

## STUDIES IN ECONOMIC HISTORY

This series, specially commissioned by the Economic History Society, focuses attention on the main problems of economic history. Recently there has been a great deal of detailed research and reinterpretation, some of it controversial, but it has remained largely inaccessible to students or buried in academic journals. This series is an attempt to provide a guide to the current interpretations of the key themes of economic history in which advances have recently been made, or in which there has been significant debate.

Each book will survey recent work, indicate the full scope of the particular problem as it has been opened by research and distinguish what conclusions can be drawn in the present state of knowledge. Both old and recent work will be reviewed critically, but each book will provide a balanced survey rather than an exposition of the author's own viewpoint.

The series as a whole will give readers access to the best work done, help them to draw their own conclusions in some major fields and, by means of the critical bibliography in each book, guide them in the selection of further reading. The aim is to provide a springboard to further work and not a set of pre-packaged conclusions or short cuts.

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*Edited for the Economic History Society by  
M. W. Flinn*

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# *Laissez-faire and State Intervention in Nineteenth-century Britain*

*Prepared for  
The Economic History Society by*

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The title of this study is borrowed without permission from J. B. Brebner's 1948 essay which was the starting-point for many of the controversies which it has been my purpose to examine.

A.J.T.

## *Editor's Preface*

SO long as the study of economic history was confined to only a small group at a few universities, its literature was not prolific and its few specialists had no great problem in keeping abreast of the work of their colleagues. Even in the 1930s there were only two journals devoted exclusively to this field. But the high quality of the work of the economic historians during the inter-war period and the post-war growth in the study of the social sciences sparked off an immense expansion in the study of economic history after the Second World War. There was a great expansion of research and many new journals were launched, some specialising in branches of the subject like transport, business or agricultural history. Most significantly, economic history began to be studied as an aspect of history in its own right in schools. As a consequence, the examining boards began to offer papers in economic history at all levels, while textbooks specifically designed for the school market began to be published.

For those engaged in research and writing this period of rapid expansion of economic history studies has been an exciting, if rather breathless one. For the larger numbers, however, labouring in the outfield of the schools and colleges of further education, the excitement of the explosion of research has been tempered by frustration caused by its vast quantity and, frequently, its controversial character. Nor, it must be admitted, has the ability or willingness of the academic economic historians to generalise and summarise marched in step with their enthusiasm for research.

The greatest problems of interpretation and generalisation have tended to gather round a handful of principal themes in economic history. It is, indeed, a tribute to the sound sense of economic historians that they have continued to dedicate their energies, however inconclusively, to the solution of these key problems. The results of this activity, however, much of it stored away in a wide range of academic journals, have tended to remain inaccessible to many of those currently interested in the subject. Recognising the need for guidance through the burgeon-

ing and confusing literature that has grown around these basic topics, the Economic History Society decided to launch this series of small books. The books are intended to serve as guides to current interpretations in important fields of economic history in which important advances have recently been made, or in which there has recently been some significant debate. Each book aims to survey recent work, to indicate the full scope of the particular problem as it has been opened up by recent scholarship, and to draw such conclusions as seem warranted, given the present state of knowledge and understanding. The authors will often be at pains to point out where, in their view, because of a lack of information or inadequate research, they believe it is premature to attempt to draw firm conclusions. While authors will not hesitate to review recent and older work critically, the books are not intended to serve as vehicles for their own specialist views: the aim is to provide a balanced summary rather than an exposition of the author's own viewpoint. Each book will include a descriptive bibliography.

In this way the series aims to give all those interested in economic history at a serious level access to recent scholarship in some major fields. Above all, the aim is to help the reader to draw his own conclusions, and to guide him in the selection of further reading as a means to this end, rather than to present him with a set of pre-packaged conclusions.

M. W. FLINN  
*Editor*

It was the age of Samuel Smiles and the self-made man, of the dominance of the *bourgeoisie*. Its political foundations were the general abstention of the State from attempts to control the course of industrial development and the reliance on the initiative and unrestricted competition of independent business concerns. It was the age of *laissez-faire*.

*Britain's Industrial Future* (The Liberal Yellow Book)  
(1928) p. 6

I do not myself think that the conception of a period of *laissez-faire* is helpful. It has just enough truth to conceal its defects, which are many, and it is an encouragement to error.

G. S. R. KITSON CLARK, *An Expanding Society: Britain, 1830–1900* (1967) p. 162

'When *I* use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.'

LEWIS CARROLL, *Through the Looking-Glass*