

service of righting the balance between Peel and Wellington are especially in evidence in his fifteenth chapter, titled simply “Irish Questions.”

Wellington’s accomplishments as a leader in the Lords can be seen to advantage when compared to the mismanagement of the Lords in 1909 by the fifth marquess of Lansdowne, Unionist leader in the Lords and grandson of the third marquess, who figures prominently in Davis’s work as one of Halifax’s old Whigs. By the outbreak of the First World War, the Lords had become no longer the “Upper House” but, rather, a “Second Chamber.” Davis’s work splendidly brings to life an epoch in which this transition had not yet occurred and restores to the Lords their proper place in our understanding of the early nineteenth-century constitution. If the monarchy itself lost influence after 1828–32, the Lords held their ground for decades to come.

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Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern

Britain. By *Frank Trentmann*.

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. Pp. xiv+450. \$50.00.

Free Trade Nation recovers the heyday, and explains the demise, of a political culture with free trade at its center, and it situates that story within the longer history of the relationship between commerce and civil society from the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846 to the “fair trade” campaigns of today. Intending for this book to register beyond the historical profession, Trentmann relates its arguments to contemporary debates about trade and globalization. To the defenders of liberalization who seek to insulate trade policy from public pressure, he calls attention to the political culture that once supported a popular commitment to free trade; and to the advocates of fair trade who associate their position with progressive virtue, he recovers the history of earlier such movements that linked consumerism with imperialism. In each case Trentmann insists that commerce, consumption, and civil society do not exist in isolation, and *Free Trade Nation* makes that case by showing that historical memory, economic theory, popular democracy, and government policy together sustained the free-trading nation of Edwardian Britain.

The opening chapter discusses late-Victorian and Edwardian memories of the 1840s, and the introduction and epilogue address today’s debates about globalization, but the action in these pages primarily takes place during the first three decades of the twentieth century. *Free Trade Nation* begins by asking why, alone among peer nations, Edwardian Britain resisted protectionism and adhered to free trade. By contrast with accounts that explain trade policy as an expression of state power, financial interests, or rational choice, Trentmann recovers the popular—and often raucous—political culture in which free trade flourished. He characterizes this commitment as something like a national ideology: a set of beliefs as important as the faith in parliamentary liberty and bearing resemblances to the simultaneous movements of socialism and nationalism. These arresting claims are demonstrated in the riveting chapter 2, “Bread and Circuses,” which recovers the tactics employed by defenders of free trade and advocates of tariff reform. In addition to the famous dueling loaves of bread, one large and one small, the tactics in these Edwardian campaigns included seaside lectures, lantern displays, dumping shops, free trade shops, posters, films, postcards—and, surely to the dismay of outmatched tariff reformers, generous doses of anti-German hysteria. Developing his earlier work on the relationship between consumption and

civil society, Trentmann considers the ways in which food became a contested symbol in these campaigns, as diet and trade became associated with the national character. British free traders, for example, argued that tariffs had forced the poor German people to subsist on a diet of black bread—despite the fact that rye bread was more popular and nutritious than the white British loaf.

Part 2 examines the “unravelling” of this political culture after 1914. By 1932, when Neville Chamberlain introduced a general tariff as the triumph of the crusade begun by his father nearly thirty years before, only a handful of unreconstructed liberals lamented the demise of free-trading Britain. In accounting for this dramatic turn of events, Trentmann again challenges explanations that would explain trade policy as the consequence of economic developments alone. Rather than depicting the abandonment of free trade as a response to a specific economic crisis, he shows that the ideas, institutions, and practices that once supported free trade had in fact been eroding since the Great War. By the latter half of the war, the British state encountered consumers demanding not freedom and cheapness but, rather, regulation and fairness, a transition to what Trentmann identifies as “a new, social democratic vision of the consumer” (193). After the war Herbert Asquith dusted off his old speeches denouncing state intervention, but the structure of assumptions in which those arguments had once flourished had been undermined by emergent commitments to intervention instead—to the extent that, in the general election of 1924, the Liberal leader lost his own seat. The shifting economic, political, and international circumstances of the 1920s only accelerated this process, and Trentmann charts this transition in domains such as international relations, party politics, and economic theory—a story that culminates in (rather than revolves around) Chamberlain’s introduction of the general tariff in 1932.

Free Trade Nation includes fascinating discussions of the connections between consumption and citizenship, of the intersections between local politics and global affairs, and of the roles of women and children in extraparliamentary campaigns, but it is the book’s methodological example that commands particular attention from historians of other times and places. In *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago, 2005), William H. Sewell Jr. urges historians to cease ceding the ground of social analysis to economists, sociologists, and other social scientists, emphasizing historians’ sophisticated (if not always articulated) understandings of the fateful, contingent, complex, eventful, and heterogeneous nature of social life. This characterization aptly describes Trentmann’s account of the culture of free trade: an account that refuses to isolate economic theory from popular jingoism or to treat either economic interests or political institutions as independent variables. Trentmann instead emphasizes the role of popular narratives in creating economic interests: “Interests, knowledge, and beliefs are socially created,” he writes. “Attention to the roles of ideas, stories, and languages helps to explain why certain interpretations of material interests are formed” (14). The actors in this book are multiple and overlapping, from civil society to organized interests to the British state, and the analysis is dynamic: Trentmann analyzes politics as a process rather than a “system,” and he shows that the framing of that process around the right to cheap goods flourished spectacularly—only to erode rapidly—in the decades on either side of 1914. *Free Trade Nation* is a theoretically informed work of history, one that engages with the issues raised by historically minded social scientists, and it succeeds at both enriching and transforming our understanding of the zenith and demise of free-trading Britain.

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