

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Britain and Europe

JAMES ELLISON

Introduction

In his foreign policy speech at the Lord Mayor's Banquet on 10 November 2003, Tony Blair confided to his audience 'the British Prime Minister's European dilemma: do you hope that Europe develops of its own accord in Britain's direction before participating; or do you participate at the outset in the hope of moving Europe in Britain's direction?'¹ Blair is not the first prime minister to have to deal with this predicament and neither will he be the last. If there is one certainty in the history of Britain's relations with Europe, it is that they are rarely, if ever, uncomplicated.²

Blair's dilemma encapsulates the central issue for British governments since the Second World War of how to define policies towards European integration. From the moment European co-operation was first contemplated after 1945, the vexed question rested, mostly uncomfortably, on whether Britain should join its western European neighbours in their endeavours to create an integrated community. Once the Macmillan government announced its intent to seek negotiations on the terms of membership of the European Economic Community (EEC) on 31 July 1961, an unstable mix of national interest and national identity made Europe an issue of controversy in British political discourse. After the United Kingdom joined the European Community in 1973, the question rested, still largely uncomfortably, on how far Britain should involve itself in the developments which have produced the modern European Union. Partly in consequence of the all-pervading and often troublesome contemporary significance of Britain's European quandary, but also due to the prominence of the issue in the annual release of government papers, the subject has received much attention from scholars of British history and has become a dominant historiographical field of enquiry.³

This chapter explores that field of enquiry. It begins by considering three major historiographical perspectives on Britain's relations with Europe: the missed opportunities school; the revisionist response to it which considers whether Britain's differences from other European powers explain its troubled relationship with European integration; and Alan Milward's national strategy thesis. The chapter then gives these

historiographical views their place in the specifics of the subject by considering the key points in the chronology and how historians have advanced our understanding of them. Here it concentrates on the period 1945–1963, about which most historical research based on archival material has been carried out. The chapter concludes by drawing out the innovations in the field and by contemplating its development.

Three Historiographical Perspectives

Any delineation of historiographical perspectives on a subject as complex as Britain and Europe will not do the literature entire justice, but it is possible to identify three broad approaches. The first is the missed opportunities school, which suggests that misjudgement at the top condemned Britain to the ill-befitting position of *demandeur* for too long with deleterious consequences. The second is the revisionist response to the missed opportunities school, which variously discards its premise, seeks to understand and explain British policy choices and actions and the difficulties experienced by the British in pursuing, achieving and benefiting from membership. The third and the most recent is Alan Milward's national strategy thesis, which rejects the methodology of previous research, sets Britain's European policy within a wider framework and argues that the strategy chosen by British governments was essentially the right one. The features of each of these perspectives will now be explored further.

The missed opportunities school

Reflecting in 1996 on Britain's relations with Europe, Sir Oliver Wright, the retired British diplomat and adviser to the prime ministers Alec Douglas-Home and Harold Wilson, commented: 'I've often thought the patron saint of British European policy was Ethelred the Unready.' He went on to say:

At key moments, we've always been unready, including the first key moment. We have always been unready to take decisions from which we could have derived maximum advantage instead of which so far, like Johnny come lately, we've had to run and catch up and accept what the others have already decided and in a sense got very little advantage from it. But if you adopt a permanent policy of Ethelred the Unready you've only got yourself to blame, haven't you?⁴

Wright's patron saint has played his part in configuring a significant school of thought which describes Britain's relations with Europe as a history of failure. Actors in the events, prominent commentators, political scientists and historians have to varying degrees promoted the supposition that Britain forfeited early chances to influence, join and lead Europe, and then suffered isolation until 1973, deprived of the economic growth enjoyed by EEC members in the Community's first decade. A long tradition exists amongst former British ministers and officials involved in the development and implementation of Britain's European policy of lamenting the lack of British foresight and initiative towards European co-operation. Frequently noted are the detrimental effects of being 'Johnny come lately' on a country which needed to shed its imperial baggage earlier than it did, embrace a European destiny more suit-

able to its geographical location, and benefit from this new foundation for its international position.⁵ Indeed, the prime minister most associated with beginning Britain's transition towards the EEC, Harold Macmillan, led the way in this admission of failure, writing in his memoirs that Britain 'should have been more alert to the dangers' in 1955 when the Six powers (Belgium, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Luxembourg and The Netherlands) met in Messina, Sicily, to discuss their plans for further European integration.⁶

This idea that Europe was a missed opportunity for Britain has also found a dominant place in scholarship. Miriam Camps, in her landmark work of contemporary history, *Britain and the European Community 1955–1963*, published in 1964, was the first substantive account which had elements of such a premise.⁷ Unique in her position as an insider and historian, Camps's criticisms of the British government were measured, but the balance of her judgements was later clearly influenced by the course of British policy post-1963. In 1993 she argued that 'The British failure to give their relationship with Western Europe a higher priority in the early post-war period was one of the biggest of several missed opportunities to establish a satisfactory relationship with continental Western Europe. Also, many of the actions taken and the attitudes adopted in this early period created problems for the British later.'⁸

Amid the troubled contemporary affairs between Britain and the European Community in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, historians and political scientists elaborated upon the perspective of witnesses to the events and early historians such as Camps. Michael Charlton's *The Price of Victory*, a hybrid publication, part populist history, part witness testimony, had as its theme the failures of British decision-makers to attach requisite importance to the events leading up to the founding of the EEC. This view was given greater weight by the discussion of it in the first surveys of post-war British European policy, written by historians who had cut their teeth on the period 1945–50.⁹ It then grew specific in its attention to two particular moments, both of which will receive attention later in this chapter, the Schuman Plan of 1950 and the Messina conference of 1955, when a supposed parting of the ways took place between Britain and the Six.¹⁰

Perhaps the most articulate explication of the missed opportunities school is that of the late journalist and political commentator Hugo Young. Young admitted the hindsight involved in his argument, a contravention of one of the tenets of historical research but a hazard for all those who argue that Britain failed to recognize earlier the opportunity offered by European integration. Focusing on the actions of central individuals, Young argued that British leaders made judgements on 'misperceptions of truth':

The people who made the error had their reasons, but subsequent events show that, for too long, their attachment to Britain's cultural and historic differences got the better of their political judgement. Ultimately, Britain did choose the fate her leaders long resisted or failed fully to embrace – but only after a period in which much opportunity was, by sheer lapse of time, wasted.¹¹

The missed opportunities school's arguments have been confirmed by events time and again since Britain took the decision to apply for membership and then

eventually gained it. But this confirmation in itself raises a problem. Hugo Young's admission of hindsight stands out, as historians have generally been very careful about the positions they take when finding fault with British policy to avoid such a perspective. The missed opportunities school may be criticized for writing history backwards, conditioned by the long-run development of the Six and Britain's problematic relationship with European integration. Consequently, it has had its detractors who contest its methodology and standpoint in relation to specific issues, examples of which will be considered below. Prior to that, two further major historiographical perspectives need to be examined, both of which by their very design reject the first school.

The revisionist response

Largely in reaction to arguments based on accusations of missed opportunities and failure, the majority of historical research on Britain and Europe may be categorized, somewhat unsatisfactorily given its complexity, as revisionism. Historians of this perspective often take issue with the methodological appropriateness of the missed opportunities school and seek instead to explain and understand policy-making and policy implementation rather than condemn it. This is not to say that such historians do not offer critical judgements, but instead that they are careful to avoid the dangers involved in hindsight or in teleological interpretations, particularly those based on the premise that the course of integration chosen by the Six in 1950 was set on a trajectory of success.¹²

The first examples of revisionism came in the work of a group of historians who analysed the European policy of the Attlee government and the role in particular of Ernest Bevin as Foreign Secretary.¹³ Here, the emphasis of the research was on the reconstruction of decision-making processes, on the influence of personalities, party politics and institutional attitudes, and on the relationship between Britain's European policies and its wider policies, especially towards the United States, the Commonwealth and the Cold War.¹⁴ The methodology of this early work has significantly influenced the consequent writing of the history of Britain and Europe to the present day, especially after it found wide expression in the first surveys written on the subject.¹⁵

There have been various avenues of research leading on from the arguments raised by these revisionists, especially in their surveys of the history of Britain and Europe over the whole post-war period. One has been particularly productive, namely Stephen George's contention that Britain is essentially different to the founding members of the EEC and that this uniqueness explains much of the difficulty in its acceptance of European integration.¹⁶ George applied his thesis to the history of Britain's membership of the European Community after 1973, but it has nevertheless either overtly or tacitly informed historical analysis of the period from 1945 onwards.

The debate concerns the degree to which Britain's geographical location, its history, the nature of the British state, its systems of government, and the attitudes of its leaders and peoples explain the difficulties it faced in adjusting from a global to a European regional position in the post-war period. This concept of difference

is what Winston Churchill implied in his famous phrase that described Britain as being 'with but not of' Europe. Yet the idea has recently been criticized, mainly on the grounds that Britain was not distinctly different to other western European states who are members of the European Union.¹⁷

As one of the leading revisionists, John Young, points out, Britain has indeed shared similarities with other member states in that it has sought to achieve objectives related to the national interest through the process of European integration. But at the same time, Britain was different from the Six. Its historical development was in many ways uncommon, not least during the Second World War when it was neither occupied nor saw its institutions destroyed. Britain's immediate post-war outlook was also unique; policy-makers recognized the importance of Europe, not least in Cold War terms, but nevertheless had other priorities, specifically in relation to economics and defence and Anglo-American and Anglo-Commonwealth/empire relations. These aspects of the British national interest strengthened British leaders' anti-supranational stance in response to the proposals of the Six. However, a main contention of the revisionists is that this did not mean that Britain was ill-disposed towards European co-operation, rather that it had a different conception of it to that of the Six.¹⁸

These are the general themes that have been explored and developed by revisionist historians, who have produced more comprehensive and credible explanations of British policy than those offered by the missed opportunities school. This will be seen below in the discussion of particular moments in the post-war history of Britain and Europe but beforehand it is necessary to introduce the third historiographical perspective, which responds to the work of both the missed opportunities school and the revisionists.

The national strategy thesis

Although it cannot yet be described as a school of thought, standing as it does alone and ahead of the field, Alan Milward's national strategy thesis warrants singular attention in this survey of the historiography of Britain and Europe for the novelty of its methodology and the originality of its argument.¹⁹ In the first volume of his official history of the UK and the European Community, *The Rise and Fall of a National Strategy, 1945–1963*, Milward eschews the missed opportunities approach and develops an argument which, though having shades of revisionism, distinguishes itself by its perspective.

Unlike those who have gone before him, Milward presents two key propositions: first, British policy towards European integration can and should be understood as an aspect of a greater national strategy for post-war renewal; second, that strategy, and thus British European policy, was a rational choice for a country whose assets were largely extra-European and whose aims, like those of any other country, were to provide economic and physical security for its population. From this conceptual position, Milward is able to deal with the issue of Britain and Europe unburdened by the negativity of the missed opportunities school, a point he makes in his introduction: 'a critique of the grandiosity of British strategy usually posits "Europe" as an alternative to the worldwide stage on which the United Kingdom is judged no

longer to have had the resources and the influence to perform. The argument of this volume is that such critiques themselves are unrealistic.²⁰

The analytical framework that Milward constructs to judge British policy towards Europe is that of the wider national strategy of which it was a part. While other historians, particularly revisionists, have explored Britain's European policy as an element of its wider foreign and economic policies, none have done so with the coherence that Milward has. The national strategy that he describes as being in place by 1950 sought to make the best of what Britain had to bargain with – principally its Commonwealth trade preferences – in full knowledge of the limited endurance of its global reach and power, and in the hope of securing a long-term settlement on the basis of a grand tariff agreement with the United States. The aim was to construct a one-world system uniquely advantageous to Britain's position, economically and politically. Limited co-operation with Europe was only one aspect of the rise of this strategy but, in Milward's view, it was the deciding factor in its fall: 'In 1962 in the negotiations for entry into the European Community, a major element of [the strategy], the importance attached to trade preferences in the Commonwealth, had to be abandoned, and the search for a new strategy had to begin.'²¹

With this concentration on the goals and course of Britain's national strategy, Milward is able to render invalid 'the simplistic question of whether the United Kingdom should have joined the European Communities or not' by arguing that this was not Britain's primary aim as long as the national strategy existed.²² Milward exonerates Britain from decisions others have described as failures. He states that there was no imperative for Britain to join the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), that association with the European Defence Community (EDC) was the appropriate policy, that the Free Trade Area proposal's failure was not a foregone conclusion, and that Britain could not have done more, earlier, to deflect de Gaulle's veto of the first application. These are controversial statements. Yet Milward is not an apologist for British policy. He argues that there were weaknesses in the strategy, particularly in the reluctance of British governments to adjust relations with the Commonwealth. He also argues that, once Britain decided to modify its national strategy to accommodate the development of the European Community, errors in judgement and presentation contributed to its demise. Ultimately, though, in Milward's view, Britain's European policy, as a by-product of a greater national strategy based on a rational appreciation of Britain's place in the world, was sustainable until other, largely uncontrollable, events, such as the success of French strategy within the EEC and the American preference for a regional European discriminatory trade bloc, rendered it unobtainable. It was at that point in the summer of 1962 that a new strategy, based on EEC membership, became Britain's principal policy.

Such is the state of the major historiographical debates about Britain and Europe. The three perspectives outlined above hold the high ground in an area of enquiry which is rich in detail, examples of which are the focus of the next section of this chapter.

The Historiography in Detail

Although historical research on the question of Britain and Europe now deals with it in its most contemporary sense, the majority of scholarly attention has followed

the release of government documents and other archival papers under the 30-year rule. The leading edge of the subject has thus reached 1970, although a mature debate only exists for the period 1945–63 with new research initiating the discourse for 1964–70.²³ In light of this, the following discussion will select events from 1945 to 1963 to exemplify key areas of historical interest. These will be the adjustments in Ernest Bevin's European policy from 1945 to 1949, Britain's rejection of the Schuman Plan in 1950, its response to the Messina conference of June 1955, the evolution of its policy towards Europe from 1956 to 1961, and the failure of the first application for EEC membership in 1963.

Ernest Bevin's European policy

To an uninitiated audience, it often comes as some surprise to learn that in the immediate post-war period, the British government seriously considered the prospect of a foreign policy based on association with western Europe rather than with the United States. Such an audience is enlightened by the debate about Ernest Bevin's aims as Foreign Secretary in the Attlee government, which rests on two premises. The first has it that Bevin placed little importance on Anglo-European co-operation and, motivated by anti-communism and pro-Americanism, sought from 1945 to orchestrate a mutual defence arrangement with the United States.²⁴ The second, almost a mirror image, suggests that Bevin, 'so far as Europe was concerned . . . was remarkably integrationist and embraced the idea of Britain, through close collaboration with her European neighbours, holding an intermediate and cooperative position between the two new Superpowers – a "third force"'.²⁵

It is the second of these two premises that now holds the ground. The first places too much weight on the interest of Bevin and the British government in prioritizing relations with the United States, and gives too much coherence to the search for an Atlantic alliance from 1945. Moreover, it fails to accommodate the fluidity of events leading up to the formation of NATO in 1949, a period unusual in the post-war era for its tumult. The more convincing second interpretation sees British attitudes towards Europe undergo change in response to the development of events. Britain was not entirely prejudiced against a European-based foreign policy or predisposed towards one which elevated the United States to first ally status. Indeed, the significant evidence that Bevin and the British Foreign Office considered the idea of a western European union in 1947–8, perhaps including colonial assets, points towards this. Bevin's famous Commons speech on 22 January 1948 is crucial to this view. The European priority waned only when the onset of the Cold War, weakness in the British economy, and the unreliability of the western Europeans for British security coalesced to force Bevin and the British government to seek a link with the United States which could sustain Britain's fundamental national interests.

At this early post-war stage, therefore, it was the paramount importance of providing security which ensured that relations with the United States dominated relations with Europe. It was not that the Attlee government was instinctively opposed to Anglo-European unity, rather that such unity (especially in the form conceived by some on the Continent) did not fit with Britain's main objectives at that time. This view has found further support in Alan Milward's national strategy thesis which develops a similar line but places primary importance on Britain's post-war economic

goals.²⁶ Continental proposals for a European customs union built on Marshall Plan aid did not suit Britain's economy, based as it was on the pre-eminence of sterling as an international currency and on trade with the Commonwealth and empire. Moreover, to a country set on restoring its international position, association with the United States was the only course which would enable Britain to pursue its one-world economic policy or, as Milward describes it, its national strategy.

Historical research on British policy towards European co-operation from 1945 to 1949 has thus produced a persuasive interpretation. Policy towards Europe was at first a priority as a means of re-establishing British power (and did not involve the abrogation of British sovereignty). It lost its status in the Attlee government's agenda once Britain's economic policies pointed in the opposite direction to ideas for a continental customs union and when the Cold War began to bite. Between 1948 and 1950 this became the basis of British policy towards European co-operation just as Britain was invited to join its European neighbours in their first attempt to create a supranational organization.

Britain and the Schuman Plan

Britain's rejection of the invitation to join the discussions initiated by the French Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, on 9 May 1950 has been the focus of much historical research, not least because Schuman's call for a pooling of coal and steel production under the auspices of a supranational authority produced the ECSC, the institution which began the process of economic integration which would eventually lead to the EEC. This moment and its intricacies (not least the nature of the invitation to the British, the question of whether the French wished to exclude Britain, perhaps with tacit American agreement, and the British Cabinet decision of 2 June 1950) have produced a historiographical debate which serves as a microcosm of the study of Britain and Europe involving each of the three perspectives outlined earlier in this chapter. In particular, it reveals the character of the missed opportunities school and responses to it.

Britain's self-exclusion from the negotiations following the Schuman Plan has especial magnitude for those who argue that this was the most critical of the missed opportunities in Britain's relations with the European Community. Anthony Nutting first took this position in his 1960 publication, and it was supported by Michael Charlton, who argued in 1983 that 'as subsequent events were, in the end, to prove, Britain had made the first major misjudgement of how Europe was going to "evolve" and would pay a heavy price for standing back in 1950'.²⁷ This view had endurance and despite the revisionism of Bevin's European policy was invigorated in the work of Edmund Dell.²⁸ In a classic expression of missed opportunity, Dell takes each of the major principles upon which the Attlee government rejected the Schuman Plan and counters them. The foremost of these, the potential abrogation of British sovereignty on joining a supranational institution, is reversed as Dell argues that, by excluding itself from the formation of the ECSC, the British government in the long run weakened its own sovereignty. The leadership of Europe was handed to France, Britain's influence in Europe and in the United States (the US government keenly supported the ECSC) was reduced, and within 11 years

Britain had to seek entry into the club formed in 1950. The bus had left the station and Britain had missed it, condemned, in Oliver Wright's phrase, to being 'Johnny come lately'.

The element of 'what could have been' in the missed opportunities school involves varying degrees of hindsight, but its proponents have done historical understanding a service in generating debate. Other historians' replies to their work offer two kinds of antidote. The first, of the revisionists, seeks to understand the decision of the British government rather than denounce it. In this view, while some dismissiveness of the proposals may have been involved in the numerous opinions which produced the decision on 2 June 1950, there were also reasonable grounds for rejection of the French plan. Britain's interests simply did not fit with a supranational European grouping. The issue of sovereignty was not just constitutional but was related to the fact that there were no economic incentives for Britain to pool its coal and steel industries with those of the Six. Moreover, Britain's outlook was global, not European, especially during the early years of the Cold War. This did not mean, however, that the British wished ill on the European undertakings. Indeed, John Young suggests that Britain sought association with the ECSC, as it would with the EDC, in a policy of 'benevolence towards, but non-involvement in, supranationalism'.²⁹

The second antidote is that of Alan Milward's thesis. His view of the British rejection of the Schuman Plan reveals how his national strategy argument shares similarities with the research of the revisionists. Milward deals with the issue of a missed opportunity head on and employs some of the arguments ranged by, for example, John Young. Yet he takes the economic grounds for Britain's decision further and, more significantly in historiographical terms, sets it within the wider framework of the global national strategy. From this perspective, the decision in June 1950 is entirely understandable and furthermore, in answer to the question of whether joining the ECSC would have led to Britain becoming a founding member of the EEC, Milward argues that 'The break between the United Kingdom and the Six in 1955 would not have been avoided by earlier British membership of the ECSC, unless British foreign policy and commercial policy had changed as a result of an overall change in national strategy. Membership of the ECSC would not have had such a sweeping impact.'³⁰ It is to 1955 and the second occasion that Britain was invited to join the Six that we now turn.

Britain and Messina

The Eden government's response to the Messina conference of June 1955 is fodder for a conclusion similar to that reached by proponents of the missed opportunities school on Britain and the Schuman Plan. Messina was the moment when Britain could have joined the ECSC powers on the infamous bus heading towards Rome and the creation of the EEC.³¹ Yet such a view has been questioned on two grounds. On the one hand, it has been suggested that there was no bus to catch as the 'success of the Messina initiative was not at all guaranteed' and that, having examined it, 'no [British] minister seriously considered buying a ticket'.³² On the other, the bus debate is rendered a non-issue methodologically: 'Discussions of "lost opportunities" or the

“missed bus” . . . bristle with methodological difficulties; they are both highly speculative and, in the end, rather unsatisfactory. Because of the range of assumptions and historical might-have-beens involved, the debate seems unanswerable in anything like precise terms.³³ This has to be close to the last word on the topic, showing that the Messina bus takes historians, unlike the Six, to a dead end.

Whereas there is still debate about Britain’s supposed first missed opportunity in 1950, a consensus is being reached over the second in 1955. No historian disputes that this was an instance when the British government machine malfunctioned. From the first archival studies to the latest, the most constructive research has examined personal and institutional attitudes and the process which led Britain to discount and even oppose the Six’s plans for a common market.³⁴ Much rests on what principles the Eden government was able to set aside its officials’ judgement in November 1955 that if a European common market succeeded, ‘the disadvantages [for Britain] of abstaining would, *in the long-run*, outweigh the advantages’.³⁵ The picture that is painted in response to this question reveals much about the tenets of British European policy.

In 1955 an essentially economic issue was decided on political grounds.³⁶ There is some debate about quite how far the failure of the EDC and the success of the British intergovernmental lifebuoy, the Western European Union (WEU), predisposed the British to discount the Six’s efforts, but there is agreement that British involvement was rejected on the basis of the pre-existing stance of prioritizing extra-European policies. Of the entire British government machine, there were only three voices of dissent. One came from the Economic Section of the Treasury, which counselled that a successful common market excluding Britain would be harmful to its economic interests, and the others from the now legendary Board of Trade official who attended the Spaak Committee, Russell Bretherton, and his superior, Sir Frank Lee, both of whom raised concerns about British policy. These were no match for an overwhelming combination of ministerial and Whitehall anti-Messina opinion. The significance of historical research on this subject reveals how much the decision of autumn 1955 was official-led. Ministers, motivated either by doubt bred by the EDC/WEU experience, disinterest due to the problems Europe posed for Conservative Party politics, or indifference, played no active role (Harold Macmillan’s part has been a point of debate). Instead, the Foreign Office, in one of its most unenlightened moments, discounted the Six’s chances and the Treasury saw their proposals as an unwanted complication for Britain’s one-world policy. Only the Board of Trade, a relatively lowly department, urged a more productive response to the Six, but even it did not favour a common market. Political judgements, largely from Treasury officials opposed to the Six’s form of economic co-operation, configured the economic case against British membership which was accepted by ministers who were not politically disposed to consider Messina seriously, especially given the Foreign Office disinclination to apportion credence to the Six.

This interpretation of Britain’s response to Messina synthesizes the general thrust of recent accounts, but it is important to note that there are differing emphases. Revisionist diplomatic historians, while giving full attention to the decisions of October/November 1955, also concentrate on the diplomacy associated with them. In their *démarche* the British departed from the policy of benevolent non-involvement to one of short-lived malevolent involvement which had enduring effect

on Britain's reputation amongst the Six, ensuring their suspicion of subsequent British policy initiatives.³⁷ This important diplomatic fall out is not the focus of Alan Milward in his recent research, which concentrates instead on how Britain's national strategy dictated the decision taken over the Messina proposals. Milward argues that the Eden government simply reaffirmed the national strategy set out by 1950, and thus 'Britain crossed the Rubicon almost by default' because membership of a European common market appeared to British ministers 'as the death of the global strategy which they all, with considerable differences of emphasis, supported'.³⁸ Milward also questions the health of that strategy and the Messina decision, especially in light of British economic performance and the evidence of French commitment to European integration from 1950 to 1952.

This is the state of the field on Britain and Messina. A certain maturity in the historiography has been achieved in relation to the missed opportunities school, and through the research of diplomatic and economic historians we have a full picture of the reason why Britain decided against membership of a European common market and the impact of its consequent diplomacy. The same maturity is also having a similar effect on the study of policy from 1956 to 1961.

The evolution of British policy, 1956–1961

The period from the failure of Britain's initial response to the Messina conference to the announcement of its intent to negotiate terms of membership of the EEC on 31 July 1961 is when British policy towards European integration underwent, in the words of historian R. T. Griffiths, 'a slow one hundred and eighty degree turn'. The decision of 1961 reversed that of 1955. Ostensibly, this was a straightforward development, yet the two moments of greatest policy evolution since 1948–50 – the Free Trade Area (FTA) proposal of 1956–8 and the first application of 1961 – are matters of conflicting historical opinion. The debates centre on the intent of Britain's FTA proposal and the degree to which the first application marked a turning-point in British attitudes towards Europe.

In its early stages, historical enquiry concentrated on contemporary suspicion, heightened by Britain's diplomacy towards the Messina proposals, that Plan G, as the FTA proposal was known in Whitehall, was a British attempt to sabotage the common market by dissolving it in a wider, looser economic area 'like a lump of sugar in an English cup of tea'.³⁹ While it may have left a nasty taste in the mouth of some of its opponents, it is now accepted that the FTA was ultimately not intended to destroy the common market. Although it cannot be ruled out that there were those in the British government from 1956 to 1958 who hoped that it would have this effect, recent research suggests that the FTA was based on the assumption that the common market would endure and that Britain would make peace with it. It was less a case of dissolving and more a case of blending.⁴⁰ The problem for the Macmillan government was that this was a British recipe for a continental chef. The result was rejection, at the hands of the first of General de Gaulle's vetoes in November 1958.

This is an important aspect of the FTA, but its real significance in the study of Britain and Europe is what it represented in the overall advance of British attitudes. Although some historians still view it in negative terms, it has been depicted

otherwise.⁴¹ One account illustrates the seriousness with which the Whitehall departments that had influenced Bevin's European policy, recommended rejection of the Schuman Plan and opposed Messina, now recognized the importance of Europe for British interests and initiated, with ministerial support, adaptation towards it.⁴² This view is similar to Alan Milward's recent judgement that the FTA was a 'tactical adjustment' which sought 'to bring nearer the grand tariff bargain with the USA which would put in place the one-world system'.⁴³ For Milward, the FTA was the initial move in a two-step which produced the first application and ultimately brought the demise of the national strategy which had governed Britain's European policy since 1950.

The debate about Britain's first application has largely been influenced by the question of whether it was a 'turning-point' in British policy.⁴⁴ The answer offered by historians has been no. Instead, the first application is represented as a shift in British tactics to secure traditional goals, the same ends by different means. Two specific interpretations are the most significant. The first, from Wolfram Kaiser, is that the first application used Europe and abused the Europeans in 'a dual "appeasement" strategy' to maintain strong Anglo-American relations, particularly in nuclear terms, and to hold the Conservative Party together while splitting the Labour Party.⁴⁵ This sweeping argument has been criticized for underplaying the motives specific to European integration and overplaying uncertain potential diplomatic and political by-products.

The motives underplayed by Kaiser have been the focus of other research which offers a more compelling interpretation of the first application. In a detailed study of the process of policy-making, Jacqueline Tratt argues that trade concerns provided the foundations for a decision which was then taken on political and geopolitical grounds.⁴⁶ Sharing elements of Tratt's analysis, Alan Milward also acknowledges geopolitical motives, but emphasizes the link between the first application and Britain's wider national strategy. In this view, the first application was the product of Macmillan's 'restless determination not to see the United Kingdom's position in Europe deteriorate' and the efforts of 'a small group of like-minded officials' set on changing the national strategy to accommodate Europe's new economic, and political, importance.⁴⁷ Such a contention, part historiographical synthesis, part original research, part innovative approach, produces the clearest and most convincing picture of the motives for Britain's first application, suggesting that, while it was not a turning-point, it had the potential to become one should the application fail.

The failure of the first application, 1961–1963

Britain's first application failed on 14 January 1963 when General de Gaulle issued his second *non* to a British European initiative. It led a dejected Harold Macmillan to make his often quoted diary entry of 28 January 1963: 'All our policies at home and abroad are in ruins'.⁴⁸ The ramifications of the failed effort are clear in this statement, and have led historians to ask two particular questions of Britain's policy: why did it fail, and could Britain have done more to ensure its success? In producing answers, three perspectives prevail, variously criticizing each other. The first, of Wolfram Kaiser, is that high diplomacy outside the Brussels negotiations, specifically

the Macmillan–de Gaulle relationship and the issue of nuclear co-operation, explains the failure of the application. The second, of Piers Ludlow, is that the real explanation can be found in the Brussels negotiations themselves, where Britain could have done more, earlier, to stack the cards against a unilateral intervention by de Gaulle. The third, of Alan Milward, analyses and dismisses the other two arguments, suggesting that de Gaulle took the decision to veto regardless of nuclear diplomacy and that Britain could not have done more in the Brussels negotiations.

Kaiser's main explanation for the failure of the first application is a mix of politics and geopolitics.⁴⁹ His view is akin to contemporary opinion which suggested that de Gaulle was predisposed to veto a British application on the grounds that Britain was insufficiently European and overwhelmingly Atlanticist. Given that de Gaulle aimed to put distance between Europe and the United States via French leadership of the EEC, British membership was therefore contrary to France's interests. The failure of Macmillan to offer de Gaulle a substantive nuclear bargain as a form of compensation and payment for entry ensured that the French leader alighted on the opportunity provided by the exclusive Anglo-American nuclear agreement at Nassau in December 1962 to break off the Brussels negotiations.

Ludlow's explanation of the failure of the talks, and his contention that there were moments when Britain might have improved its chances of success, rest on his study of the Brussels negotiations between Britain and the EEC powers from 1961 to 1963.⁵⁰ He does not reject the issues of diplomacy raised by Kaiser, but instead argues that the negotiations themselves reveal much about why the French were able to defeat the British: the negotiations were 'a central part of the plot, and, one which, if acted out differently, could have totally altered the dénouement'.⁵¹ Had Britain been more flexible, and the Six more wilful, then the application's potential for success could have been improved prior to the strengthening of de Gaulle's domestic position in 1962, which enabled him to veto unilaterally. It was thus Britain's own negotiating tactics which help explain why its application failed.

Milward's explanation distinguishes itself from Kaiser's and Ludlow's by countering their major suppositions and offering in their place an overarching judgement related to his central national strategy thesis.⁵² He accepts that de Gaulle was influenced by questions of Atlantic–European relations and nuclear diplomacy, but he discounts them as reasons for his veto at some length, arguing that 'It seems perverse to ignore a total of three years of deadlock between Britain and France in economic negotiations and to suppose that something else – the organization of NATO, the lack of help for the development of French nuclear weapons, and of France's determination to challenge the USA's dominance over western Europe – was the cause of [the] final breakdown [of the Brussels negotiations]'.⁵³ Milward also analyses the evolving positions within the British Cabinet over the Brussels negotiations in the summer of 1962 and concludes that the Macmillan government could not have negotiated more quickly 'without an increased danger of division'.⁵⁴ Ultimately, however, for Milward, neither of these points offers the real explanation for the application's failure. That must come from the clash between Britain's national strategy and France's: 'Britain's weakness in the negotiations did not spring from its tactics but from direct conflict between its own worldwide strategy, which in the Conservative Party still had powerful adherents, and that of France. It was not a part of the United

Kingdom's strategy to base its economic or political future on European preferences. France, however, would accept nothing less and the outcome was de Gaulle's veto.⁵⁵

The historiography of the fortunes of the first application exemplifies how a mature debate between historians of different perspectives, uncomplicated by questions of missed opportunities, can produce a full and comprehensive explanation of Britain's early relationship with the European Community. This represents the field at its best, and though Milward's thesis will be contested, as things stand, it offers the most coherent explanation for British policy towards the European Community.

The Future of the Subject

This chapter has introduced the current state of historical research on Britain and Europe with reference to the major historiographical perspectives and specific areas of interest and controversy. In this final section, there will be reflection on the field of inquiry and rumination on the development of the subject. Though it is an unusual practice for the historian to look forwards as well as backwards, such navel- and crystal ball-gazing may be useful, as it is clear that the relationship between Britain and Europe has become a significant theme so far in the study of post-1945 British history and is set to hold a dominant position in the future.

The enhancement of historical understanding of Britain's policies towards European integration and relations with western European powers has largely been due to the research of political and diplomatic historians, and also economic historians and political scientists. Focus has concentrated on key moments of policy evolution (the demise of western union in 1948 and the creation of the national strategy, the rejection of common market membership and the proposal for a Free Trade Area in 1957, and the Macmillan government's decision on the first application in 1961) and instances of historical magnitude (Britain's rejection of the Schuman Plan in 1950, its response to the Messina proposals in 1955, and the failure of the first application in 1961–3). A number of particular avenues of enquiry are notable. The objective of explaining and understanding British policy in its development and implementation, rather than criticizing it for simply missing opportunities over Europe, has produced commendable, constructive research. Within this, the study of personalities has been of benefit in and of itself and as a means of analysing the course of policy evolution. Figures such as Bevin, Churchill, Eden, Heath, Macmillan and Wilson stand tall. So too do key officials such as Bretherton, Cooper, Dixon, Jebb, Lee, Makins, O'Neill, Palliser, Roberts, Robinson and Roll. At times almost forensic reconstruction of the systems of government and the architecture of decision-making has produced a full understanding of British policy. So too has the examination of its implementation on both a diplomatic and a technical level. At its best, the writing of the history of Britain and Europe incorporates all of these elements, which marks a significant methodological advance as evinced by the ambition of recent research.

There have also been related areas of enquiry. Study of Britain's relations with western European countries has produced particularly informative research, as has scrutiny of the negotiations between Britain and the Six from 1961 to 1963.⁵⁶ Associated foreign policy questions are now benefiting from research. Most recently, Britain's policy towards the EDC has been viewed through the lens of Anglo-American relations, and Britain's relationship with Europe has received its fitting Cold

War angle.⁵⁷ Also in foreign and economic policy terms, specific examination of Britain, the Commonwealth and Europe is beginning to rectify the surprising lack of interest in this topic.⁵⁸ Related to these areas is research on British foreign economic policy and Europe.⁵⁹

It might be surmised from this description that historical research on Britain and Europe has been energetic and comprehensive. The former assumption is accurate, the latter is not. The historiographical debate is without question very rich, but it has yet to enter all significant environs. In the domestic context, research on political parties and Europe is still in its very early stages and, similarly, pressure groups have received little attention.⁶⁰ In the same vein, there has been all but no research on the relationship between government policy, the press and public opinion.⁶¹ Consequently, historians still refer to books published on these subjects in the 1970s and 1980s.⁶² In the European context, Ludlow's research on the Six and the British stands almost alone in the study of Community negotiations and member states' views of Britain.⁶³ There have been relatively few analyses of the attitude of the Six and their institutions, let alone other European powers, towards the British from 1950 onwards.⁶⁴ Neither have there been extensive comparative histories, despite their potential effectiveness.⁶⁵ In the international context, while a full historiographical debate exists on Britain's relations with the United States, there has been limited analysis of the impact that relationship had on Britain's European policy or of the effect Anglo-American relations have had on the course of European integration.⁶⁶ The same can still be said about Anglo-Commonwealth relations and Europe, despite the obvious relationship between economic change, the end of empire and the movement towards Europe.⁶⁷

The predominance of political, diplomatic and economic historians in the field accounts in part for some of these lacunae. So too does the nature of historical enquiry itself. Arguably, apart from aspects of the domestic context and the attitudes of the Six towards Britain, these missing links had to be preceded by research on the development of British governmental policy. There are other related factors. Domestic political research demands a particular kind of historian and access to, and analysis of, the sources related to such issues as public opinion is by no means as straightforward as that related to government records. Also, in respect of the attitudes of the Six and other European countries towards Britain, there has not been great interest from non-British historians in exploiting European archives, neither has the field in the UK bred large numbers of historians whose linguistic and archival skills have encouraged them to travel to repositories in Brussels, Paris or Bonn, for example.

These points have particular relevance to the future of the field. The now well-established traditional approaches to the subject will endure. Political and diplomatic historians will write event-specific studies beginning shortly with British entry in 1970–3, through the renegotiations and referendums of the mid-1970s, to Thatcher and the British budgetary question, the Single European Act and then Britain and Maastricht, the Exchange Rate Mechanism, Black Wednesday, and eventually Blair, the euro and beyond.⁶⁸ They will maintain the perspectives which have proven productive in the study of Britain and Europe before 1970. But the subject will change significantly once Britain has become a member of the European Community, rather than an applicant.

Consideration of the plethora of effects that membership of the European Community/Union has had on the life of the British state and peoples confirms that the study of Britain and Europe after 1973 will be an entirely different subject than that which exists now. Areas of interest will include: Britain as an actor within the Community/Union and as a player in its system; the impact of membership on the British state, especially in constitutional and legal terms; the implementation and effect of Community/Union legislation; the relationship between the Community/Union economy and policy and the British economy and policy; the attitude of successive British governments to change within the Community/Union in relation to widening, deepening and enlarging; European attitudes towards Britain as a member state and the issue of foreign policy and foreign relations; the effect of membership on Britain's place in the world; the consequences for British democracy in parliamentary, party political and public terms; and finally, membership and the relations between British governments, the media and the public. Even a modest survey such as this indicates that the subject will grow in importance. It will demand historians with a wider skills base and historians of different kinds than those who have approached the subject so far.

In their endeavours, and their discourse, historians and other scholars have significantly advanced our understanding of Britain and Europe as a subject of academic study and popular interest. The early, sometimes hindsight-driven accounts have been replaced by more objective, complex interpretations which provide deeper knowledge of why Britain found it at first unnecessary and then difficult to make the transition to membership of the European Community. We now have a better understanding of Bevin's European policy, Britain's rejection of the Schuman Plan and Messina proposals, the evolution of its policy from 1956 to 1961 and the failure of the first application from 1961 to 1963. Recent research will soon begin the debate about the period 1964–70 and thereafter build on the existing work on Britain as a member state. This will be the major task of future scholars and their aim will be to decide how Britain advanced, in Churchillian terms, from being 'with but not of' Europe to being, arguably, 'of but not with' Europe.

NOTES

- 1 See www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page4803.asp, accessed 12 Nov. 2003.
- 2 The term 'Britain and Europe' has become shorthand for Britain's policies towards, relations with and membership of the European Community/Union.
- 3 See also Daddow, *Britain and Europe since 1945*.
- 4 Churchill College Archive Centre, Cambridge, British Diplomatic Oral History Project, Wright interview, 18 Sept. 1996.
- 5 The first prominent example was Nutting, *Europe Will Not Wait*. Thereafter, a succession of former officials unburdened themselves of their Civil Service neutrality: see for example Denman, *Missed Chances* and Gladwyn, *Memoirs*. Former ministers have made similar points in print, e.g. Heath, *The Course of My Life*; Jenkins, *A Life at the Centre*.
- 6 Macmillan, *Riding the Storm*, p. 69. Though clearly an acknowledgement of fault, Macmillan's choice of the word 'danger' alludes to his view that the Six posed more of a threat to British interests than an opportunity.
- 7 Camps, *Britain and the European Community*; see also Beloff, *The General Says No*.

- 8 Camps, 'Missing the Boat at Messina and Other Times?', p. 135.
- 9 Examples are Greenwood, *Britain and European Cooperation*, and Young, *Britain and European Unity*.
- 10 Dell, *The Schuman Plan*, is the most prominent. Young has also been specific in his criticism of decisions made during the period 1955–7, see Young, *Britain and European Unity*, p. 191.
- 11 Hugo Young, *This Blessed Plot*, p. 3. For the longevity of the missed opportunities school, see some of the contributions in Broad and Preston, eds, *Moored to the Continent*.
- 12 See comments on this point in relation to the Messina conference by Wurm, 'Britain and European Integration, 1945–1963'.
- 13 See for example Greenwood, *The Alternative Alliance*; Kent, *British Imperial Strategy*; Milward, *The Reconstruction of Western Europe*; and Young, *Britain, France and the Unity of Europe*.
- 14 Notable brief studies are Warner, 'The Labour Governments', and Young, 'Churchill's "No" to Europe'.
- 15 Greenwood, *Britain and European Cooperation*; George, *An Awkward Partner*; Young, *Britain and European Unity*.
- 16 George, *An Awkward Partner*.
- 17 Kaiser, *Using Europe*, pp. 211ff.
- 18 Young, *Britain and European Unity*, pp. 184–202.
- 19 Milward, *The United Kingdom and the European Community*.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- 23 Examples are Parr, 'Harold Wilson', and Pine, 'Application on the Table', and the various contributions in Daddow, ed., *Harold Wilson and European Integration*.
- 24 The most forceful proponent of this case is Bullock, *Ernest Bevin*.
- 25 Greenwood, *Britain and European Cooperation*, pp. 7–29. This debate is clearly summarized in Young, *Britain and European Unity*, pp. 6–25.
- 26 Milward, *The United Kingdom and the European Community*, pp. 10–47.
- 27 Nutting, *Europe Will Not Wait*, pp. 34–5. Charlton, *The Price of Victory*, pp. 122–3.
- 28 Dell, *The Schuman Plan*.
- 29 Young, *Britain and European Unity*, pp. 26–52, quote from p. 36. See also see Lord, *Absent at the Creation*.
- 30 Milward, *The United Kingdom and the European Community*, p. 77.
- 31 For a survey of this opinion, see Greenwood, *Britain and European Cooperation*, p. 61.
- 32 Kaiser, *Using Europe*, pp. 54–60.
- 33 Wurm, 'Britain and European Integration', p. 255.
- 34 Compare Burgess and Edwards, 'The Six Plus One' and Young, '“The Parting of the Ways”?', with Milward, *The United Kingdom and the European Community*, pp. 177–216.
- 35 National Archives, Public Record Office, London, CAB134/1228, EP(55)54, 7 Nov. 1955.
- 36 Ellison, *Threatening Europe*; Kaiser, *Using Europe*; Milward, *The United Kingdom and the European Community*; Young, *Britain and European Unity*.
- 37 See Ellison, *Threatening Europe*; Greenwood, *Britain and European Cooperation*; Kaiser, *Using Europe*; and Young, *Britain and European Unity*.
- 38 Milward, *The United Kingdom and the European Community*, pp. 179, 229.
- 39 Mayne, *The Recovery of Europe*, p. 252; Lamb, *The Macmillan Years*, p. 111.
- 40 Ellison, *Threatening Europe*; Kaiser, *Using Europe*; Schaad, *Bullying Bonn*.
- 41 Kaiser, *Using Europe*, pp. 72–87, is critical of the FTA.
- 42 Ellison, *Threatening Europe*.

- 43 Milward, *The United Kingdom and the European Community*, pp. 255, 269.
- 44 This was Macmillan's contention: see Macmillan, *At the End of the Day*, p. 1.
- 45 Kaiser, *Using Europe*, pp. 108–73.
- 46 Tratt, *The Macmillan Government and Europe*, pp. 188–9; see also Ellison, 'Accepting the Inevitable'.
- 47 Milward, *The United Kingdom and the European Community*, p. 331.
- 48 Quoted in Horne, *Macmillan 1957–1986*, p. 447.
- 49 Kaiser, *Using Europe*, pp. 174–203.
- 50 Ludlow, *Dealing with Britain*.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 245.
- 52 Milward, *The United Kingdom and the European Community*, pp. 463–83.
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 472.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 483.
- 55 *Ibid.*
- 56 See e.g. Bouwman, 'The British Dimension'; Huth, 'British–German Relations'; Schaad, *Bullying Bonn*; Ludlow, *Dealing with Britain*.
- 57 Ruane, *The Rise and Fall*; Dockrill, *Britain's Policy*; Mawby, *Containing Germany*.
- 58 e.g. May, ed., *Britain, the Commonwealth and Europe*; Ogawa, 'Britain's Commonwealth Dilemma'.
- 59 Milward and Brennan, *Britain's Place in the World*; Newton, 'Britain, the Sterling Area, and European Integration'; Schenk, *Britain and the Sterling Area*.
- 60 Broad, *Labour's European Dilemma*; Forster, *Euroscepticism*; Onslow, *Backbench Debate*. On pressure groups, see for example Ted R. Bromund, 'Whitehall, the National Farmers' Union and Plan G'.
- 61 The exception is Wilkes, 'British Attitudes to the European Economic Community'.
- 62 Jowell and Hoinville, eds, *Britain into Europe*; Lieber, *British Politics*; Moon, *European Integration*.
- 63 Ludlow, *Dealing with Britain*.
- 64 Exceptions are Bossuat, *L'Europe de français 1943–1959*; Bloemen, 'A Problem to Every Solution'; and Lynch, 'De Gaulle's First Veto'. See also chapters in Griffiths and Ward, eds, *Courting the Common Market*, Wilkes, ed., *Britain's Failure*, and Loth, ed., *Crises and Compromises*.
- 65 A notable exceptions is Wurm, 'Two Paths to Europe'. For two other examples of the benefits of a comparative approach, see Giauque, *Grand Designs and Visions of Unity*, and Moravcsik, *Choice for Europe*.
- 66 Manderson-Jones, *The Special Relationship*, stands virtually alone. Ruane, *Rise and Fall*, goes some way to rectify this, as does Pagedas, *Anglo-American Strategic Relations*.
- 67 See n. 66 above and Dockrill, *Britain's Retreat from East of Suez*; Krozewski, 'Finance and Empire'; and Schenk, 'Decolonization'.
- 68 Recent research has already begun on some of these events; see, for example, Alisdair Blair, *Dealing with Europe*.

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FURTHER READING

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Britain in the European Community (Oxford, 1990). For a critical, lively and provocative read, see Hugo Young, *This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair* (1998) and, for the first volume of the official history, Alan S. Milward, *The United Kingdom and the European Community*, vol. 1: *The Rise and Fall of a National Strategy 1945–1963* (2003). Brian Brivati and Harriet Jones, eds, *From Reconstruction to Integration: Britain and Europe since 1945* (Leicester, 1993), provides an informative collection of chapters, and Miriam Camps, *Britain and the European Community 1955–1963* (Oxford, 1964) remains useful. For suggestions on specific topics, see the references in this chapter.