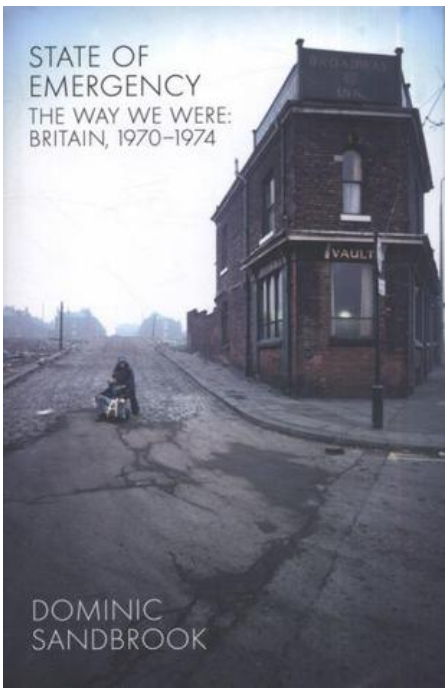

State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970-1974

Dominic Sandbrook

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In the early 1970s, Britain seemed to be tottering on the brink of the abyss. Under Edward Heath, the optimism of the Sixties had become a distant memory. Now the headlines were dominated by strikes and blackouts, unemployment and inflation. As the world looked on in horrified fascination, Britain seemed to be tearing itself apart. And yet, amid the gloom, glittered a creativity and cultural dynamism that would influence our lives long after the nightmarish Seventies had been forgotten. In this brilliant new history, Dominic Sandbrook recreates the gaudy, schizophrenic atmosphere of the early Seventies: the world of Enoch Powell and Tony Benn, David Bowie and Brian Clough, Germaine Greer and Mary Whitehouse. An age when the unions were on the march and the socialist revolution seemed at hand, but also when feminism, permissiveness, pornography and environmentalism were transforming the lives of millions. It was an age of miners' strikes, tower blocks and IRA atrocities, but it also gave us celebrity footballers and high-street curry houses, organic foods and package holidays, gay rights and glam rock. For those who remember the days when you could buy a new colour television but power cuts stopped you from watching it, this book could hardly be more vivid. It is the perfect guide to a luridly colourful Seventies landscape that shaped our present from the financial boardroom to the suburban bedroom.

State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970-1974 Details

Date	:	Published September 1st 2010 by Allen Lane
ISBN	:	9781846140310
Author	:	Dominic Sandbrook
Format	:	Hardcover 768 pages
Genre	:	History, Nonfiction, Politics, European Literature, British Literature, Historical

From Reader Review State of Emergency: The Way We Were: Britain, 1970-1974 for online ebook

Bryan Wigmore says

Rather long, but very readable account that filled in lots of gaps in my knowledge of the political and cultural forces that shaped my early childhood. Keen now to read the next in the series, about the late seventies, which I remember rather better.

Cora says

STATE OF EMERGENCY is the third in an ongoing series on modern British history by Dominic Sandbrook, this one focusing on the tumultuous years under Ted Heath. As usual, Sandbrook is excellent at making the cut-and-thrust of British politics compelling reading, meaning that the decision to end each volume with a change of government ensures that the last chapter is filled with verve. And while Sandbrook is obviously writing for a British audience, I found it all very accessible. (It's possible too that I'm just getting used to how the whole system works.)

(As an aside, Wikipedia is saying that I should call the government that ruled Britain from 1970 to 1974 'the Heath ministry,' like I would say the Nixon administration or the Ford administration. That sounds a little staid to me, but I don't honestly know any better so there you are.)

In WHITE HEAT, Sandbrook described the Wilson ministry as an endless (and amusing) series of feuds and plots and squabbles, which was all very entertaining. The Heath ministry lacks that kind of personal appeal, so it helps for dramatic purposes that Britain was apparently coming apart at the seams. The chapters on Northern Ireland were horrifying, as you might expect (and not great for encouraging pride in the Irish-American community either). But even the chapter on sports, a snooze for me in WHITE HEAT because I don't even care about _real_ football, includes a long section on hooliganism, that turns out is not as funny as it is on THE SIMPSONS.

It was also interesting to see the old clubby spirit of British politics in the Macmillan era surviving in some ways well into the 70s. The bipartisan dismay that greeted the resignation of Reginald Maulding (who, like many bipartisan heroes in the US, was corrupt as hell), or the decision by Labour not to demagogue the issue of the Uganda Asians. And while I can sympathize with the decision to sideline Enoch Powell, the fact that the most popular politician in the UK at the time was left to cool his heels in the back benches suggests a political universe where elite opinion mattered most. At the same time, you can see this world crumbling, both from the rise of investigative journalism and eventually in the tacit alliance between Powell and Harold Wilson in the 1974 election. (The latter led to my favorite part of the book, where Powell rebuts a pro-Heath heckler with, "Judas was paid! JUDAS WAS PAID!")

Of course, one reason why the clubbiness survived could be because Britain was more stable than it might have been. As disturbing as the rise in crime might have been, Britain during the 'mugging epidemic' had a murder rate an order of magnitude lower than the US at the time (and a fifth the size of the US murder rate in 2014). And while there was a great to-do about a million people being unemployed in 1972, 4% unemployment doesn't sound so bad. (Maybe this shows a vague Thatcherite sympathy on my part, but the idea of an expansionary fiscal policy under 4% unemployment and high inflation strikes me as totally insane.

Which I suppose just goes to show how different British political culture was at the time, or alternatively, that I'm a brain-dead neoliberal stooge.)

I think what I appreciate about STATE OF EMERGENCY, and what I'm coming to appreciate about Sandbrooks' series as a whole, is its reliability. Sandbrook writes an accessible account that is totally lucid without (so far as I can tell) skimping on complexity, and with a story-teller's eye for the revealing anecdote or detail. I very much look forward to SEASONS IN THE SUN and Sandbrook's forthcoming WHO DARES WINS.

Anastasia Fitzgerald-Beaumont says

The following review was published on my blog in October 2010. For some reason I did not think to add it here, an omission I'm now making good. I do so for one reason: I'm in the process of writing a review of Seasons in the Sun: The Battle for Britain, 1974-1979, the sequel by the same author.

I've entered into a room in the middle of a conversation. I missed the opening, so it has taken a little time for things to assemble in proper order. This is a conversation that's far from finished, one that's destined to go on, one that I intend not to miss. What's being talked about, what's the subject? Why, we are the subject, the British are the subject, a large part of our post-war political, social and cultural history is the subject. You see I've been reading *State of Emergency-the Way We Were: Britain, 1970-1974* by Dominic Sandbrook!

This is the first of his books I've ever tackled though it is the third part in what is clearly shaping up to be a classic of narrative history, a story told in a simple, discursive style, scholarly without being weighed down by scholarship, accessible in the best sense of the term. I missed the early parts of the 'conversation', his account of the Macmillan years – *Never Had it so Good*, and the first ministry of Harold Wilson- *White Heat*. I intend to catch up with these just as soon as I am able, just as I intend to follow the author's future meanderings through the mid and late seventies.

The four years he describes in *State of Emergency*, so called because Edward Heath, then prime minister, called no less than five states of emergency, are full of incident, high politics and low drama. Drama, yes, that's the word, in politics certainly, though tragedy might serve better. It's the tragedy of Edward Heath, conceivably the unluckiest prime minster in all of British history, a man overwhelmed by events.

As I said previously, I acquired a greater understanding of the Heath years in a few pages of Sandbrook than I did from several hundred of *Edward Heath*, the official biography by Philip Ziegler. Heath had the reputation of being a new kind of Conservative, so his friends thought, so his enemies assumed, one who was believed to have embraced a free-market oriented policy, adopted at a conference held at Selsdon, allowing Harold Wilson to dub him Selsdon Man, after Piltdown Man, the famous anthropological fraud.

It was a myth: Heath was not a monetarist, not a prototype for Margaret Thatcher. No, he was the last of the 'one nation' Tories, the last of a pre-war generation who believed that unemployment was the greatest evil. Rather than cutting back on public expenditure, his government presided over a major expansion in the welfare state. The simple fact is that this philosophy was untenable, that the economic progress that had upheld the political consensus pursued since 1945 was over never to return. Inflation and stagflation, its new cousin, were set to replace unemployment as the great evil.

The storms that beset Heath, this elusive, cold, slightly ridiculous man with his overblown 'upper class'

accent, would have destroyed even the strongest, and he was far from that. I alluded previously to George Dangerfield's classic *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, a study of the four years leading up to the First World War when England was in danger of being torn apart by union militancy, by the Irish problem, by feminist radicals. Between 1970 and 1974 the spectres returned: England was once again being torn apart by union militancy, the Irish problem and all sorts of radicals! It seems to me that these are the key years, a bridge between the past of Macmillan and the future of Thatcher. Heath was not the wave of the future; he was the last surge of the past.

There is so much more in this book than politics. Sandbrook has an incredible mastery of his brief, with wonderful attention to detail. It's almost as if he had lived through the period himself, although he was only born in 1974. There are dark passages, the account of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the IRA atrocities are particularly grim. But there is much on the details of ordinary life, of a time which actually saw an increase in living standards and expectations.

Some snippets caused me to laugh out loud, including a comment by one Dave Hill of a band called Slade, dressed outrageously in silks and satins favoured by performers at the time, a dreadful gay caricature, saying that he could not be camp if he tried "coz I'm working-class." This was a time, up until 1971, that Wimpey burger restaurants did not allow unaccompanied women in after midnight because they were assumed to be prostitutes; a time when the wholly naff avocado with prawns emerged as the sophisticated and favoured starter at pretentious middle-class dinner parties!

The details go on and on in a hugely entertaining way. Sandbrook quotes an article by a certain firebrand Labour Member of Parliament, something that might very well have been penned by Karl Marx, on improving the condition of the working class – "…few people could have imagined that Robert Kilroy-Silk would end up smothering himself with cockroaches to amuse the viewers of ITV."

Some enthusiasms were rendered absurd by future developments, including *The Ecologist* magazine's welcome to the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, a movement which "deserves our best wishes, our sympathy and our attention. We might learn something". The *Daily Telegraph* fared no better, predicting that a certain new African leader would be a contrast to all the others and a "staunch friend to Britain." What was his name, you ask? He was Major General Idi Amin.

This is a splendid book, a conversation that really is worth listening to, a drama worth watching, by far the best account I have come across of our passage from one state of social and political evolution to another.

Rob says

I was born in 1963, so the period covered in this book, 1970-1974, coincides with my first proper memories of a world outside my family. I don't remember the election of 1970, but, being brought up in an SNP-supporting household I do remember Margo McDonald winning Govan in 1973, and the SNP's subsequent successes in the 1974 elections. Decimalisation impacted the sixpence in my pocket directly, and what schoolboy could forget the excitement of having to huddle round candles during the power cuts of the miners' strike and the three-day week.

My perspective was Scottish. The Ibrox disaster (dismissed in this book in a sentence, in one of the few misjudgements of perspective) was traumatic as my father was at the game - waiting with my mother for him

to return home from the game as news of fatalities mounted will always stay with me. Jimmy Reid only became a hero once I was old enough to understand the nature of the UCS work-in, and how it differed from ordinary industrial disputes. However, the horrors unfolding in Northern Ireland were distant, despite Glasgow perching precariously on the edge of the same sectarian precipice.

My memories of the period are patchwork, and necessarily underinformed. I remember Slade and The Goodies, but not Lord Lambton, and I was too young to understand the fuss about Poulson. Yet it made the experience of reading this book different from that of reading its splendid predecessors, Never Had It So Good and White Heat. With respect to these, the past is definitely a foreign country as one has little context with which to refer except for what one has read in books. However, reading State of Emergency allowed me to affirm my experiences and to better understand the context of the events which had unfolded around me.

When discussing the book with a friend, he said that it was too soon for a proper perspective on the events of the seventies, but I don't agree. What Sandbrook has achieved is a masterly summery of the major movements of the period - political events, social, cultural - and brought it together in a synthesis which is highly engaging. There is something Tragicomic about the Heath administration, and Sandbrook manages to capture Heath's gaucheness and rudeness (of the Leader of an Orchestra who said "if you don't stop being so rude to us, Sir Edward, we might start following your instructions") but is also willing to give him credit for much which is today forgotten.

It is a top down book and despite its length it is of necessity superficial in a lot of ways - his earlier books contrast sharply with David Kynaston's bottom-up surveys of the forties and fifties in Austerity Britain and Family Britain which are largely compiled from dairy observations and Mass Observation. Sandbrook does use such sources (the frequent references to diaries of upper-class reactionary James Lees-Milne are particularly entertaining and illuminating, calling Captain Mark Phillips, for instance, "barely a gentleman") but more of his sources are from a dizzying variety of books, newspapers, government papers, film and television. It is the skill with which he manages this mass of information which impresses. Above all, he achieves a nuance of tone which allows him to switch seamlessly from high political drama to carnage in Ulster to the permissive society and Woman's Lib, whilst maintaining a uniformity of clarity, humour and insight. It is quite brilliantly done, and I look forward to further volumes.

Taken from my blog http://roderick-random.blogspot.co.uk...

F.R. says

One of the curious things about Dominic Sandbrook’s whistle-stop tour through recent British history is that very little original research seems to be on offer. Unlike Andy Beckett (whose ‘When The Lights Went Out’ covers much the same period) there are no fresh meetings with the participants in crucial events and no descriptions of the author heading out to once important, but now obscure parts, of the UK to see these sites from himself. As such these books are really a distillation of history. But what saves them from being like hearing the same bad joke twice is Sandbrook’s mastery of his material and a fine, witty style.

So we have Edward Heath “lecturing the television cameras like some latter-day General De Gaulle”; radio DJs John Peel and Bob Harris “who liked to torment night owls with interminable progressive rock”; the special effect of a giant rat in Doctor Who being “one of the worst-realized monsters not merely in the show’s history, but in the history of human entertainment”; while on the lack of success of would-be far right

leader Andrew Fountaine, the author writes – “Somehow it said it all that Fountaine could not even win the support of his own mother, who heckled him during his public meetings.” The book also includes the remarkable tale of Labour big-hitter Barbara Castle arriving at a Cabinet meeting in a trouser suit and exciting her male colleagues so much that then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Denis Healy, felt compelled to tuck her under his armpit. “It is hard to imagine,” Sandbrook observes, “many of Edward Heath’s ministers treating Margaret Thatcher in quite the same way.”

This is essentially a swift trip through the chaotic events of Edward Heath’s premiership, with other chapters investigating important topics such as racism, feminism, environmentalism, football and music. Despite the reputation he earned as a fervent slasher of public services with a wild desire to take on the Unions, Heath’s government was actually the biggest spending of any post-war government at that point (remarkably, given what would happen later, Margaret Thatcher’s Education was the biggest spending department) and he tried his absolute best to be conciliatory to the Unions. Unfortunately though a combination of circumstance, bad luck and his own faulty political antennae, it all exploded spectacularly in his strange granite face.

Reading this in 2010 (or 2011 as it now is, Happy New Year All!) one is struck by the parallels with recent events. A leader who lacks the common touch besieged by a huge Global economic downtown, a general election which didn’t take place, a Liberal Party which is suddenly resurgent in the eventual election campaign, followed by an inconclusive result at the polls. I don’t need to read the next volume to know what chaos lay ahead for Britain in 1974. Let’s hope we’re a bit luckier now.

Ade says

Perhaps not quite as gripping as earlier volumes but this is to quibble; still a darn good read, with Heath rendered a much more interesting and conflicted man than popularly believed by history.

Martin Nelson says

This is an excellent history. The main thesis are brought out well, including that the real effect of the counter-cultural 60s was only seen in ordinary people in the 70s, and the cultural history and political history themes are woven together to complement each other. The history of the UKs entrance to the EC is particularly resonant now - even Heath could never bring himself to admit that EC entrance necessitated a drop in UK parliamentary sovereignty- but itself is balanced against the realisation that the Britain of the 1970s was simply a much less European nation than now, be it through regular wine with meals, coffee in the morning or pavement seating at cafes- all of which a 1972 poll said that most Brits derided as unwelcome European habits. And, fantastically, the author has a habit of referring to Doctor Who episodes throughout.

I should also say that I listened to the audiobook of this and the narrator is fantastic.

Sara says

Carbon democracy

[Through my ratings, reviews and edits I'm providing intellectual property and labor to Amazon.com Inc.,

listed on Nasdaq, which fully owns Goodreads.com and in 2013 posted revenues for $74 billion and $274 million profits. Intellectual property and labor require compensation. Amazon.com Inc. is also requested to provide assurance that its employees and contractors' work conditions meet the highest health and safety standards at all the company's sites].

More Doctor Who than class struggle, but the facts are there. With trade unions to be "bought off until the North Sea oil comes on stream", you get the industrial picture of a country that for being far removed from the Soviet threat had been allowed to live off coal much longer than its continental peers, actively encouraged by the US to shift to oil two decades earlier, through the Marshall plan.

The power that coal dependence bestowed on the miners is inconceivable today. To meet the power shortage brought about by the miners' overtime strike, the UK was on a three-day business week for the first months of 1974 and power cuts had been the norm during all of Edward Heath's legislature.

Coal dependence also dwarfed the oil shock, or better - the oil shock gave the impression that there was no actual alternative to coal. Surprisingly, the British workers' monster contractual power and relentless picketing did not seem to back anything more than salary claims, which is testament to the long-standing "one nation" UK tradition, and to an atmosphere of world wars and Britain's "finest hour" never really left behind. With a fraction of that power, workers' struggles in Italy were to bring the country on the verge of revolution.

Andrew Fish says

Sandbrook's epic history of Postwar Britain reaches the early seventies with this, by Sandbrook's standards, relatively slim volume covering the period of the Heath Government from 1970-74. The book is much more densely political than previous installments, which may partially be because the period itself was intensely so, but may also reflect an increasing deftness in weaving themes together on Sandbrook's part. It is also, for myself as for Sandbrook, the first to cover my lifetime, albeit a period only vaguely etched in personal memory.

The early 1970s were a time of profound upheaval and societal conflict, from the waves of strikes in mines and shipyards to the conflagration that swept Northern Ireland and has, somewhat dismissively, gone down in history as "The Troubles." It was a period when the Marxist left tried to radicalise everything from sex to the environment, whilst the conservative right railed against the perceived tide of permissiveness and religious decline. Unlike in the 1960s, which Sandbrook told us mostly happened to other people, the impacts of the seventies affected everyone, with strikes, power outages, high inflation and the beginnings of the IRA campaign in the mainland UK.

Sandbrook, as ever, tells the story through both politics and cultural reference, whether relating the package holiday boom to Carry on Abroad or attitudes to Northern Ireland to Paul McCartney's banned Give Ireland Back to the Irish (something Sandbrook believes should have been banned on artistic rather than political grounds). He even identifies the socialist messages in Doctor Who (of which he is clearly a fan). As ever, he gives a measure of the intensity of feeling at the time, helping us to understand a period which, although relatively recent, still seems almost like a foreign country, with uncomfortable attitudes to race, to women and to violence. These views would be tempered by time, but the binding theme of the book seems to be that those who espoused revolutionary views of society were as doomed to fail as those whose views were merely

reactionary. Britain, as ever, muddled through on its middle way, avoiding the difficult decisions for as long as was possible - something which would create much greater problems only a few years later. That, however, is a tale for another volume and a volume I will definitely be purchasing very soon.

Christopher says

Though born in 1974, journalist Dominic Sandbrook has a keen interest in Britain in the years before he was born, or at least before he had left childhood. His "The Way We Were" series of popular history began with *Never Had It So Good* and *White Heat*, and in this third volume he offers a panorama of UK politics, society and popular culture from 1970–1974.

These years were Edward Heath's term as prime minister, and saw British economic decline, a series of crippling strikes, and the flaring up of violence in Northern Ireland and on English soil. So, it's no surprise that this book looks in great depth at politics and the economy. The reader will get into the nitty-gritty of British labour unions and their struggle with Heath's cabinet.

However, Sandbrook also covers the remarkable changes (or lack thereof!) in society's views on sexuality, the environment and race relations. New television dramas were intended to satirize racist old people as a fading phenomenon, but in fact the majority of the population was strongly opposed to immigration or living besides second-generation West Indies or Indian people. Sandbrook suggests that the sexual revolution really happened during this particular era, when use of the pill exploded, and not in the 1960s as often claimed. British football also unexpectedly gets a chapter of its own.

Sandbrook has essentially distilled the contents of book from earlier publications. After each string of several paragraphs, a footnote will list the various books that he drew on for the preceding section. There's no bold new research or interviews with prominent people from that era. The result is very dry. I came to this book after reading a number of books on the British counterculture written by people deeply involved, and their perspectives were a lot more engaging than Sandbrook's dispassionate library combing. Still, there is an immense amount of interesting trivia here, and it'll have you spending a great deal of time following up on the various references on everyone's favourite online encyclopedia.

Ian Brydon says

Dominic Sandbrook has that happy knack of combining his considerable scholarship with accessibility. This large book is actually merely the first instalment of what would have been an immense book, detailing British history during the 1970s. Such is the wealth of material available to him, that he had to opt instead for two volumes.

While the basic frame of the book follows the political history during that turbulent period, he consolidates that with detailed consideration of the cultural and sociological context. There is scarcely n aspect of British life in the early 1970s that doesn’t some under his pellucid gaze.

What rapidly becomes clear is that, although the book only covers four years, there was so much going on. The period was bookended by two general elections that would yield surprise results. I was just seven years old in 1970, so have no valuable recollection of the general election. In 1970, no one, least of all Edward

Heath himself, really expected that the Conservatives might win the election. Harold Wilson's government had, like so many Labour administrations of recent years, subsided into internal wrangling, with personality clashes among the front benchers spilling over into policy disputes. His Conservative rivals, however, were also divided, and lacked any clear economic vision, and Wilson had chosen to cut and run, hoping to secure a third term. Sandbrook covers the election campaign with great verve, conveying Harold Wilson's surprise and disappointment at the outcome.

Heath's four years as Prime Minister would see major upheavals, all of which reverberated through subsequent history to a greater degree than could reasonably have been expected. He is probably now best remembered for having clashed with the miners, and taking Britain into the Stygian gloom of the three-day week and lengthy power cuts. On a more positive point, he also succeeded, where previous Labour and Conservative governments had failed, at gaining admission into the European Economic Community, negotiating membership from 1 January 1973.

Although the prism of memory renders an image of him in constant strife against the trade unions, he actually had a better relationship with most of the union leadership than his Labour predecessor. Indeed, many people on the right of the party came almost to suspect him of crypto-Socialism. Even Joe Gormley, the relatively moderate national leader of the miners' union, got on well with Heath, and attempted to maintain constructive relations with him, though these were undermined by the scheming of his more extreme colleagues Mick McGahey, leader of the Scottish miners, and Arthur Scargill, leader of the Yorkshire chapter.

Sandbrook's analysis shows that Heath's greatest weakness was his inability to deal with people. Far too prickly, he simply couldn't communicate, and could never be comfortable in company. He was, also, incredibly unlucky. All the way through his administration he was overtaken by external events over which he had no control (such as the sudden outbreak of war in the Middle East and the consequential surge in oil and petrol prices around the world).

Sandbrook's analysis of the industrial strife, and in particular the miners' strikes, is very clear. He encapsulates complex concepts and sequences of events in a lucid and easily absorbed manner. Obviously, writing with the pellucid focus lent by hindsight helps, but he manages his material with great dexterity.

He also knows how to strike the right balance between the factual accounts of the political machinations with insights into the changing cultural and social horizons, offering diverting chapters on the rise of feminism, the lengthening shadow of unemployment and the grimmer aspects of professional football.

This is accessible history of the highest calibre, and I am eager to move on to the next volume.

Nick Harriss says

While the Heath years are only a folk memory for me (being 3 when he left office), the key events that commenced (at least in a major way) during his administration, became some of the key political issues of my formative years and beyond: the trouble in Northern Ireland; industrial relations; inflation; energy shocks; EEC/EU membership. What this book does well is give picture devoid of folk memory, and puts it into historical context, but not an overly academic one. Well worth a read and I am looking forward to the follow on book that covers 1975-79.

Mark Jolly says

Ah, popular history.

Free from the constraints of academia, Dominic Sandbrook, in his four-volume history of post-war Britain, is able to select the facts he needs to support the argument he had clearly decided on before he even sat down.

Then he is allowed to interpret those facts however he wishes as long as it looks good, and if the facts don't quite back up his argument, well, he can choose some others. That's what makes him a journalist rather than a historian.

Sandbrook claims to have at least tried to be even-handed. Really? Just read the chapter on the Polytechnic of North London.

I've read the last two books in the series, State of Emergency and Seasons in the Sun, and both, especially the latter, form what is not far short of a Thatcherism cookbook.

You put in the following ingredients – inflation, out-of-control unions, IRA bombing campaigns, growing extremism on the left, add a pinch of punk rock. Allow to simmer through the Winter of Discontent by limiting the money supply, and by May 1979 you'll have a fully formed Iron Lady.

Sandbrook may even be right. He argues his case well, and plenty of people will agree with him.

He may also be wrong, which is where you have to look at his sources and see whether his conclusions are justifiable.

This is where it gets a bit muddy. Apparently it took him just 18 months to write Seasons in the Sun, which is quite some feat for a book of this length, especially bearing in mind he makes TV series and writes hysterical (not in the funny sense of the word) articles for the Daily Mail.

It took me nearly a month to read it, and I was going quite quickly.

That leads you to question whether he was quite as rigorous a historian as he may have been.

The same sources pop up again and again: Bernard Donoughue, the adviser to both Harold Wilson and James Callaghan; Tony Benn, Peter Hall.

Every historian would use contemporary diaries as principal sources, but Sandbrook goes back to the same ones again and again, and the book seems to go beyond mere use and into rehash.

I started to think he was giving the impression of being authoritative, without necessarily being so. Again, the art of journalism. I'm not the only one to think so. There is even a website dedicated to pointing out the errors in his work. Here's one I spotted this morning: he writes of education being a common topic on Question Time in the 1970s – but the BBC TV programme did not start until September 14, 1979.

That all said, it is well-written and easy to read. But good writing, certainly in non-fiction, can be a danger.

Just because he has a good turn of phrase and can write in a way that makes you want to read on doesn't necessarily mean he's not lying through his teeth. (Although, it has to be said, it's not a bad test. Not that I've ever looked at it, but Mein Kampf is supposed to be almost unreadable.)

One of the things that tires me greatly is that people on the right will read this book because they agree with it, but people on the left will not, as they don't. This strikes me as ignorant. You shouldn't just read books that back up what you already think. Everyone should read books that challenge their preconceptions. Once you have a few facts at your disposal, you may have to change your mind (that is called growing up), and even if you don't, you've informed your own argument and made it much broader by examining the alternatives.

That's the political side of the book. Definitely worth looking at. It's far better than the cultural chapters, which is where his lack of firsthand experience of the 1970s is exposed. Sandbrook was born in 1974, so he's brave to tell us who were around at the time what we were listening to, watching, and most of all thinking.

He seems to think that a quick look at what was the most popular song, film, book or TV programme will tell us all we need to know.

For example, many reviewers have taken umbrage of his dismissal of punk rock: he points out that for all the fuss, the Bay City Rollers and Abba sold far more records than the Sex Pistols.

A fact, maybe. But let me put it this way. Can you name the biggest selling singles of 1972? They were Mouldy Old Dough by Lieutenant Pigeon, and in top place, The Royal Scots Dragoon Guards with Amazing Grace. If you don't remember them, their true awfulness is available on Youtube. And their influence? Nil. Punk rock was a reaction to the rubbish in the charts. That was the whole point. And when those of us who lived through it as teenagers grew up and the world became ours, we remembered.

So, in conclusion, probably not worth reading if you yearn for the days of Thatcher, because a piece of journalism like this, as opposed to history, will just confirm your prejudices. For everyone else, worth a look for the politics, if only to find out what you are up against. But if it's a culture and social history you are after, look elsewhere.

Read my other reviews at booksandbikes.co.uk

Tariq Mahmood says

Audible version

Undoubtedly the best book on politics I have yet to read. I loved the narration, the story and the characters which were cast as good as any novel. The biggest achievement of the book is the way a dry political factual history was turned into an engaging and exciting tale. The book covers the Edward Heath years of Britain, the impact of the decisions he took on the people of UK amid international crises like petrol prices and Irish terrorism. Not only is the political aspects covered very well, but the social, cultural, moral and economic changes and flavours of the day are covered very well.

Its a must read of any fan of political and cultural history.

Jon Arnold says

This is the first of Sandbrook's series on modern Britain I've picked up, partly through good word of mouth and partly as I've been looking for a good popular history series on the period. I started with the early 70s as it's fascinated me; the period that shaped the world I was born into. It ends up as exactly the book I've been looking for, the story as told by an intelligent history of my generation, history now beginning to congeal around the time as we can properly set it in context.

There are two tricks Sandbrook has which render this a compelling read. The first is obvious from other volumes – he divides modern British history into governments, hence this follows volumes on the Macmillan and Wilson regimes and is followed by one on the Callaghan/Wilson one. It allows a natural shape to events (though when it contributes to a greater understanding and context he's admirably willing to go outside the dates in question). The second is always to show how events are embedded in popular culture, acknowledging the nostalgia histories of shows such as 'I Heart The 70s', though he's careful to avoid the sugar-coated revisionism of those series., Such insights as pop culture could bring are always used to emphasise and illuminate his arguments instead, though his fanboy love of Doctor Who does show though. Not that I'm complaining there.

What really surprised is how contemporary Sandbrook makes all these troubles seem – there are good cases for paralleling Heath with Gordon Brown and even Cameron's current regime on many issues, particularly economic ones. And many of the issues facing the UK in that decade have come round the track again (or never really gone away). We like to think our problems are unique but Sandbrook ably demonstrates that this is rarely the case and we could learn from even recent history. He perhaps lacks any startling conclusions (bar an excellent musing that the hooliganism bedevilling football in the 70s and 80s was actually down to affluence) but finds virtue in thoroughness, adeptly bringing characters and issues of the time to life as easily as he illustrates more abstract concepts. Editorialising is kept to a minimum, though occasionally a little heavy-handed – one comment in the chapter on sport rides awfully close to the simplistic terrace goading of 'always the victims, it's never your fault'.

Historically it's admirably fair too, never brushing over Heath's faults but acknowledging that in terms of the events he couldn't control he was extraordinarily unlucky even if his government didn't always cope with them well. In fact, that's the main lesson to be drawn here. No matter how shrewd we may be, how competent or incompetent there's so little in anyone's control it's preposterous to ascribe sole blame to one regime. It's a book long proof of MacMillan's attributed response to the question of what Prime Minsters most feared – 'events, dear boy, events'. Whether he said it or not, Heath's reign was a perfect demonstration of that, from the death of his initial appointment as Chancellor to the events of the weeks leading up to the election. Heath brought much of his trouble on himself, but still deserves a more sympathetic view than Thatcherite revisionism tends to allow. Ultimately brought down by his own faults and unwillingness to change, this plays out as a political tragedy. As this is real life though, and more a soap opera than a one off play, it ends on a cliffhanger, the credits rolling with Wilson returning to Number Ten...

I know what happens next, but I still want to see what Sandbrook makes of it.