Britain since 1939

Progress and Decline

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David Childs

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Nottingham

DAVID CHILDS

Introduction

The title of the book is *Britain since 1939: Progress and Decline*, but I felt I would have produced an incomprehensible account if I had started in the year war broke out, decisive though the Second World War was for Britain's subsequent political, social and economic development. I decided, therefore, to write two introductory chapters covering the interwar period.

This book is about the general developments in British politics and society, but there is an underlying theme which is difficult to ignore – that is, the decline of Britain since the 'Great War' of 1914–18. And although the book attempts to tell the story in chronological order, using the different political administrations as convenient, recognisable signposts, this underlying theme is discussed, implicitly or explicitly, throughout. Some will argue that, although Britain has declined in economic terms, it has not done so in other respects; in particular, its institutions have adapted and survived better than those of most European states. To a degree, they are right. In addition, great progress can be seen, in the arts and sciences, standards of living and people's opportunities. Yet the decline in the economy means that Britain is less able to support the things its citizens want and need – better education and training, better health care, better transport systems, better law enforcement, and defence forces adequate to our commitments. In one or all of these areas, many European, and some non-European, states have caught up with, or overtaken, Britain. It is baffling that a nation with so much talent at its disposal has decayed so much, right down to the 1990s. I have done my best to provide some clues to that puzzle, but I do not claim to have a definitive answer. As another recent writer admitted, at the end of his study of Britain's decline, 'Our understanding of Britain's relative failure . . . remains incomplete and unsatisfactory.'*

Britain has also made great progress during the same period, and this cannot be ignored if one wishes to understand the political development of the country. However, in attempting to document both our progress

*Michael Dintenfass, *The Decline of Industrial Britain, 1870–1980* (London, 1992).

and decline, I have invited the student and the general reader alike to pause and think about particular incidents and general themes – education, colonialism, immigration and racism, crime, the media, the monarchy, popular opinion, the changing role of women, etc. – in the history of the period. These are often neglected in a general book of this relatively modest size. I hope I have covered the main events in a fairly objective way so that readers who do not agree with some of my assessments, nevertheless find the book useful.

Originally I had no intention of writing about Ireland, except to cover, briefly, events leading up to the treaty of 1921, and some more recent events in Northern Ireland. However, I found it difficult to discuss these without, at least, glancing in the direction of Dublin. The more I looked, the more I got involved. I do not regret this. Considering our histories and populations are so intertwined, Ireland is all too often a far-away country of which we know little. I hope my references to the South will be seen merely as an aid to British readers who do not normally consider Ireland as part of their studies or interest. My hope is that they will then move on to more substantial accounts. It has not been my ambition to compete with the excellent Irish and British writers who cover Irish history at greater depth. Nor is it my intention to imply that Ireland is in any sense part of the United Kingdom – on the contrary, I believe Irish independence was a positive development.