

Elizabethans.

PATRICK COLLINSON



ELIZABETHANS

Frontispiece: Title-page of the Bishops' Bible. Queen Elizabeth is flanked by the figures of Faith and Charity and represents Hope. The engraving has been assigned to Franciscus Hogenberg but may have been the work of his brother Remigius Hogenberg, who is known to have been in Archbishop Parker's employment. The text from Romans 1, 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ . . .', had been appropriated by Elizabeth's father in Holbein's engraved title-page to the Coverdale Bible of 1535.

The Bishops' Bible was first published, with this title-page, in 1568. From the edition of 1574 onwards, the portrait of Elizabeth no longer appeared. Dr Margaret Aston refers to 'the conviction of some contemporary purists that portraiture was an inherently idolatrous art'. (*Cambridge University Library*)

The.holie.Bible.

conteynyng the olde
Testament and the newe.



ELIZABETHANS

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Hambledon and London

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1 Inaugural Lecture as Regius Professor of History in the University of Cambridge, delivered on 9 November 1989 (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

2 The J.E. Neale Memorial Lecture for 1986, delivered in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester on 8 May 1986; *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 69 (1987), pp. 394-424.

3 The J.E. Neale Memorial Lecture for 1987, delivered in University College, London, in November 1987; *Parliamentary History*, 7 (1988), pp. 187-211.

4 This essay originated in an Open Lecture given in the University of Kent at Canterbury in February 1982. Versions of it have since been shared with lecture audiences and seminars in the universities of Cambridge, East Anglia, St Andrews, Sheffield and Western Australia, and at the California Institute of Technology. I am grateful for a number of suggestions made on these occasions, some of them incorporated in this final version. I have also benefited from the critical comments of Dr Caroline Litzenberger and Miss Alex Walsham. The essay is printed here for the first time.

5 This essay was read to the Renaissance Society in January 1989 and was subsequently shared with the Church History Seminar in Cambridge; it is printed here for the first time.

6 *Clio's Mirror: Historiography in Britain and the Netherlands* (Britain and the Netherlands, vol. 8), ed. by A.C. Duke and C.A. Tamse (De Walburg Pers, Zutphen, 1985), pp. 31-54.

7 This essay originated in a lecture given at Peterhouse in 1989 to mark the fourth centenary of Perne's death. *Andrew Perne: Quatercentenary Studies*, edited

by David McKitterick, Cambridge Bibliographical Society Monograph no. 11 (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 1-34. This publication also includes the text of a second commemorative lecture by David McKitterick on 'Andrew Perne and his Books' and an edition by Elizabeth Leedham-Green of Perne's will of 1588, together with an earlier will, dated 1581.

8 *William Shakespeare: His World, his Work, his Influence*, i, *His World*, ed. John F. Andrews (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1985), pp. 21-40.

Preface

In the preface to my *Godly People: Essays on English Protestantism and Puritanism* (Hambledon Press, 1983) I was foolish enough to try to exorcise the ghost of my sometime supervisor, Sir John Neale, who thirty years before had said: 'Collinson, I like to think of you spending the rest of your life on this subject', the subject, that is, of Puritanism. In 1983 I wrote: 'It is time for me to tuck up my articles and occasional pieces in this stout volume and and to utter no more on the subject, unless compelled to do so by main force.' But, as I should have known, the main force of the Anglo-American conference industry has prevailed and, for better or worse, there have been more utterances on that subject, described by Dr A. L. Rowse in his review of my very first book as 'rebarbative'. The present volume at least presents a broader collection of subjects. I cannot get away from religion, but some of the religion in this collection takes us as far back as St Jerome in the fourth century and as far forward as Poland and Ealing in our own century. The title, *Elizabethans*, indicates where the centre of gravity lies.

Since this collection of essays was first assembled in 1994 there has been a good deal more of the same: lectures, essays and other occasional pieces on the civilisation of early modern England, including studies of Tudor and Stuart historiography, national sentiment and popular culture, but always with the same religious bias, betrayed in accounts of William Tyndale, Thomas Cranmer, John Knox, John Foxe, Richard Hooker and William Laud; and of such institutions as Canterbury Cathedral, Emmanuel College Cambridge and the university church of St Mary's Cambridge. But Elizabeth I and her age remains my anchor, although having made of Elizabeth the longest article in the forthcoming *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (36,000 words!), I have decided against perpetrating yet another biography of the over-biographed woman. It was in 1754 that Thomas Birch wrote that the last thing that anyone needed was yet another history of Elizabeth. 'To relate over again the same series of transactions diversified only in the method and style, and with the addition of a few particular incidents, would be no very agreeable undertaking to the historian, and certainly of little use to the reader.' In 2003, Amen. So let *Elizabethans* be my tribute to the memory of Gloriana, in this, the four hundredth anniversary of her demise.

There are many debts which this collection incurs, and which it cannot adequately repay. I am indebted to the universities of Manchester and London (University College, London) which did me the honour of inviting me to deliver in each place a Neale Memorial

Lecture. My original publisher, Jonathan Cape, and personally Graham Greene, are thanked in connection with the UCL lecture. Two other universities, Sheffield and Cambridge, took me on to their payroll in the years since 1983, and two of the pieces in this collection began life as inaugural lectures. At Cambridge I was richly blessed with a remarkable cohort of highly gifted postgraduate research students, to whom this book is dedicated. They continually inspire me and materially assist my work in more ways than can be explicitly stated in what follows.

As on an earlier occasion, my most considerable debt is to Martin Sheppard. A foreigner, not enjoying perfect familiarity with the nuanced precisions of the English language, might call Martin a great bookmaker. What makes him great is his capacity to turn unpromising materials (I speak only of my own books) into useful and even attractive volumes. And I doubt whether another publisher exists who combines such efficiency with so much unruffled kindness.

I am glad to acknowledge the help of Syndics of the Cambridge University Library in providing many of the illustrations and permitting their reproduction.

Abbreviations

<i>A. & M.</i>	<i>The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe</i> , ed. Stephen Reed Cattley (1837-41)
BL	British Library
HMC	Historical Manuscript Commission
Hartley, <i>Proceedings</i>	<i>Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I</i> , ed. T.E. Hartley, i, 1558-1581 (Leicester, 1981)
<i>HP 1558-1603</i>	<i>The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1558-1601</i> , ed. P.W. Hasler, 3 vols. (1981)
Neale I	J.E. Neale, <i>Elizabeth I and her Parliaments, 1559-1581</i> (1953)
Neale II	J.E. Neale, <i>Elizabeth I and her Parliaments, 1584-1601</i> (1957)
<i>Parl. of England</i>	G.R. Elton, <i>The Parliament of England, 1559-1581</i> (Cambridge, 1986)
PRO	Public Record Office
<i>Works of Knox</i>	<i>The Works of John Knox</i> , ed. David Laing (Edinburgh, 1844-)

*To My Postgraduate Research Students,
Past and Present,
in Admiration and with Affection*

De Republica Anglorum:
Or, History with the Politics Put Back*

A rather bleak biblical text which was hung around my neck as a far from satisfactory child returns to haunt me as the incumbent of this chair: 'Of him to whom much has been given, much shall be required.' But of my predecessor and friend Sir Geoffrey Elton I may well reverse the text and say: 'He who has given so much deserves in return all and more than he has received.' It is not for me to come back after thirty-six years spent elsewhere (and with a certain frisson as I enter this lecture room with its strong undergraduate memories) to tell Cambridge what it owes to Geoffrey Elton, who has been here for the past forty. But it may be that non-historians do not know the full extent of Elton's exertions on behalf of his subject beyond this place, good things done not exactly with stealth but without much self-advertisement: especially in promoting and turning into practical politics and economics a succession of authorial, editorial, bibliographical and indexing ventures. And this is not to speak of what is more properly his own, the books from which generations of school and university students have learned about the sixteenth century. For Elton has never spared himself the stern advice which he imparted in the book called *The Practice of History*: that 'the active labours of teaching and study' should 'fill the year and every day of it'¹ – although I understand that an exception is sometimes made of 25 December. It is an achievement which has not been matched in living memory by any other member of the historical professional. So to Elton himself I extend the elegant turn of phrase which he used in his own inaugural to compliment that other former Regius still happily living among us, and with which I should like to be associated: 'Chadwick rather gave distinction to the Chair than derived distinction from it.'²

In that same inaugural, Elton called Sir John Seeley the first truly notable Regius professor, succeeding Charles Kingsley, who was 'the last of the absurdities'. At the risk of inaugurating a new line of absurdities I have to confess to being rather chuffed to sit in a chair once occupied by the author of *Westward Ho!* and *The Water Babies*, which was the second book which I ever read (the first being *Alice in Wonderland*, of course). For I should have

* See retrospective note, below, pp.28-9.

¹ G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (Sydney, 1967), p. 163;

² *The History of England: Inaugural Lecture Delivered 26 January 1984* (Cambridge, 1984).

been on both sides of the Bury – Trevelyan debate about history as art or science, intuitive or definitive, which followed Bury's inaugural of 1903. The title of the collection of essays presented to Hugh Trevor-Roper, another living Regius from another place, *History and Imagination*,³ does not suggest to me two distinct entities and activities but one. There can be no history worth reading without imagination. But imagination has its proper and improper uses, and the now notorious 'empathy' of some school history syllabuses is doubtless one of the improper ones. Anyway, 'imagine that you are Geoffrey Elton or Owen Chadwick' is an examination question which I should be careful not to attempt.

II

On a day in September 1983, the newspaper *Le Monde* carried as its main front page headline the announcement that there had to be a reform in the teaching of history. That was with reference to a government report which had insisted that the incoherence which had crept into the teaching of the subject in French schools must give way to a strictly chronological progression which would ensure that, having begun at a tender age with Pepin the Short, all children by the time they parted company with formal education should have reached the 1960s and the reign of Charles the Tall. I was in France at the time and remember saying that such a headline could never appear in an English newspaper. Historians should never use the word never. The Secretary of State for Education and Science, in a letter dated 10 August 1989 (as it happens, my sixtieth birthday), has insisted on a chronological framework for the teaching of history in our English and Welsh schools, and that 'the British experience' should be given a 'sharper focus';⁴ and this and other public pronouncements about history have resonated in the public prints, even if they have yet to reach the top of the front page. Professional historians are not sure that they agree with everything or indeed with anything which is being said, but seem gratified that their subject is a talking point in what must be, at any level beyond the mythological, the least historically minded of all advanced societies. But we are also worried, or ought to be. In his inaugural lecture of a quarter of a century ago, Sir Herbert Butterfield identified one of the factors likely to determine the future development of historical scholarship as, 'the interest of government in the subject – a thing which has its dangers as well as its

³ Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl and Blair Worden, eds., *History and Imagination: Essays in Honour of H.R. Trevor-Roper* (1981).

⁴ The Rt Hon. John MacGregor to Commander L.M.M. Saunders Watson, D.L., Chairman, History Working Group, Schools Branch 3, Department of Education and Science, reproduced in the *National Curriculum History Working Group Interim Report* (September 1989).

advantages'.⁵ I have no idea what these words referred to in 1965 (although I recall that there was a Labour government at the time) but I know what they would mean if uttered now. Government has a legitimate interest in what history is taught in the schools, although I hope that we are entitled to take issue with its judgments. But so far as universities are concerned, one can only endorse what the mistress of Girton has recently written: 'It is absurd to suppose that someone else, not the historians, should dictate what is a proper subject to be taught in their departments.'⁶

Most inaugural lectures delivered from this chair have been general treatments of the subject. Trevelyan spoke in 1927 about *The Present Position of History*, Butler in 1949 on *The Present Need for History*, Butterfield in 1965 on *The Present State of Historical Scholarship*: so many authorities on the past pronouncing on the present! And the future! Sir Geoffrey's theme in 1968 was *The Future of the Past*. As my own title indicates, I had not intended to follow suit. But in the midst of the first national debate on the teaching of history ever staged, something ought to be said by someone who owes his place to the Crown. And I am not forgetting what Elton has told us: that the prince of English and Cambridge historians, F.W. Maitland, turned down the Regius chair in 1902 because he acknowledged that it carried an obligation to 'speak to the world at large', something which Maitland had no inclination to do.⁷

The present debate about history embraces the question of skills versus content which was provoked in the classroom by the Schools History Project but which has spilled over into the universities and even into this faculty, where it is having some impact on the latest episode of that long-running soap opera, tripos reform. For if university entrants have become accustomed to in some sense doing history and not simply learning passively about it, then we must address ourselves to minds which may to this extent be more active and alert than some undergraduate minds of the past, but less well-stocked. So we are talking about work more self-consciously related to the competent handling of primary sources and their secondary interpretation. Meanwhile the Secretary of State has expressed a conservative concern lest the *Interim Report* of the National Curriculum History Working Group, with its interest in skills and methods, may have placed too little emphasis on acquiring knowledge of what Mr John MacGregor calls 'the substance of history', even 'essential historical knowledge'.⁸ And can we agree on what *that* is? On this matter I propose to say only that history is *both* an active intellectual skill *and* a body of knowledge.

⁵ Herbert Butterfield, *The Present State of Historical Scholarship: An Inaugural Lecture* (Cambridge, 1965), p. 3.

⁶ *Observer*, 5 November 1989.

⁷ G.R. Elton, *F.W. Maitland* (1985), p.14.

⁸ *National Curriculum History Working Group Interim Report*.

There can only be limited value in learning about historical skills and even exercising them in a vacuum of content and context. There is *some* value, what the *Interim Report* calls 'benefits beyond the study of history', but not the value of learning about the past. Conversely, there is limited value in acquiring historical information, for example the regnal years of the kings of England, without any thought or attention paid to its status, reliability or meaning. But it is not the value of understanding how the past came to be recorded and how it has been appropriated and applied to the successive presents of human affairs. So history is both a skill and a method and content and context.

As to which skills and methods, the 'which road to the past' debate seems to have subsided of recent years, unless I have been looking the other way. Most historians now seem to favour a latitudinarian position: all helpful roads. At least this is the atmosphere prevailing in this as in most other British history faculties and departments. Not for us the fierce methodological and ideological wars which beset some other subjects, which shall be nameless. Elton has spoken for all of us: 'We are all historians, differing only in what questions interest us and what methods we find useful in answering them.'⁹ I am almost wholly innumerate and work from documents and texts. But I have no intention of denigrating the number-crunching cliometricians and can only hope that they will be nice to me.

It is easy to be all things to all men, harder to turn such stifling tolerance into pedagogical practice. Life is short, timetables and national curricula are finite, a three-year degree course is really too short. And history exists in unmanageable profusion, even on a conservative understanding of what it is, and a restrictive doctrine of what kinds of history ought to concern British students of the subject in the 1990s: what Commander Saunders Watson calls 'informed citizens of the 21st century'.¹⁰ This brings me to the question of scope and content on which my predecessor had both heartfelt and provocative things to say six years ago in an inaugural address called *The History of England*.

The *Interim Report* is under fire for what it leaves out from an education in history to be shared by all. It is indeed deplorable that we should lose the middle ages and the Tudors and Stuarts from all but the lowest forms, where such matters can only receive ideographic treatment; that there should be no European history before Napoleon, except, inconsequentially, for the Italian Renaissance – no Reformation, a particular cause of regret for some of us, no Hitler either. More fundamentally, the principle of the Procrustean Bed is regrettable. Why apply to the teaching of history

⁹ R.W. Fogel and G.R. Elton, *Which Road to the Past? Two Views of History* (New Haven, CT, 1983), p. 109.

¹⁰ *National Curriculum History Working Group Interim Report*.

the unnecessary rigidity imposed on the church service by the Tudor acts of uniformity? But at the same time it is awe-inspiring to find what abilities and powers in respect of the past children are now supposed to master at successive stages of their intellectual development. According to the D.E.S. Report entitled *History From 5 to 16*, by the latter age pupils (all pupils) should not only 'know' their world history but should have acquired the capacity 'to distinguish between historical facts and the interpretation of those facts', and 'to understand that events have usually a multiplicity of causes and that historical explanation is provisional, always debatable and sometime controversial'.¹¹ One wonders what the minority who opt to continue with history beyond the age of sixteen still need to learn about the subject.

At all levels the agenda, or curriculum, is placed under great strain by the near universality of the history which, or so it could be argued, we need to know, and, what is more, to understand. However much we may be inclined to sympathise with the Secretary of State in his concern for the priority of British History (and applaud the determination of the *Interim Report* that this should be properly *British* history and not the history of the Home Counties), there are so many other pressing claims. Are we to follow the example of the British press and pretend that most of South America doesn't exist? Do we believe that the future of those parts of Africa which do not include or impinge upon South Africa already lies in the past and that consequently we do not need to know about that African past? My own answer to both those questions, certainly if they are posed at a tertiary level, is no. We can hardly ignore the U.S.A., still less turn away from Europe at this juncture, nor, in this seismic autumn of 1989, understand by Europe only the member states of the E.E.C. It is also a precious principle that some history should be studied which has no obvious relevance, simply for its otherness, because it is there. So much for breadth. We ought also to applaud Professor Elton's insistence on the need to make students of the subject feel (and suffer?) the sheer *length* of history. History is indeed as long as a piece of string and as broad as we care to make it. And meanwhile the unrelenting accretion of knowledge has produced at all levels that incoherence complained of in *Le Monde* in 1983, the loss of direction which Dame Veronica Wedgwood deplored thirty years ago: 'too many perspectives and too few principles'; in the words of Dr Kitson Clark (who did his fair share of adding to our perspectives): 'a kind of historical nominalism with innumerable accidents and no universals'. There seemed to be less to read when I was an undergraduate. Yet two years before I was born Trevelyan, in his inaugural, had wondered what was to be done with the ever

¹¹ *History from 5 to 16: Curriculum Matters*, 11, Department of Education and Science (HMSO, 1988).

increasing mass of facts which historians were accumulating with such admirable zeal and skill.¹²

III

Historians have acquired a vast empire, Seeley would have said, in a fit of absence of mind. If it happened, or simply existed, the day before yesterday, it is history. Other disciplines, some of them originally fathered by history, others with independent pedigrees, have become colonies of both commerce and settlement: economics, demography, political science, theology, anthropology, psychology, cartography, iconography. To alter the metaphor: I myself am most happy to live next door to the study of literary texts, in a semi-detached house with paper-thin party walls. The environment must surely concern us increasingly. It is too bad that we have no courses in which to prescribe to students the reading of that brilliant book by Sir Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World*, a kind of charter document of history's potential green-ness which originated in a course of Trevelyan Lectures delivered in this university.¹³ From an absorption with society, some historians have shifted their interest to the human body, defined not only as a social particle but biologically, as an organism. There is no bodily function or dysfunction on which there is not by now a considerable literature claiming historical status: from conception to death, a particularly popular subject, from the ingestion of food and drink to the evacuation of substances, menstruation and the principles and practices of bodily cleanliness – which, we have recently been told, in pre-industrial Europe meant not clean skin but white linen, and when water, and especially hot water, was seen to be life-threatening.¹⁴ Above all, it is a current preoccupation how the body, and especially, it appears, the female body, has been seen in the past, the history of gaze-lines. Every aspect of past sexuality belongs to history; and madness too, or, *homage à Foucault*, the perception of madness. A book on *The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* is by no means a peripheral text.¹⁵

History has now reached the point where an article on the wearing of earrings in late medieval Florence can occupy sixty pages of a mainstream

¹² C.V. Wedgwood quoted by John Kenyon, *The History Men: The Historical Profession in England since the Renaissance* (1983), p. 272.; G.R. Kitson Clark quoted by Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (1970), p. 183; G.M. Trevelyan, *The Present Position of History: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at Cambridge October 26 1927* (Cambridge, 1927), p. 20.

¹³ Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England, 1500-1800* (1983).

¹⁴ Georges Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages*, tr. Jean Birrell (Cambridge, 1988).

¹⁵ C.W. Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, CA, 1987).

journal.¹⁶ We are not talking about one of those sub-historical hobbies which constitute a long and honourable tradition of their own, like the history of squash rackets or of trading stamps. Florentine ear-rings were one of those signs which are capable of leading us out along those webs of significance which man has spun for himself and which, according to Clifford Geertz, make up that human artefact, human culture.¹⁷ For as they appear, or fail to appear, on the ears of holy women in Renaissance paintings, ear-rings tell us about a society in which the exotic was also alien and corrupt, where ear-rings were badges of prostitution and Jewishness, where the preaching friars had the power to attribute these significations to otherwise neutral items of personal attire and adornment; but began to lose it, as the evidence takes us from the early to the high Renaissance and as respectable, Christian women began again to decorate their ears. Evidently there are now no limits beyond those indicated by the literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt in the opening sentence of a recent book: 'I began with the desire to speak with the dead.'¹⁸ I want to make it clear that I for one am not prepared to pronounce that any of this is not history. I find mercifully meaningless E.H. Carr's distinction between facts and historical facts.¹⁹ But it remains true, and perhaps mercifully true, that a majority of the doctoral theses in history defended within the last twenty years have not been on the subject of ear-rings but on thoroughly traditional topics in politics and administration, a fact which Sir Keith Thomas has found regrettable.²⁰

IV

So on what park bench did we absentmindedly leave Seeley's famous pronouncement that history is 'past politics'? – an aphorism worn into a cliché and also fathered on Edward Augustus Freeman, amongst others.²¹ For now history is not so much past politics as past everything. Seeley went on: 'History fades into mere literature when it loses sight of its relation to

¹⁶ Diana Owen Hughes, 'Distinguishing Signs: Ear-Rings, Jews and Franciscan Rhetoric in the Italian Renaissance City', *Past and Present*, 112 (1986), pp. 3-59.

¹⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (1975), p. 5.

¹⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford, 1988), p. 1.

¹⁹ E.H. Carr, 'The Historian and his Facts', in *What is History?* (1962).

²⁰ Keith Thomas, reviewing Lawrence Stone, *The Past and the Present* (1981), *Times Literary Supplement*, 30 April 1982.

²¹ The words 'history is past politics' will not be found in Seeley's inaugural, although he is heard in that address to say that 'history is the school of public feeling and patriotism', 'it is the school of statesmanship'. 'The Teaching of Politics: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at Cambridge', in J.R. Seeley, *Lectures and Essays* (1870), pp. 290-317. 'History is past politics' is attributed to Freeman by Marwick, *The Nature of History*, p. 47, and to Herbert B. Adams by Fogel in *Which Road to the Past?*, p. 15. See Herbert B. Adams, 'Is History Past Politics?', *Johns Hopkins University Studies*, 13 (1895).

practical politics.' His concerns included a local bit of 'practical politics', the need for the still insecure Cambridge history faculty and tripos to anchor itself on some principle and rationale which would make it a success. Seeley's solution to that problem (the solution of someone who was not himself a historian, or at least not a historian's historian cast in the Rankeian mould) led to late nineteenth-century tensions in this place between the interests of history, as it were for its own sake, and Seeley's priorities as a teacher of a kind of political science. But it also led to the alarming success which the History Tripos came to enjoy in early twentieth-century Cambridge, where it occupied some of the time of a quarter of all undergraduates, supplanting the Classics which constituted Seeley's native discipline.²² Later, Acton's inaugural endorsed his predecessor's dictum. 'The science of politics is the one science that is deposited by the stream of history, like the grains of gold in the sand of a river.' (But it is gratifying for a historian of religion like myself to hear Acton in the same address accord 'some priority' to ecclesiastical history over civil, since 'by reason of the graver issues concerned and the vital consequences of error' (for Acton religion was 'the first of human concerns'), it was more important to get that matter straight, so that ecclesiastical history had attained rigorous standards of scholarship rather earlier than civil history).²³

It is now nearly twenty years since Sir Geoffrey Elton revived and restated Seeley's dictum in the book called *Political History: Principles and Practice* (1970), one of the most reflective (if I may presume to say so) of all my predecessor's writings: reflective, that is, in the layered depth of the categories and definitions of political history which it acknowledges and deploys, seeing politics as the active expression of a social organism, those dynamic activities which arise from the fact that men create, maintain, transform and destroy the social structures in which they live. But it was also a pugnacious book, pouring scorn on those who supposed that political history was a spent force, 'a very old-fashioned way of looking at the past'.²⁴ And there were plenty who did say such things in the late 1960s. When the *Times Literary Supplement* published three special issues in 1966, celebrating 'New Ways in History',²⁵ 'the coming revolution' as Keith Thomas called it, some of the contributors spoke of the preceding sixty or seventy years when, after all, British history had come of age as an academic discipline as a kind of dark tunnel in which historians had 'lost their bearings' (unlike

²² Peter Slee, *Learning and a Liberal Education: The Study of Modern History in the Universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Manchester, 1860-1914* (Manchester, 1986), p. 58. The fullest account of Seeley and his aspirations is in Deborah Wormell, *Sir John Seeley and the Uses of History* (Cambridge, 1980).

²³ Lord Acton, *A Lecture on the Study of History* (1895), pp. 2-3, 6, 21.

²⁴ G.R. Elton, *Political History*, pp. 3-11.

²⁵ The three special issues appeared on 7 April (when Keith Thomas's remarks appeared, p. 275), 28 July and 8 September.

the ensuing twenty years in which, according to diehard traditionalists, their successors proceeded to lose their marbles).

So, on the fashionable denigration of political history, Elton wrote robustly in 1970, in tones reminiscent of Dr Johnson on London and life: 'There is nothing at all to be said for such attitudes: historians who can muster no interest for the active political lives of past societies have no sense of history at all' – in effect, are tired of life.²⁶ With that it is hard to quarrel. However, another of Elton's propositions seems to me more dubious: that the only political units worthy of study are sovereign and separate states. That was Seeley's view too but it looks no more plausible than Arnold Toynbee's doctrine that the irreducible units of historical investigation consist of a somewhat arbitrary list of past civilisations. I agree with Dr Susan Reynolds when she writes that our task ought to be one of 'disentangling the political ideas and loyalties of the past from those of the present'.²⁷ Notions of the modern state as a norm or a necessary destination of historical development, especially in the form of the nation state, may distract us in the pursuit of that stringently historical goal. And in any case, on this continent at least, such notions are destined to be overtaken by events: unless, which is possible, state nationalism proves to have the last, or latest laugh. I also try to remember that historians of non-European societies, many of them my colleagues in this faculty, cannot be subject to the Seeley-Elton ruling that political history means the history of states. In many parts of Africa a political history guided by Dr Reynolds's golden rule would not even be about the politics of tribes, for tribes turn out to be one of those pieces of invented tradition, invented, that is, for the convenience of colonial administrations.²⁸ But from this it does not follow that Africa has no indigenous political history, that its affairs belong exclusively to anthropology.

My title, I admit, is a provocation. It would be absurd to propose that the politics has to be put back into history, and especially absurd in a university which still devotes a series of Tripos papers to the exclusive study of British political and constitutional history, a subject formally separate from social and economic history, and which contains a college which has given its name to the austere study of high political processes, as the Peterhouse School. I may seem to speak for only those prodigals who, having wandered for too long in a far country, eating the husks of social and cultural history, even so-called 'total history', remember that in their father's house, political history, even the servants have food enough and to spare, and decide to come home. The irritation felt by the prodigal's elder brother may well be

²⁶ Elton, *Political History*, p. 4.

²⁷ Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900-1300* (Oxford, 1984), p. 253.

²⁸ Terence Ranger, 'The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa', in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 211-62.

shared by those colleagues who are able to say of political history; 'Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment.'

I hope that it will be understood that the phrase 'with the politics put back' echoes the third of the notorious Cambridge historical dicta, or clichés, to which it is mandatory to refer, and defer, on such occasions as this. Seeley and Bury have already been quoted. That only leaves Trevelyan's definition of social history as the history of a people with the politics left out. What Trevelyan actually said, on the first page of his best-selling *English Social History*, was that 'social history might be defined negatively as the history of a people with the politics left out'. To quote only the last ten words of this seventeen-word pronouncement is to miss its tentativeness ('might be') and the suggestion that there is, or may be, also a more positive definition of social history. And Trevelyan went on at once to say: 'It is perhaps difficult to leave out the politics from the history of any people, particularly the English people', explaining that he intended only to redress the balance of other history books which had consisted only of political annals, with little or no reference to the social environment.²⁹ That is reminiscent of Max Weber's careful explanation in his essay on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that he had no intention of substituting for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic interpretation of culture and of history.³⁰ That did not save Weber from misrepresentation, and Trevelyan too has been misrepresented: but with some justification, since his *English Social History* hardly deserves its title, in the perception of a more recent generation of social historians. Although one must not forget (and Sir John Plumb will not allow us to forget) that several hundred thousand people were happy to read it, that perhaps compounds rather than excuses what Arthur Marwick has called Trevelyan's 'greatest dis-service to historical studies'.³¹ In his inaugural, he had defined social history, revealingly and inadequately, as 'everyday things in the past', and doubted whether there was room for such a subject in the Tripos.³² That was to connect social history with a pre-professional strain of imaginative encounter with the past, mainly through its literary remains, and to confine the rigorous canons of professional, academic history to 'past politics'.

Just as there is now a new social history, a hard-hat area which sometimes seems to threaten us with the kind of intolerant hegemony once exercised

²⁹ G.M. Trevelyan, *English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries, Chaucer to Queen Victoria* (1942), p. vii.

³⁰ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, tr. Talcott Parsons (1930), p. 183 and n. 119, p. 284.

³¹ Marwick, *The Nature of History*, p. 59.

³² Trevelyan, *The Present Position of History*, p. 15.

by political and constitutional history (ecclesiastical historians may feel especially threatened), so we may speak of a new political history, which is social history with the politics put back in, or an account of political processes which is also social. This inaugural can hope to do little more than celebrate the fact that this is currently happening; that, for example, the revival of narrative, which is one of the most discussed departures in current history, involves in almost every case the return of a kind of political history. For what could be more political than the 'thick narrative' comprising *The Return of Martin Guerre*, or *Carnival in Romans*, or the devious village conspiracies disclosed in *Montaillou*?³³ The essence of this new political history is to explore the social depth of politics, to find signs of political life at levels where it was not previously thought to have existed, and to disclose the horizontal connections of political life at those lower levels as coexistent with the vertical connections which depended upon monarchy and lordship and which have been the ordinary concerns of political history, certainly in medieval and early modern Europe. I take as indicative of a current trend the title of a paper not yet published but kindly supplied to me: 'Did Peasants Have a Politics?' The argument concerns English village communities in the fifteenth century and their dealings with the Crown, and it finds that they did indeed have a politics, and not only at the level of village elites but among those whose relative poverty kept them below the local office-bearing class. Even these poor were also political animals.³⁴

People's history, working-class history in the socialist tradition, has served as an ideology, or inspiration, for the realisation of a stage of social development achieved only more recently or not yet achieved. It has to do with a future, not with a past, and, to be sure, with a future which we may never live to see. Historians of traditional European society learned some time ago that its popular politics were not at all progressive but, on the contrary, conservative and backward-looking. It has taken rather longer to grasp that they were not necessarily reactive, alternative politics either, but indicative of established and normal cultures and structures, not requiring explanation, still less realisation, by reference to other structures. This lesson was slow to be learned because we have encountered popular politics mainly at those moments of disclosure which were (in conventional terminology) peasant revolts. Without 1381 or 1549 in England, or 1525 in Germany, we might never have suspected that there was a political culture

³³ Natalie Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA., 1983); E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Carnival in Romans: A People's Uprising at Romans, 1579-1580* (Harmondsworth, 1981); idem, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294-1324* (Harmondsworth, 1980). Lawrence Stone writes on the revival of narrative in *The Past and the Present Revisited* (1987), pp. 74-96: 'The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History'.

³⁴ I am grateful to Dr R.B. Goheen of the University of Ottawa for allowing me to read his article 'Did Peasants Have a Politics? Village Communities and the Crown in Fifteenth-Century England', before publication. It is now published in *American Historical Review*, 96 (1991) pp. 42-62.

at relatively submerged levels, well below the apexes of lordship and monarchy. That is as much as to say that a healthy organism, or the organism in a normally healthy state, has been perceived to exist only when it has revealed itself in a somewhat pathological condition.

So Professor Peter Blicke began with the evidence of the so-called Peasants' War of 1525, which he elevated to the status of an early modern Revolution of the Common Man. But he then found that to account for such an abortive revolution it was necessary to understand not only certain extraordinary precipitating circumstances (in a word, the Reformation) but a pre-existent, preconditional culture of communal politics and administration. Late medieval German agrarian society is found to have consisted to a considerable extent of self-governing village communes, with their peasant officers responsible for all the more mundane functions of government, including the preservation of the peace and law enforcement.³⁵ Similar discoveries are being made by English students of popular 'commotions' in the sixteenth century,³⁶ and of the ostensibly democratic movement of the mid-seventeenth century reified by its opponents as the Levellers. As men supposedly born before their time, the Levellers may have enjoyed a vision of things which were yet to be, which accounts for much of the interest taken in them. But that seems inherently unlikely. What is more certain is that the Levellers and their platforms allow historians to see and recognise what already was: the active and indispensable involvement in the political and administrative infrastructure of society of thousands of ordinary householders and proprietors. Sir Keith Thomas remarks that the roots of their ostensibly radical proposals lay 'deep in the traditional political structure'.³⁷

I am no medievalist but I suspect that one of the more fruitful developments in recent medieval studies has been an enhanced recognition of the communal, associative character of western European political culture in the middle ages, indeed about as far back as it is possible to trace its outlines: which can be expressed as concentration on political horizontality to balance a more traditional preoccupation with verticality. Europe is perceived both as a 'network of communities', a mass of local groups acting collectively, and as a series of layers, all involving identification and engagement, up to and including what in England by the thirteenth century it was commonplace to call 'the community of the realm'. Dr Susan Reynolds remarks: 'The collective solidarity of medieval kingdoms has

³⁵ Peter Blicke, *The Revolution of 1525: The German Peasants' War from a New Perspective*, tr. T.A. Brady Jr and H.C. Erik Midelfort (Baltimore, 1981).

³⁶ Diarmaid MacCulloch, 'Ket's Rebellion in Context', *Past and Present*, 84 (1979), pp. 36-59; Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors: Politics and Religion in an English County, 1500-1600* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 315-37.

³⁷ Keith Thomas, 'The Levellers and the Franchise', in G.E. Aylmer, ed., *The Interregnum: The Quest for Settlement, 1646-1660* (1972), pp. 60-1.

been insufficiently appreciated.³⁸

As an ecclesiastical historian, I take particular interest in the current popularity as a subject for historical research of gilds and fraternities, called by one of their historians 'a form of association as unself-conscious and irresistible as the committee is today' – and, one may add, in all probability more useful and efficient than most committees.³⁹ The parish, too, is nowadays described as having its roots in similar needs, impulses and circumstances, owing its substance and vitality less to proprietorship and patronage than to the creative input and strong community sense of the parishioners themselves, especially 'parochiani meliores et antiquiores', the village elites.⁴⁰

And here it is necessary to explain that these insights are, or ought to be, stringent, grounded in evidence, and not simply a nostalgic harking back to late nineteenth-century myths about instinctive *Gemeinschaften* in transition towards more purposeful *Gesellschaften*. Community is a potent myth, but it would be a harmful anti-myth to deny that there was any such thing as community in European civilisation.⁴¹ For community was not, as nineteenth-century mythologists supposed, a feature of the social prehistory of Europe but part and parcel of the developing historical process itself. For the horizontal, communal bonding of society was neither unrelated to the vertical ties and demands of lordship nor, except in exceptional circumstances, resistant to vertical ties and demands. Rather it was the case that the growth of government and the imposition of a new range of public functions, initially at least, reinforced local communities and strengthened the hands of local elites and petty office-holders, just as the demands of royal government, and especially its fiscal demands, stimulated at a higher level the development of representative estates and the political culture associated with parliaments. Peasant revolts may have been revolts of the peasants, and in many other cases of other social groups, including townsmen. But they were also forceful protests in extreme circumstances of the lower echelons of government and public service, the medieval

³⁸ Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, p. 250.

³⁹ G.H. Martin, 'The English Borough in the Thirteenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 13 (1963), pp. 123-44; Caroline Barron, 'The Parish Fraternities of Medieval London', in Caroline Barron and C. Harper-Bill, ed., *The Church in Pre-Reformation Society: Essays in Honour of F.R.H. du Boulay* (1981); John Henderson, 'Confraternities and the Church in Late Medieval Florence', Richard Mackenney, 'Devotional Fraternities in Renaissance Venice', Miri Rubin, 'Corpus Christi Fraternities and Late Medieval Piety', all in W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood, ed., *Voluntary Religion*, *Studies in Church History*, 23 (1986), pp. 69-109.

⁴⁰ 'The Community of the Parish', in Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*; and C.N.L. Brooke, 'The Churches of Medieval Cambridge', in Derek Beales and Geoffrey Best, ed., *History, Society and the Churches: Essays in Honour of Owen Chadwick* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 49-76. Important ongoing work on the late medieval and early modern English parish is being done by Dr Clive Burgess of Oxford and Dr Beat Kümin of Cambridge.

⁴¹ Alan Macfarlane et al., *Reconstructing Historical Communities* (Cambridge, 1977).