

Attention to Disability Studies also has reciprocal potential. Historians drawing on a well-established subfield of social history have insights to offer about ‘the social’. In particular, historians might expand the social so that it is not simply a vector for oppression, but a realm for thinking about concrete, historically specific forms of social experience that might range across labour, kinship, intimacy and desire, activism, and mobility. In the social and political context where record numbers are claiming state support for disability,³³ and welfare continues to be used as a political football, new perspectives on the social, cultural, and political agency of disabled peoples across time are more vital than ever. As it moves with historical scholarship into the twenty-first century, *Modern British History* has the opportunity to provide an important venue for such discussions.

British History and the Fate of National Historiographies

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For the historian of Britain in the USA, the ‘future of British history’ summons reflections less on the field’s content than its existence.³⁴ In addition to the hiring crisis, addressed elsewhere in this issue, US-based historians of modern Europe face pressures of two kinds. The first is the ongoing provincialization of Europe, a generational adjustment entailing the redistribution of an inherited (and unjustifiable) preponderance of non-US undergraduate courses, graduate fellowships, and faculty positions from Europe to the world. The second is the shift towards more transnational and thematic concerns—away from the likes of Old Regime France or modern Germany, towards such areas as migration or environmental history. The European field is not static—as evidenced by the ability of its international historians, such as Quinn Slobodian and Giuliana Chamedes, to navigate the shift towards transnational subjects.³⁵ But for historians trained and working in national historiographies, these developments feel existential.

Despite this reading of the disciplinary landscape, I want to offer grounds for optimism about the future of British history in the USA. Let me begin by clarifying why I believe this field remains worth sustaining. Working in a national historiography does not imply a naive belief in the nation-state as a discrete and sufficient subject. As my colleague Tom Bender put it, calling for the internationalization of US historiography, ‘the nation cannot be its own historical context’.³⁶ It is the case, however, that the modern nation-state—and its attendant society, polity, and culture—represents one significant scale of human life, which its historians seek to relate to other scales and frameworks such as the regional, the imperial, and the global. The result is a British history increasingly embedded within—and revealing of—broader developments and processes. My own case for British history therefore emphasizes not its exceptional content, so much as its lack of any necessary content.

The virtue of any spatially defined field, that is, lies in the fact that it includes, not any particular periods or topics, but all of them. Consider the annual meeting of the North American Conference on British Studies (NACBS). This conference includes sessions on diplomatic history and transgender history; religious history and Black history; political

³³ Department for Work and Pensions, ‘DWP Benefit Statistics: August 2023’, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/dwp-benefits-statistics-august-2023/dwp-benefits-statistics-august-2023>>, accessed 12 February 2025.

³⁴ With thanks to Geoff Eley, Andrew Seaton, and Robert Travers for their comments.

³⁵ Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Giuliana Chamedes, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade: The Vatican’s Battle To Remake Christian Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2019).

³⁶ Thomas Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America’s Place in World History* (New York, 2006), 2.

history and disability studies. Its temporal range spans not decades but centuries, indeed epochs, as medievalists jostle alongside Victorianists for a drink at the reception. I do not mean to romanticize things—one (ok, both) likely skipped the plenary on the Reformation. But, however mortal, these are our colleagues: in addition to attending the same conference, we run joint seminars, teach adjacent surveys, assign each others' books, publish in common journals, and collaborate on graduate training. Far from the blinkered, exclusionary caricature of its critics, an outward-facing national history is topically omnivorous, methodologically catholic, and temporally expansive.

In a university of finite resources, the pressures identified above can take the form not of supplements to national fields, but their replacements. But the way we narrate the discipline's history overstates the likelihood of that outcome. As Susan Pedersen has remarked in these pages, 'our understanding of our own historical practice is often Whiggish'.³⁷ Historiographical development becomes narrated as a litany of progress, insights replacing oversights en route to our own understanding of the past. The charge stings whenever I assemble a graduate syllabus, the sequence of which implies—and, worse, teaches—a reading of the field in which outdated contributions are steadily replaced by recent work. Innovations become 'turns', the ur-turn having been the linguistic turn of the 1980s–1990s. I hasten to acknowledge the significance of that shift, the historiographical iteration of a broad challenge to materialist assumptions across the humanities and social sciences. But an indication that the linguistic turn's partisans overstated their achievement arrived towards the end of Geoff Eley's *A Crooked Line* (2005).³⁸ Eley's clear-eyed rendering of the clash between social and cultural approaches concluded by saluting a new generation of historians for their ability to combine both.³⁹ After all the denials of our access to a pre-discursive real, the 'social' had quietly slipped its inverted commas to resume position alongside economic, political, and cultural approaches.

But rather than an uneven process of topical additions, shifting emphases, and revised methodologies, each taking their place within a layered set of practices, 'turns' implies that historiography proceeds through a series of replacements. Talk of transnational, imperial, or global 'turns', in particular, imply that national fields are finished. Substitution may characterize, as Pedersen noted, an individual's training—which proceeds not through cumulative additions to a shared pool of knowledge, but through an immersion in the priorities of the moment in which their own training begins.⁴⁰ Disciplines, however, differ from individuals, because they retain topics, approaches, arguments, and, yes, colleagues that predate the present. A historian who works comparatively has not, embarrassingly, missed a transnational turn: they work in a way that transnational historians might not. A focus on the latest innovations obscures the persistence, sophistication, and contributions of inherited arguments and practices. In other words, speaking historiographically, our accounts of disciplinary change could do with less Macaulay, *The History of England*, and more Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old*.⁴¹

I want to suggest another way of thinking about disciplines and how they change. Historiography resembles less a caravan, leaving behind those who miss a turn, than a forest.⁴² A forest is a complex environment, the diverse elements of which—even when they seem in competition—interact so as to sustain the whole. Networks of fungi

³⁷ Susan Pedersen, 'Money, Space, and Time: Reflections on Graduate Education', *Twentieth Century British History*, 21 (2010), 382–96, at 382.

³⁸ Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line: From Cultural History to the History of Society* (Ann Arbor, 2005).

³⁹ On historiographical 'turns', see Judith Surkis, et al., 'AHR Forum: Historiographic 'Turns' in Critical Perspective', *American Historical Review*, 117 (2012), 698–813.

⁴⁰ Pedersen, 'Money, Space, and Time', 386.

⁴¹ Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James II*, 5 vols. (London, 1848–1861); David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old* (Oxford, 2007).

⁴² New Yorkers think a lot about forests. For a different use of the metaphor, see Pedersen, 'Money, Space, and Time', 386. For a cooperative understanding of the forest's elements, see Suzanne Simard, *Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest* (New York, 2021).

subterraneously link towering trees, the root systems of which sustain a riot of grasses, shrubs, and flowering plants. New arrivals jostle to find their place, while death certainly comes to older varieties, within a complex environment only superficially dominated by its brightest or tallest trees. While both metaphors can account for recent interest in global or diasporic histories, the forest better captures the persistence of political and military histories, too. Viewed in this ecosystemic way, departments hire and teach emerging fields not because they have found the answers at last, but because we want today's priorities, approaches, and insights to be represented once they, too, eventually become displaced.

What does this way of thinking about a discipline—as a diverse and layered ecosystem, less a caravan than a forest—mean for British history in the USA? British history is unlikely to feature in upcoming *American Historical Review* roundtables (though British historians might)—the energy of the US discipline simply lies elsewhere. Displacement, however, is not erasure—a fact understood by fans of baseball, still a summer fixture even if no longer the national pastime, and one that even the language of ‘provincialization’ tacitly acknowledges. British historiography does not figure as the tallest tree in the North American forest—but, then again, it never did. And yet, as a generation of imperial history shows, including—to cite just a single instance from successive centuries—books by Phil Stern, Chris Brown, Erika Rappaport, and Erik Linstrum, British history remains a vibrant part of the US discipline.⁴³ To convey their contributions (or, as applicants, claim the right to make them), British historians will situationally identify as historians of corporations, slavery, commodities, or science. Indeed, this is precisely the sort of training—a kind of disciplinary code-switching—that we aim to cultivate at NYU. But in our archives, our teaching, and our interventions, we remain, among these other things, historians of Britain.

I have been discussing British history in the context of the historical *discipline* in the USA. But a second question concerns this subfield's relation to the British *field* in the UK. (I limit my remarks to these two settings—deferring, out of both ignorance and respect, from commenting on the wider world of British historiography.) Here a tension potentially emerges, to the extent that US-based historians, seeking to engage the colleagues and students around us, adopt frameworks and priorities that depart from those that organize the field in Britain. This centripetal dynamic explains the mutual scepticism sometimes evident between colleagues on either side of the Atlantic—historians divided, we might say, by a common historiography. For example, when David Edgerton remarked in the *New Yorker* that historians in the USA disproportionately emphasize British imperialism after 1945, several US-based historians immediately clapped back on Twitter.⁴⁴ The stakes of any such rupture run higher on the US side, since our most intellectually—if not proximately—immediate colleagues reside in Britain. What, then, is the future of US-based British history, in terms of its relation to the larger British field? Or, to put the question more pointedly, what can a peripheral US field contribute to the larger enterprise of British historiography?

Here, too, an ecosystemic turn of mind offers grounds for optimism. Historians in the USA (like historians anywhere) want to engage the colleagues and students who surround us. That impulse requires that we relate our work to extra-British concerns, whether understood spatially (transnational, imperial, global), thematically (modernity, settler colonialism, political economy), politically (Marxism, feminism, environmentalism), or otherwise. Failing to think beyond the specific British case would convey an insularity that few fields can afford. It may not be the case that our work—speaking for myself—always meets this

⁴³ Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundations of the British Empire in India* (Oxford, 2011); Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill, 2006); Erika Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton, 2017); Erik Linstrum, *Ruling Minds: Psychology in the British Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).

⁴⁴ Isaac Chotiner, ‘The Queen's Death and Competing Narratives of Empire’, *New Yorker*, 21 September 2022, <<https://www.newyorker.com/news/q-and-a/the-queens-death-and-competing-narratives-of-empire>>, accessed 12 February 2025.

challenge. But, as I have written elsewhere, any future for British history in the USA will have to be secured not by Britain's history, but by its historians.⁴⁵ The historians from whom I learn the most continually push the boundaries of their frameworks, so that their studies—rather than merely their objects of study—speak to issues that preoccupy the broader discipline. And this dynamic, rather than driving the US and UK fields apart, actually positions this potentially marginal site to stimulate innovations in the field at large.⁴⁶

In 5 years as co-editor of *Twentieth Century British History*, with Adrian Bingham and Helen McCarthy, several of the articles I was most proud to publish fulfilled this role precisely. These included Judith Walkowitz's relating of policing and prostitution to recent currents in international feminism; Sam Wetherell's mapping of neoliberal urban governance across the North Atlantic; Deborah Cohen's situating of an imperial campaign at the intersection of international history and the history of emotions; and Andrew Seaton's repurposing of Werner Sombart's famous question to ask why there is (comparatively) no environmental history in Britain.⁴⁷ Each of these (then) US-based scholars placed their subjects in conversation with themes that transcended the British case. By no means would I suggest that such achievements are exclusive to US work—as many other articles we published in *TCBH* abundantly attest. But I highlight this feature of these pieces to call attention, not only to the existential pressures, but also to the creative potential, of the institutional settings in which US-based historians work.

Let me close by acknowledging that, as a graduate advisor, I am only too aware that these remarks offer cold comfort to early career scholars facing a harrowing job market. And I hope that, by emphasizing persistence alongside innovation, I will not be misread as counselling complacency. (I can imagine, in that case, that constitutional history might like a word.) Instead, I have aimed to convey, mainly to colleagues in Britain, the predicament that British historians in the US face. And I have sought to offer, mainly to colleagues in the USA, grounds for optimism about the viability of our field. Fields and disciplines, I have suggested, resemble less caravans than forests—a way of thinking that leaves space both for British history in the USA and for US work in British history. Whatever forms it takes, the future of British history will not look like its past. The pressures I have discussed, along with many I have not, will only further stimulate an expansive British historiography. But these developments are evidence, not of a dying field, but a living one.

Both Fox and Hedgehog

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If we measure the vitality of our field by the range and originality of the projects taken on by graduate students—and what measure is better?—modern British history is in a state of rude good health. I cannot think of a time when my students, or my friends' students, or

⁴⁵ Guy Ortolano, 'The Typicalities of the English? Walt Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, and Modern British History', *Modern Intellectual History*, 12 (2015), 657–84, at 684.

⁴⁶ On creativity at the periphery, see Bernard Bailyn, "'To Begin the World Anew' – Politics and the Creative Imagination" (1998), <<https://www.neh.gov/news/press-release/1998-03-23>>, accessed 12 February 2025.

⁴⁷ Judith R. Walkowitz, 'Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in King's Cross in the 1980s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), 231–63; Sam Wetherell, 'Freedom Planned: Enterprise Zones and Urban Non-Planning in Post-War Britain', *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), 266–89; Deborah Cohen, 'The Geopolitical Is Personal: India, Britain, and American Foreign Correspondents in the 1930s and 1940s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 29 (2018), 388–410; Andrew Seaton, 'Environmental History and New Directions in Modern British Historiography', *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), 447–56. The inclusion of Wetherell and Seaton makes clear that I am referring, not to these scholars' passports, but to the institutional settings in which they produced this work.