

*A New History of Britain Since 1688: Four Nations and an Empire*. Susan Kingsley Kent. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. ISBN: 9780199846504

Textbooks are never easy to write. The questions asked, the answers provided, and then the never-ending complaints about a book reading ‘like a textbook’ are considerations that every author takes on when they strike out to produce such a volume. In *A New History of Britain Since 1688: Four Nations and an Empire* Susan Kingsley Kent delivers a highly-readable book and succeeds in giving new life to the story of British history. Kent’s background in gender, environmental, and imperial history has clearly influenced how this book covers the development of the Britain and its people.

Kent ambitiously approaches *A New History of Britain* with a methodology that has been considered by British historians for decades: to analyse the course of British history by including the ‘four nations’ that make up the British Isles. Weaving the histories of England, Ireland, Wales, Scotland into the fabric of both nation and Empire, Kent does not merely survey the history of the islands inhabitants; she tells their story: the story of all the people that make up the British Isles. Ambitious and engaging, this book comes at a time when, perhaps, it is more important than ever for readers to understand how culture, religion, politics, and environment, influenced each nation within the empire and the empire itself. In highlighting these areas, Kent provides readers with a much-needed analysis of the intricacies involved in forging and maintaining a nation and how that is applied to the creation of an empire.

Constructed as one would expect, *A New History* follows the chronological movement of the British people as they develop into a nation-state, and while many aspects of British history are well known, Kent writes in a way that will make them fresh and appealing to students and professors. At the end of each chapter is not only a guide for further reading but a timeline of the events covered in the previous pages. Both of these are extremely valuable to students trying to

understand this new information. One of the more interesting aspects of this book is that Kent provides a place for the environment within the text. By doing more than inserting a map and referencing it, Kent lays out the importance of the physical world to its inhabitants. Her subtle placement of land within the narrative allows readers to consider the importance of its role in history. Additionally, each chapter contains a snapshot, or 'A Place in Time' of how the 'big events' covered in the chapter affected the city of Liverpool. These essays, go into remarkable depth. In doing so, they offer an intimate view of events such as how Liverpool, as a city of people, dealt with the Jacobite Risings of 1715 and 1745, the first passenger railway in the 1820s, and the Toxteth Riots in 1981. Tied to the events discussed in the chapter, this micro-view of history is a gift to readers as they build an understanding of how events affected communities. Expertly crafted, these essays add immeasurably to what this book offers on British history.

Significant as the Glorious Revolution, industrialization, and imperialism are to British history, Kent provides much-needed discussion to the impact of more modern events such as the Second World War, Thatcherism, and even the Scottish Referendum. All too often contemporary events, or near history, are given short shrift when being discussed in a textbook. Kent, however, provides a much-needed survey of these events that includes the politics of gender, religion, and class. For instance, discussion of the Second World War goes beyond mentioning the Blitz and Churchill to provide insight into responses of the dominions to being called to fight. She goes on to discuss how the war began the process of making Britain a more multiracial and multicultural society. Additionally, Kent delivers an easily understandable explanation of how the war provided the impetus for the government to fix the social injustice and poverty that was rampant in Britain at the time.

As all good books do, *A New History of Britain* uses maps and photographs sparingly to enhance their effect. Importantly, many of the maps are not the usual ones to be found in every textbook on British history. Just as impressively, the pictures Kent chose do tell a story all their own. Whether it is the pictures of Emigrants in Liverpool in 1850, the ‘Irish Fenian as monster’ in 1869, or multicultural commuters in London in 2015, each photograph is placed to provide depth to the political, social, and cultural history she is providing.

Undoubtedly making the effort to avoid writing a textbook that only deals with war, politics, and men of stature, Kent takes these areas of traditional history and firmly sets the importance of race, gender, religion, and class in the midst of the narrative. By combining these important, yet all too often overlooked or ignored, aspects of history, the author creates a delightfully readable account of all aspects of Britain. Written with flair, *A New History of Britain* is a fast reading and brilliant analysis that begs to be read by historians, students, and the general reader.

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