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The discomforts of life on the edge: Britain and Europe, 1963-1975

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Stephen Wall, *The Official History of Britain and the European Community. Volume II. From Rejection to Referendum, 1963-1975*, London and New York: Routledge, 2012, ISBN 978-0-415-53560

Recent trends in both Britain and continental Europe have made the question of the United Kingdom's position as a fully fledged member of the EU more contentious than it has been for decades. The almost unchecked rise of Euroscepticism amongst both the British political elite – especially within the governing Conservative Party – and the media, means that the possibility of British withdrawal from the Union, or at very least the renegotiation of its position within it, is discussed more openly and in more mainstream political circles than at any time since the 1970s. On the other side of the Channel meanwhile, the perceived need to address the weaknesses of the single currency by increasing integration, whether across the EU as a whole or simply those countries that share the Euro, has helped create a situation in which many of the key decisions are taken in fora within which the British are either not represented at all, or are marginal players at best. Few European governments openly aspire to a situation in which the United Kingdom moves away from the core European decision making system, and several have publicly deplored the possibility. But faced with the need to press ahead, and the ever decreasing likelihood of the British being able to follow any such advance, European governments are being forced to contemplate the prospect of a core Europe without Britain.

In such circumstances it seems particularly appropriate that the publication of Sir Stephen Wall's volume of *The Official History of Britain and the European Community* allows us to revisit an earlier period, that between 1963 and 1975, when Britain's relationship with the then fledgling European Communities was in a state of profound uncertainty. The new volume, the sequel to Alan Milward's first volume of the *Official History* covering the years from 1945 to 1962, takes a detailed look at the failure of Britain's first attempt to accede to the EC in 1963, the second Labour-led application of 1967 which like its predecessor was thwarted by a veto from General de Gaulle, the revival of Britain's second application once de Gaulle had left power, the membership negotiations of 1970-1, the struggle to secure parliamentary ratification of the European Communities bill, Britain's first year in the European Community and the Labour-inspired renegotiation of British membership in 1974,

before ending with the 1975 referendum on British membership which resulted in a seemingly decisive popular vote in favour of remaining within the EC. The nature of both Britain and the Community in the 1963 to 1975 period was, needless to say, very different from today. So too was the tone of the debate on both sides of the Channel. The underlying questions however of what membership or exclusion from an integrating Europe would mean for Britain's wider role in the world, or what the British could contribute, for good or for ill, to the integration process itself and to Europe's future still have a degree of resonance in the current situation. This is contemporary history, in other words, whose relevance and interest for those primarily engaged with the present day is almost beyond dispute.

The story recounted in Wall's volume is both eventful and complex. The book opens where Milward's account left off in late 1962, with Harold Macmillan's government in the midst of a complex membership negotiation with the six member states of the EEC. Straight away however one of the key differences between Wall's approach and that of his predecessor becomes apparent. For while Milward, whose background was that of an economic historian, remained fascinated in the substance of the membership negotiations and was ready, indeed, to turn the economic questions that the UK's interaction with Europe raised about Britain's place in the world into the *leitmotiv* of his whole volume, Wall is much more inclined to focus primarily on the high politics of the Britain and Europe story. The central characters of this account are thus Macmillan, Harold Wilson and Edward Heath on the British side, and Charles de Gaulle, Georges Pompidou, and to a lesser extent Willy Brandt on that of the Community, rather than those who actually conducted the multiple membership negotiations, and of the issues at stake, political and geo-political calculations often outweigh economic assessments of what might be gained or lost through British membership of the EEC. Great men dominate this history (and in the pre-Thatcher era they were all men) rather than the interplay of structural forces favoured by Wall's predecessor.

As a result the key episodes in the first of Wall's nine chapters are Macmillan's failed attempt at Rambouillet in December 1962 to persuade de Gaulle that Britain belonged inside the European Community, the summit between John F. Kennedy and Macmillan at Nassau in the Bahamas that immediately followed the Rambouillet meeting, and de Gaulle's famous – or infamous – press conference of January 14, 1963 in which he rejected British membership. The idea that the nuclear

deal struck between the British Prime Minister and the US President at Nassau in some way provoked the veto – as some retrospective comments by French ministers appeared to suggest – is rejected, rightly in my view. The causes of the veto are instead seen as lying in de Gaulle's strong sense that the inclusion of Britain in the Community as it existed would make it less advantageous for France, economically and politically, and less easy for Paris to dominate. The actual negotiations in Brussels, the last ditch attempt by the British to rally the 'friendly Five' member states to their cause, and the multiple efforts by Macmillan and others to persuade the French leader that Britain was becoming more European and as such better suited to the Community were all of little consequence in the face of de Gaulle's implacable opposition.

This sense of Britain's European vocation having been thwarted by an immovable French barrier sets the scene for chapter 2. Entitled 'picking up the pieces' this looks at the aftermath of the Brussels breakdown, reviews the domestic political consequences devoting some space to the position of Harold Wilson, the new leader of the Opposition, and looks at the somewhat ineffective diplomatic manoeuvring as the British and their allies amongst the Five sought to salvage something from the wreckage. Wall also outlines a little known disagreement between Macmillan and Heath, when the latter who had served as chief negotiator in the abortive 1961-63 membership bid and as such felt particularly ill-used by de Gaulle, helped quash the Prime Minister's brief flirtation with the idea of Anglo-French military cooperation. This clash between a strategy based on wooing the French and one that instead sought to pressurise the French into giving way by emphasising Britain's links with the Five foreshadows, as Wall perceptively points out, the much better known 'Soames Affair' of 1969.

The problem with both this chapter and that which follows, though, is that not a great deal happens. The book's basic technique is to allow its course to be dictated by events and to provide detailed summaries of both key meetings, and important documents. Wall has an eye for a good quote and plenty of experience in extracting the essentials from a diplomatic conversation or meeting. He is therefore able to assemble quite a rich mix of narrative description, but chooses not to comment on it extensively or to impose his own analytical structure. This method works effectively when, as in the first chapter, plot developments come thick and fast. But it is less well suited for those intermediate periods between the main events, where British policy

tended to drift. As a result, neither the chapter covering Conservative policy after the failure of the first membership bid, nor that devoted to Labour's initial uncertainty about the appropriate European course really grip. The out-and-out specialist will find useful details. I enjoyed for instance the account of Wilson's first encounter with de Gaulle. But the more general reader may find it hard to stay the course.

The narrative picks up pace again in the two chapters devoted to Harold Wilson's membership bid. As he acknowledges in his introduction, Wall is clearly fascinated by the Labour Prime Minister, discerning in him a degree of commitment to British EC membership that many others have overlooked. 'Wilson, once persuaded of the advantages of membership (and the absence of viable alternatives), held to that view both in Government and in Opposition.' (p.2) Wall also makes good use of his additional sources in this section, since while the official minutes of the Cabinet discussions that preceded Labour's 1967 application have been open for some time at the National Archives, Wall, as official historian, is also allowed to see the Cabinet Secretary's notes upon which the official minutes are based. Quite a lot of extra detail can be added as a result – detail which only highlights the adept way in which the Prime Minister piloted his fractious ministers towards the decision that he sought. Once more the emphasis in this explanation of why Wilson too decided to turn to Europe is on the political rather than the economic. The Labour Prime Minister seems never to have regarded the economic case for membership as wholly convincing since the possible long term merits of additional competition and trade, were largely balanced out by the negative short term impact on Britain's fragile balance-of-payments position and the failings, from a UK point of view, of the Community's costly and protectionist agricultural policy. But what did make the difference were the political dangers of marginalisation were Britain to stand aside from an integrating Europe. A Britain within 'Europe' could aspire not only to become leading members of European grouping – one of the sub-texts running throughout this book is the way in which all of the governments covered based their calculations on the assumption that once within the EC Britain would quickly establish itself as a strong leader, if not *the* leader of the integration process – but would also be able to use their new position to revitalise links with the United States and with the Commonwealth that were otherwise likely to fade. Remaining outside – or 'going it alone' as it was described in government circles – by contrast, carried with it the strong danger that Britain would soon find itself nothing more than 'a

greater Sweden', largely excluded from the key political and global decisions of the day, and forced instead to watch as Western policy was determined through dialogue between the United States and an ever more French and/or German-dominated Europe. It was primarily for this reason that Harold Wilson, and his foreign secretaries George Brown and Michael Stewart, became convinced that Britain had to become a member of the EEC.

Convincing a divided Labour party of this decision was difficult enough; winning round the French was more demanding still. Chapter 5 thus describes in some detail the multiple tactics by which Wilson tried to circumvent the barrier of de Gaulle. Direct diplomacy was one option: Wilson like Macmillan before him travelled to Paris in an attempt to persuade the French leader that British membership would strengthen the Community rather than weaken it, and would prove advantageous to France. Wilson's outline of how Britain could help create a 'technological Community' was for instance intended to win round the French. Another possibility was to persuade France's Community partners to place sufficient pressure on the General to force him to change his mind. And yet a third was to hope that by beginning a process of debate and discussion on Community enlargement, if necessary in fora other than the Community itself like the Western European Union, such a degree of momentum would be established that it would become impossible for France to bar Britain's path. But it was all to no avail. In two press conferences first in May, and then more decisively in November 1967, de Gaulle once more made clear that Britain was not yet ready for membership, nor the Community yet ready for enlargement. Instead the United Kingdom should seek some form of association with the EEC. British hopes had again been thwarted by seemingly immovable opposition from Paris.

The failure of the 1967 application was followed by another period in which neither British policy, nor Wall's description of it, had much sense of direction. Association was impossible, not just because it had been suggested by de Gaulle, but more importantly because it would subject Britain to some of the short term economic disruption that a commercial realignment with Europe would entail, without providing the British with any voice in Brussels and hence any of the political dividends to which Wilson had become so attached. Nor were any of the alternatives to membership – going it alone, or exploring the possibility of a commercial tie up with the United States – that had been rejected in the spring of 1967 any more attractive or

realistic one year on. Instead, all that London could do was to maintain its course, ensure that the Five went on calling for enlargement in Brussels, and wait until the obstacle in the *Elysée* was removed from Britain's path. There was admittedly a brief moment in early 1969 when it looked as if de Gaulle might have changed his mind about British membership, telling Sir Christopher Soames, the new British ambassador in Paris, that France and Britain should hold secret bilateral discussions about the way forward – a way which he implied might well lead to something rather different from the existing European structures. But internal divisions within London, with some eager to explore this potential opening and others fearing a cunning trap, led to this opportunity – if that indeed was what it was – being wasted. Rather than the start of an Anglo-French rapprochement, the Soames affair became another bitter London-Paris spat.

In April 1969, however, General de Gaulle did resign. His successor, Georges Pompidou, while a Gaullist, was on record, moreover, as having spoken more favourably of British membership than the General had ever done. And in December 1969, the Six held a summit in The Hague where they agreed to press ahead with the 'completion', the 'deepening' and the 'widening' of the European Community. Britain's chances of being able to join seemed immeasurably improved. Chapter 7 can thus describe the start of membership negotiations, culminating in the set-piece encounter in May 1971 between Pompidou and Edward Heath. Again Wall decides to opt for a primarily high political account. Those wanting details of the various issues from agriculture to Commonwealth trade, from fishing limits to Britain's budgetary contribution, around which the Brussels talks revolved would do well to turn to the published Whitehall history of the negotiations themselves written up by the leader of the UK delegation, Sir Con O'Neill. Instead, the focus here is on Heath's contacts with his counterparts amongst the Six and especially the meticulous preparation that went into the May 1971 summit. This bore fruit. When the two leaders met in Paris, Heath was able to impress his European vision upon the French leader – something which both Macmillan and Wilson had sought in vain to do with de Gaulle – and, crucially, persuade Pompidou to engage in a substantive discussion of some of the issues holding back advance in Brussels. The success of the summit thus went beyond establishing a good personal rapport between the British and French leaders and signalling the start of a new period of *entente cordiale*; it also caused the instructions to French negotiators in Brussels to be altered, thereby clearing the way

for a rapid advance through most of the outstanding dossiers. Success in Paris quickly translated into success in Brussels.

Were the membership terms eventually agreed upon good or bad? The title of chapter 8 seems to promise an assessment. Once more, however, Wall prefers to report the views of others more than advance his own. We are thus told about Commonwealth reactions, about views within the government, and crucially about the way in which the mood in the Labour party had hardened against the negotiating outcome, leading the majority of the party vehemently to reject what Heath had achieved. This segues logically into a useful description of the dramatic vote of October 1971 when the government was only able to secure passage of the European Communities Bill thanks to the votes of 69 Labour rebels led by Roy Jenkins, who defied Wilson's three line whip, and supported British entry. We also learn about reactions on the continent, where the unexpectedly problematic negotiations over the newly launched Common Fisheries Policy were not enough to dent a strong sense of satisfaction that after more than a decade the long-running dispute over British membership had at last been laid to rest. Partly for this reason the new member states were invited to participate in several major internal discussions, including the December 1972 Paris Summit, even before they had officially taken their place within the Community. The chapter does thus convey the extent to which Britain had joined an EEC full of ideas and ambition about advance, as well as Heath's readiness fully to participate in these new ventures. But Wall's own judgment of the negotiations' outcome (pp.425-6) is highly guarded, noting the problems that were always likely to occur as a result of the budgetary settlement in particular, but tempering such criticism with the admission that this outcome was all but inevitable.

The final two chapters serve as a reminder of how life inside the European Community proved almost as difficult and frustrating as life outside had been. Part of this was to do with timing. 1973 of course was not just the year when Britain took its place amongst the Nine. It was also the year when the long postwar economic boom came to its end. As a result, the new member states enjoyed no honeymoon period during which high growth rates helped ease the pain of any European readjustment, but instead found themselves and their new partners plunged rapidly into economic crisis. Also hard-hit were some of the Community's ambitious new plans, notably that for economic and monetary union. The Werner Plan to realise EMU by 1980 was rapidly swept aside by the ongoing collapse of the world monetary system and the

increasing volatility of European currencies against one another. Nor were Europe's foreign policy ambitions, to which Heath in particular had attached such hope, spared from this period of turmoil, suffering from first the botched American attempt to declare 1973 the Year of Europe and to readjust its approach to its Western partners, and then, by the year's end, from the eruption of precisely the type of crisis in the Middle East that was best designed to reveal the cracks in any façade of European unity. Twelve months on from the champagne and gala celebrations which had greeted Britain's entry, much of the idealism with which some had regarded European membership looked distinctly tarnished.

Equally important though was the ever stronger vein of opposition to European membership apparent within the Labour party. For by February 1974 Heath had fallen from power to be replaced by Harold Wilson, now at the helm of a party that had fought the election campaign on a pledge to renegotiate British EEC membership and to place the outcome before the British people, either by means of a general election, or by a referendum. Britain's hard won EEC membership looked in doubt after little over a year inside the Community. Wilson, Wall makes clear, did not want to leave, nor did Jim Callaghan who had become Foreign Secretary. But staying in required delicate manoeuvring both vis-à-vis the Labour party and vis-à-vis Britain's European partners. In the end the renegotiation changed relatively little since one of the main concessions secured from the Six, a mechanism designed to reduce the likelihood of Britain paying in substantially more to the Community budget than it was ever likely to receive back in the form of Community spending was hedged about with so many conditions that it never came into effect. The benefits of the other main prize secured, an improvement in the terms given to New Zealand agricultural exporters, were little felt in the UK itself. And such concessions had been won at a price in Brussels that put paid, in the short term at least, to any real hopes of British leadership of the integration process – although I would have welcomed a little more reflection on the part of Wall about the costs of renegotiation. But Wilson had succeeded in manoeuvring himself and his government into a position where, in early 1975, he could throw his authority and that of his principal ministers behind the 'yes' campaign in the referendum. Some ministers did take the opposite line, as they were permitted to do under the highly unusual (although as this volume demonstrates not totally unprecedented) Cabinet 'agreement to disagree'. But the presence of most mainstream politicians from all three main parties on the 'yes' platform, together with

the sight of a 'no' campaign prominently featuring Tony Benn, Ian Paisley and Enoch Powell is credited with helping to deliver the substantial 67% to 32% victory for those in favour of the UK remaining a member of the EEC. The argument appeared over – except of course, as volume 3 of the *Official History* will doubtless go on to illustrate, it was not.

So what can be learnt from the lengthy and eventful tale? At one level, it is of course a striking demonstration of how much has changed in both Britain and the rest of Europe since the period covered by this volume. The Community with which Macmillan, Wilson or Heath interacted was an incomparably smaller entity than the EU of today, whether measured in terms of its institutional system, its policy range, its economic weight or its membership. The early EEC was already highly ambitious. Indeed it is remarkable how a Community whose activities in the 1960s and early 1970s were essentially restricted to the running of a customs union and an expensive Common Agricultural Policy had already positioned itself in the minds of most Western European politicians, including those British leaders who aspired to join, as *the* central mechanism through which Europe as a whole could address and possibly reverse its relative decline in Global influence. There were still many, moreover, who envisaged a near future when its structures would evolve along federal lines and become an out-and-out European government, although as Wall's chapter on Britain's first year in the Community helps remind us, such idealists were a largely frustrated if still vociferous minority within the EEC of the Seventies. But the Community's actual powers and range of activity were still highly limited, making the drawing of parallels between then and now even more hazardous than usual.

Britain too was utterly different. One noticeable contrast is the centrality of the Commonwealth to the British European debate in the 1960 and 1970s and the shared sense, amongst both Britain's political elite and its public opinion, that securing a respectable deal for the former Dominions (and to a lesser extent other parts of the Commonwealth such as the sugar producers of the West Indies) was absolutely central to any European choice. The manner in which both Heath in 1971 and then Wilson in 1974 chose to accept a less favourable outcome on the issue of Britain's budgetary contribution in return for a better package of measures designed to help New Zealand farmers seems almost incomprehensible from a contemporary perspective. Equally striking is the all pervasive sense in British governing circles in

the period covered that the decline of Britain's power and standing was an inescapable reality, to be tempered or mitigated perhaps by such steps as joining 'Europe' but fundamentally irreversible. Viewed against this backdrop, the reaction against such 'declinism' in the early 1980s and beyond becomes that much more comprehensible – if not without pitfalls and problems of its own. And also noteworthy is the way in which the British economic recovery aspired to by all of the governments discussed in this volume, was one built primarily on a revival of manufacturing and industry rather than finance and the service sector. The voice of the City, so ubiquitous in contemporary debates about Britain and Europe, is notable by its absence in this volume.

Some important continuities remain, however. One such is the British tendency to analyse European politics and seek to interact with the rest of Europe almost exclusively through the big powers. There are times when reading this volume when Britain's relationship with the Community appears to have been solely a tale of two cities, London and Paris, with neither Brussels nor any of the other member state capitals having any real part to play. At other moments of the 1960s and 1970s a bit more importance was accorded to Germany, but little attention was ever paid to either the smaller powers or the Community institutions themselves. Some of this big power bias remains in British European policy-making and policy interpretation of more recent times. Also eerily familiar, and depressing, is the failure of successive British governments to build up a strong rapport with their German counterparts. In chapter one Wall cites a British despatch from Bonn which urged the Macmillan government 'to demonstrate that we regard the Federal Republic as a trusted Ally, instead of a rather shady business partner to be tolerated but not liked' (p.27). There is little in the chapters that follow, however to suggest that this advice was every really taken to heart. On the contrary, the Bonn-London relationship remained much more distant than it ought to have done despite the close identity of views on many issues, European and otherwise, between the two governments. Britain therefore never gained the capacity to match either France or the US in influence on German policy, with UK ministers forced all too often to resort to ineffective bluster about troop withdrawals or other forms of bullying whenever they sought to alter Germany's course. The relatively good Heath-Brandt relationship, although less intense than that between Heath and Pompidou, remains a striking exception to an unfortunate general rule.

A final continuity, and one of some relevance for the current debate about Britain's position vis-à-vis the EU, is the way in the Community/Union remains an entity in which flexibility towards insiders comes at the cost of a very reduced capacity to heed the needs and requests of outsiders. Britain's efforts to influence the Community's direction from without during the course of the 1960s met with little success, despite the genuine goodwill towards London felt by many of the Six and the widespread belief that Britain would one day become a member of the club. In the heat of bargaining around the Council table in Brussels, the voices that matter are those that are present, not those of countries looking on from the outside. Furthermore, the bargains once reached, tend to be all but impossible to unravel at the behest of third parties, however urgent their appeals or persuasive their pleas. Once inside, by contrast, a Member State is much better placed to have their special interests met or their needs addressed. The British renegotiation is a case in point, since neither legally nor morally, was the legitimacy of the UK request to revisit membership terms that had been agreed only two years earlier very great. But the political need of the new British government to be able to show that it had kept its electoral pledge was acknowledged by the other member states, and not only was a dialogue able to begin, but a number of actual changes in the membership terms were agreed. Translated into contemporary terms this means that Britain's capacity to influence today's much larger and more complex EU from the outside would be very limited indeed, with the inevitable outcome that multiple decisions would be taken in Brussels that affected Britain's interests but over which London would have next to no say. Getting one's way in an EU of 27 is never easy; getting one's way, without being a member, would be all but impossible.

As the preceding pages demonstrate, there is plenty of interest and relevance in Stephen Wall's volume. With the successor volume in mind though, it is worth highlighting one or two features that were a little disappointing. One such was the almost complete overlooking of the extensive secondary literature that already exists on both Britain's relationship with the European Community, and with the development of European integration more generally. The footnotes to this volume refer almost exclusively to primary documents, the sole exception being a handful of references to political memoirs. This has at least two negative effects. First of all it makes it still harder for the reader to work out where to situate Wall's account and interpretation against the multiple others that have preceded it. And second it means

that Wall's assessments and judgments can never extend beyond the archival materials that he has been able to review. As a result, his analysis of British policy towards, say, Germany depends wholly on what British diplomats at the time thought was happening in Bonn, rather than what we now know to have been the case through historical research. Similarly, the importance of British domestic politics, or the state of the British economy on British European policy making, can only be spotted, using Wall's approach, when the causal link is explicitly present in a primary document – something which is often not the case. The rather muted role of Britain's economic difficulties in this book's account of Labour's turn to Europe after 1966 may well be a case in point, since all of those participating in the Cabinet discussions of 1967 would have been so aware of the economic background that this scarcely needed to be spelled out, but remained of importance to the decision made. Also slightly unfortunate is the decision not to divide any of the individual chapters, each of which is fairly lengthy, into any subsections. This means for instance that an important episode like the Soames affair is buried in the latter part of a chapter the first portion of which contains comparatively little of interest, and which the reader might well choose to skip.

Overall though this is a useful addition to the existing literature on Britain and Europe. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the near complete archival access to this period that historians have long enjoyed, there are few real surprises or revelations in this volume. Nor is there the type of bold new interpretative thesis that Alan Milward sought to provide in volume one of the official history. But such is the richness of the material, and the thoroughness of Wall's account, that this is a book that will prove essential reading for anyone working on the troubled history of Britain's attitude towards Europe. And as this review has sought to illustrate there is also plenty here for those more interested in the present and the future, but still sensitive to the importance and relevance of contemporary history.