Geographies of British Modernity

Space and Society in the Twentieth Century

Edited by
David Gilbert, David Matless
and Brian Short

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Geographies of British Modernity

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Series Editors' Preface

The RGS–IBG Book series publishes the highest quality of research and scholarship across the broad disciplinary spectrum of geography. Addressing the vibrant agenda of theoretical debates and issues that characterize the contemporary discipline, contributions will provide a synthesis of research, teaching, theory and practice that both reflects and stimulates cutting-edge research. The series seeks to engage an international readership through the provision of scholarly, vivid and accessible texts.

Nick Henry and Jon Sadler
RGS–IGB Book Series Editors

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Chapter One

Historical Geographies of British Modernity

Brian Short, David Gilbert and David Matless

Geographies of Modernity

In 1902 Heinemann of London published Halford Mackinder's *Britain and the British Seas*, a work of geographical synthesis in which 'the phenomena of topographical distribution relating to many classes of fact have been treated, but from a single standpoint and on a uniform method' (1902: vii). Reread a century later, Mackinder's account of Britain contains some elements that seem archaic and others that still appear perceptive or even visionary. One diagram in the book shows 'the relative nigresence of the British population' (1902: 182). This used an index based on samples of hair colour to map the patterning of what were described as long-skulled and dark Celts, long-skulled and blond Teutons, and remnant groups of 'round-headed men'. Mackinder's diagram is now used only as a pedagogic device to illustrate the contemporary obsession with racial difference (and the shaky evidence on which it was based). Students familiar with the cultural complexities of early twenty-first-century Britain find the language, aims and methods of Mackinder's treatment of 'racial geography' perplexing, amusing, risible or offensive. In contrast, Mackinder's comments on the potential of tidal power as a replacement for fossil fuels, seem like a prophecy still waiting to be fulfilled:

> A vaster supply of energy than can be had from the coal of the whole world is to be found in the rise and fall of the tide upon the submerged plateau which is the foundation of Britain. No one has yet devised a satisfactory method of harnessing the tides, but the electrical conveyance of power has removed one at least of the impediments, and sooner or later, when the necessity is upon us, a way may be found of converting their rhythmical pulsation into electrical energy. (1902: 339)

It is appropriate to open this book on the *Geographies of British Modernity*, the first volume dedicated specifically to the historical geography of twentieth-century Britain, with reference to Mackinder, not just because *Britain and the British Seas* provides a convenient starting point from the early years of the century. As we argue later in this introductory essay, it is important to think about how the discipline of geography has changed and developed over the twentieth century as a way of writing about Britain and Britishness, and Mackinder is often credited with the establishment of British academic geography. But it is also appropriate to start with Mackinder because, as Gearóid Ó Tuathail (1992) has argued, his work as both academic geographer and as politician must be interpreted as a comment on the nature of the modern world and Britain's place within it. Mackinder is now best remembered as a geopolitician, through his theory of the 'world heartland' that influenced and legitimized American Cold War strategy. This work on the 'closed heart-land of Euro-Asia' as the 'geographical pivot of history' needs to be set within what was a much broader response to dramatic transformations that were taking place at the beginning of the twentieth century (Mackinder 1904: 434). Mackinder's work can be seen as an attempt 'to modernize traditional conservative myths about an organic community in an age where a multiplicity of international and domestic material transformations were eroding the economic foundations of the British Empire and the social world of the aristocratic establishment who ran it' (Ó Tuathail 1992: 102). Seen from this perspective, Mackinder's broader undertaking becomes a particular interpretation and projection of the geography of British modernity at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The term modernity is one for which there is certainly no simple or agreed definition: 'Its periodisations, geographies, characteristics and promise all remain elusive' (Ogborn 1998: 2). In general terms modernity has been seen as a description both of major social and material changes – particularly the emergence of the modern state, industrial capitalism, new forms of science and technology, and time-space compression – and of the growing consciousness of the novelty of these changes. This consciousness has been marked by pronounced double-sidedness or ambivalence. To be modern, in Marshall Berman's words, 'is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and at the same time threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are' (1983: 15). Berman's account in *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air* is perhaps the most influential late twentieth-century interpretation of modernity. In a key passage he outlines the different dimensions of the 'creative destruction' of modernity:

> The maelstrom of modern life has been fed from many sources: great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our

> place within it; the industrialisation of production which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life, generates new forms of corporate power and class struggle; immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habitats, hurtling them halfway across the world into new lives; rapid and often cataclysmic urban growth; systems of mass-communication, dynamic in their development, enveloping and binding together the most diverse people and societies; increasingly powerful nation states, bureaucratically structured and operated, constantly striving to expand their powers; mass social movements of people, and peoples, challenging their political and economic rulers, striving to gain some control over their lives; finally, bearing and driving all these people and institutions along an ever-expanding drastically fluctuating capitalist world market. (1983: 16)

As Berman acknowledges, this describes a vast history which is highly differentiated in time and space. The conservative imperialism of Mackinder and many of his contemporaries in the British establishment can be seen as a reaction both to the general characteristics of these changes at the beginning of the twentieth century, and to their specific impact upon Britain and the British empire. The beginning of the twentieth century was, as Stephen Kern (1983) has suggested, a time of sweeping change in technology and culture altering understandings of time, space and the nature of the world order. Significant technological innovations of the period included the telephone, wireless telegraphy, cinema, bicycle, automobile, and airplane, while contemporary cultural and intellectual developments included the emergence of psychoanalysis, cubism and relativity. The early twentieth century witnessed an acceleration in the rate of the 'internationalization of human affairs', a consequence in part of the time-space compression facilitated by new technology (Ó Tuathail 1992: 103). It also saw growing pressure in Western societies from groups previously marginalized – particularly the working classes and women – for greater political power and social justice.

We return to Mackinder and questions of British modernity below, but recent work has begun to ask specifically geographical questions about the nature of modernity *per se*. Historical geographers such as Ogborn (1998), Pred and Watts (1992) and Gregory (1994) have begun to demonstrate the impossibility of understanding modernity (or indeed any other historical formation) in an aspatial fashion, whether the concern is for the geographical project of empire, the spatial organization of industrial production, the relations of city and country, or the symbolic geographies of modern or anti-modern nationhood (see also Graham and Nash 2000). What we wish to emphasize in this collection is the spatial fabric of the modern in all the above senses, rather than geography being simply a fixed spatial background over which historical processes play. The understanding of modern

times cannot achieve sufficiency apart from the understanding of modern spaces. In *Spaces of Modernity,* his account of 'London's Geographies 1680–1780', Miles Ogborn highlights three ways in which a geographical understanding may transform our sense of modernity: 'through investigating the forms in which the spatial is written into theories of modernity; by acknowledging the ways in which there are different modernities in different places; and by conceptualising modernity as a matter of the hybrid relationships and connections between places' (Ogborn 1998: 17). While this book is concerned with a very different period within 'modernity', these questions remain central, whether one is considering the rationalization of modern spaces through industrial policies or planning theories, the specifically British inflections of wider global processes, or ways in which local processes in twentieth-century Britain cannot be understood apart from imperial or postcolonial relationships.

If the geographies of modernity have been subject to various readings on different scales at different times, the geographies of *British* modernity have been less subjected to systematic analysis. Historians of twentieth-century Britain, and of the modernities of earlier British life, have developed sophisticated and often contrasting analyses of the ways in which Britain played a key role in the emergence of modernity *per se*, the particular inflections of the modern found in Britain as distinct from other Western powers, and the ways in which Britishness was imagined in relation to the modern (for example Colley 1992; Nava and O'Shea 1996; Schwarz 1996; Samuel 1998). This volume complements recent historical collections such as Daunton and Reiger's *Meanings of Modernity* (2001), addressing Britain from the late Victorian era to 1939, and Conekin, Mort and Waters' *Moments of Modernity* (1999), concerned with the period 1945 to 1964. The essays in this volume approach the geographies of British modernity through a variety of spatio-temporal themes: longitudinal analyses of social and political change, studies of national identity, archaeologies of particular sites, and discussions of the nature and scale of geographical knowledge. The temporal coverage of individual essays varies: some focus on specific moments in the century, others provide overarching surveys. Here we offer some broad introductory outlines of the geographies of the British modern.

British Modern: Something Done?

British reactions to twentieth-century modernity have been extremely variable. In recent decades a number of commentators have diagnosed a form of British disease – in essence a set of negative responses to the modern world. For example, Martin Wiener (1981) influentially argued that the idealization of the past, and particularly of an aristocratic, deferential, and

rural version of the past, was endemic to British culture and had hamstrung economic flexibility and progress in the twentieth century. Such 'declinist' concerns are themselves not new (Friedberg 1988) – indeed one can detect a variant of this theme in the work of Mackinder, whose reaction to early twentieth-century transformations was decidedly anxious and pessimistic. Mackinder's work illustrates the ways in which geographical scholarship has always been a part of wider cultural commentary on the world, a theme to which we return below. In the 1880s, the reaction of the British establishment to modern transformations in space and time had often taken the form of enjoinders to ever greater national effort and enlargement of Britain's global role. J. R. Seeley's 1883 essay on *The Expansion of England* can be read in just this way, not only as a statement of Britain's manifest destiny and its global civilizing mission, but also as a necessary response to the challenges posed by modernity. Similarly, James Froude in his *Oceania or England and her Colonies* of 1886 stressed the need for an ever-extending role in the world:

> The oak tree in the park or forest whose branches are left to it will stand for a thousand years; let the branches be lopped away or torn from it by the wind, it rots at the heart and becomes a pollard interesting only from the comparison of what it once was with what fate or violence has made it. So it is with nations. . . . A mere manufacturing England, standing stripped and bare in the world's market-place, and caring only to make wares for the world to buy, is already in the pollard state; the glory of it is gone for ever. (1886: 387)

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the response to change had often become distinctly more pessimistic. Mackinder's view of Britain as an 'organic community in decay' in the face of the forces of early twentieth-century modernity was part of a developing tradition that highlighted relative decline – regarding Britain as, in Aaron Freidberg's term, the 'weary titan' (Ó Tuathail 1992: 109; Freidberg 1988). Mackinder, in work from the early 1900s through to the 1940s, provided a conservative geographical analysis that sought to counter a loss of leadership and community with schemes for the maintenance of imperial order through a form of spatial organization that stressed the significance of national, regional and local scale in economic and cultural life. Geographical knowledge was itself a key component of this life:

> It is essential that the ruling citizens of the world wide Empire should be able to visualise distant geographical conditions . . . Our aim must be to make our whole people think Imperially – think that is to say in spaces that that are worldwide – and to this end our geographical teaching should be directed. (1907: 37 quoted in Ó Tuathail 1992: 114)

While Mackinder offered an anxious and sometimes pessimistic analysis of decline, such a passage also indicates a proponent of what Alison Light has called, in a very different context, 'conservative modernity', characterizing a particular kind of British reaction to substantial social and cultural change: 'Janus-faced it could simultaneously look backwards and forwards; it could accommodate the past in the new forms of the present; it was a deferral of modernity and yet it also demanded a different sort of conservatism from that which had gone before' (1991: 10). We can begin to draw out these concerns via a later specific document of self-consciously British modernity, the 1947 Central Office of Information publication *Something Done: British Achievement 1945–47*. If Mackinder's work gives an academic geographical understanding of Britain, here we find another rendering of Britain's modern space, which is in its own way a geographical account. A heroic steelworker stares from the front cover, a heroic housewife hangs washing on the back (figure 1.1). The publication celebrates achievement in the name of the people during and, despite austerity, carrying wartime rhetoric and publication style into peace. Inside the front cover, over a backdrop of firework celebrations on the Thames in London, Lionel Birch's text begins:

> We came out of the war victorious. We also came out of it much poorer, and needing a rest. There was no rest. There was work to do.
>
> There were houses and power-stations to build, coal to dig, cloth to weave, ships to launch, fields to till, our trade to rebuild. There were social reforms to make – reforms we all agreed, during the war, that we must have.
>
> So we came away from the battlefields of the world only to find new and different battles to fight. This book tells the story of some of the first victories. Here are reflected, as in a mirror, certain highlights of achievement – some things we have done as a people, things in which each one of us may take a true national pride.
>
> In this mirror, and behind these achievements, we see also ourselves – a free people, on the move, in its ancient home. (COI 1947: 2)

The publication begins with a pronatalist celebration of the upturn in the birthrate, linked to 'the problem of maintaining Britain's industrial and cultural potency in a world which is very much on the look-out for any symptoms of British senility' (1947: 6). The back-cover housewife is to produce babies as well as homes (Riley 1981). Industrial and cultural potency are backed up by accounts of power stations, development areas, television, coal, education, new towns, hydro-electric power, aviation, underground railways, films, agriculture, exports, housing, mapping, shipping and the land speed record. Such a publication connects to a wide range of planning and reconstruction literature, and anticipates guides to the Festival of Britain pavilions four years later (Banham and Hillier 1976;

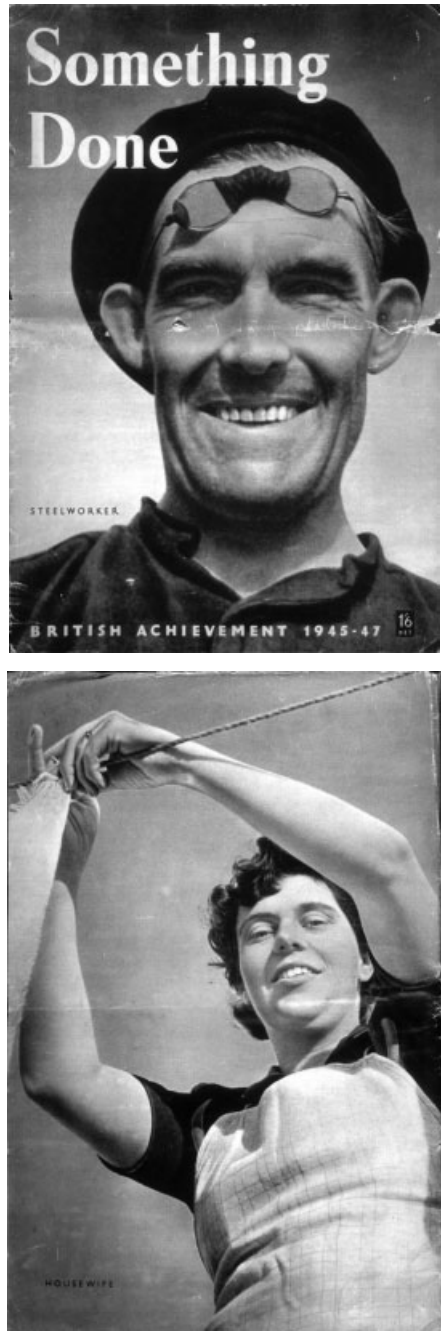

Figure 1.1. Steelworker and Housewife. Front and back cover of *Something Done: British Achievement 1945–47*

Matless 1998). What is striking in this context is the acutely geographical vision of achievement produced. This is in part a matter of demonstrating the physical products of reconstruction, but the new Britain being conjured in these pages in many ways resembles a geographical textbook, with aerial photographs of south Wales industrial estates, Hebburn shipyards, housing estates, London docks, new towns, and airfields turned to arable land. Regional development and global air routes are mapped, while diagrams show HEP stations and tractor production. The spirit of the Ordnance Survey, celebrated for 'making Britain the best-mapped country in the world' (COI 1947: 54), and itself taken as a sign of modern advancement, pervades the document as a whole. Geographical order – modern spaces well laid out, appreciated from the air, integrated into a modern regional organization – is offered as the facilitator and outcome of British achievement. And mapping itself denotes modern life, the account of the Ordnance Survey beginning: 'During the war millions of people in Britain learned for the first time how to orient themselves, and how to find a rendezvous from a map' (1947: 54). Changes in war and peace demand that up-to-date maps are maintained:

> a map is a representation of the ground; and the ground, in this case, is Britain. It is a spacious ground and a varied one, and, since it is not given to any man to go all over the ground before he dies, the next best thing is for him to make an understanding study of the Post-War Ordnance Survey – and to take his choice of Britain. (1947: 55)

Mapping could not only underpin progress but cultivate citizenship (Weight and Beach 1998).

The geography of *Something Done* reflects a fairly conventional mid-twentieth-century sense of a modern planned economy and society, expressing a landscape which it was hoped would further a post-war social democratic consensus of stable and harmonious class relations, advancing the cause of labour through reform rather than revolution. The status of women might also advance without overturning traditional domestic gender relations. Such visions were of course highly contested, but this official document plays down any controversy. Throughout the document material production, modernized through expert knowledge, carries symbolic weight; power generation, new homes, modern mining, ships and steel. This very solid modern geography shaped official senses of mid-twentieth-century Britain and Britishness, just as stories of imperial and globally commercial geographies shaped early twentieth-century accounts (Driver 2001). Different, but no less geographical, stories of a 'late modern' or 'post-modern' economy and society structure accounts of late twentieth-century British modernity. The electronic service economy carries its own

symbolic geographies, even in its more extreme rhetorics of footloose life and global interconnection. Declarations that space has been overcome are no less geographical than statements of the value of local rootedness. Zygmunt Bauman has recently described the late twentieth century as an era of 'liquid' or 'fluid' modernity, in contrast with earlier times, characterized by modernity in its 'heavy, bulky, or immobile and rooted solid phase' (Bauman 2000: 57). If, however, the language used to interpret this transformation is explicitly geographical, in such broad analyses there is often neglect of specific national, regional and local formulations. It is instructive to consider late twentieth-century parallels with *Something Done*, official understandings of the nature of Britain and its place in the world. Both New Labour's early attempts to 'rebrand Britain' and the Millennium Dome worked through new types of spatial rhetoric. In *Britain TM*, Mark Leonard's book for the think-tank Demos, Britain's identity could be renewed by understanding the nation as a dynamic and creative 'hub' in a world of networks, flows and connections (Leonard 1997). Similarly, the Greenwich Dome was structured around different zones, many of which attempted to invoke new senses of the 'fluidity' of late twentieth-century Britain: 'journey zone', 'money zone', 'talk zone', 'shared ground'. The perceived failure of the Dome as a national exhibition comes in part from the nature of its times. In previous great exhibitions it was possible to produce state-sanctioned versions of what Dean MacCannell called the 'ethnography of modernity', which drew heavily on exhibiting and staging the fixed sites of work (MacCannell 1999: 13). In the 1951 Festival of Britain, one of the most successful exhibits was a 'working' coalmine on London's South Bank. The Dome suffered from the difficulty of producing equivalent simulacra of spectacular emblematic sites of late twentieth-century British modernity: internet cafes, shiny call centres, expanded universities and science parks failed to capture the imagination in the same way as the power stations, mines and ships of an earlier time. We offer further reflections on such themes in the afterword at the end of this volume.

The official qualities of *Something Done* or the Dome also alert us to the ways in which statements on a country's geography work through claims to cultural authority reflecting particular political projects and economic interests. Lionel Birch's passage quoted above specifies a modern 'we' in whose name *Something Done* speaks and whom it seeks to uphold, a collective 'people' acting together in a common interest. The wartime resonance is obvious, but as many have argued, such collective statements need careful scrutiny, and both the political left and right have then and now questioned the degree to which government could speak as and for the people in the name of reconstruction. The present book seeks to further the scrutiny of geographical knowledge claims, whether official or otherwise, suggesting

that it is not enough simply to highlight the importance of the geographies of modernity; we must investigate critically how such geographies have been articulated. The language of geography demands as much critical analysis as any historical narrative. It would, however, be a mistake to argue for geography over history, space over time. This is collection of works in historical geography, and the point throughout is to bring together historical and geographical analysis. Indeed *Something Done* itself requires scrutiny in terms of its historical as well as geographical imagination. At this fulcrum of the twentieth century we find, as Conekin, Mort and Waters (1999) have emphasized, versions of the modern which are adamantly grounded in tradition, seeking to develop rather than replace supposed national qualities and traditions, building a modernism connecting past, present and future rather than signalling temporal and historical rupture. Mid-twentieth-century British arguments around modernity often argued for a blend of the national and international, deploying a historical narrative whereby the Victorian era was set up as a time of industrial and aesthetic chaos, while the Georgian period offered a time of aesthetic order which could be regained and transformed through a new modern spirit. Much the same tactic of historical reclamation and progressive development ran through architectural modernisms of the time (Saint 1987; Whiteley 1995).

Something Done offers achievement going beyond unplanned industrialism via expert leadership, scientific knowledge and planning. This is a different narrative of history and authority from that underpinning visions of British modernity in both the earlier and later twentieth century. If the cultural establishment of the Edwardian era looked back to a globally adventuring Tudor England for imperial legitimation (Colls and Dodd 1986), post-war modernity would later be challenged by a Thatcherite reclamation of Victorian values as dynamic and entrepreneurial rather than ornamentally chaotic. As Donald Horne and others have highlighted, such historical narratives connect to regionally specific visions of national quality, as in Horne's formulation of Northern and Southern British metaphors:

> In the *Northern Metaphor* Britain is pragmatic, empirical, calculating, Puritan, bourgeois, enterprising, adventurous, scientific, serious, and believes in struggle . . . In the *Southern Metaphor* Britain is romantic, illogical, muddled, divinely lucky, Anglican, aristocratic, traditional, frivolous, and believes in order and tradition . . . (Horne 1969: 22)

While distinctions between Northern and Southern metaphors can be overplayed, bypassing Eastern and Western, and indeed Midland, metaphors and tending to be reduced in some analyses to progressive northern city versus nostalgic south country, debates on the modernity or otherwise

of Britain and its constituent nations and regions always work through senses of history and geography combined at different scales. The story remains to be told of how in the late twentieth century the south-east of England came to epitomize for both proponents and critics a vision of a new country, car-based, consumerist, property-owning, dynamic and/or fraught, continually on the move and looking for settled homes. 'London and its region' becomes once more the centre for national geographical debate, though in a different fashion to late nineteenth-century imperial or interwar/wartime planning argument. This is a region with a complex internal symbolic geography of metropolis, suburb, motorway, countryside, Green Belt and estuary. While recent studies have explored elements of the economic and social geography of 'a neo-liberal heartland' (Allen et al. 1998), a more cultural and historically informed story awaits detailed elaboration. The Southern national metaphor as applied to the south-east breaks down into sub-regions, counties, Downs, corridors, motorway circuits (Brandon and Short 1990). Terms such as Essex and M25 become loaded with symbolic geography.

Critiques of the national geography envisaged in *Something Done* came well before Thatcherism. Senses of post-war Britain as not so much well-ordered as stultifyingly conformist, less progressive than stuck in traditional routine, figure from the late 1950s in the work of diverse authors such as Colin MacInnes, setting a mod London Continental cosmopolitanism against squarely provincial believers in the welfare state (MacInnes 1959), or Keith Waterhouse setting the dreaming Billy Fisher against the honest boredom of provincial family life. The open sequence of John Schlesinger's 1963 film of *Billy Liar* pans along rows of identical flats and suburban semis, while 'Housewives' Choice' plays the request of a lucky housewife (Kenneth McKellar's 'Song of the Clyde'), old urban terraces are demolished and a conventional new order moves along its merry way. National radio picks out individuals who in their choices and houses appear all the same. Upstairs from the family breakfast, lying in late again, Tom Courtenay as Billy gazes at the ceiling and imagines another life: 'Lying in bed, I abandoned the facts again and was back in Ambrosia' (Waterhouse 1959: 5). Schlesinger and Waterhouse tap into mid- to late fifties architectural and social critiques of 'subtopia', instigated by Ian Nairn as an argument against 'making an ideal of suburbia . . . Philosophically, the idealization of the Little Man who lives there' (Nairn 1956: 365). If *Billy Liar* could signal a failed revolt through fantasy, others offered more direct action against a post-war order, whether through radical community politics responding to modernist urban planning, or conservative evocations of local character destroyed by progress. Social, feminist and environmental critiques of the something that had been done since 1945 could take many political forms, which are beyond our discussion here (Roberts 1991; Samuel 1994;

Veldman 1994; Wright 1985, 1991, 1995). Ironically the politically triumphant Thatcherite critique would in its own way idealize that which figures such as Nairn condemned, with subtopia rescripted in the name of a suburban individualism devoted to conformities of style, and characteristically mixing the freedoms of property with devotion to law and order and the policing of threat and deviance. The landscapes of Thatcherism, as those of earlier social visions and critiques, carried their own contradictory geographies, which warrant detailed historical exploration.

Our choice of *Something Done* as a specimen of British modernity could also of course be read as indicating that there is nothing unique to Britain in such material, as an example of general processes of modernity receiving British inflection. There are, for example, affinities here with much of the material covered by Paul Rabinow in his book *French Modern*, where he elaborates a 'middling modernist' outlook on 'social modernity' over a hundred years to 1939. Rabinow addresses French variants of international social scientific ideas and practices, and says of his book that: 'its unit of analysis is not the nation, the people, or culture, and even less some perduring "Frenchness" ', but is about 'the elements of one specific constellation of thought, action, and passion' (Rabinow 1989: 13). The British modern addressed in this volume is similarly not explored as part of a search for an essential Britishness in modernity, or modernness in Britain, yet that does not mean that one should dismiss the claims to Britishness (or Englishness, Scottishness, etc.) which may have driven modern British acts in the twentieth century. Rabinow goes on to argue that: 'An ethnographic approach to society as the product of historical practices combining truth and power consists of identifying society as a cultural object, specifying those authorized to make truth claims about it and those practices and symbols which localized, regulated, and represented that new reality spatially' (1989: 13). A key element of those truth contests and spatial practices has been the way in which senses of the nation have informed and shaped the processes under scrutiny. To address the British modern is therefore to consider both how twentieth-century Britain carried a specific and unique mix of global and local economic, political, cultural processes, and how those processes were inflected by a sense of Britain as modern or otherwise.

British Historical Geography and the Twentieth Century

This collection presents work in historical geography. As we have argued above, the most important justification for this is the inherently spatialized character of both twentieth-century modernity in general and the British experience in particular. There is also a significant secondary motivation for

this collection, in that it reflects a developing focus in a sub-discipline. The past 20 years have seen a substantial shift in the temporal balance of studies in historical geography, with much more attention being paid first to the inter-war period (Heffernan and Gruffudd 1988), and then increasingly to the years after the Second World War. To some extent this is a simple consequence of the passing of time, as events, processes and patterns from the twentieth century have come to be defined as being of 'historical' interest, much as 'contemporary' history has emerged in recent decades. Thus the major existing collection on the historical geography of England and Wales, itself concerned for earlier geographies of modernity, stops at 1900 (Dodgshon and Butlin 1990). The interest in new time periods also reflects, then, a growing interest in the sub-discipline in the conceptual challenges posed by the distinctive formations of twentieth-century modernities.

The twentieth century is distinctive not least as the period when geography as a new academic and institutionalized practice itself played a role in the processes under scrutiny, reflecting and forming perspectives on the world, whether through the observation or education of those concerned with the planning of industrial change, the governance of empire, or the contestation of cultural identity. The twentieth century is special for us in part because it contains the genesis and development of British geography at university level. Historical geography developed as a sub-discipline distinct from both history, with which it had been so closely intertwined in the writings of Paul Vidal de la Blache (1843–1918) in France, and anthropology, where links had been personified in H. J. Fleure, Professor of Geography and Anthropology at Aberystwyth (Campbell 1972; de Planhol 1972). The writings of earlier generations of contemporary human and environmental geographers are available to us now as representations of earlier geographies, and they appear sometimes as sources, but more often as objects of analysis and interpretation.

There are many overviews of the sub-discipline available which chart its development through the century (Baker and Billinge 1982; Butlin 1993; Darby 1983, 1987), and we do not propose to conduct a further full review here. However, it is important to note that historical geography has repeatedly found itself a testing ground for theory as paradigms and intellectual fashions have changed, a springboard for methodological pluralism, and a source for empirical data collection. As Harley somewhat caustically put it: 'Theories, ill-clad and poorly shod with evidence, migrated like paupers into the past, lured on by the prospect of factual El Dorados to validate universal truths' (1982: 264). An element of reflexivity becomes almost inescapable, as the development of historical geography has both reflected and informed perspectives on the twentieth-century world.

The term 'historical geography' was well established by the beginning of the twentieth century, when it referred to attempts to demonstrate the significance of geographical features in the study of a more realistic history, and more broadly (and deterministically) to refer to the study of the influence of geography upon history. In the mid-twentieth century the most important figure shaping the sub-discipline in Britain was probably H. C. Darby. Particularly through his role as professor at Cambridge University, Darby was an important influence on succeeding generations of historical geographers – as both inspiration and increasingly as the focus of critiques (Prince 2002). In the late 1920s Darby's first exposure to Cambridge historical geography was through Bernard Manning's final-year course which focused on the geographical conditions affecting the historical and political development of states, and which also took in colonial expansion and political subdivisions for administrative purposes (Darby 1987: 117–37, 2002: 1–2). This close relationship with political and colonial issues had been typical of the sub-discipline during what Butlin (1993: 3) refers to as the period of 'Nationalism 1870–1914', typified perhaps by the Revd H. B. George's *Historical Geography of the British Empire*, first published in 1904 and reaching a seventh edition by 1924.

However, significant changes took place from the 1920s onwards, stimulated in part by the establishment and growth of geography departments in many British universities. The concern with explicitly political and colonial issues was downgraded as Darby, with others, moved the focus to an intensely academic and empirical concern with work on the Fens, on the Domesday Book, and on woodland clearance. This work applied what were self-consciously understood as 'modern' geographical methods to historical data, drawing upon contemporary developments in regional and environmental analysis (Baker 1972, 2003; Butlin 1993). Darby became increasingly concerned to go beyond the detailed cross-sectional reconstructions of past landscapes at particular moments that were seen to best effect in the Fenland work or in his edited 1936 *Historical Geography of England before 1800*. Later work attempted to combine the established cross-sectional method with concerns for process and narrative to incorporate the dimension of change. The updated 1973 volume, the *New Historical Geography of England*, shows the full extent of the development in Darby's vision of the sub-discipline, with cross-sectional essays interleaved with discussions of process.

Darby's work on the Fens had emphasized a heroic, even Whiggish drive for the taming of nature, echoing other visions of British progress and position in the world. Darby himself was part of a certain culture of mid-century British progressivism, particularly through his public service as a national parks commissioner after the war (Darby 1961). In such work

a vision of a new order of popular citizenship with access to the countryside was combined with a concern for the conservation of historic landscapes. Darby's supposed academic neutrality and progressive vision were, as he later acknowledged, 'prisoners of their own time and of their own cultural and intellectual world' (Darby 1983: 423). In retrospect, the *New Historical Geography of England* seems like the last significant example of this way of presenting historical geography. Tellingly the final cross-sectional essay, by Peter Hall, concerns 'England circa 1900', almost as if the challenges of sustaining the method into the period of living memory were too great. As Darby himself recognized obliquely in his introduction to the volume, from the 1960s onwards the impact of wider changes within geography had ensured that the sub-discipline would change significantly:

> In another generation or so the materials for an historical geography of England will not be as we know them now. A wider range of sources will have been explored and evaluated. Fresh ideas about method will have prepared the way for a more sophisticated presentation. And by that time we and our landscape will have become yet one more chapter in some other *Historical Geography of England*. (Darby 1973: xiv)

What for Darby could be portrayed as the increasing sophistication of new methods was in fact a series of quite fundamental challenges to the established approach of historical geography – what Butlin has described as its 'classical phase' between 1930 and 1960. From the 1960s onwards, as is well attested, geography moved in concert with other disciplines to successively embrace the several statistical, theoretical and behavioural approaches, and these found their place within the sub-discipline with varying degrees of success and contestation. Regional studies were joined by work on perception and cognition by Prince (1971: 1–86), Lowenthal and Bowden (1975) or Powell (1977), who thereby again imparted historical concerns to the prevailing geography of the day. A more sustained critique of established historical geography came from those geographers influenced by Marxism, who worked on the historical materiality of space (indeed, pushing space into historical materialism). From this perspective the progressive narrative implicit within Darby's historical geography could be regarded as 'materialistic and bourgeois' (Gregory 1984: 186), and as over-consensual, partial and even elitist. Criticisms of 'the Darbyesque landscape' saw it as largely devoid of human agency: 'those appearing were the rulers and directors only' (Williams 2002: 207–8). The work of David Harvey in particular prompted a shift towards a focus on the historical geography of capitalist development and of class conflict (Harvey 1973, 1979), and Harvey's theoretical work was joined by the more empirically informed historical depth of Massey's spatial divisions of labour within

Britain (Massey 1984), presenting rounds of successive regional investment as forming the creative destruction of capitalist modernity. In the 1980s, working within a broad cultural Marxist framework, Cosgrove (1984) and Cosgrove and Daniels (1988) revealed the cultural and power-laden asymmetries of the landscape, one of the central and relatively unproblematic themes of the older historical geography. The differences between the first and second editions of Dodgshon and Butlin's *Historical Geography of England and Wales* indeed reflect such changes within the sub-discipline between 1978 and 1990.

One feature of this shift towards historical geographies of capitalist development and social and cultural conflict was the way in which it opened new possibilities for the study of the twentieth century. The experience of restructuring and of renewed mass unemployment in the 1980s stimulated a new generation of historical geographers to examine the inter-war period, a time that seemed to offer relevant evidence about the role of capital and state in the development of regional inequalities, the struggles for survival of particular places in the face of powerful economic and political forces, and the organization of collective resistance, particularly through the union movement (Ward, 1988; Heffernan and Gruffudd 1988; Sunley 1990; Gilbert 1992). The cross-sectional genre was transformed into studies of different aspects of industrialization and its consequences (Langton and Morris 1986), or of social and political conflict (Charlesworth et al. 1996). In keeping with wider cultural and political agendas, the locus of such political enquiry went beyond workplace studies of class relations to encompass matters of gender and community, as in Rose's work on inter-war east London (Rose 1990, 1997). Attention to the economic and political dimensions of the experience of British modernity was here accompanied by work that sought to broaden this understanding, again often revisiting established sub-disciplinary themes from perspectives that drew upon critical traditions interrogating the nature of modernity. A number of studies addressed relations between city, country and suburbia, and the ways in which each can become the focus of particular cultural values concerning landscape, community and place. Such work brings out in different contexts the geographies of power and identity associated with rurality, urbanity and the suburban, and connects also to an interest in relations of landscape and national identity. (Matless 1998; Short et al. 2000) Work in the late twentieth century has been characterized by a renewed interest in the distinctiveness of such relationships in the constituent nations of the United Kingdom (Gruffudd et al. 2000; Lorimer 2000, 2001), work which brings out the complex relationships between Britishness and Englishness, Welshness and Scottishness, notably in terms of resistance to one in the name of the other (Gruffudd 1995, 1999). The