, not one kind of social scientist. This leads him into what often look like quite inadequate simplifications—about cultural change, for example, or the influence of technology. The graphs of economic indices with which the book is prefaced are left to stand on their own without explanations or connecting links, so that we are unsure whether Mr. Taylor has included them to strengthen his interpretation or to add to our stock of reference. There are times, too, when the word "people" desperately needs to be broken down, and when a little comparison between British politics and society and other people's politics and society would illuminate much that otherwise seems obscure, and perhaps qualify judgments which, as it is, we must take or leave. Yet there is an engaging candour in Mr. Taylor's cross-references to economics and science, and a refreshing vitality in his belief that you can strip history of its "misterie" all on your own by pointing fiercely towards "the Establishment" or by recalling Cobbett's revelation of THE THING, "the entrenched English system" which always looks after *its* own.

THERE ARE TIMES in the book when Mr. Taylor admits that the kind of history he writes and writes so well will be very difficult to write in relation to future periods. In his preface he explicitly says that he is leaving science on one side for the excellent reason that "I do not understand the internal combustion engine, let alone the atomic bomb." In fact, he includes Tizard and Lindemann, Bernal and Zuckerman, though not Fleming or Florey (the doctors do not get a square deal in this book), and points out how research and development were beginning to modify both intelligence and finance. Science will have to be given a different place in the next volume of the history. As far

as economics as a social science is concerned, Mr. Taylor gets a very long way indeed by commonsense—some of his passages about economic history and one footnote about economic historians are excellent—but he recognises that commonsense was beginning to be displaced during the 1930s. Keynes, like Einstein, was "incomprehensible, where Newton, like Adam Smith, had been neat and obvious [were they?]. The concert-goer could hum the themes of Mozart and Beethoven, not those of Stravinsky. He never learnt to hum the themes of the new economics." Given the interconnected role of science and economics in our even more recent history, what kind of a historian will we need to dispel the "misterie"? Mr. Taylor as an outstanding radio and television performer knows one of the necessary qualifications. "A time will come when every history faculty will possess gramophone-cubicles and film theatres, which will be as much used as libraries or lecture rooms—maybe more." By itself, however, this equipment will not be enough. Historical synthesis will depend on analysis. There will be ample room for debate, but it will be debate within a "frame"

EVEN IN RELATION to Mr. Taylor's period, more study of the frame might have been rewarding. Two of his general ideas are fascinating enough to have sustained deeper and broader examination.

England, he suggests on several occasions during the book, was the kind of society where agreement was relatively easy, where the political culture, as it is now fashionable to call it, more often made for compromise or evasion than for conflict and violence. As a result Baldwin and MacDonald were in many respects interchangeable, but English ways of thinking and behaving provided no guidance in relation either to India or Palestine. Ireland, too, which Mr. Taylor handles very well, was not provided with a final settlement. Chamberlain's deal with De Valera in 1938 was for De Valera "a payment on account." Since the end of Mr. Taylor's period, successive British governments have had to deal often equivocally, seldom completely confidently, with other people's intransigence. Imaginative gaps have widened. Was there not a sense in which the inter-war years were critical years in relation to this process? Were the changes simply power changes, as Mr. Taylor implies? This is only one question about the relation between ourselves and others.

There are occasions during Mr. Taylor's narrative, also, when he himself seems to me, without raising old issues, to show an imaginative failure to understand the nature of the German

régime between 1933 and 1945. Anxious as he rightly is to separate history from propaganda, is it really an adequate comment on anti-Semitism (there should be an index-reference to this) to say that Jews were treated as badly in other countries as in Germany, and that there was in any case a good deal of quiet anti-Semitism in England, with Jews being kept out of many social organisations such as golf-clubs? The specially horrifying features of the Nazi policy towards the Jews are central, not peripheral: they are concerned with pathology as well as politics, or with pathology as a branch of politics. There was a basic difference in social and cultural structure in Britain and Germany during the 1930s, as there is now, and it is surely the duty of the historian of England—Mr. Taylor insists throughout that he is limiting his account to England—to deal with such frames as well as with events or people. Not to seem to understand Germany—and Mr. Taylor has written a great deal about Germany—can lead even the historian of England into difficulties. And by the end of his book, having raised the important question of Roosevelt, the United States and England, Mr. Taylor seems to be in danger of focusing attention exclusively on power questions once again. From some of his earlier and rather old-fashioned references to Roosevelt's "New Deal," it is certain that he understands the United States?

MR. TAYLOR'S SECOND idea is contained in his last unforgettable sentences. If Churchill's "blood, sweat, and tears" speech of 1940 reminds Mr. Taylor of Garibaldi and Clemenceau—and it was none the worse for that—Mr. Taylor's last sentences surely have echoes of Gibbon and Macaulay:

The British were the only people who went through both world wars from beginning to end. Yet they remained a peaceful and civilised people, tolerant, patient, and generous. Traditional values lost much of their force. Other values took their place. Imperial greatness was on the way out; the welfare state was on the way in. The British Empire declined; the condition of the people improved. Few sang "Land of Hope and Glory." Few even sang "England, Arise." England had risen all the same.

In other words, though British power declined throughout the period and the faith of most British people during the Second World War that they were directing history had an element of illusion in it, in some sense the country had "risen." At this final point of peroration, argument surely begins. In what sense had the country risen? In terms of the economic indices left stranded by Mr. Taylor at the beginning of the book? Relatively or absolutely? On its

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MAX HART

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own or as part of a bigger complex? Did the people who sang "England, Arise" at the beginning of the period think that England would rise in this way? What was the relationship between traditional values and new values? What were the new values, anyway? Were they the values of war-time fellowship, the "sense of solidarity" referred to so frequently when danger threatened or when hopes of a more equalitarian society were raised? Or were they the values expressed through a "mass culture," particularly in the national press and based on giving people what they want? In this whole process of change what were the relative contributions of the state and the market? How and why did the British Empire decline? Was it because a British *élite* had lost power, because new colonial *élites* had risen, because the English people were ignorant or apathetic or anti-imperial, or because other nations' power had outstripped that of this country? Given that the final verdict is such an optimistic one—even a complacent one—was there no sense in which these inter-war years were the wasted years, the years of the locust, as Professor Mowat saw them in his *Britain Between the Wars* (a valuable textbook to which Mr. Taylor generously acknowledges his debt)?

AFTER FINISHING *English History, 1914-1945*, all the questions leap to the surface. They are very general questions, most of them concerned with Britain's place within the 20th-century world and with the place of the years 1914 to 1945 within the century. By

contrast, some of the questions or retorts that Mr. Taylor provokes about particular events or particular people seem trivial and not worth while pursuing. Yet it is by no means clear that such general questions could be properly posed, let alone answered—certainly there would be no need for retorts—if we were not in possession of a book as superbly written, as energetically organised and as full of challenge—as Mr. Taylor's. An immense amount of work has gone into its compilation, and it is an invaluable addition to the Oxford series. As narrative history it could scarcely be surpassed, and narrative history is a rare art in our age precisely because our conceptions of history are changing. Its influence goes much deeper than this, however. It rids us of many superficial impressions and easy and familiar topical generalisations which handicap understanding, about the "missed opportunities" of the 1930s, for example, or about the extent of planning in the same period, about the extent of the "depression" and the extent of the guilt and incompetence of the guilty and incompetent men.

In other words, we do succeed, at times almost despite Mr. Taylor, in moving from news into history. We can only move further when we have access to more materials. All recent historians must agree fervently with Mr. Taylor that it is time we had free access to basic sources. When the "frame" within which we think and act in some respects has not changed, is it not absurd that we cannot examine Treasury policy in 1929 or 1931? Must we wait till everything is dead before we seek to bring it back to life?

## Myths about Ideology

By David Marquand

FOR SOME YEARS now, the official myths of British party politics, propagated by the parties themselves, have been overshadowed by an Unofficial Myth, propagated implicitly by the more fashionable commentators in the quality press and the more ruthless interviewers on radio and television. According to this Unofficial Myth, the two major parties in this country are both essentially oligarchic in organisation and essentially non-ideological in policy. These two propositions, moreover, are normative as well as descriptive. Only with parties of this sort, it is alleged, can the British Constitution work: and the immaculate con-

ception of the British Constitution is, of course, self-evident.

But, the Unofficial Myth goes on, although these two propositions are in fact accepted by the sane, sober fellows who lead the two parties in Parliament, they are not accepted to anything like the same extent by the strange people who actually man the parties at the grass roots; thus, there is a gulf between "moderate" Parliamentary leaders and "extreme" extra-Parliamentary followers. The fourth proposition is more complicated still, and is rarely put forward explicitly. It says that even if the first three are in fact false, they ought to be true; that poli-