



The Story of Britain: From the Romans to the Present: A Narrative History

Rebecca Fraser

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A sparkling anecdotal account with the pace of an epic, about the men and women who created turning points in history. Rebecca Fraser's dramatic portrayal of the scientists, statesmen, explorers, soldiers, traders, and artists who forged Britain's national institutions is the perfect introduction to British history.

Just as much as kings and queens, battles and empire, Britain's great themes have been the liberty of the individual, the rule of law, and the parliamentary democracy invented to protect them. Ever since Caractacus and Boudicca surprised the Romans with the bravery of their resistance, Britain has stood out as the home of freedom. From Thomas More to William Wilberforce, from Gladstone to Churchill, Britain's history is studded with heroic figures who have resisted tyranny in all its guises, whether it be the Stuart kings' belief in divine right, the institution of slavery, or the ambitions of Napoleon and Hitler.

The Story of Britain: From the Romans to the Present: A Narrative History Details

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Tyler Shafer says

I love British culture and literature, but apparently reading the story of one of the oldest, most enduring civilizations the world has ever seen takes some time! It took me nearly two months, much longer than most books, but it was worth it. From Celtic, Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Viking, and Norman times through the empire and now to the Commonwealth, Britain truly has had a long, strange journey, especially for such a small island with poor weather. A book like this, which is written in clear, simple prose yet is detailed enough to be similar to a textbook, is not always a page-turner. Some historical eras were more interesting in others. Occasionally, monarchs and ministers were difficult to keep straight. Yet there was also great moments: Boudicca's rebellion; the tale of Henry II and Thomas Beckett; the enduring, and bloody, conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism; England's complicated (to say the least) relationship with the kingdoms of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland; the rise and fall of the empire, especially some of the Indian rebellions; the British perspective on the American Revolution; the 20th century experiments in progressivism and socialism; the transformation of the monarchy, from autocrats to symbols; and Thatcher's unique brand of capitalism and conservatism. Ultimately, there's no way I will retain all of the information from this book, but it did help me get a better sense of this odd, independent, stubborn, tolerant, tiny, and fascinating nation.

Judy Maurer says

First, it's not a history of Britain; it's "A History of England, plus the Scots and Welsh when they complicate life for the English." Second, it's a history of the elites - the kings, cardinals, prime ministers, queens, generals and mistresses, who plan and plot, go to war or choose peace. The plagues, the invention of the printing press, the industrial revolution all get short shrift in this book; history, in the author's telling, depends on the brilliance of a general or the arrogance of a king.

Still, I am reading this before I go to England. I didn't want to sit in a museum thinking, "now, who were the Stuarts? Were they before or after the Tudors?" So in that it was helpful. But now I'm looking for a deeper view of English history.

Joel Childers says

Pretty straightforward history of Britain written in an engaging and accessible way. I appreciated the mix of factual information (names, dates, etc.) and legends/rumors about particular figures our situations.

Francisca says

although i haven't found yet what i would consider the *perfect* history book on britain, this would be my closest pick.

having read around 850 pages, i can conclude this book has one big strength and one big flaw. its strength is the author's ability to summarise large chunks of information in a couple of sentences, leaving only what she probably considered were the most important facts. its biggest flaw is no one's fault but my own, assuming by some silly misconception that, because this book was written by a woman, it would give a greater sense of protagonism to some historical female figures that tend to be overlooked with time. yet, this preconception of mine--and its subsequent failure within the text--can only be my fault for the book never says it is a *feminist* story of britain. i just assumed things and, in the end, i was a tiny bit disappointed.

nonetheless, for anyone looking for an extensive (but comprehensive) read unto the story of england, i would absolutely recommend this in a heartbeat.

R.C. Matthews says

"Wait. You're reviewing a history book? Like, a textbook?"

Yes, I am. This is not what it seems. "The Story of Britain" is a narrative history, making it far more enthralling than some clunky giant that you had to carry around between classes in high school. Granted, I have an avid interest in history. I always tell people that if I hadn't gone to school to major in English, I would have studied history. But I digress. On to the book.

Although I haven't finished it yet (seventy-some percentages finished), I have enough to work with. I would recommend this text for anybody who has even the slightest interest in history, especially the history of England with all of its kings and queens and wonderfully bloody civil wars. This book contains something which most history texts do not: human depth. Although there IS a tiresome amount of political jargon and information (if you happen to enjoy that sort of thing, you're in luck!), the majority of this book is a straightforward, thoughtful, and smoothly chronological (which can be hard to achieve while writing intricate histories) creation. Fraser does an especially decent job of introducing a human element. She doesn't just record what has happened. Throughout this book, there are mentions behind the foundation of a certain name or place, behavioral aspects of many kings, and some colorful myths and legends that, as an American with limited knowledge of England, was never made aware of. I mean, I would much rather hear about how crazy King George the Third was during his illness than to hear about the fifty million laws drawn up by Parliament to limit the power of the king. Not that the book does not contain the latter, but still. There's a bit of everything for everybody.

Now, if you're looking for a detailed history of Great Britain in its entirety, look elsewhere. Although there are some mentions of Scotland, Ireland, etc., this text primarily focuses on England and its relationship to lands that will (eventually) become part of the United Kingdom. Still, Fraser presents enough information for the reader to have a decent grasp on how the UK came to be. I also find the text lacking in what I believe is essential to a historical analysis: the general condition of life for the common man and woman. Although Fraser briefly describes, say, the poor working conditions of the eighteenth century, she tends to focus more so on the wealthy class, the politicians, and the kings (and queens) themselves. But, once again, this is only to an extent. I can't say that there is a single element totally excluded from this particular text.

One last thing. You're probably wondering, "Is it biased? History books are infamous for being biased." Well, not really. If you're like me and you analyze the usage of language to an overwhelming extent, you may be irked when Fraser describes the French as "meddlesome" or when she insists that the Irish were once again stirring "mischief" over their poor and virtually nonexistent representation in London. I'd say that some

things seem to be downplayed to a certain extent. However, I believe that Fraser is educated enough to distance herself from the English opinion. Her writing insists that she is fully aware of the brutality, injustice, and morally ambiguous nature of early English life and politics. And, as an American, I was pleased to discover that she didn't have any negative words to associate with the American Revolution (she believed it was justified). Although there was a poor choice of presentation when she mentioned the Boston Massacre, downplaying the "massacre" bit. Yes, she used quotes around it, since apparently the death of three innocent people is in no way a massacre. That's just me being whiny. Do I penalize her for any of this? No. I think it's just Fraser being Fraser. And let's face it: not a single nation in the world is innocent of having spilled innocent blood.

Four stars. Another star would be warranted had Fraser toned down on the political intrigue and told me something about daily life for the average man and woman throughout the centuries she covers (Romans to the present). Anyway, go read it. You'll learn stuff.

Jason says

I have recently become a huge anglophile so I am pretty jazzed to read this book.

Dana says

Read my review of *The Story of Britain* .

John Bohnert says

This was a very enjoyable experience. I learned so much more history than from my recent reading of THE OXFORD ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF BRITAIN.

Avory says

I thought the Story of Britain was a fabulous, comprehensive history, reminding me of what I loved about the study of history as an undergraduate. Though my personal interest is social history, so I didn't always follow or enjoy the political stuff, I liked how Fraser made this book something to everyone. It's a good, intelligent narrative that weaves together little stories about politics, war, social history, religion, the lives of the monarchy, and technology. Nothing is covered so exhaustively as to get bored - I was especially happy that we didn't spend thirty pages in the WWI trenches - and she miraculously manages to keep the book moving through 785 pages, covering Roman Britain all the way to 2002.

Brent says

In under 800 pages, Fraser covers the history of the British Isles from Roman times to the Golden Jubilee of

Elizabeth II in 2002. This is impressive. However, Fraser's way (presumably the British way) of narrating is frustrating. This American dummy had to re-read more than a few passages thanks to a lack of punctuation. Commas are your friends, Ms. Fraser! Set off those parenthetical phrases and relative clauses so we can understand what you're saying.

Also, I had to trust Ms. Fraser to tell me accurately what happened, but when she says that the Soviet Union put a man into space in 1957 with Sputnik (uh, no), she loses credibility.

Randall Wallace says

Every church and town had a Magna Carta copy so that citizens could know what their rights were. The never barbaric English end the life of their Edward II by sodomy with a red-hot poker iron that apparently produced screams that could be heard for more than a mile. On the battlefield, the English longbow's rate of fire clearly outguns the French crossbow. Ash trees, used for arrows, and geese, for arrow feathers were then completely protected by the state. The two-fingered British gesture of defiance can be traced to the days of Agincourt when French knights attempted to chop off the archer's two arrow hand fingers to stop them. Boldly flashing one's two fingers at the retreating enemy soon became a timeless gesture of defiance revived in the fabulous 1960's. Anyway, by 1453, the vaunted longbow's days are already over as the English lost badly to French artillery. That ends the Hundred Year's War and leaves England with only Calais on French soil. The War of the Roses is between two Plantagenet Kings.

The Protestant Revolution was clearly fueled by greed and lust for property because many became wealthy during the property grab of monastery land. In Tolkien, we see the lighting of beacons along mountains in the Lord of the Rings. That comes from real history when they were used just so to warn the English that the Spanish Armada had entered the English Channel. Later on, douchebag Cromwell gets in power, puts down the Levellers for daring to want the right for ALL men to vote. Many were also upset at Cromwell & Company because of their killing of both the monarchy and Charles I. Then Scotland and Ireland get uppity at him wanting something called freedom. After 1707, England, Scotland and Wales become known as Great Britain. It was not British high culture, but Hanoverian King George's obvious German background that brought the composer Handel to England. Tory at this time means Catholic. Walpole was the first Prime Minister and first to live at 10 Downing Street. If you were a Scottish Highlander at the time, you were screwed: how could you meet the ladies if you couldn't wear your tartan? Or show any sign of Highland life unless you wanted to be thrown off your land and branded a Jacobite?

American colonists use John Locke's sanctioning of rebellion against unjust rulers as moral justification for their Revolutionary War. Rebecca Fraser implies what Noam Chomsky and Gerald Horne now openly say, that the British Somerset Decision of 1772, which forbade slavery in England, was a direct threat to the revolting colonists bent on continuing slavery and expanding into foreign native held lands. Anyway, the British hired 18,000 Hessians to fight the colonists. But after Saratoga, France helps the colonists. During these 10 years of heavy colonial war costs, and boycotting colonial goods, England would have gone under but for its role in the Industrial Revolution with James Watt et al. In 1807, Britain becomes the first European country to outlaw the slave trade, while the structurally racist US (Land of Freedom) would have to wait until 1862. British police carried no guns because Peel in 1829 determined that alone would silence the critics of police misusing power. The Suez Canal cut the travel time to India by six weeks. Khakis were created as a battle uniform to blend into the African bush during battles of conquest. WWI destroyed the hegemony of Britain and also France. More Australians died in WWI than US soldiers died in Vietnam. WWI killed 1/3 of Europe's young men – a new Black Death. A woman couldn't vote in Britain until 1928,

in France it was 1944, in Switzerland it was 1971. Wow... Hitler moved into the Rhineland when he saw that Mussolini's move into Ethiopia brought no moral concern by other major powers. Rebecca gets very conservative about history after WWII and overestimates Stalin's threat and those of Nationalists like Nassar to US/UK interests. Otherwise, a very good, easy to read book...

Fergie says

This book is certainly not an easy or short read. With the ancient history and culture of Britain, the story is vast and rich. However, because of this fact, the reader must be attentive to the many, often complicated details of the past. For this reason, I felt myself losing the ability to attend to those details on a prolonged basis. At times, I felt I was reading a text book from a history course in college. Perhaps the title is misleading. In placing the word "Story" in the title, it led me to believe that the book would read like a story. This is where the book fell short for me because it was not written in as interesting a way as I had hoped. The book is big and rich on details that is equal to Britain's history. The drawback and irony is because of this rich, ancient history, the reader must devote her attention wholly and patiently to all those details if she is to get the whole "story". Because of the size and scope of the book, I felt I did not sustain the appropriate attention that would lead me to give the book anything more than 3 stars.

Omar Masood says

This is a very good book. Fraser has a difficult task, covering the history of Britain from the Roman invasion to 2003. She passes with flying colors. This book gives you an excellent overview of British history. You will learn who mattered, what mattered, and why. You will gain an understanding of the British, particularly English, psyche. This book does a good job explaining the evolution of Britain over the years and the various influences on this important nation. It does not cover everything in minute detail, but given the breadth and complexity of the topic, this would be an unrealistic expectation. However, at 785 pages of text it provides sufficient detail for a book of its breadth. If you are looking for a single book to learn about British history this is a very good choice.

Samuel Giordano says

This narrative of the English history was very pleasant to read. The author is very competent in storytelling catching the attention of the reader. I had little notion about the Vikings and Normans invasions of the island and it was enlightening to me. The Roman occupation is really concise and short. Understandable for a work of this span. Very positive to read it and complement with history books if you are interested.

Ted Cross says

I've always love British history and Britain herself, so I'm glad I finally got around to reading a comprehensive history. I knew much of this history already, having read so much of it in individual pieces, but it was great to see it all together in one long timeline. It was a fast read at first, but once it hit more

modern times, around World War 1, it really slowed down for me and became less interesting, but that's most likely just because I find modern times relatively uninteresting.
