

Roy Porter in *London Review of Books*, 5th March 1998, p.19 (the earlier half of the review, on English Population History, by Wrigley et al. has been omitted)

Luckily, those who are impatient to see the dry bones live do not have to wait for a further instalment from this source. Another Cambridge historian (or historian-anthropologist) has no such qualms about theorising about the fates of whole countries – indeed continents. Alan Macfarlane is well known for his bold theories about the forces shaping past societies, already advanced in such books as *The Origins of English Individualism* (1978) and *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction, 1300-1840* (1986), to say nothing of pioneering studies of Nepal.

The Savage Wars of Peace in effect takes up the challenge of interpreting the English demographic pattern as established by Wrigley and Co. But it is far more besides, because Macfarlane sets his study in the wider context of his pet theme of ‘English exceptionalism’ – and now of ‘Japanese exceptionalism’, too. How, he asks, does demographic behaviour, and the social constraints which shape it, explain why it was England which became the first industrial society? And why does the emergence of industrial society in Japan bear so many resemblances to the path taken by England?

Macfarlane approaches these key questions from various angles. The fact that both are offshore islands is held to be of cardinal importance – geographical good fortune enabled both nations to develop along lines quite distinct from the adjacent mainland. Each, moreover, found a way of its own of escaping from the Malthusian trap which for so long blighted the growth prospects of much of Europe and equally of China, where population pressures have perennially been dire.

Macfarlane’s explanation of the English situation is wholly consistent with the Cambridge Group’s findings. From early times England enjoyed a lowish birth-rate and a lowish death-rate. Why? Because a precocious market society had evolved, which became accustomed to adjusting family size to economic opportunities and social slots – in other words, the English got used to regarding children as commodities with a market value.

As for Japan, its island status enabled it to escape war and epidemics, while efficient farming helped keep famine at bay. Above all, the Japanese perfected the use of preventative checks. They cultivated fertility control, not (as in England) by late marriage but by the use of protracted breast-feeding, with all its contraceptive effects, by the effective employment of abortion and even infanticide, and perhaps by the early termination of marital sexual relations. Macfarlane sets these features of Japanese society in the context of its strict system of social regulation, in a way which affords illuminating comparisons with England. He offers an eye-opening account of adoption customs, sexual mores, gender roles, hygiene and public health practices and, not least, explains Japan’s success in creating a model of disciplined agricultural production out of a barren terrain.

Britain and Japan attained similar goals, via somewhat different routes. The upshot was that when economic opportunities offered themselves in England towards the end of the 18th century, the nation had already accumulated ample capital – it had enjoyed capital growth without demographic growth – and was ready to embark on a

population take-off which escaped any Malthusian check. A century later, when industrialisation was imported from abroad, Meiji Japan, too, was in a position to launch itself into industrial growth

Each of these books in its way presents a compelling reading of the lost world which gave birth to our own. Each of them implies also that 'Population Malthus' got it right: not the apocalyptic Parson, who preached famine and pestilence, but the astute observer of parish life.

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