Conclusion

We pray that the happy influence of this undertaking may be to incite a generous and laudable competition among the sons of science, art, and labour, throughout the world…

Bishop Wainright, prayer at the opening of the Crystal Palace, New York City, 1853\(^1\)

It is a long journey from the age of the medieval guilds to Crystal Palace. This work has not sought to explain the operations and historical development of the transitional process of agrarian capitalism as such. Its purpose, rather, has been to trace the evolution of British manufactures from their feudal and early modern origins to the Industrial Revolution in the context of the operations of agrarian capitalism. Specifically, we have sought to demonstrate that the world’s first industrial revolution did not come about as the result of the operation of natural and immutable economic laws but rather through a series of processes that involved conscious decisions and actions by social agents engaged in a long train of struggles over the preservation of customary modes of economic regulation versus the expansion of market regulation of the economy and the subsumption of social relations to capital.

This series of processes by which pristine capitalism and pristine industrialisation first developed in Britain was protracted and complex. Indeed, it was too protracted and complex a process to be explained away by theories based upon intermediate ‘phases’,

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‘stages’, ‘proto-capitalist’ forms or by way of a ‘bourgeois revolution’ that would clear away the ‘fetters’ of monopoly and custom to make way for the full emergence of capitalism. By offering a narrative of half a millennium of the economic and social history of England and the British Isles, this study challenges readers to rethink long-standing notions about the Industrial Revolution by offering an alternative explanation for its development.

It was deemed necessary to present an analysis that weaves socio-economic and political history together in one narrative in order to emphasise the critical role of the state in shaping economic outcomes as capitalism developed. This proved increasingly difficult as the writing progressed, mainly because the literature becomes increasingly divided between economic, social and political histories as one enters the eighteenth century. This would seem to be, at least in part, a reflection of the very process by which the capitalist economy was ‘dis-embedded’ from social relations, producing an apparent separation of the economy from the polity.2

Another challenge was addressing the separate histories of England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, which was generally not done except by way of discussing the history of England’s ‘periphery’ – Wales, Scotland, Ireland and the colonies – as these societies were annexed and/or converted to agrarian and industrial capitalism, and to the extent that they actually were. While numerous topics for future study of the development of agrarian capitalism and the Industrial Revolution in England, Great Britain or the United Kingdom have been identified at various points throughout this work, separate studies addressing the specific ways in which Wales, Scotland and Ireland were involved in the processes we have discussed are also needed. A counter-study is needed to consider the claims made here that capitalism made little headway in continental Europe before the end of the French and Napoleonic Wars in 1815. And finally, as a rebel colony of Great Britain, the social property relations of the United States were clearly informed by those of agrarian capitalism even if it proved impossible to transplant that system to colonies with no history of feudalism or a feudal aristocracy. Thus there remains much to be explained about the specific development of capitalism and industry in the United States in light of the theory of agrarian capitalism as pioneered by Brenner, Wood and Comminel and the present treatment of the first industrial revolution.

Probably the most surprising aspect of this research was the recognition that even by the mid-nineteenth century, some three-quarters of a century into the Industrial Revolution, the United Kingdom was still very much ruled by a landed oligarchy whose interests were converging with those of the industrial,