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# 1938: Modern Britain: Social Change and Visions of the Future

by Michael John Law, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, viii + 189 pp., £16.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781474285018

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**1938: Modern Britain: Social Change and Visions of the Future**, by Michael

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‘We are too inclined to let what happens next determine the meaning of what happened before’, writes the critic Adam Gopnik. ‘It’s a style of thought that sees the true meaning of dinner as the next day’s hunger.’ Judging by this stylish book, Michael John Law would agree. His *1938: Modern Britain: Social Change and Visions of the Future* draws readers into the social and cultural history of Britain’s final year of peace. Peering through the fog of war, Law depicts a vibrant, ‘modern’ Britain that in numerous ways anticipated the 1950s.

*1938* is organised around a series of case studies, offering a fresh material history of Britain before the Second World War. These cases include Glasgow’s Empire Exposition, the ‘Radiolympia’ radio and television trade show, London’s Adelphi office building, the launch of the *Picture Post*, a newly opened pub, and a host of regional airports. Throughout these discussions, Law develops several broader themes, including class and wealth, Americanisation, consumers and consumption, network formation, and aspects of urban life. He does not minimise the year’s obviously epochal events unfolding in central Europe, nor does he purport to offer a more ‘complete’ history than those that came before. When most sharply put, in a book generally more congenial than combative, Law explains: ‘My thesis is that the impact of extraordinary political events has distorted our understanding of the history of the late 1930s’ (p. 2). The result is less correction than corrective, an illustrated testament to another Britain – and another 1938 – than those that populate textbooks.

Several case studies are particularly absorbing – even revelatory. Perhaps the greatest measure of the book’s success is that, as I read, I continually found myself updating my list of favourite chapters. The most successful chapters – and parts of chapters – are the most concrete. Chapter 2, for example, examines a number of popular science magazines, to elaborate their participation in what Law terms a “‘modern wonder’ discourse” (p. 9). But the discussion most comes to life when he focuses on cigarette cards in particular. Perhaps this is because (though he does not belabour the point) here Law consults his own collection – a personal investment that likewise distinguishes a superb chapter on a new London office building, near Charing Cross, the Adelphi. Law’s prior experience in the world of business shines through, in this deft explication of the various ways that spaces shape the men and women who file through them. From this point the author hits his stride, and the reader can only marvel at Law’s ingenuity in identifying one 1938 debut after another: from the *Picture Post*, to the Prospect Inn, to airport terminals in London, Manchester, and Liverpool.

The book delivers on what it promises – no more, perhaps, but importantly no less. It touches on broader concerns, for instance about the meaning of ‘modernity’ or the problem of teleology, but generally *1938* demurs from challenging readers on a conceptual level. Though the bibliography is handsome, historiography is not a strength. An argument with Charles Maier misfires: Maier is bemoaning the tedium of claims to precedence, not the histories thus produced, as predictable and thus ‘dreary’ (pp. 5, 139); while John Gold is correct that a *British* public, not just a London one, experienced the Festival of Britain. That discussion would have benefitted from consulting Becky Conekin, on the festival’s national scope, and the book generally could have engaged the work of David Edgerton, a leading historian of Britain’s technological modernity. Indeed, in light of recent scholarship on class, consumption, and modernity, *1938* is unlikely to transform the ways that historians think about modern Britain. But as a work of history, rather than an exercise in historiography, *1938* succeeds. Michael John Law has produced a snappy, often startling reconsideration of

Britain before the war, adding texture, range, and a contrarian's sensibility to conventional accounts.

## Notes on contributor

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**Youth and Popular Culture in 1950s Ireland**, by Eleanor O'Leary, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, x + 240 pp., £59 (hardback), £29 (paperback), ISBN 978-1350015890 (hardback), 978-1350136076 (paperback)

Something is happening in Irish social history. For decades, the study of the post-1945 period was the preserve of social scientists and a handful of pioneering historians. In the last few years, however, things have begun to change. Long-held orthodoxies are being challenged. In their place have come new ways of reading the country's complex history, driven by vibrant new research in women's studies, urban history, medical history, the history of childhood and youth, and the history of sexuality.

Eleanor O'Leary's book is a welcome contribution to this growing field. It tells the story of how young Irish people engaged with international popular culture in the 1950s, and how it shaped their identities as 'teenagers'. In the process, it documents a country on the cusp of dramatic change. The book's thematic chapters, covering youth education, employment, the social consumption of leisure, cinema, youth organisations, and literature, offer a fascinating insight into the creep of Americanised culture, and Ireland's willing embrace of the consumer society beginning to dominate across Western Europe.

That narrative challenges us to think differently about the history of late modern Ireland. O'Leary argues for moving away from the reductivist (though still frequently-held) view of the 1950s as a 'lost' decade. The reality, she contends, was far more complex. The Ireland she depicts was marked by high levels of emigration and unemployment, but also by energy and opportunity; by young people seeking out new experiences through cinema, music, fashion, and literature. It was also, O'Leary adds, far less culturally isolated than is generally assumed. Her descriptions of the comic books sent home by emigrants, the films teenagers watched, and the rock 'n' roll stars they imitated, provide a glimpse into how international popular culture was consumed in Ireland. The cinema was centrally important in that process. It became a place where social and cultural norms were transferred, allowing teenagers to keep in touch with international fashions and trends. But it was also a vital social outlet: a space to be seen, to hang out with friends, and to explore and experiment with sexual intimacy.