

Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement. *By Matthew Hilton*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xiii + 382 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations. Cloth, \$70.00; paper, \$27.99. ISBN: cloth, 0-521-83129-6; paper, 0-521-53853-X.

Reviewed by John Benson

For far too long, claims Matthew Hilton, historians of twentieth-century Britain—unlike those chronicling early-modern Britain or the United States of America—have studied consumerism and politics separately, on the assumption, implicit or explicit, that they are mutually exclusive. Such an approach, he believes, is deeply misguided. He means to put it right: “As a history of organised consumer movements and consumer politics, this book is an attempt to re-politicise consumerism, both as a category of analysis and a field of historical study” (p. 5).

Hilton’s focus on the organized consumer movement makes good sense, given our current understanding of consumption, consumerism, and the emergence of a so-called consumer society in twentieth-century Britain. His detailed analysis of developments across a wide range of political, consumer, business, trade-union, and women’s organizations is exceptionally impressive. It enables him, in particular, to identify a new chronology of consumption. He discerns a fundamental distinction between the first and second halves of the century, the former dominated by the politics of what he describes as “necessitous” consumption, the latter by the politics of “affluent” consumption.

During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Hilton suggests, “the politics of bread” were central to developments in a large number of working-class organizations and movements. He discusses, as one would expect, the activities of the Co-operative Society and the Women’s Co-operative Guild, but he also looks at the aims and achievements of groups such as the Independent Labour Party, the Social Democratic Federation, and the Trades Union Congress, whose consumerist interests and credentials are far less widely recognized. Indeed, as he points out, labor-movement activists tended to be deeply distrustful of luxury and to favor, in many cases, something approaching an ascetic way of life. Nonetheless, they well understood the importance of the cost of

living—the housewife, the Labour Party explained in 1938, “can give a lead in interpreting Labour’s policy in terms of her own job.” However, at no time during the first half of the century, did women’s—or men’s—concerns about prices and consumption come close to dislodging the labor movement’s traditional preoccupations with wages and work.

But change there was. According to Hilton’s analysis, the politics of consumption underwent a number of significant shifts during the course of the 1940s. “[D]istinctions between luxury and necessity, or between a life of ostentation and asceticism, were of little use in a world which accepted the right of the masses to some degree of material abundance and participation in consumer society” (p. 137). He ranges increasingly widely—and increasingly imaginatively—in his pursuit of the politics of consumption: from the Women’s Advisory Committee’s testing of domestic products in the early 1950s, to the National Anti-Hunt Coalition’s end-of-century campaign against the John Lewis Partnership for its encouragement of hunting on company outings.

However, Hilton is particularly interested in—and interesting on—the Consumers’ Association, the organization that was set up in 1956 as a private, non-profit-making company devoted to the interests of a predominantly middle-class membership. Within four to five years, the Association boasted a quarter of a million members, and eight million people claimed to have seen a copy of its magazine *Which*, which was widely known for its product reports and recommended “best buys.” But although the Association became a firmly entrenched British institution, mass readership did not mean mass activism. Its many subscribers, Hilton is at pains to point out, revealed little by way of deep-seated or wide-ranging commitment to consumerism, either as a social movement or as a political interest.

Hilton’s decision to focus on the organized consumer movement comes, it must be said, at something of a cost. His immersion in the institutional politics of consumerism means that the richness of his research tends in places to make for rather a heavy read. It means too that those indifferent to the politics of consumption and/or disinclined to involve themselves in organizational activity necessarily receive somewhat short shrift. But this is a price well worth paying. As other reviewers have already observed, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain* represents a major achievement. Empirically

rich and conceptually challenging, it confirms the need to incorporate consumption and consumerism into the proper analysis of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain. Business historians, along with other scholars, will need to take note.

John Benson is professor of history at the University of Wolverhampton. He has written widely on twentieth-century Britain: his recent books include The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880–1980 (1994); Prime Time: A History of the Middle Aged in Twentieth-Century Britain (1997); and Affluence and Authority: A Social History of Twentieth-Century Britain (2005). He is currently working on a study of “murder,” class, and gender in early-twentieth-century provincial England.