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Hard times

by [John Gross](#)

On *Austerity Britain: 1945–51* by David Kynaston.

David Kynaston

Austerity Britain: 1945–51.

Walker & Company, 704 pages, \$45

Britain emerged from the Second World War victorious but badly bruised. There was relief, of course; there was an underlying pride at having won through. But anything approaching euphoria was quickly dispelled by continuing hardships and restrictions, and by the prospect of more to come. In his new history, *Austerity Britain: 1945–51*, David Kynaston quotes a middle-aged schoolteacher writing in her diary, after the government had unveiled its 1951 Budget, “Oh, dear! What a THIN time lies ahead!” She might have been speaking, he adds, “for most people after most Budgets in the immediate post-war period.”

The title of Kynaston’s book virtually chose itself. “Austerity” has become a standard term for life in Britain after 1945, and with good reason. It was an age of shortages, waiting-lists, queues, power-cuts, permits, barely edible food substitutes, drab “utility” clothes. Taxation was at penal levels. Only a tiny amount of currency could be taken abroad. What you could buy was to a large extent determined by the “points” and coupons in your ration-book.

During the war conditions like these were generally understood to be unavoidable. They were much harder to accept in peacetime—the period was also a golden age of grumbling. And in some respects, too, things had actually got worse. Bread-rationing, for example, which had been unknown even in 1940, was introduced for the first time in 1946.

Yet austerity isn’t the same thing as deprivation. On the contrary, it often counts as a virtue—up there with self-restraint, serious-mindedness, a just severity, a sober disregard for the world’s coarser pleasures. To describe post-war Britain as a land of austerity is to acknowledge, somewhat euphemistically, its shortages and discomforts, but it is also to make considerable claims for its prevailing spirit—a spirit which tends to be closely identified, by those who take this positive view, with that of the Labour government led by Clement Attlee which came to power in July 1945.

At this hour in the day, even the most ardent Labour supporter is unlikely to deny that the Attlee government, which remained in power until 1951, often got things wrong. But it still commands widespread respect, both for its professed ideals and, to some extent, for its record—above all for its central role (though it had predecessors) in creating the welfare state.

Needless to say, not everyone agrees. What exactly was accomplished in these years remains a

subject of sharp controversy. But one thing which is beyond dispute is that the post-war Labour government set the course which British politics were to follow long after Attlee had left office. For a generation and more, both major parties were committed to the mixed economy (part private, part nationalized) which Labour had bequeathed and to the welfare services in the form that Labour had created them. It was only with the arrival of Margaret Thatcher at 10 Downing Street in 1979 that the consensus was broken.

David Kynaston makes us aware of this longer perspective from the outset. For *Austerity Britain* is only the opening section of a sequence intended to cover the full sweep of British life from 1945 to 1979, and it rests on the assumption that those years “have become a period—a story—in their own right.” To tell such a story, in the detail Kynaston proposes, is a daunting enterprise. But he has already shown how effectively he can work on a large scale, in a splendid four-volume history of the City of London (the city’s financial district) from 1815 to the present; if *Austerity Britain* is any guide, the new sequence will be even more impressive.

Without banging the drum about “history from below,” he devotes most of the book to the experience of ordinary people—the population as a whole. An enormous number of sources contribute to the overall picture: along with official reports they include diaries, letters, biographies, memoirs, newspapers (local no less than national), novels, films, plays, radio scripts, television programs, advertisements, and opinion surveys. Much of this material is previously unpublished, much of the rest is little-known or forgotten. But the important thing is not so much the industry which has gone into unearthing it as the skill with which Kynaston deploys it.

The quotations and illustrations are beautifully chosen, both for their intrinsic interest and for what they contribute to the overall picture. Again and again, we hear widely shared views being expressed in distinctive tones. It is as hard to forget the anonymous working-class woman being asked about her marriage in the 1940s—“He’s very good, he doesn’t bother me much”—as it is the anonymous vicar being questioned in 1950 about his attitude to Americans: “Something like horror though that is much too strong a word. Their strident vitality makes me want to shrink into myself.” (Poor vicar.)

When Kynaston has an especially good source, he makes the most of it. The surveys carried out by the organization Mass Observation were outstanding (they covered everything from holiday camps to weeping in cinemas), and they are cited extensively. So are the sketches of industrial workers by the Polish-born sociologist Ferdynand Zweig, which have something of the individual tang of Henry Mayhew’s nineteenth-century interviews with the London poor. And a few of the diarists whom Kynaston has discovered appear often enough for us to start feeling we have actually met them.

The oddest of these is a civil servant called Henry St. John, a sex-obsessed solitary man with little if any interest in public affairs. His account of masturbating while watching a performance at the celebrated striptease theater the Windmill might perhaps qualify as iconic, but unlike his fellow-diarists he doesn’t make much of a historical witness. Of the others, the most likeable is a housewife called Judy Haines, who comes across as cheerful (but not foolishly so), steadfast, and thoroughly decent. It is particularly interesting to have her instant reaction to the broadcast with which Churchill opened the 1945 election campaign: “It was awful.” The broadcast is generally agreed to have been a disaster for the Conservatives. (Churchill had warned voters that if a Labour government were intent on carrying through its program it would have to fall back on “some form of Gestapo.”) But if you want confirmation of the damage it did you could hardly do better than the verdict of someone as essentially moderate as Judy Haines.

Kynaston isn’t so wedded to the virtues of vox pop that he isn’t ready to use better-known names to spice up his story. “It might not be a bad thing for the Labour boys to hold the baby”—as the result of the 1945 election became clear, many Conservative supporters, thinking of the country’s looming

problems, must have consoled themselves with the same thought. But it lends piquancy to this particular comment that it was made by Noël Coward.

Many other well-known figures put in an appearance. One of the less expected ones is Ronald Reagan, who spent the icy winter of 1948–49 working on a movie in a studio outside London and undergoing many of the familiar ordeals of austerity, inadequate heating in particular. Some of the problems he encountered were the result of inherited problems which no British government could have put right in a hurry. But he was inclined to ascribe most of them to officialdom, inefficiency, and the abandonment of sound economic principles. In his memoirs, written thirty years later, he recalled his time in Britain as a defining moment in his political education: “I shed the last ideas I’d ever had about government ownership of anything.”

Kynaston’s own final verdict on the Attlee years, when it comes, is bound to be a good deal more nuanced than Reagan’s. But there is nothing to suggest that he feels much enthusiasm for the principle of public ownership as such. Between 1946 and 1948, Labour nationalized, among other things, coal, gas, electricity, the railways, iron and steel, and the Bank of England. On paper, such measures may have looked like the start of a major social revolution, but any sense of excitement quickly wore off. By 1951 a Gallup poll recorded a clear thumbs down for all the nationalized industries apart from coal, which had long been regarded as a special case—and, even in the mines, public ownership hardly ushered in utopia. There were more coal strikes in the year following nationalization than in the year before.

Kynaston’s account of all this is solid and well-balanced. (He gives due weight to the other, non-socialist factors which were also responsible for Britain’s missed economic opportunities.) But you still feel that nationalization, understandably enough, is not a subject that particularly inspires him. By contrast, he is at his most zestful when he writes about post-war faith in planning in general, especially as it was applied to urban renewal and the “new towns” in which large numbers of the inhabitants of old cities were resettled.

He gives some wonderful examples—sometimes comic, more often chilling—of the serene certitudes of experts who were sure they always knew better than the people they were planning for. Local conditions, to say nothing of the claims of the past, were frequently disregarded, while a refusal to accept that most people’s ambitions centered on the home, rather than on some fancied ideal of communal living, could easily spill over into outright contempt. Labour’s principal literary spokesman, the novelist and playwright J. B. Priestley, was not above describing the suburbs as “tree-lined concentration camps.”

Fair-minded as ever, Kynaston reminds us that this wasn’t the whole story. The excesses of planning didn’t mean that the only alternative was a free-for-all, and some planners were more reasonable (and democratic) than others. One such was Frederic Osborn, who combined a life-long commitment to planning with a realistic assessment of the temper of the British people: Osborn’s honorable and awkward in-between position comes across eloquently in the passages Kynaston quotes from his letters to his American friend Lewis Mumford.

Many of the issues discussed in *Austerity Britain* are still living ones, very much so. But since the period covered may sound rather a dreary one, it is worth ending up by re-emphasizing that the book is also exceptionally lively—that it is packed with illuminating incidents and curious detail. How odd, for example, almost emblematic, that the building of Stevenage, perhaps the most famous of the “new towns,” should have involved the destruction of the village which was the setting of the house in E. M. Forster’s *Howards End*. (Forster duly protested—in “non-connecting” mood, as Kynaston wittily says, alluding to the famous injunction on the title-page of the novel.)

Or perhaps one might cite one of the many anecdotes Kynaston draws from the world of sport—not

only on its own account, but because it also brings out that, for all the upheavals of post-1945 Britain, and indeed of the previous thirty years, much of a positively Edwardian class system was still in place.

One sturdy survival was the rigid distinction in cricket between “Gentlemen” (the amateurs) and “Players” (the professionals). I remember that when I first became interested in the game, in the late 1940s, it was taken for granted that the captain of the England team was an amateur. Most of the captains of the county teams were, too.

Even so I was unprepared for a story Kynaston tells about a match in 1950 between Gloucestershire and Cambridge University. The teams included two young players who were to have notable futures in cricket—Tom Graveney, a Gloucestershire professional, and David Sheppard, who played for Cambridge. (Sheppard was also to become a bishop in the Church of England.) As they were coming off the field for an interval, the Gloucestershire captain, who was called Allen, overheard Graveney say to Sheppard, who had been batting, “Well played, David.” A few minutes later, Allen went over to Sheppard and apologized: “I’m terribly sorry about Graveney’s impertinence. I think you’ll find it won’t happen again.”

Epochs and generations overlap. That, too, was England in the Age of Austerity.

John Gross's most recent book is *A Double Thread: Growing Up English and Jewish in London* (Ivan R Dee).

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