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Gentrification and the Enterprise Culture: Britain 1780–1980. *By F. M. L. Thompson.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. x + 200 pp. Cloth, $39.95. ISBN 0-199-24330-1.

Reviewed by Peter T. Marsh

Rarely can there have been so commanding a critique of a familiar thesis in economic history. After a professional lifetime spent studying the economic and social history of British landownership, Michael Thompson is exasperated with cultural explanations of the comparative deterioration in British economic performance since 1850. Thompson is not so much concerned about (though he questions) the common impression that the British economy failed to keep up with the pacesetters in the international economy, particularly the United States and Germany. What bothers him is the influential argument of Martin Wiener in the United States and Correlli Barnett in Britain that places the blame for that decline on the gentrification of British businessmen in the second half of the nineteenth century and on the accompanying set of anti-entrepreneurial values inculcated by the major private schools that the English call public. The bases for this argument were never more than impressionistic. Wiener founded his line of thought on commentary by Victorian men of letters, and Barnett argued his case with more anger than evidence. Their cultural thesis has left economic historians unconvinced, yet, until now, they have not effectively refuted it. And it proved remarkably persuasive, particularly among British Thatcherites in the early 1980s, a development that deepened Thompson’s irritation.

He subjects the Wiener/Barnett thesis to withering crossfire from three angles: he insists on a longer explanatory time frame; he pays proper attention to economic data including statistics; and he takes a good look at international, mainly Anglo-American and Anglo-German comparisons. The longer explanatory time frame is by itself devastating. The nub of the problem is chronological. The Weiner/Barnett thesis begins with the second half of the nineteenth century when the decline of the British economy is supposed to have set in. Thompson insists on comparing their thesis with analyses of the century of the Industrial Revolution before 1870, and he finds direct contradictions between the two accounts: “[a] gentry culture which in one phase is claimed as the hero of expansion and in the next as the villain of stagnation and contraction; and a relationship of businessmen to gentlemanly values which veers from being stimulating and productive to being stultifying and destructive” (p. 7). Instead of bemoaning the anti-entrepreneurial effects of gentrification upon middle-class businessmen, historians of the eighteenth century have drawn attention to “the readiness of aristocracy and gentry to behave commercially” (p. 20) and to be if anything too “sharply entrepreneurial in their handling of their agricultural estates" (p. 29). Extracting the cultural sting, Thompson arrives at the calm conclusion that "[g]entrification has been around for a very long time as a typical, probably the typical, outward expression of the upward social mobility of the wealth in Britain" (p. 143). Landed gentrification emerges from his study as a badge not so much of entrepreneurial decadence as of entrepreneurial success.

Nor was gentrification uniquely British, part of the disease from which Britain's eventually more successful competitors escaped. Thompson strengthens his critique with lovely touches of international comparison. "One need only look," he writes, "up the Hudson Valley at the rows of great mansions and parks of the Roosevelts, Rockefellers, and Vanderbilts, at the Hearst Castle and estate in California, or at the rural retreats of great German business dynasties like the Krupps, the Hoeschs, or the Siemens, to see that in other economies such manifestations of aristocratic tendencies have not been seen as signs of moral or economic decay" (p. 97).

Thompson uses economic data to close the coffin on the Wiener/Barnett thesis. Here his argument, which rests otherwise on the historiographic and primary source literature, is reinforced with detailed research. Much of it is statistical, enlivened with sketches of individuals, gleaned from estate records and compendia of biographical information. Thompson deploys these weapons against another set of historians, Lawrence and his wife Jeanne C. Fawtier Stone, and W. D. Rubinstein, who questioned the openness of the landed elite to those who acquired great wealth through trade and industry. The Stone/Rubinstein argument goes far to refute Wiener/Barnett, too far for Thompson. After careful calculation, he concludes that there was considerably more gentrification of businessmen than the Stones and Rubinstein allow, but "if it is measured by acceptance into landed society there was almost certainly a great deal less of it than implied by Wiener" (p. 73).

Thompson delivers his deadliest statistical blow to the cultural heart of the Wiener/Barnett argument with its emphasis on the "supposedly anti-industrial and anti-business attitudes instilled by the public schools" (p. 123). Thompson shows that "[a]t no time before 1945 did the long arm of the public schools reach very far into the boardrooms of British industry. . . . There simply were not enough public school boys in charge of businesses for their managerial and entrepreneurial performance, whether good or bad, to have had any decisive impact one way or the other" (p. 131). Then, standing the Wiener/Barnett thesis on its head, Thompson points out that "it was business and industry which were anti-public school and anti-university" (p. 137) rather than the other way round. He hammers his general point home with the comparative observation that the leading German businessmen, whom Wiener supposed to be culturally uninhibited entrepreneurs, preferred to send their sons to the local *Gymnasium*, an institution "far more starchily anti-modern and far more wedded to a strictly classical syllabus than any English grammar school or public school by the 1870s" (p. 138). Need one say more?

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