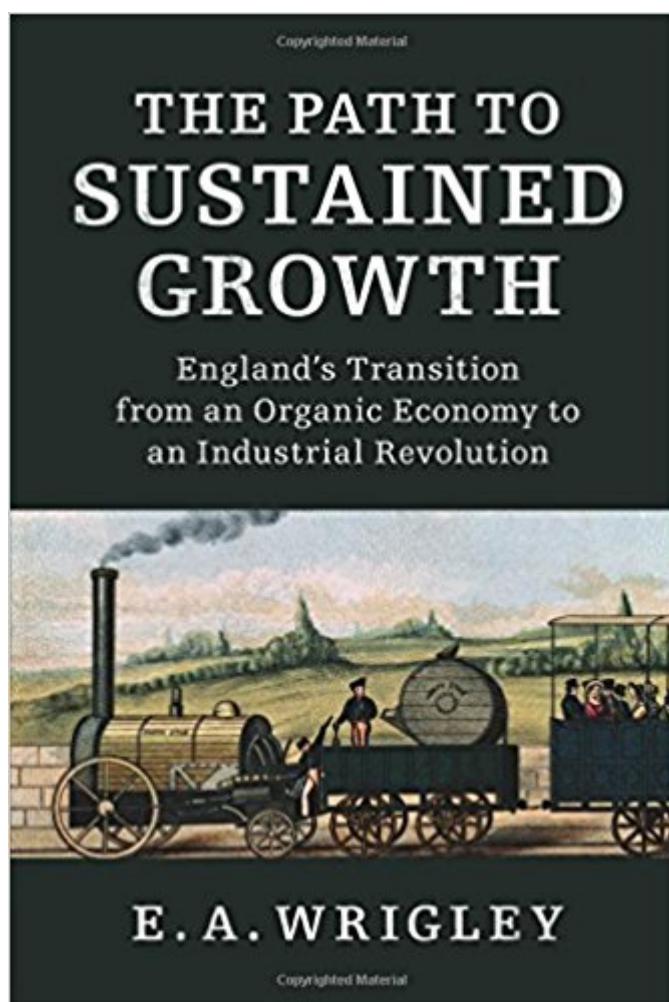


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The Path To Sustained Growth: England's Transition From An Organic Economy To An Industrial Revolution



Synopsis

Before the industrial revolution prolonged economic growth was unachievable. All economies were organic, dependent on plant photosynthesis to provide food, raw materials, and energy. This was true both of heat energy, derived from burning wood, and mechanical energy provided chiefly by human and animal muscle. The flow of energy from the sun captured by plant photosynthesis was the basis of all production and consumption. Britain began to escape the old restrictions by making increasing use of the vast stock of energy contained in coal measures, initially as a source of heat energy but eventually also of mechanical energy, thus making possible the industrial revolution. In this concise and accessible account of change between the reigns of Elizabeth I and Victoria, Wrigley describes how during this period Britain moved from the economic periphery of Europe to becoming briefly the world's leading economy, forging a path rapidly emulated by its competitors.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

'This volume has much to recommend it. It is an outstanding introduction to the emergence of growth in Britain. It also continues Wrigley's long career of unearthing, collecting, and analyzing important data at an extraordinarily detailed level.' C. Knick Harley, The Journal of Interdisciplinary History

Charts Britain's transformation from the European periphery to a global economic power over three centuries from the reign of Elizabeth I to Victoria. The book explores how new energy resources, population growth and urbanisation enabled Britain to overcome the constraints of an organic

economy and forge a path to industrialisation.

A very interesting and concise discussion of several aspects of the industrial revolution in Britain. This is not a systematic study or overview but rather an insightful exploration of some important themes pursued in prior work by this pioneering demographic and economic historian. Wrigley's overarching theme is the replacement of an "organic" economy based on agriculture and muscle power (both human and animal) with the substitution of coal for organic sources of power. Different aspects of this transition, why it occurred in Britain, and some of its consequences are featured in several interesting chapters. Wrigley opens with a concise discussion of the limitations of an organic economy, particularly as discussed by pioneering economists such as Smith, Ricardo, and Malthus. This is followed by sections discussing important features of Britain that favored the emergence of industrialization in Britain. One interesting aspect is the key role of coal not only in its obvious role as substituting mechanical power for organic power, but also important roles in pre-industrial Britain. Following other scholars, Wrigley points out the early and important role of coal for heating, which effectively spared a large amount of land that would have been needed for fuel wood. Other interesting aspects of coal use are that it favored the development of effective transport systems and incented the development of steam power to pump water out of mines. Another relatively distinctive British feature pointed out by Wrigley is a virtually unique rise in urbanization, interacting with rising agricultural productivity, leading to a virtuous circle favoring considerable economic development. Wrigley presents Britain as a distinctively successful organic economy which he sees as a necessary prelude to industrialization. He also has a very interesting discussion of the relatively flexible western European marriage pattern which clearly facilitated adaptation to varying economic circumstances and was part of this successful organic economy. The final parts of the book deal with the "completion" of industrialization, a discussion of several essentially irreversible technological, demographic, and economic changes brought in train by industrialization. As Wrigley remarks, this is not a comprehensive analysis but each topic is important, analyzed carefully, and the quality of discussion is excellent.

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