

Zeiler, Thomas W. *Free Trade, Free World: The Advent of GATT* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

In a few short years after the Second World War, the United States dropped its century-long commitment to high tariffs and tried to lead a large part of the world towards a multilateral set of low tariff agreements. The most durable of these agreements, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), provided a framework for a large group of states to whittle down tariffs beginning in 1948 and ending with the creation of the World Trade Organization in 1994. GATT's creation coincided with the beginning of the Cold War and the formation of NATO, but heated debates have revolved around the relationship between United States policy encouraging freer trade and its political leadership in the Cold War. Corporatist theorists and Cold War "revisionists" have asserted, in differing fashions, that the US used the Cold War to advance its economic interests. By contrast, Zeiler argues that political goals, not economic advantage, were always the guiding factor in the battles around GATT and that the US did not use agreements such as GATT to take advantage of other countries.

GATT, according to Zeiler, was a compromise between the ardent free-traders, largely in the State Department, and business interests and their representatives in Congress who generally opposed free trade. GATT required only modest cuts in the tariffs of other countries, while the US cut its own tariffs sharply. Nonetheless, GATT allowed the Truman administration to sell historic tariff cuts to Congress and the public by claiming that a mechanism was in place to get other nations also to cut their tariffs. The Truman administration convinced Congress and the US public to accept tariff cuts and GATT by "lifting the debate out of the realm of trade and placing it squarely in its foreign policy and Cold War agendas" (125). The US needed to cut its tariffs and accept GATT to help other nations stand up against the Soviets.

Not only was GATT a compromise, Zeiler argues, but the right one. Dogmatic free traders had seen GATT as the first step to a stronger trade agreement, based on a proposed International Trade Organization (ITO), "a sort of economic United Nations" (134). In fact, according to Zeiler, the more limited and flexible GATT was the right step. It did little to help the US economically, but it made political sense by strengthening closer ties between the US and its allies. "GATT was designed to ensure American values and security, not just profits" (2). Zeiler argues that Truman allowed the proposal for the much stronger ITO to die because protectionists saw it as a complete surrender to free trade and some libertarian free-trade purists saw it as an overly bureaucratic way to bring about free trade (159-62).

Unfortunately, too much of Zeiler's book is not sustained by engagement with the existing literature. Instead, it is an argument against a strawman. "In the period under review," Zeiler claims, "ideology, domestic politics, and diplomacy

supplanted pure economic considerations and theories of efficiency in commercial relations" (196). Yet it can be legitimately asked whether "pure" economic considerations have ever ruled in commercial relations. Tariffs have always been political as much as economic institutions. Alan Milward has even insightfully described nineteenth century tariffs as playing the role of "constitutions" in the sense they cemented crucial alliances among interest-groups.

It is also disheartening to read a book on economic policy which has such a weak grasp of economic theory and history. Zeiler argues, for example, that because of "a recession in 1949," Truman hoped that "the trade agreements program could help combat inflation" (166). Since the problem in a recession is unemployment, not inflation, Zeiler needs to explain why Truman would have thought that inflation was a major threat. Zeiler also keeps saying that "free trade" was defeated by protectionist sentiment. He states, for example, that "The Torquay Round was another setback for American free-traders" (183). In this case, only the extreme view which called for nearly complete free trade and the creation of the ITO was defeated. In fact, GATT was accompanied by a major cut in tariffs. Zeiler cites but does not draw out the significance of this drop: "From 1934 to 1949 duties on commodities plummeted by 37 percent; on manufactures, by half" (177). Even though the ITO was defeated, the historic cut in tariffs represented a major victory for free trade, but Zeiler casts it as a defeat.

The scarcity of data on actual tariff levels distorts Zeiler's presentation. Thus, he fails to deal with why other nations claimed that the US was hypocritical for advocating the ITO, and why scholars have seen the US as self-interested. Zeiler says that the US was the major force for lowering tariffs at the end of World War II (44) while Britain was the major opponent of "free trade multilateralism" (52). Yet he mentions in passing that "British tariff rates [were] lower than America's" (92) and that the Australian *Sydney Morning Herald* saw GATT as "a victory over U.S. protectionism" (123). Zeiler does not really deal with the cynical view that the US only cut its tariffs when it was running trade surpluses and that its demand for multi-lateral free trade largely served its own interests.

In general, there is a carelessness of argument here. On the same page Zeiler states that the British believed that the "Ottawa contract with the dominions" was the bedrock of their tariff system and that Australia believed "that the Ottawa accord was being shredded" (92). Zeiler does not distinguish between the attraction of free trade for domestic producers because it meant greater exports and the threat of free trade because it meant cheap imports. Instead, both are the case at the same time. Thus, Zeiler states that Roosevelt "backed freer trade because it benefitted his New Deal. Liberal trade was a means to help struggling farmers and workers augment their exports" (9). At the same time he argues that Roosevelt "would not hang out core supporters like labor in the winds of the free market" (9) presumably by letting in imports.

Zeiler also frequently uses terms without specifying amounts, percentages, or relative weights. Without specific numbers, the debates he covers on “preference margins” (33), “deficiency payments” (55), and “peril points” (85) too often sound like political quibbles. We need to know whose economic interests were involved, to what degree, in order to know whether the debates were significant.

Sadly, the editing of this book suggests a work rushed into print. The first page of the first chapter has Hitler’s name as “Adolph” (6). Words appear to have been dropped: “The Commonwealth, as well as Western European remained unmoved” (173). He refers to the Netherlands as “Holland” (173). Statistics are unclear. The Commonwealth states, for example, “increased their share of world exports 28 percent by 1948, whereas America’s share had dropped to less than 23 percent” (175). Did Commonwealth exports increase *by* 28 percent or *to* 28 percent?

In sum, although Zeiler has an important subject and his overall argument merits consideration, his book as a piece of scholarship is disappointing.

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James Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

E. P. Thompson, *The Romantics: England in a Revolutionary Age*. Foreword by Dorothy Thompson (New York: The New Press, 1997).

For the past twenty years or so, the study of romantic literature and culture has benefited from a strong turn to history, what came to be known, of course, as the “new historicism.” While one might characterize E. P. Thompson’s book on politics and romantic poetry as an example of the “old historicism,” his impressive body of work – particularly *The Making of The English Working Class* – has been a constant resource for new historicists seeking to understand romanticism’s engagement with history. James Chandler, who has provided many exemplars of historical literary scholarship, offers his *England in 1819* as a model for an even “newer historicism.” One hopes that these two different, fine books can give fresh impetus to the already strong scholarship engaged with the historical literary study of the romantic period at a moment when many seem to be wearying of history.

There are important points of contact between these two authors, one the leading historian of radicalism in the period, the other a key voice in romantic literary studies. Both books are interested in the ways in which romantic literature can be placed within its historical period. Both are committed to the