

Warfare State: Britain, 1920–1970. By David Edgerton. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xv + 364 pp. Index, notes, appendix, tables. Cloth, \$75.00; paper, \$32.99. ISBN: cloth, 0-521-85636-1; paper, 0-521-67231-7.

Reviewed by Alan Booth

This is an impressive book that offers a fundamental critique of a number of hypotheses about the nature of the British state and its relation with manufacturing industry. Perhaps the best way of approaching David Edgerton's work, and this book in particular, is to see it as an effective blast against Correlli Barnett's argument, propounded in *The Audit of War*, that the British state was always remote from the workings of manufacturing industry and that at a key juncture, the end of the Second World War, it opted to construct a welfare state, rather than choosing to rebuild its crumbling manufacturing base.

As Edgerton has argued in previous works, well before Britain created its welfare programs, a profoundly powerful British warfare state came into existence that supported technologically sophisticated branches of manufacturing in the interest of creating and defending a far-flung empire. Thus, Britain was the first nation to create a military-industrial complex, which supported, first, the great armaments firms that produced armor plating, gunnery systems, communications systems, and, eventually, aircraft and air defense for the Royal Navy. These were the high-technology industries of the 1920s and 1930s, and they were vigorously supported in research, development, and manufacturing techniques by a huge establishment of research scientists and similar members of what Edgerton terms "the research corps." He points out that the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force each had more qualified scientists than Cambridge University throughout the interwar years. Indeed, one of the main themes of the book is the neglect of this huge industrial research effort by commentators on both the British state and British manufacturing. Still more radical is his demonstration that the symbiotic relation between the state and the strategically important sectors of British industry, especially the high-technology branches, flourished well into the postwar years, buoyed

by an underlying spirit of technonationalism. The enthusiasm for achieving national technological excellence lasted until the late 1960s, when the Wilson government began to cut government research expenditure, shifting the center of gravity from the huge state research establishments to the universities and bringing a more commercial orientation to the research effort. Edgerton's reappraisal of the British state's support for technologically advanced industrial sectors is immensely impressive, persuasive, and overflowing with fresh insights.

Another of Edgerton's purposes for writing the book was to discover why the historiography of the British state has been so colored by the notion of its antipathy toward science. Edgerton notes that, compared to the situation in the United States, for example, university scientists and the research corps had little contact with each other. Moreover, the leading proponents of the view that the British state neglected science spoke up during a period of deep pessimism about British long-term economic prospects, with the result that more attention was paid to such arguments than they deserved. The position that the British government had paid too little attention to science became a staple of what Jim Tomlinson, another of the political-economic historians leading the reappraisal of recent British economic performance, has termed "declinism," the notion of a continuous, homogenous process of decline spanning more than a century, which was taken up enthusiastically by politicians and commentators in the 1950s and 1960s. This theme is less compelling and is not spelled out as persuasively as Edgerton's reappraisal of the nature of the British state, but he clearly wants to explain why the British military-industrial research corps has so consistently been given short shrift by historians. A fruitful exercise would be to read this book in conjunction with Jon Agar's *The Government Machine*, which shows how another group of British civil-service experts, the management specialists and information processors, have also been overlooked by economic, social, and political historians.

A fundamental reappraisal of British economic policy, performance, and institutions is now gathering pace. Edgerton's work has long been an inspirational part of that reappraisal. This, his latest, book is without doubt the most important single contribution to the new historiography of twentieth-century Britain.

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