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What should they know of England? History and citizenship

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HOME › 10 (2022) 2 › WHAT SHOULD THEY KNOW OF ENGLAND? HISTORY AND CITIZENSHIP

What Should They Know of England? History and Citizenship

BY COLLINS, MARCUS ON MARCH 24, 2022 • (1)



Abstract: This article argues that the traditional efforts to invest moral meaning in narratives of the national past are evident both in the government-sanctioned version of British history and the critiques of it by academic historians. These historians demonstrate that the official version of the British past glosses over past wrongs, but do not sufficiently challenge the notion that histories of a nation need be geopolitically focused or morally instructive.

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The Life in the United Kingdom test contains the closest thing the UK possesses to an official narrative of British history. Every migrant between the ages of 18 and 64 must answer correctly at least three-quarters of the twenty-four multiple-choice questions in order to obtain citizenship or permanent residency. The questions test factual recall of the set text, Life in the United Kingdom (3rd ed., 2013).[1] So what do these newest residents need to know about the many generations of Britain's inhabitants who preceded them?

Selection and Interpretation

Anyone thinking history is a useless subject will be surprised by its prominence in the citizenship test. More than one-third of the text of *Life in the United Kingdom* is devoted to history and the historical questions account for a commensurate proportion of the test. In practice tests, nine of the twenty-four questions concern British history.[2] In contrast, applicants are expected to answer a single question apiece on literature, popular culture, demography, geography, religion, customs and celebrations plus one or two on sport (often historical in nature).

Though history is granted more space than any other subject in *Life in the United Kingdom*, it is nonetheless difficult if not impossible to create a coherent and authoritative narrative of British history since the Stone Age in just 14000 words of basic English. The acts of selection and generalisation practiced by every historian are magnified, while other fundamental historical tasks (evidencing,

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contextualising, analysing) are almost entirely abandoned. The result is necessarily simplified to the point of being simplistic, so the decision has to be made which people, topics and events are to be

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island story” as extolled by Michael Gove, it recounts the national past in “kings and battles” fashion.[5] Scotland, Wales and Ireland are routinely included, but are consigned to the role of supporting actors which interact with or are compared to England’s leading part.

Power and Glory

Frank Trentmann is most troubled by what he rightly characterises as the handbook’s “serious problem with race.”[6] The most charitable explanation of its mealy-mouthed account of slavery and its omission of Hitler’s genocides is that followed Michael Gove’s ambition to foreground British history.[7] By Govean

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logic, the kidnapping, torture and forced labour of enslaved Africans and the murder of Jews and other persecuted peoples happened outside Britain and therefore have little or no place in a British citizenship test. Trentmann detects a still more sinister motive for what he terms the “softening of the slave trade ... [and] sanitising of Hitler”.[8] To him, such revisionism amounts to a concerted attempt to “edit, distort and falsify the past” in order to portray Britain as “always great, always leading and almost always alone”.[9]

According to Trentmann, this Whiggish account of British history is not simply one-sided or wrong-headed but “dangerous” because it fails to “confront the darker chapters of ... [a] national past.”[10] It is the very issues of “race, empire, conflict and national weakness” which are downplayed by the 2013 edition of *Life in the United Kingdom* that Trentmann thinks indispensable to any account of British history.[11] To omit appeasement, the Holocaust, the chemical castration of Alan Turing, the subjugation of Irish Catholics, defeat in the Hundred Years’ War, escaped slaves, anti-colonial resistance, the bloodbath of Partition and “the slaughter of civilians” by the British in the Boer War in his view “does violence to our basic understanding of history”.[12]

What connects these disparate events is that they all undermine any claim to Britain possessing a peculiarly “illustrious history”.[13] More constructively, to contemplate “past injustice” is in Trentmann’s view a “patriotic and decent thing to do”: a lesson in citizenship much richer than memorising the names of Henry VIII’s wives.[14] “[H]ow will societies be able to see and tackle current and future injustice if they do not have any understanding of

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injustice in the past?” he asks.[15] The question is a rhetorical one but not, perhaps, as straightforward to answer as he reckons. There are plenty of moral people with little historical knowledge who don’t need to pass a citizenship test in order to refrain from enslaving, murdering, colonising or chemically castrating others.

Morality and History

Moreover, Trentmann’s advocacy of “moral history” is not dissimilar to the approach of *Life in the United Kingdom*. [16] One celebrates Britain’s contribution to the world’s “political, scientific, industrial and cultural development” and the other excoriates its record of “past injustice”, but both accept the idea that citizenship is founded on a moral accounting of a nation’s past. [17] For Trentmann, Britain is firmly in the debit column. While citing many inglorious acts, he doesn’t mention a single meritorious initiative taken by a British government which merits inclusion in the handbook. He appears to suggest that British anti-imperialists deserve mention, although his two examples (John Wilkes and Mary Kingsley) were complex figures whose attitudes appear by turns admirable and repugnant by today’s standards. [18] Trentmann further chips away at the patriotic intent of the handbook by pointing out that several of the famous British scientists it mentions had non-British collaborators. [19]

Trentmann therefore proposes that the basis of British identity should be the reverse of that promoted by the handbook. Instead of celebrating past accomplishments, new British citizens should “confront past injustices”. [20] And rather than

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learning about British exceptionalism, they should appreciate the nation's interconnectedness with Europe, Empire and the wider world. These proposals would go some way towards balancing the “boosterish and glorious” historical account he identifies in *Life in the United Kingdom*.^[21] However, they do not challenge the handbook's premise that a nation's history represents a source of pride and shame for people who live in the same place in the present day. It is not self-evident that twenty-first century British citizens should feel some ancestral connection to the inventor of the hovercraft or, for that matter, the perpetrators of the Highland Clearances. That national histories have traditionally been framed in moral terms is no reason to continue the practice.^[22]

The Living and the Dead

To me, the principal omission in *Life in the United Kingdom* is the stuff of human experience. There is no love, no sex, no birth control, no crime, no pastimes and no death except plague, warfare and in the case of nobles meriting burial mounds. The only families which appear throughout this narrative are of the dynastic kind. Trentmann notes that a handful of the people appearing in the narrative are non-white, but there is scarcely more mention of women.^[23] Queens and princesses are the sole women to feature in the narrative before 1750 and women remain a small minority thereafter. The remedy is not to practice what Gerda Lerner termed “compensatory history” by adding to the pantheon of Great Men an equal proportion of “women worthies” whose prominence was the exception to the patriarchal rule.^[24] Nor is it to follow *Life in the United Kingdom* by referring to gender inequality when it becomes subject to

legislative reform in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. A more meaningfully inclusive approach would be to switch the historical focus to “history from below” and to discuss the cultural, social, economic and familial structures which shaped people’s lives.

Society appears in the narrative when jolted into change by a new invention, law or war. Economics are subordinated to politics and, to the extent that they are mentioned, appear more in the context of international trade and enslavement than domestic agriculture and the household economy. If G.M. Trevelyan did himself a disservice by describing social history as “the history of a people with the politics left out”, this form of political history mostly leaves the people out.[25] The handbook opens by stating that “Britain is a fantastic place to live: a modern, thriving society” full of “diversity and dynamism”. [26] It’s odd, therefore, that the past in *Life in the United Kingdom* seems so lifeless. Viewing history from above is a poor vantage-point to discern the experiences and passions of ordinary women, men and children.

Further Reading

- Collins, Marcus, and Peter N. Stearns. *Why Study History?* London: LPP, 2020.
- Watson, Michael. “Michael Gove’s War on Professional Historical Expertise: Conservative curriculum reform, extreme Whig history and the place of imperial heroes in modern multicultural Britain”, *British Politics* 15 (2020): 271–290, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-019-00118-3>.
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[1] Home Office, *Life in the United Kingdom. A Guide for New Residents*, 2nd ed. (London: TSO, 2013).

[2] “Life In The UK Test”, last modified 2022, <https://lifeintheuktestweb.co.uk/> (last accessed 18 March 2022).

[3] Home Office, *Life*, 14.

[4] Arthur Chapman, “LUK – Reading Re-Writings of Official History”, *Public History Weekly* 7 (2019), dx.doi.org/10.1515/phw-2019-13255; Arthur Chapman, “Changing LUK. Nation and Narration in the First and the Third Editions of *Life in the United Kingdom*”, in *Analysing Historical Narratives. On Academic, Popular and Educational Framings of the Past*, ed. Stefan Berger, Nicola Brauch, and Chris Lorenz (Oxford: Berghahn, 2021), 304-326; Frank Trentmann, “Britain First. The official history of the United Kingdom according to the Home Office – a Critical Review”, last modified September 2020, <https://historyjournalorguk.files.wordpress.com/2020/09/britain-first-frank-trentmann-september-2020.pdf> (last accessed 18 March 2022).

[5] Michael Gove, ‘All Pupils Will Learn Our Island Story’, speech on 5 October 2010, <https://conservative-speeches.sayit.mysociety.org/speech/601441> (last accessed 18

March 2022).

[6] Trentmann, “Britain First”, 6.

[7] See Michael Watson, “Michael Gove’s War on Professional Historical Expertise. Conservative curriculum reform, extreme Whig history and the place of imperial heroes in modern multicultural Britain”, *British Politics* 15 (2020): 271–290, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41293-019-00118-3>.

[8] Trentmann, “Britain First”, 7.

[9] Frank Trentmann, and Stephen Parkinson, “Has Britain’s Official History Been Distorted? A Debate”, *The Spectator*, August 23, 2020, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/has-britain-s-official-history-been-distorted-a-debate> (last accessed 18 March 2022).

[10] Trentmann, “Britain First”, 6, 9.

[11] Ibid, 6.

[12] Ibid, 1, 10.

[13] Home Office, *Life*, 7.

[14] Trentmann, “Britain First”, 10.

[15] Ibid, 10.

[16] Ibid, 10.

[17] Home Office, *Life*, 7; Trentmann, ‘Britain First’, 9.

[18] Trentmann, “Britain First”, 10.

[19] Ibid, 8.

[20] Ibid, 9.

[21] Ibid, 8.

[22] See Stefan Berger (ed.), *Writing the Nation. A Global Perspective* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

[23] Trentmann, “Britain First”, 5.

[24] Gerda Lerner, “Placing Women in History. Definitions and Challenges”, *Feminist Studies* 3, ½ (1975): 5, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3518951>.

[25] George Macaulay Trevelyan, *English Social History. A Survey of Six Centuries – Chaucer to Queen Victoria* (London: Longmans, Green, 1942), vii.

[26] Home Office, *Life*, 7.

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Caitriona Ní Cassaithe / Arthur Chapman

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Starkey, Hugh, OPR

March 24, 2022 • 10:09

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OPEN PEER REVIEW

An Imagined Community

The political and geographical entity known as the UK is a relatively recent creation in its current form. It dates from 1927 following the independence of the Irish Republic. To govern this constructed polity, it is helpful to create an emotional connection between the people and both the elected government and the hereditary monarchy. National symbols, institutions, heroes and historical narratives all play a role in creating an imagined community.[1] Education has a key role in transmitting elements of a national story that furthers state formation.[2] Migrants who have not been educated in the UK and who apply for nationality, sometimes also known as citizenship, are required to learn a potted version of the national curriculum set out in a guidance manual, *Life in the United Kingdom* (LUK).[3] The contribution to which I am responding comments on the 14000-word section within this textbook entitled *A long and illustrious history*. It accepts the argument that this constitutes an official narrative of British history,[4] since it is produced by the civil service and approved by government ministers.

The author introduces a report, from Professor Frank Trentmann of Birkbeck who is extremely critical of the quality of the history within LUK, particularly its omission of a clear national connection with the slave trade and refusal to name the Holocaust.[5] Trentmann claims, justifiably in my view, that the official narrative has ‘a serious problem with race’. This reluctance to engage with racism was further demonstrated in the much disparaged government-commissioned 2021 *Report of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities* and the 2022 government response entitled *Inclusive Britain*. [6] The response proposes to instrumentalise the teaching of history: “We will ensure that how our past is taught in schools encourages all pupils, whatever their ethnicity, to feel an authentic sense of belonging to a multi-racial UK”. [7] There is a promise of developing a Model History Curriculum by 2024 designed to “help pupils understand the intertwined nature of British and global history, and their own place within it”. [8]

That said, the recent guidance on *Political Impartiality in Schools* seems intended to promote extreme caution in teachers. [9] Whilst the guidance states that opposition to racism is not contentious it warns that there are “many topics relating to empire and imperialism, on which there are differing partisan political views, and which should be taught in a balanced manner”.

The new model history curriculum will likely draw on Ofsted’s 2021 *Research Review series on history*. [10] This argues for the importance of generative knowledge through the introduction of substantive concepts such as ‘invasion’, ‘tax’, ‘trade’, ‘monarch’ or ‘empire’ as well as

chronological knowledge. We might test the LUK curriculum for its systematic inclusion of these topics. 'Invasion' has 10 mentions, associated with the Romans, the Normans and then several by Germany in WWII. Great Britain apparently doesn't engage in invasions. Iraq 2003 is described as an operation. The word 'tax' has seven mentions, associated with Magna Carta, the 1688 *Declaration of Rights* and the American colonies. Trade is an important theme in LUK including a section on the slave trade that Trentmann critiques for inaccuracy. There are also many occurrences of the word 'monarch' or 'monarchy' and Empire is a major theme. Those preparing for the test are advised to ensure they understand the relationship between the monarchy and Parliament, and Britain and the colonies of the Empire. Whether the inclusion of these concepts is in fact generative is a matter for further analysis.

[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso Books, 1991).

[2] Andy Green, *Education and State Formation: Europe, East Asia and the USA*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

[3] Home Office, *Life in the United Kingdom: A Guide for New Residents*, 3rd edition (2013) 5th impression (Norwich: The Stationary Office, 2013).

[4] Arthur Chapman, 'Changing LUK: Nation and Narration in Life in the United Kingdom. In N. Brauch, S. Berger, C. Lorenz (Eds.) *Analysing Historical Narratives: On Academic, Popular and Educational Framings of the Past* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021), 304–26.

[5] Frank Trentmann, 'Britain First: The Official History of the United Kingdom According to the Home Office – a Critical Review', *History Journal* (blog), 11 September 2020, <https://historyjournal.org.uk/2020/09/11/britain-first-the-official-history-of-the-united-kingdom-according-to-the-home-office-a-critical-review/>.

[6] Minister of State for Equalities, *Inclusive Britain: Government Response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities* (London: The Stationary Office, 2022), <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/inclusive-britain-action-plan-government-response-to-the-commission-on-race-and-ethnic-disparities>; Minister of State for Equalities.

[7] *Inclusive Britain*, p.83.

[8] *Inclusive Britain*, p.84.

[9] Department for Education, 'Political Impartiality in Schools', GOV.UK, 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/political-impartiality-in-schools/political-impartiality-in-schools>.

[10] Ofsted, 'Research Review Series: History', GOV.UK, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-history>.

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