Clare C. J. Griffiths, James J. Nott and William Whyte, *Classes, Cultures and Politics: Essays on British History for Ross McKibbin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), xii + 320 pp. ISBN: 0199579881 £68-00

As a volume of essays on the history of modern Britain, *Classes, Cultures and Politics* both marks Ross McKibbin's retirement and demonstrates the lasting influence of his work. In addition to forming a *Festschrift*, the stated purpose of the collection is firstly to build directly upon McKibbin's contributions to the field and secondly to 'illuminate the history of modern Britain' through the use of innovative sources and approaches to the past. On both counts, *Classes, Cultures and Politics* undoubtedly succeeds.

As the book's title suggests, the core collection of fourteen essays takes as its basis McKibbin's work on modern British history, in particular his seminal *Classes and Cultures*. Yet while the essays are nominally divided into the titular categories of 'Classes', 'Cultures' and 'Politics' respectively, it is testament to McKibbin's influence on the contributions that such divisions hardly seem necessary. The core collection is also supplemented by a series of contributions concerned with McKibbin directly. In an introductory essay charting McKibbin's bibliographical record, Peter Ghosh presents a forceful case for the historiographical significance of McKibbin's works, arguing that their approach and style ensure that they will continue to be read for a long time to come. Yet equally fascinating is Boyd Hilton's biographical introduction, and the reflections of those other contributors who have known him; such contributions give a very real sense of the man behind the historian and, while perhaps incidental in the wider scheme of things, they undeniably add to the volume.

Classes, Cultures and Politics represents to a certain degree an extension of McKibbin's work. Janet Howarth's chapter on the culture of working-class women, for instance, directly follows on from

Classes and Cultures, assessing the changes and continuities which occurred in the decades after 1951. In a similar manner, Joseph McAleer builds upon McKibbin's analysis of attitudes to the pre-war healthcare system through the exploration of literary sources, examining the use of the National Health Service as a setting in the romantic fiction of Mills & Boon. By making use of McKibbin's approaches in this way, the contributors not only present the reader with a collection of highly interesting and engaging essays, but also underscore the sheer potential for further such research.

However, while building upon McKibbin's contributions to the discipline, *Classes, Cultures and Politics* is by no means uncritical of his work. Andrezj Olechnowicz, for example, takes issue with McKibbin's ascription of a 'quasi-magical' status to the monarchy; questioning McKibbin's reliance on the works of Geoffrey Gorer and Kingsley Martin as evidence for a partly magical or sacred monarchy, Olechnowicz argues that such an interpretation fails to recognise the knowingness underlying the official languages of monarchy. Indeed, Olechnowicz is not the only contributor to question McKibbin's use of Gorer. Peter Mandler, in his contribution, argues that Gorer's *Exploring English Character* is essentially unsafe as evidence of British social attitudes, its findings having been predetermined by Gorer's somewhat unorthodox assumptions about the problems of English society and their causes. Perhaps the most interesting critique of McKibbin's work lies, however, in William Whyte's chapter on the fiction of Richmal Crompton. Wholeheartedly embracing McKibbin's use of Crompton as an observer of middle-class culture, Whyte then proceeds to convincingly argue that the Conservatism evident in Crompton's work was not so much the largely negative construct identified by McKibbin in *Ideologies of Class*, but instead that of a middle class 'unthreatened by modernity'. It is in this aspect, at once a critique and an expansion of McKibbin's work, that the volume's main strength lies.

If a criticism is to be levied at *Classes, Cultures and Politics*, it is perhaps that in its efforts to illuminate the history of modern Britain the lights shine too brightly and risk blinding the reader. The sheer diversity present within the collection, both in terms of subject matter and approach, undermines the book's ability to present a coherent whole; each contribution shines its own spotlight on an aspect of Britain's past, but no overarching viewpoint of modern Britain emerges. Its failure in this respect is, however, arguably the greatest quality of *Classes, Cultures and Politics*. If the volume simply used McKibbin's approaches to provide a single, sweeping account of modern Britain, it would be entirely unnecessary; *Classes and Cultures* and *Parties and People* already exist, and are unlikely to benefit from simply being rewritten by other hands. Instead, *Classes, Cultures and Politics* serves as a complement to McKibbin's work, developing his approaches while at the same time tempering his conclusions with a reaffirmation of modern Britain's complexity. The result is a collection which leaves the reader with, if not so much an overview of modern British experience, a clear impression of how the study of modern British history looks set to develop over the coming years.

In summary, *Classes, Cultures and Politics* forms a particularly useful companion to McKibbin's work and will be of immense value to the researcher of modern British history. In this sense, it serves as a truly fitting tribute to McKibbin's career.

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