

Book Review: This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair

Blog Admin

In order to help put the current discussion about the UK's relationship with the EU into context, our sister blog *EUROPP* looks back at the history of the debate, with a contemporary review of **This Blessed Plot**. First published in 1998, it is seen by many as one of the most important books published on the UK's relationship with the EU. The book takes a close look at how Britain's interests evolved both towards, and away from Europe, all against an on-going backdrop of euroscepticism. **Claudia Traffler** finds that 15 years after it was first published; Hugo Young's work remains incredibly relevant to contemporary debates about the UK and the EU, and still offers insights for policy-makers and politicians alike.

This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe from Churchill to Blair. Hugo Young. Overlook Press. 1998.

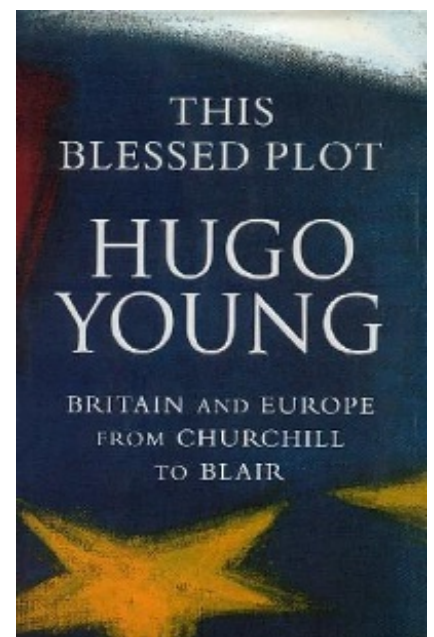
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On the 23rd of January, David Cameron celebrated the 40th anniversary of Britain's accession to the European Economic Community with a speech widely perceived as a threat of divorce. This new approach quickly bore "fruit": on the 5th of March Britain was outvoted in Brussels on a piece of crucial financial services legislation for the first time in political memory. The "gradual ebb away of [British] political influence" among its European partners raises the question of British future in the European Union. And yet to understand whatever might come next, it is of great importance to analyse how we got here in the first place. Hugo Young's classic piece, *This Blessed Plot: Britain and Europe, From Churchill to Blair*, offers a good starting point.

A preeminent political journalist with *The Guardian* until his death in 2003, Young wrote a linear political history listing key moments, key decisions and biographical details. These collected facts make the book a useful reference in itself, but that would be a very short-sighted evaluation of Young's work. This is a deep study into the layers of British identity and ambiguity towards the Continent. In Young's own words, 'This is the story of fifty years in which Britain struggled to reconcile the past she could not forget with the future she could not avoid.'

What is it about British identity that yields to this ever differentiation between each side of the Channel? Charles De Gaulle expressed this difference when he vetoed for the first time Britain's entry into the EEC in 1963 by declaring that "*La nature, la structure, la conjoncture, qui sont propres à l'Angleterre, diffèrent profondément de celles des Continentaux*". Hugo Young draws up a convincing series of plots to explain the political dynamic underpinning this difference.

In 1945, Britain saw itself as not only one of the military victors of World War II but the unchallenged moral victor. The English people never succumbed to fascism; they fought it against all odds, making them (and the English constitutional system) ever superior to their European neighbours. Perhaps, the way for Britain to have ever embraced the emotional tie to Europe, as the rest of the Continent did, would have been to lose the war – but then, there would be no Europe at all.



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Although allusions to a united Europe were common in rhetorical performances in the aftermath of the war, they had no substantial seriousness. The only reality: the idea of Britain and its national interest that emerged unchallenged and ever more powerful in 1945. Young painstakingly details Churchill's ambiguity towards European integration. His post-war speeches ([Zurich](#), [The Hague](#)), while in opposition, lifted European federalist spirits, yet there was more rhetoric to them than political commitment. His designs for Britain were far from those he allowed the "Continentalists" to believe. And he would have never chosen a more special partnership with Europe over the two other circles of influence in which the UK evolved. According to Young, Churchill was thus setting a precedent for the future generations of politicians and his ambiguity towards the Continent was to become the thread.

Churchill saw three circles of influence in which Britain needed to develop its interests: the transatlantic alliance, the Commonwealth and Europe. But British history of the 20th century suggests a "forced" convergence towards Europe, in order to defend world and continental leadership. The choice for Britain to align itself closely with Europe to the (falsely) perceived detriment of the other two circles has not been taken willingly. The Commonwealth remains a point of reference and the US special relationship is precious and at times more valuable than the European collaboration. The highly emotional reaction to President Obama's official Philip Gordon's comment that the UK should stay in the EU is yet another example of feeling cornered in the EU when the favourite option lies elsewhere. As soon as the economic or geopolitical pull of Europe weakens the UK tries to rebalance these three circles.

This Blessed Plot is furthermore a story of Euroscepticism in Britain. Perhaps the more insightful chapter on the subject – although Young dedicated an entire section to Bill Cash and his "partisan" beliefs – is the one on Margaret Thatcher. Hugo Young is very familiar with the character that he portrayed in a [biographical reference book](#); and the nearly 70-pages he dedicates to the Iron Lady are perhaps the most first-hand material in the whole volume.

Euroscepticism, says Young, has existed since Europe exists. It was nothing new in the 1980s and emanated from both sides of the political spectrum. But Thatcher's years raised it to another level. He qualified her as the first Prime Minister in the history of UK membership to have given 'at important moments Europe the loudest place on the agenda' (p.306): the Bruges Speech, her mistrust of Germans and Germany, with a special dislike for Helmut Kohl and finally her losing the struggle (and her office) to the internal party battle over Europe. She had divided the Conservatives over Europe, and her extreme Euroscepticism led to her undoing.

Hugo Young, notorious pro-European, is highly critical of the Eurosceptic tendency running through the whole History of UK-EU relations and when he published this book in 1998, he seemed to be more confident in the future, as if Blair administration would finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. That was of course without considering Thatcher's children.

And here lies the up-to-date relevance of this piece. Although published 15 years ago, this plot has never been more present. The internal crisis antagonising the political arena over Europe brings Hugo Young back on the front line. The conclusion is blunt: nothing has changed, it only got worse. And whatever might come next – referendum or not, in or out – Cameron's attitude towards Brussels must be understood as part of a long line going as far as the post-war years. To policymakers, *This Blessed Plot* offers a warning. To everybody else, it presents a gloomy perspective of the upcoming scenario if Britain keeps on going down this path. As Sir Henry Tizard forewarned in 1949: "We are not a Great Power and never will be again. We are a great nation, but if we continue to behave like a Great Power we shall soon cease to be a great nation" (p.24).

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