

**History**  
**Prelims 2017**

**Examiners' Report**

## PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION IN HISTORY 2017

### REPORT OF THE EXAMINERS

Along with the FHS Examiners' Report, this is a new style Report which concentrates on candidates' performance in the exam, with administrative matters reported separately to the Faculty's Examinations Sub-Committee.

#### I: Statistical overview

Table 1: Performance of candidates by gender

Year	All HIST candS	No + % of Ds, all	No + % of Ps, all	F	No + % of Ds, F	No + % of Ps, F	M	No + % of Ds, M	No + % of Ps, M
2017	219	74 33.80%	145 66.21%	118	28 23.78%	90 76.28%	101	46 45.50%	55 54.45%
2016	234	87 37.18%	147 62.82%	133	38 28.57%	95 71.43%	101	49 48.51%	52 51.49%
2015	225	71 31.60%	154 38.44%	107	31 29.0%	76 71.0%	118	40 33.90%	78 66.10%
2014	240	74 30.83%	166 69.17%	128	35 27.34%	93 72.66%	112	39 34.82%	73 65.18%

Table 2: Number of candidates for each paper in 2017

Paper	Main School	Joint Schools	Total
History of the British Isles I - c.300-1087	25	7	32
History of the British Isles II – 1042-1330	54	6	60
History of the British Isles III - 1330-1550	17	2	19
History of the British Isles IV – 1500-1700	41	2	43
History of the British Isles V – 1685-1830	36	13	49

Paper	Main School	Joint Schools	Total
History of the British Isles VI – 1815-1924	27	8	35
History of the British Isles VII – since 1900	19	6	25
General History I – 370-900	74	29	103
General History II – 1000-1300	44	5	49
General History III – 1400-1650	57	22	79
General History IV – 1815-1914	44	21	65
OS 1 – Theories of the State (Aristotle, Hobbes, Rousseau, Marx)	36	23	59
OS 2 – The Age of Bede, c.660-c.740 (No takers in 2016-17)	-	-	-
OS 3 – Early Gothic France c.1100-c.1150	4	3	7
OS 4 – Conquest & Frontiers: England & the Celtic Peoples 1150-1220	3	1	4
OS 5 – English Chivalry & the French War c.1330-c.1400	12	-	12
OS 6 – Crime and Punishment in England c.1280-c.1450	9	2	11
OS 7 – Nature and Art in the Renaissance	5	2	7
OS 8– Witch-craft & Witch-hunting in early modern Europe	23	4	27
OS 9 – Making England Protestant 1558-1642	3	-	3
OS 10 – Conquest & Colonization: Spain & America in the 16 <sup>th</sup> Century	31	10	41
OS 11 – Revolution and Empire in France 1789-1815	14	7	21
OS 12 – Women, gender and the nation: Britain, 1789-1825	4	2	6
OS 13. The Romance of the People: The Folk Revival from 1760 to 1914	10	1	11
OS 14 – Haiti and Louisiana: The problem of Revolution in the Age of Slavery	29	8	37
OS 15. The New Women in Britain & Ireland, c.1880-1920	10	2	12
OS 16 - The Rise and Crises of European Socialisms: 1881-1921	11	4	15

Paper	Main School	Joint Schools	Total
OS 17. 1919: Remaking the World	11	5	16
OS 18 – Radicalism in Britain 1965-75 (suspended in 2016-17)	-	-	-
OS 19 – The World of Homer and Hesiod (AMH)	2	4	6
OS 20 – Augustan Rome (AMH)	2	3	5
OS [21] – Industrialization in Britain & France 1750-1870	-	5	5
Approaches to History	107	38	145
Historiography: Tacitus to Weber	75	18	93
Herodotus	-	-	-
Einhard and Asser	8	-	8
Tocqueville	14	4	18
Meinecke and Kehr	3	3	6
Machiavelli	1	-	1
Diaz del Moral	3	-	3
Quantification	8	7	15

### History of the British Isles (Sex/paper by paper)

Class	Nos (both sexes)	%	Men		Women		Women as % of total in each class
			Nos	%	Nos	%	
D	82	31.18	44	35.78	38	27.15	46.35
Pass	180	68.44	78	63.41	102	72.85	56.66
Ppass	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fail	1	0.38	1	0.81	-	-	-
Total	263	100	123	100	140	100	-

### General History (Sex/paper by paper)

Class	Nos (both sexes)	%	Men		Women		Women as % of total in each class
			Nos	%	Nos	%	
D	52	1.57	34	23.45	18	11.92	34.62
Pass	243	82.10	110	75.87	133	88.08	54.73
Ppass	1	0.33	1	0.68	-	-	-
Total	296	100	145	100	151	100	-

Optional Subjects (Sex/paper by paper)

Class	Nos (both sexes)	%	Men		Women		Women as % of total in each class
			Nos	%	Nos	%	
D	123	40.32	68	46.90	55	34.38	44.72
Pass	180	59.02	75	51.72	105	65.62	58.33
Ppass	1	0.33	1	0.69	-	-	-
Fail	1	0.33	1	0.69	-	-	-
Total	305	100	145	100	160	100	-

Approaches to History (Sex/paper by paper)

Class	Nos (both sexes)	%	Men		Women		Women as % of total in each class
			Nos	%	Nos	%	
D	38	26.21	22	30.14	16	22.22	42.10
Pass	106	73.10	50	68.50	56	77.78	52.84
Pass	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fail	1	0.69	1	1.36	-	-	-
Total	145	100	73	100	72	100	-

# Historiography (Sex/paper by paper)

Class	Nos (both sexes)	%	Men		Women		Women as % of total in each class
			Nos	%	Nos	%	
D	40	43.02	25	52.08	15	33.33	37.50
Pass	53	56.98	23	47.92	30	66.67	56.60
Ppass	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	93	100	48	100	45	100	-

## **II Marking & Classification**

### **III Comments on Papers: General**

#### **History of the British Isles I: c. 300-1087**

Thirty-two candidates took this paper. There was a notable clutch of strong papers (over a third obtained marks in the first class), and most of the rest were at least adequate. The paper is attracting very able and committed students, along with some others who have found getting to grips with an unfamiliar society a challenge in their first year. There was a reasonable spread of questions. Favourites were Britain before 400 (even though many answers insisted on discussing Britain after 400), conversion (on the whole well done), Alfred and Eadgar (where answers relied heavily – but often effectively – on George Molyneaux's recent book), the status of women, and Fleming's views on the late Anglo-Saxon aristocracy (which were surprisingly often misunderstood). The notable gap was in answers on non-English topics: a perennial problem, but also a sad reflection of our current lack of teaching strength in Celtic areas.

(J. Blair)

#### **History of the British Isles II: 1042-1330**

Sixty candidates took this paper. In general, it was very well done: more than half the scripts achieved marks of 65 and above, more than a quarter were in the first-class range, and there were few really weak performances. There was also a pleasingly wide spread of choice across the questions, almost all of which attracted at least three or four answers. The most popular choices were 'the first English empire', Domesday Book, distinctions between Normans and English, the political incoherence of Wales, and Magna Carta. The disease of formulaic answers was most apparent in relation to Domesday Book (too much emphasis on tenurial change, which was not exactly the question asked) and Magna Carta (lists of all the grievances rather than a focus on economic change). Overall, however, we can congratulate ourselves on very effective tutorials and lectures, and a high level of engagement on the part of students.

One trend, however, is worrying. A remarkable number of candidates seem strangely unaware of the debates about the nature and reality of relationships between military organisation and modes of land-holding over the past generation. It is mind-boggling that, in 2017, a significant proportion of Oxford History undergraduates can cheerfully ascribe socio-economic change in late eleventh- and twelfth-century England to 'the feudal system': it is as though the clock had been put back fifty years. (It may be significant that the one question on the paper that attracted no answer was the quotation urging that 'the tyrant feudalism must be declared once and for all deposed'!) Something, somewhere, has slipped, and both tutors and lecturers need to be aware of this problem.

(J Blair)

#### **History of the British Isles III: 1330-1550**

Nineteen candidates (17 History, 2 History & English) sat this exam; marks ranged from 55 to 72, and examiners awarded 5 first-class marks, 12 upper-second (2.i), and 2 lower-second (2.ii). Thirteen of the twenty questions were answered, with by far the most popular being on Lollardy (10 candidates), revolts (9), and theories of kingship (8). This last question, though popular, was generally done badly: lack of detailed knowledge of individual reigns leading to factual inaccuracies; anachronistic reference to 'divine right of kings'; little engagement with constitutional history since McFarlane; nor indeed with the intellectual history of the period



(Fortescue was name-dropped). The question on Lollardy, on the other hand, was generally answered quite well, eliciting sophisticated and interesting responses from the most able candidates, while even the weaker candidates were able to discuss changes over time and approach the question from several different angles. This demonstrates that perennially popular topics need not be dull or formulaic when done in exams – Lollardy appears to have engaged many students' interest in a way that enabled them to apply their developing historical skills to very good effect. At the same time, it is worth noting the paucity of answers on cultural history; and that, with the exception of answers to a question on the Reformation and the odd mention of the Pilgrimage of Grace, the early sixteenth century was largely absent. These observations may be of greater use to tutors and exam setters as they consider how to get students to engage best with the potential scope and variety of this paper.

More generally, a common feature of weaker scripts was poor historiographical engagement, either simply invoking scholars as authorities or making generalised claims ('recently, historians have...'). Other common problems in weaker scripts were sweeping yet bland introductory statements; the misspelling of 'counsel' as 'council' by several candidates (an error which has implications for the meaning of the argument); and use of the statement 'it is clear that...', which increased in direct proportion to candidates' lack of evidence or examples. The strongest candidates combined accurate and detailed knowledge of relevant events and evidence across an impressive chronological range with well-structured, analytical responses to questions. Answering the question set clearly and coherently was a notable feature of scripts which received high marks – in the best scripts, this was done with some nuance, sophistication, curiosity, and flexibility.

(O Margolis & A Ruddick)

#### **History of the British Isles IV: 1500-1700**

Forty-three candidates took the paper and overall produced a creditable crop of scripts. All but two of the questions on the paper were attempted (Baconianism, and the poor laws), albeit with predictable clustering around the questions on popular politics, parliament, 17th C. union, the civil wars, James II, and (especially) the Reformation. Pleasingly, around a third of candidates received an average mark of 70 or above. These very able candidates had the refreshing ability to answer the question as set, very often unpicking - and criticizing - the assumptions of the question (notably on gender), or offering impressive detail across a long period of time (notably on chief governors of Ireland). Key words and phrases like 'significance', 'effective', and 'success' were addressed, and ways of benchmarking or comparing people, places, and themes elaborated. There was also a longish 'tail' of weaker performances, with more than a third of candidates scoring 64 or below. Such candidates often offered aggressive but rather superficial arguments, sometimes by simply rejecting the thrust of a question without significant discussion, or by focusing their attention very narrowly. It was, for instance, disheartening to read a number of answers on the very popular Reformation question that only discussed the Henrician era - in defiance of the rubric to consider '**broad developments within the period and avoid undue narrowness of focus**' - or else were prone to comment in general terms on nations at the expense of the stipulated 'regions'. Weaker answers on q. 20 offered perfectly plausible answers to a question on why James VII & II lost his thrones, but paid little or no attention to the key part of the question that asked why he fell 'so quickly'. Finally, and as a general comment, candidates could certainly afford to engage with historiographical debates more than they are at present.

### **History of the British Isles V: 1685-1830**

The paper was taken by forty nine candidates. Few, if any, undergraduates are even remotely familiar with this period before studying it for Prelims': a pleasing reflection whenever examining this paper is how quickly, effectively, and thoroughly they get to know and master the field. As ever, political and cultural history predominated, with an impressive number of candidates drawing on their familiarity with Scottish and Irish developments in this era; as ever, Wales was conspicuous by its absence. Many candidates displayed critical engagement with the literature regarding American and imperial history, usually to good effect. Occasionally one heard the echo of a tutorial essay in answers that were a little too formulaic; the best candidates answer the question asked rather than the one they would ideally want to have in front of them. All too few candidates tackled the question on the arts; a few more answered those on religion and 'Enlightenment', often to telling purpose. Secondary authorities were all too often deferred to rather than challenged. A good variety of perspectives and evidence of hard reading paid dividends for the very best candidates.

### **History of the British Isles VI: 1815-1924**

There were 36 candidates for this paper ... This is a period with which some candidates are already familiar from their studies at school and college; a good number, however, do come to it with fresh eyes and both groups need to consider anew the period without being informed by too many preconceptions. There is a large degree of bunching in this paper, with a great many candidates answering questions about women's suffrage and the politics of the working classes; allied to this is an increasing tendency for people to specialise more in the second half of the period, and candidates should be encouraged to think more deeply across the period as a whole. There were some genuinely outstanding papers, but also a good many of a more pedestrian nature. An unquestioning attitude to notions of progress was evident in quite a few scripts; the Whig theory of progress now seems to be giving way to what one might call the Labour theory of progress, fine if properly argued for, but insufficient a datum for deeper analysis. Candidates should be encouraged to question familiar narratives regarding this period, and the very best candidates did just that, with positive results.

### **History of the British Isles VII: since 1900**

Twenty five candidates (19 in the main school and 6 in the joint schools) were examined for this paper. This was the last time that HBI VII will be examined at Prelims, and the standard of answers was hearteningly high for its farewell outing. Almost all candidates received marks in the mid-60s or above, with around a third being awarded marks of 70 or above. Candidates sat the exam at an interesting political juncture, ten days after a general election. The election epithet 'strong and stable' actually appeared in two scripts, though it was not entirely clear whether it was being used ironically or subliminally. Perhaps because of Brexit fatigue, the question on Britain's relations with the rest of Europe was one of only two (the other was on political extremism) that were not attempted by a single candidate. A question on Scottish and/or Welsh nationalism only elicited two answers, but both were impressively knowledgeable.

By far the most popular question was Q. 13, on Thatcherism's relationship to neoliberalism (only a couple of candidates elected to answer the same question with reference to New Labour). Here, answers were distinguished by whether or not they offered a working definition of what neoliberalism was. The best were really sophisticated, while the less successful ones were lightly resprayed versions of term-time essays. This illustrates the

perennial point that the most effective answers tend to be those that engage thoughtfully with the wording of the question. The questions on youth culture and immigration were also popular, but again elicited some rather generic answers that did not pay enough attention to the way in which questions were phrased.

Overall, many candidates succeeded in demonstrating 'an understanding of broad developments within the period', as the rubric for this paper requires. This bodes well for the new-style HBI VI paper, which will henceforth be extended to cover the period from 1832 to 1951.

### **General History I: 370-900 (The Transformation of the Ancient World)**

103 candidates took the paper. There were 19 (18%) distinctions and 84 passes (82%).

All questions were attempted except 9, 19, and 20. Question 1 attracted 13 answers (all on the western empire); Q2 60; Q3 13 (3 on Gregory, 10 on Procopius); Q4 9 (8 on the fifth century, 1 on the seventh); Q5 3; Q6 39 (21 on Vikings, 18 on Islam); Q7 3; Q8 15; Q10 13; Q11 10 (4 on the Baltic/North Sea; 5 on the Mediterranean; 1 on China); Q12 50; Q13 13; Q14 18; Q15 21 (16 on women, 5 on peasants); Q16 8; Q17 8; Q18 8 (6 on coins, 2 on manuscripts). In general the quality of the scripts was very high, and many graded as an overall pass nevertheless showed clear signs of distinction-level work, but tended to be inconsistent in one or more areas between different questions. The best scripts thought through and sometimes challenged the terms of the questions, showed off a good grasp of the relevant secondary positions, and demonstrated an excellent command of the source material and of historical detail. The worst scripts deployed pre-prepared essays in place of direct responses to the question, did not define crucial terms, and tended towards generalisation, showing off little knowledge beyond what might be picked up in lectures or in basic reading. It was nevertheless gratifying to see the vast majority of candidates ranging across different periods and regions, but disappointing that few candidates answered with reference to the Middle East (beyond the rise of Islam), Central Asia, and China.

### **General History II: 1000-1300 (Medieval Christendom and its Neighbours)**

This paper was taken by forty nine candidates and 13 distinction level marks were awarded. Most of the questions were attempted at least once, with the exception of those on fragmentation in the Muslim world, the Italian cities, and apocalypticism. Questions on the Byzantine empire and 'frontier' societies (almost invariably the Iberian peninsula) attracted a very respectable number of answers, but those on the Mongol empire, interfaith relations and global connections did not. Given that this paper deals with a period in which large parts of the world were connected in many ways, and exam papers routinely pose questions that range across the Eurasian continent and North Africa, the relatively narrow geographical focus of many candidates was disappointing. It may also have worked to the disadvantage of individuals, since there was a great deal of clumping of answers around the most popular questions (3, 6, 11, 14, 17 all attracted at least 10 answers), and repetition of arguments and examples, which may suggest excessive dependence on the lectures or a limited selection of secondary reading. In particular, 35 candidates answered the heresy question, and the answers were both repetitious and often very confused. The question in the paper did not ask about the spread of heresy but the *apparent* spread of heresy, which is a very different thing. Few candidates seemed to have grasped that heresy was a label applied to individuals and groups rather than one used by those people to describe themselves. While most were aware that there has been considerable debate over the topic, and were eager to reference it, they

tended to offer caricatures of the arguments rather than showing that they had actually understood and thought about either R. I. Moore or Mark Pegg on the subject. Saying that a historian has 'gone too far' is not a very compelling assessment of their ideas! Some candidates did not seem to notice that the question had been worded in order to allow them to do something different from rehashing the argument over Cathars. On the other hand, anyone taking an independent line on this question tended to do well, especially if they had been able to do something interesting with 'apparent'. On the whole, candidates did well with medieval religion and seemed able to integrate it into their understanding of the functioning of society. The usual tendency to focus on individual leaders as explanations for success, failure, stability or instability of whole systems of governance and empire was present, although the better answers were able to take a broader view of causation and the limits of individual agency. Question 1 had been phrased to remind candidates that everyone, regardless of gender or class, has to operate within larger social contexts, so it was rather disappointing to find that the majority of answers (on women) took the question as being about patriarchy and female agency/opportunity within it, which is the way that questions on women have often been framed in past papers, but was not here. There was a lot of discussion of Eleanor of Aquitaine and a handful of other individual women prominent in the historical record. Better answers tended to take a consciously intersectional approach, looking at social class and profession in particular, but candidates could have ranged even more widely within the human experience, referring to factors such as environment, disease, types of labour, life expectancy, warfare, social structures, legal systems, etc., and looked at changes in the course of a person's lifetime – childhood, marriage, parenthood (and childbirth for women), old age, death. Most of the papers showed evidence of solid revision of factual details, sources and source quotations, and some historiography (although this depended very much on the topic), and in general, the level of knowledge on display was very pleasing. More work could always be done on sources, moving beyond the use of illustrative quotations to showing understanding of the purpose, audience and functioning of particular texts. Candidates on the whole seemed weaker on interpretation, the interrogation of concepts, and constructing independent arguments.

### **General History III: 1400-1650 (Renaissance, Recovery and Reform)**

Seventy nine students sat the exam. The overall performance was reasonably encouraging, demonstrating sound knowledge in a paper known for its challenges of thematic, geographical, and chronological breadth, in a period unfamiliar to most first-year students. While the number of candidates whose performance was consistent enough for a distinction in the overall average was lower than in some other papers, the majority of takers reached at least a higher 2.1 and many attained distinction in at least one of the questions attempted. It was also encouraging that all twenty questions were attempted, and only three (including, surprisingly, the question on witchcraft) featured less than 5 attempts. Section B showed the most uniform distribution, with three questions featuring more than 10 attempts. Still, some bread-and-butter topics (such as popular revolt) proliferated, and those attempting them faced a higher bar to distinguish themselves than those going off the beaten path. Quite a few students lost important points by failing to pay enough attention to the terms of the question. While few attempts were so egregious as to rebrand entirely different questions, many perceptive answers did not attain distinction because they did not focus enough on the specifics (for example, offering a general analysis of Protestantism's strengths rather than sustaining the comparison with earlier movements in question 12). Those who engaged

critically with the question, reflecting on its assumptions and conceptual implications, were amply rewarded.

#### **General History IV: Society, Nation, and Empire 1815-1914**

Sixty five students sat this exam this year. 11 received a mark of 70 or above; 31 scored in the range 65-69; 19 received marks in the range 60-64; 4 received a mark between 56 and 59. By far the most popular questions asked whether the period was an era of secularization (35 takers) and whether imperialism was an extension of nationalism (25 takers). Because so many students answered these questions, it was exceptionally difficult to stand out and receive a first-class mark on them. In order to excel on the question about secularization, students had to identify and describe not only two contradictory trends—that this was a century of both religious revival and secularization—but also to construct an argument that would somehow explain both. Students answered the question about nationalism and imperialism in a variety of ways, some quite creative. In general, these answers evinced a better grasp of imperialism than of nationalism (there were many vague gestures to ‘national pride’). Only a handful of answers provided clear evidence for a connection between nationalism and imperialism. In future, questions on these topics should likely be framed in narrower/more specific terms and perhaps disaggregated into multiple questions in order to avoid such heavy concentrations. Other popular questions asked about the importance of cities to industrialization (Q1: 16 answers), whether women’s lives improved over the century (Q7: 18 answers), the extent to which the aristocracy retained its power (Q5: 12 answers), and whether liberals supported democracy (Q6: 12 answers). Students attempted every question in the script except Question 10: ‘why did museums become such an important feature of the nineteenth-century city?’

#### **Optional Subject 1: Theories of State**

The paper was taken by fifty nine candidates. The paper continues to attract a formidable array of committed and able candidates; the very best papers in Prelims’ this season were very good indeed. Historians are not invariably the best expositors of abstract argument, but the best candidates revealed this interpretative ability consistently in their answers. The ability to read across periods is vital in understanding the paper as a whole, and this talent could be discerned in a great many papers. Weaker candidates tended to be opinionated rather than intellectually critical, condemning authors superficially and often without due reading. The peculiar demands made of students of Rousseau’s thought were met by a pleasing number of candidates; there is still a need to situate Aristotle more clearly in his specific context; Hobbes tends to attract too many mechanical answers; predictably, shares in Marx are rising. The best candidates used the comparative essays at the close of the paper to develop subtle and penetrating essays; the weakest saw it as a means of dealing with the political thinker with whose work they were least familiar, often treating them in all too desultory a manner.

#### **Approaches to History:**

145 candidates took the paper. This paper raised a number of concerns; all too evidently, candidates often reheat tutorial essays in a microwave, with a consequent tendency to produce bland, stodgy, and not altogether satisfying results. On the other hand, a pleasing proportion of the more able candidates had clearly found the paper rewarding; accordingly, they acquitted themselves well. A much larger number of scripts, however, showed a pattern that

gave examiners considerable concern. The number of 'pro-forma' answers that used the same series of examples (and sometimes in the same sequence), was startling. These can only be based on lectures, and they suggest that many candidates are formulating and revising pre-prepared answers from lecture notes and essentially nothing else. They are not thinking about the questions, but are using them as cues for feedback in automatic mode. The best candidates engaged much more effectively and critically with the material presented to them; and the very best demonstrated coolly considered scepticism about the work of the practitioners they discussed, from archaeology and anthropology, to art history and sociology. The best scripts, and there were some outstanding ones, drew connections between the material they had learnt for Approaches and the history they had learnt in other papers. Oxford History papers are not modules, and papers such as Approaches invite candidates to draw on the history they know beyond the examples with which they have become familiar in reading for this specific paper.

### **Historiography: Tacitus to Weber**

Ninety three candidates took the paper. This paper asks a lot of candidates, and the great majority met most, if not quite all, of those challenges. The very best candidates never lose sight of the fact that this is primarily a textual paper; there is no substitute for command of the texts set and for the contexts in which they were written and read. The balance between text and context is one that the candidates have to decide independently; a variety of approaches to the paper could be found among the whole range of interpretative abilities on display. Occasionally, a candidate took a considered interpretative risk, and they were invariably rewarded positively by the examiners. The weaker candidates tended to follow the *formulae* dispensed in lectures; they need to challenges such perspectives as much as they do the texts themselves and their various commentators. The best candidates used the comparative essays at the close of the paper to develop subtle and penetrating essays; the weakest saw it as a means of dealing with the historian with whose work they were least familiar.

Examiners:

Prof J.W. Blair (Secretary)

Dr D. Hopkin

Dr A.L. Power

Prof G. Sternberg

Dr G. Tapsell

Dr B. Young (Chair)