



# Classics in Short No.69: A Picture History of Britain

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**Brian Alderson** on Clarke Hutton's **A Picture History of Britain**.

## **Brian Alderson**

A long way after expansive Mr Dickens, we arrive at?

### *Funny stuff ? history.*

It would seem that we have recently been mulcted of round about ten million quid on account of a traffic accident in Paris ten years ago ? expensive, especially since we still don?t know what really happened. But, given the minutiae of the case, how reliable is the evidence for the millions of other acts and accidents in the past, dramatic or dull by turns? To paraphrase a now vanished historical figure: how known are the known knowns, let alone the unknown ones? Did Alfred really burn the cakes? Is Namier to be trusted in assessing the structure of politics at the accession of George III?

### *These are fundamental fascinations*

about trying to know the past, but it is rumoured that many people, and especially children, do not much care to engage with them. ?History?, one hears, is reduced to a few romantic, or controversial, or violent episodes, appropriated to capture youthful attention while the endless web of cause and effect within which they occur is neglected as too difficult to understand and hence boring.

### *Dickens did his best*

to infuse life into the dynamics of the past, at least down to 1689, as can be seen in his **Child?s History of England**, a new abridgment of which is reviewed here on page 16. His conversational and opinionated assault on the subject cannot help but falter over the complexities of the French wars or the Wars of the Roses (and obviously, a hundred and fifty years on, we now know some of the unknowns that he didn?t and can improve his take on some of the knowns) but at least he recognised the unstoppable flow of ?events, dear boy, events? which forbids the isolation of just one or two sexy excerpts as ?history?.

### *Three volumes*

were needed for Dickens?s original storytelling, a span that contrasts rather startlingly with the sixty-four folio pages, plus four sketchy endpaper maps, that make up Clarke Hutton?s **Picture History of Britain**. It was first published in 1945 and its reissue last year as part of Oxford?s centenary as a children?s book publisher might also stand as symbolic of the Press?s emergence as one of the ?market leaders? in the heady developments of the fifties and sixties.

### *You enter the book*

as it were over the drawbridge and through the gatehouse of a stylised medieval castle depicted on the cover. You are

then led through nine chapters from 'Early Britain' to the 'Twentieth Century', which last occupies almost a third of the book. The text is just about as far from Dickens as you could get, for this is, after all, a picture history, and the words function almost as a series of captions supporting the scenes and portraits that Hutton has selected for his illustrations. At its brusque, for instance, you find, on the unnumbered forty-second page, a completely random set of paragraphs touching on iron steamships, Irish Home Rule, three children's books (the two **Alice's** and **Treasure Island**), Lister and antisepsis, and the founding of a women's college at Cambridge!

### *Such a scattergun approach*

gains some justification through a new prefatory note by the Dean of Art at Central St Martins College of Art on the nature of Clarke Hutton's illustrations. Hutton was head of lithography at the College during the 1930s and became a skilled exponent of a new illustrative method whereby an artist's work could be directly prepared for printing without photographic intrusion. This gave a freshness and flexibility to colour work and by 1945 Hutton had had success with a number of picture books, including two Puffins: **Fifteen Nursery Rhymes** (1941) and **Punch & Judy** (1943). The **Picture History** carried the method into a folio format and what was lost in the cranky text was made up for by the visual commentary and comedy.

### *No little research*

must have been called for in settling the content of many of the pictures. Hutton did not aim to make precise representations of the people and artifacts encountered in his two thousand year selection, but his looser interpretations still had to be grounded in a knowledge of the fashions, materials, and social backgrounds to the changing scenes. This he achieved with a delighted indulgence in colour and in the dynamics of page design. The success of the book led him to illustrate seven further volumes in the series including histories of France, the USA and Russia. **A Picture History of Great Discoveries** is scheduled for reissue later this year.

### *This 'facsimile' edition*

is really an unedited reprint printed on glossier paper than the original (and it preserves the placing of Stockton and Darlington in Yorkshire instead of County Durham). For all its selectivity it does show history as a continuous process and though it cannot engage in Dickens's enervating polemics 'which generate a need for trials and inquests and fact-finding commissions' it touches more fruitfully than he on the life of the people rather than that of their rulers.

The illustrations are taken from the 2007 edition of **A Picture History of Britain** by Clarke Hutton, published by Oxford University Press (978 0 19 911571 6, £10.99 hbk).

**Brian Alderson** is founder of the Children's Books History Society and children's book consultant for **The Times**.

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