



## Crisis? What Crisis?: Britain in the 1970s

*Alwyn Turner*

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'Crisis? What Crisis?' tells the story of Britain in the 1970s through the soaps and sitcoms, the music and movies, the fiction, fashion and sport of the time. It was a culture that reflected a turbulent political reality.

## **Crisis? What Crisis?: Britain in the 1970s Details**

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## Martin Roberts says

Brilliant. This nuanced and fascinating account rings so true to anyone who came of age in this decade, that it was about so much more than just power cuts and strikes. That said, the author doesn't challenge the received wisdom that wage rises stoked inflation, and doesn't mention the collapse of the Bretton Woods agreement. I would also have seen far more mention of The Troubles in Northern Ireland, where there truly was doom and gloom, as well as the deep-seated and abiding regional split in the way people vote.

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## Paul Smith says

I'm afraid I'm the kind of person who has a favourite social commentator, and Alwyn Turner is mine, largely as a result of what are essentially his biographies of the '70s, '80s and '90s.

I was born in the Seventies, but was too young to remember much of the political landscape beyond endless strikes, during which I walked home from school with a torch due to power cuts (and, I now realise, a shortage of electricity), having to have a bucket of water in every room in case of fire as the emergency services were picketing the high streets, and everyone being very poor indeed.

Had I known that the country was teetering on the brink of civil war (in parliament at least) with Tony Benn and Enoch Powell effectively duelling for control of the place, I'd probably have paid more attention, rather than seeing how many Sparkle lollies I could persuade my grandparents to buy me. While the political landscape of the time is not difficult to grasp, Turner's faultless narrative dissects it so well that you find yourself actually looking forward to reports of TUC conferences and block voting by Ford workers. This is, needless to say, no mean feat.

Although centred around politics, this is by no means the only focus of the book. Turner's narrative is not only faultless as described, but shows such economy that he manages to fit in cultural aspects as diverse as flares, punk, cinema, England failing to qualify for consecutive World Cups, advertising and telly, as well as the impact of feminism, anarchism, socialism and fascism on every aspect of British life. Even the effect of Blake's Seven on the nation's attitude to the Cold War - everyone expected to end their days being vapourised by a hydrogen bomb, let's not forget - is covered.

I was tempted to read 'Crisis? What Crisis?' again immediately, just to see if I could work out how he'd written this without it being a million pages long. It's a brilliant book, not only as a commentary of the decade, but also as a way of understanding how we ended up in the shambles we are today. If you have lived in Britain for more than four seconds, for Heaven's sake read it - that goes for Turner's '80s and '90s commentaries, too.

Spoiler Alert: In the end, Margaret Thatcher gets elected and presumably everything works out fine.

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### **Adam Mills says**

Excellent social and political history of the 1970s. The history not only covers the political upheaval of the time including the strikes and economic chaos which almost brought the country to ruin but also the culture including glam rock, television adverts and sitcoms. Turner writes in a very attractive and witty style and is sometimes extremely funny. A number of memorable quotes are included such as this one from Rigsby in the comedy *Rising Damp*. 'This country gets more like the boiler room on the *Titanic* every day: confused orders from the bridge, water swirling round our ankles. The only difference is they had a band.'

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### **Gavin Smith says**

The first book of Alwyn Turner's trilogy on Britain in the final decades of the twentieth century might be the best, even if I somehow contrived to read it last. This is a thoughtful and thorough analysis of a decade that is all too often written off with a series of clichés. As I was born in 1979, I have no memories of my own from the period so can only go from what I've gleaned from popular culture and folk memory. It was certainly interesting to hear how disastrous the early part of the decade had been for the Conservative party, something that seems to have slipped out of contemporary discussion. As always, Turner mixes political history with pop culture references to give a real feel for the zeitgeist of the era. All in all, I enjoyed it.

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### **Amanda says**

Detailed and drily funny account of both the social and political history of 1970s Britain. Uses pop culture and the reaction of people to it to illustrate the the key issues/changes of the era with vivid success. On a personal level, I surprised by how much I remembered (having been a very young child at the time described), as well as how much I had not heard of.

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### **Kendra Drischler says**

This book tells the depressing story of 1970s Britain through both mainstream history and the two fields of human endeavor that objectively interest me least: sports and television. The back cover claims that the text is highly entertaining and readable, but that's probably only true if you lived through the period and/or love athletics/classic sitcoms. I waded through it for about three weeks, consistently amazed that I had been reading for so long, and yet had so many pages left.

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### **Simon Fellowes says**

I'm reading a ton of these types of books - the Kynaston & Sandbrook series for example - and wondered if anyone could bring anything new to the party. Alwyn Turner does. This book is eminently readable and full of colourful and interesting data. His politics are evident but not oppressive. In fact he manages to take positions on both sides of the political divide. He might actually be some kind of dissident.

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### **Tobias says**

Read this at a rather interesting time as it deals with the coalition politics of the mid-1970s. Book's main thesis is that Enoch Powell and Tony Benn were the two most significant political torchbearers of the age.

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### **Andie says**

The 1970's was an unfortunate decade almost everywhere, but nowhere was it as unfortunate as in Great Britain. There were feckless politicians in both the Labor and the Conservative parties, a fiscal crisis resulted in a mandated three-day work week, virulent labor strikes along with power outages and work stoppages were seemingly daily occurrences, and violence in society in the form of soccer hooliganism, skinheads and IRA bombings were on the rise.

Britain was regarded as the "sick man of Europe" and the country lurched from a longing nostalgia for their days of past glory to looking for scapegoats for their problems, be it racism/anti-immigration or Europhobia leading up to a referendum whether or not the UK would remain in what was then called the EEC. Additionally, the first strains of serious devolution movements in both Wales and Scotland began to take shape.

Author Alwyn Turner captures the dismal spirit of these times in an eminently readable volume that not only outlines the politics of the decade, but also weaves social trends and pop culture into the story. Today it seems as though history may be trying to repeat itself. The UKIP party is the direct descendent of Enoch Powell's National Front, anti-immigration fervor is again on the rise - this time aimed at immigrants from Romania and Bulgaria, income inequality is widening in the kingdom, a referendum for Scottish independence is scheduled for September 19 and the politicians of both parties are as feckless as ever.

The multiple crises of the 1970's ushered in 18 years of Margaret Thatcher. Let's hope the current malaise in Britain can be cured by less punishing measures.

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### **Nick Harriss says**

Having been born in 1971, I am firmly a child of the 70s. This book brought back both vivid memories and gave context to many aspects of my childhood that I was unaware of, being a child rather than an adult. Highly recommended.

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### **Matthew Hurst says**

Excellent bipartisan read on the era, it's a narrative of the decade, rather than a judgement, excellently written and an unstoppable read it's well broken down and well written. Highly recommend.

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### **Jonathan says**

Much more lightweight than the Sandbrook tomes on the seventies, that said it doesn't get bogged down in the minutiae of cabinet meetings. What it does do though is give much more of a feel for the times, more social history than just the politics. Very enjoyable.

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### **Veronica says**

This is a perfect companion to the two books I've recently read about the 1970s, by Dominic Sandbrook and Andy Beckett. Unlike them, Alwyn Turner merely summarises political events and concentrates on social and cultural history, which he does superbly well. As one reviewer says, he seems to have spent most of the decade watching television and has an encyclopaedic knowledge of soaps, TV series, comedy shows, and popular films. He's good on music too, and manages to unearth both obscure and better-known novels, using them to illustrate the zeitgeist. This book, more than the others, vividly brought back buried memories. Even if some of them would have been better remaining buried, for example Middle of the Road's hit *Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep*. And how distant that moral world seems, where Wimpy burger bars could ban lone women from its premises after midnight since they could only be prostitutes if they were out on their own at that time.

I realised too that what he says about the three-day week in 1973-4 and the Winter of Discontent in 1978-79 was true -- the memories had somehow become amalgamated in my mind as one occurrence, confusingly combining Edward Heath trying to face down the miners, and Jim Callaghan (not) saying "Crisis? What crisis?" as he returned from Guadeloupe to strike-bound Britain ... "so that the Labour Party became associated with all the ills of 1970s Britain, as though the pre-Thatcher Tories had never really existed".

While not outrageously one-sided, he does wear his heart on his sleeve more than the other two authors, at one point likening Margaret Thatcher to Big Daddy's domination of wrestling: "what had been a diverse and multicultural tradition was crushed by twenty-five stones of sentimentality, patriotism and predictability."

Like the other two books, Turner does bring home the negative aspects of the 1970s. But at the same time, he quotes Doris Lessing, who rightly wrote:

While everything, all forms of social organization, broke up, we lived on, adjusting our lives, as if nothing fundamental was happening. It was amazing how determined, how stubborn, how self-renewing, were the attempts to lead an ordinary life.

And he's good on the positive changes and their associated legislation: feminism, the wider acceptance of homosexuality, even the effective popular defeat of the National Front by Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League -- making it simply uncool to be a fascist.

In summary, while it's by no means a comprehensive history of the 1970s and is not intended to be, there are lots of penetrating insights, and it's an entertaining read too. I'm now moving on to Turner's *Rejoice! Rejoice!*, about the 1980s. It gets off to a good start with the iconic cover image of a handbagged Mrs T

proudly bestriding an industrial wasteland in (I think) Middlesbrough.

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### **Mark says**

Helped to put a grown-up perspective on my childhood memories of power-cuts, candles and bin-men strikes; and also showed that plus ca change...

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### **Neale says**

There have been a number of substantial social histories of the post-war United Kingdom (England, really) in recent times. They tend to concentrate on decades – which may be a simplification, but one which works surprisingly well. Do decades really have personalities? Does something really change when the decade changes?

(As a mental exercise, try to imagine the past with absolutely no reference to ‘years’. It’s scary...)

I have read several histories of Britain in the 1970s. I lived there, as a boy, from 1969 to 1972, so it is a time and a place that I can relate to. A fascinating era, both vibrant and disillusioned. ‘Reclaiming’ it from its detractors seems to have become almost modish. Turner’s book may not be the most comprehensive, ‘historically’ speaking, but it is by far the most enjoyable, and I think that it gives a much clearer idea of what it was like to actually be there. It does this by presenting history through the prism of the popular culture of the time: sitcoms, crime dramas, pulp fiction, films and music, etc.

Does politics really matter, in the writing of history? Did the politics create the history, or merely reflect what was happening elsewhere? Turner includes plenty of politics, perhaps too much, but he is at his best when describing the ‘real’ world, seen from a shag-piled living-room in the flickering light of a new hire-purchase colour TV...

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