

Beaujeu-Garnier, Jacqueline et Guilcher, André. *Les Îles Britanniques*. Collection Orbis, dirigée par André Cholley, Presses universitaires de France, 1963, 560 pages.

Cynthia Wilson

Volume 8, numéro 15, 1963

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/020468ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/020468ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département de géographie de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0007-9766 (imprimé)

1708-8968 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Wilson, C. (1963). Compte rendu de [Beaujeu-Garnier, Jacqueline et Guilcher, André. *Les Îles Britanniques*. Collection Orbis, dirigée par André Cholley, Presses universitaires de France, 1963, 560 pages.] *Cahiers de géographie du Québec*, 8(15), 111–114. <https://doi.org/10.7202/020468ar>

# COMPTES RENDUS BIBLIOGRAPHIQUES

## LES ÎLES BRITANNIQUES

BEAUJEU-GARNIER, Jacqueline et GUILCHER, André. *Les Îles Britanniques*. Collection *Orbis*, dirigée par André Cholley, Presses universitaires de France, 1963, 560 pages.

It is probably true to say that the *Tableau de la géographie de la France* could only have been written by a Frenchman ; certainly many of the finest regional studies of the *pays* of France were born of an intimate relationship between the geographer and the land. Yet there is one overwhelming difficulty in studying and writing a geography of one's native land, in that the observer is himself an integral part of the observed. The significance of the familiar is often hard to evaluate as are the many small daily changes that add up to a clear line of development. And just as the doctor is too concerned emotionally to treat the close members of his family, so the geographer is frequently too involved to stand back and see his country dispassionately, in perspective. For this reason among others, much of the new study *Les Îles Britanniques*, by Jacqueline Beaujeu-Garnier and André Guilcher, is refreshing, stimulating and often illuminating.

This is the third volume of a work devoted to Northern and Northwestern Europe by George Chabot, A. Guilcher and M<sup>me</sup> Beaujeu-Garnier, which belongs in turn to the *Orbis* collection of introductory geography texts, under André Cholley's direction. It is therefore designed as a textbook and as such one must deplore the fact that there is no index ; instead, a brief note informs the reader that he will find a complete index to the first four volumes at the end of volume IV, which in any case had not been published at that time.

*Les Îles Britanniques* is really two completely separate studies under one cover, with no attempt to integrate them. Part I, written by M. Guilcher, deals with the physical skeleton of the country. In a brief introduction the author stresses the importance of the rock structure and formation (the preglacial relief) in the present configuration of the land, and the restricted influence of the events of the Pleistocene epoch. The following five chapters contain a broad regional breakdown of the structural relief of the British Isles (the section on Scotland being contributed by Alain Godard), a study of the major surfaces of peneplanation and the evolution of the pre-glacial drainage patterns, an analysis of the coastal features and a discussion of the hydrology. The study incorporates the results and hypotheses of British and other geographers and at the end of each chapter there is a valuable bibliography. The text is supported by excellent maps, sections and block diagrams and the photographs, taken by the authors, are well-selected and arranged under regional headings. This is, however, a detailed descriptive text and most profitably studied by referring to the large-scale survey maps, which are cited in the bibliography at the end of chapter I. An inconvenient omission in this first chapter is a general map of the major structural features of the islands as a whole, to avoid the necessity of referring to volume I, which surveys the generalities.

Part II follows abruptly. In this section M<sup>me</sup> Beaujeu-Garnier builds up a picture of the human geography of the British Isles, and it is there that the freshness of the book lies. The opening chapter analyses the population distribution and structure. In population density, the United Kingdom rates fifth in the world yet « aucune autre population au monde n'offre pareille répartition des activités humaines : un aménagement extrême et déjà ancien du secteur agricole, un gonflement prématuré des groupes industriels, jusqu'à une proportion inégalée ailleurs, un épanouissement considérable du secteur tertiaire. » (p. 191). In the following chapter the discussion turns to the towns : « La population du Royaume-Uni vit, plus que toute autre au monde, dans les villes ». Four out of five people are urban dwellers, two thirds live in towns of 50,000 and more, 50 percent in towns of 100,000 and over and one third of the population lives in the

seven large conurbations. In England and Wales few people live further than 60 miles from a town of at least 100,000 and what is more, the Englishman's desire to have his own house and garden has only aggravated the problem of urban sprawl and invasion of the countryside. Urbanisation in Britain has been pushed to its extreme limits.

Logically, chapter III deals with industry : « L'industrie britannique a une place unique ». There are eleven people in mining, industry and construction to one in agriculture. Furthermore, owing to the mode of its evolution and the present policy of organisation and planning, « l'activité industrielle pénètre absolument toutes les régions du pays et elle les envahit spatialement comme elle les domine économiquement, » (p. 261). Nine million people are employed in the transformation industries alone, which provide 40 percent of the national income. Agriculture (chapter IV), on the other hand, employs only one million and provides only 4 percent of the national revenue. « Ce sont les conséquences de l'expansion commerciale, serait-on tenté d'écrire, qui ont façonné l'agriculture anglaise et cette agriculture est une espèce d'activité adaptée non seulement aux besoins nationaux mais à des échanges internationaux particulièrement actifs. Elle est, économiquement, la moins « naturelle » de toutes les agricultures du Vieux Monde », (p. 333). Chapter V is concerned with internal communications and with the sea in the British economy. Although natural conditions are so favourable to the construction of roads and railways, « les initiatives individuelles qui présidèrent à l'établissement de ces divers réseaux empêchèrent toute conception d'ensemble et tout plan cohérent, » (p. 385). The road network, the densest in the world, is rooted so firmly in the past, that it has created almost insoluble problems of congestion and delay in the high-pitched economy of to-day — and there is the modern crisis in the railways. Although modernisation has kept pace with the times, the merchant navy fleet, still the largest in the world from gross tonnage, has increased by only 16.2 percent over 1939 against a world increase of 82 percent. With respect to the ports, the author notes the post-war rise in petroleum imports and the associated location of the large modern refineries and subsidiary industries in changing their classification and relative importance.

Following this general treatment of the British Isles, M<sup>me</sup> Beaujeu-Garnier next offers a pen sketch of the broad regional differences which result today from this long and complex evolution of urban, industrial and agricultural patterns, stressing the gravitational pull towards London. « Une vision s'impose : celle d'un vaste cadre, d'une sorte d'écrin qui, à partir des étendues brumeuses et agitées de l'océan Atlantique, au nord et au nord-ouest, développe jusqu'au sud-est de la Grande-Bretagne des paysages de moins en moins montagneux, humides, solitaires, de plus en plus riants, ensoleillés, peuplés jusqu'à ce cœur du Royaume, qu'on appelle Londres . . . J'ai donc choisi de suivre le même chemin que les richesses ou les hommes de ce pays et, partant des bordures, de gagner peu à peu le centre. » (p. 414).

Finally the writer opens up the subject by placing the United Kingdom in its world setting, as the pivot of the Commonwealth, as banker and broker for the sterling area, through its investments abroad and through such large international concerns as British Petroleum, Imperial Chemical Industries, Unilever, Lloyds and the British Airlines. Fifty percent of Britain's food and nearly all primary materials are imported, so that foreign trade comprises 32 percent of the national income (cf. 5.5 percent in the U.S.). The present trade situation is highly unstable. The author discusses the question of Britain's trade relationships and thinking, with respect to Europe and the World. For the sake of completeness, chapter VIII is devoted to Eire.

M<sup>me</sup> Beaujeu-Garnier's picture of modern Britain is securely based on a wealth of historical and statistical detail as well as a personal knowledge of the country. In this land, where the modern urban-industrial society of the west had its origin, the development of the present-day economy has had a long and complex history and has passed through several cycles. One can only admire the sheer virtuosity with which the salient facts have been selected, marshalled and forced into furthering the argument at every point. The text is flowing and the line of its development never obscured. The main points are revealed and curiosity is aroused at the beginning of each chapter, then the theme is expanded. The past is evoked only in as far as it illuminates the present. The bulk of the statistical data has been reduced by cartographical techniques and a series of excellent maps and diagrams gives a wealth of significant information. At the end of

each chapter, there is a bibliography, which includes statistical sources. Perhaps the greatest weakness in the presentation lies in the use of photographic material. The photographs, taken by the author, appear as an afterthought. Often picturesque rather than revealing, they do little to heighten the reality of the study and to sharpen one's imagination. Perhaps this is partly due to the unfortunate placing of the plates in the publication of the text ; for example, photographs of Devon, Kent, Middlesborough and Thirsk are located in a regional account of Northern Ireland, and the text on Scotland is « illustrated » by plates of Leeds, Cambridge and the Fens.

At this point a comparison with the pre-war study of the British Isles by Demangeon (*Géographie Universelle*) is inevitable. This was a regional study in the French tradition, in which the personality of the islands was revealed through an intimate knowledge of man's relationship to the land, and the landscape bore witness. Due respect was given to the freedom of man's will and his flights of creative imagination, but these still played noticeably within the restrictions and potential of the physical environment. Above all, the great variety of natural conditions in the islands was expressed in significant regional differences. The rich embroidery, the warmth, continuity and completeness of the older profoundly human study contrast strongly with the gleaming clear-cut functional lines and the discontinuity of this new, more impersonal work. Yet it is the latter which comes closer to the reality of modern Britain ; that of Demangeon describes a Britain which no longer exists. The accelerated progress that has taken place in modern technology since the war, especially in communications and in modifying and evading the natural environment, has resulted in a more remote and complex relationship between man and the land, with increasing emphasis on man's interaction with man, at national and international levels.

The British Isles are so small that modern communication has engulfed them. The traditional regions have given way to those of a different form and structure. Rural areas are an integral part of the urban and agriculture a highly organised industry geared to urban demands. The few remote areas of the islands are now the parks and playgrounds of the highly mobile city dweller, country cottages are being snapped up by the townspeople, even small pieces of the Green Belt around London are being bought as semi-private picnic grounds. The remnants of traditional life now self-consciously serve the very lucrative tourist and vacation industry, an increasingly important part of the national economy. As the economy becomes more and more highly rationalised, the British Isles are fast becoming homogenised.

Considering the fundamental changes in geographical values that have resulted from advances in science and technology in the past quarter of a century, the question comes to mind as to whether this new work can succeed that of Demangeon. To this reader, the answer is no, on two major counts :

1. the handling of the physical environment, and
2. the regional analysis and synthesis.

In these two sectors the new work spans uneasily the gap between the old and the new.

In present-day Britain, soils, « natural » vegetation and even climate often appear secondary to considerations of the consumer and potential consumer — to supply and demand, time and accessibility, costs and profits, labour and politics, the balance of trade, the maintenance of a standard of living and a way of life. Yet the development of the land's potential can only be attained through a harmonious relationship between physical and human factors, and geographers are still concerned with this. Today, scientific method is being increasingly applied to this study of man and the land, with a view to understanding and optimizing the relationship. The modern regional geography must re-evaluate the restrictions and possibilities of the physical setting within the framework of current scientific knowledge and technology. The work of M. Guilcher and M<sup>me</sup> Beaujeu-Garnier by-passes this important matter. An evaluation of the natural resources of the nation based on specialist studies by earth and atmospheric scientists, the problem of their conservation, the application of this knowledge in agricultural, industrial, rural and urban development and, inversely, the question of the human factors in disturbing the equilibrium of the natural environment are not touched upon. The matter is too fundamental to be omitted and is the natural link between Parts I and II.

The theme of M<sup>me</sup> Beaujeu-Garnier's chapter on the regions of Britain is the overpowering attraction of London, and her study of London itself is perhaps the most successful part of the chapter. Elsewhere the author resorts to the traditional regional division of the islands into predominantly industrial, urban or agricultural components. This is no longer the most significant breakdown. With the increasing emphasis on regional planning and the complex interdependence of town and country (in which the same standard of living and demands are shared by town and country dwellers), it is in general more realistic to consider a set of functional regions, whose extent and degree of inner coherence depend on the quality of the communication system. Basically such a region consists of an urban centre and its sphere of influence ; such regions frequently overlap, and depending on the nature and importance of the centre and the function it serves, a hierarchy of such regions can be built up. In the British Isles, as M<sup>me</sup> Beaujeu-Garnier points out, London is at the apex, the regional centre for the whole nation.

Within the self-imposed limits of the physical and socio-economic structures of the British Isles, this new study sweeps as clean as the new broom and as such is more than a welcome addition to the literature.

Cynthia WILSON

### L'U. R. S. S.

GEORGE, Pierre. L'U. R. S. S. Paris, Presses universitaires de France, Collection *Orbis*, deuxième édition, 1962. 497 pages.

Quinze ans après la première édition, l'U. R. S. S. de Pierre George reparait dans une nouvelle édition, rajeunie et déchargée de son appendice sur la Haute-Asie et l'Iran.

Comme on s'y attend, les chapitres étudiant les traits physiques du continent soviétique ont été peu ou pas modifiés. Seule la disposition a été revue. Par ailleurs, les données humaines et économiques, beaucoup plus mouvantes, ont fourni une matière nouvelle à l'auteur.

Au chapitre de la population, plusieurs nouveaux tableaux illustrent le dynamisme démographique des dernières années au reste encore hypothéqué par les séquelles de la guerre. Un détail : le tableau de la répartition de la population par nationalités (page 253) oublie le groupe lithuanien, fort de deux millions et demi d'individus.

Le chapitre traitant de l'organisation de l'économie socialiste a été refait, en éliminant les allusions à *l'homme nouveau* et certaines références aux œuvres de Staline et Molotov. Il insiste sur l'importante réforme de 1957, instaurant le système des *sovmarkhoz* (conseils économiques régionaux). On sait cependant que, depuis cette date, les réalisations n'ayant pas rencontré toutes les prévisions du Plan, un certain retour à la centralisation administrative s'est esquissé. Pour des raisons similaires, des expériences d'envergure dans le domaine agricole ont été faites. L'auteur les mentionne : regroupement des *kolkhozes*, développement des *sovkhozes*, suppression des stations de machines, suppression des livraisons obligatoires à bas prix, diversification des assolements.

Les quinze années qui séparent les deux éditions du livre de Pierre George ont vu l'accroissement en flèche des productions de base : le texte en rend compte. (N'oublions pas que la production soviétique de minerai de fer et de coke de fonderie a dépassé celle des U. S. A. en 1958, et qu'en 1961 l'U. R. S. S. extrayait, pour la première fois, plus de charbon que les États-Unis). Il faut cependant déplorer que les tableaux de production ne se complètent pas d'une édition à l'autre, les rubriques chiffrées n'étant pas les mêmes. Étant donnée la mauvaise habitude qu'on a prise en Occident de regarder avec suspicion les chiffres livrés par la statistique soviétique, ce reproche pourrait être grave. Au reste, il eût été instructif de pouvoir faire partout une comparaison des prévisions et des réalisations.

Les nouvelles descriptions des villes soviétiques tiennent compte de la récente urbanisation de l'U. R. S. S., bien différente en caractères et en dimensions de celle d'avant la guerre. Les photographies, réjouvénées, traduisent avec plus de réalisme le visage, toujours pareil à lui-même, des villes soviétiques. (Mentionnons, en passant, que la documentation photographique de la seconde édition est entièrement renouvelée ; elle est plus à point, plus éloquente ; plusieurs photos sont de l'auteur.)