# 1

# *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 Blickle 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 Blickle, *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, 'Kett'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).

precursors of N.U.P.E. in action. Dr Reynolds speaks of the collective activities of local communities 'undertaken, as a matter of course, in support of the government, as well as in opposition to it'.[42]

## V

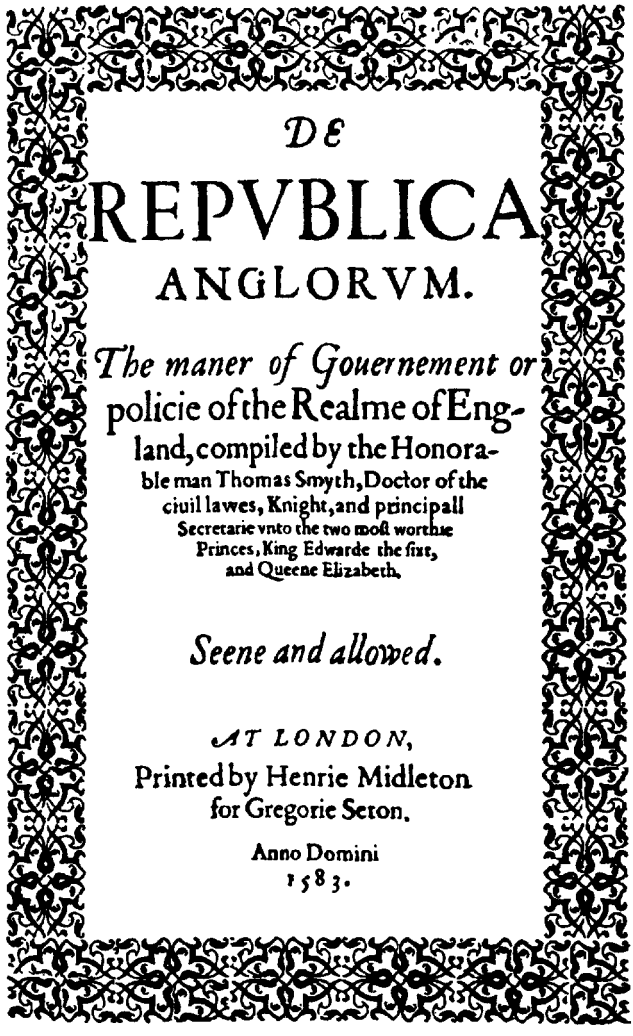
It is time to turn away from matters of which I have at best a borrowed understanding and to bring discussion down to the more manageable and defensible scale of the historical smallholding which I myself attempt to cultivate. But nowadays (to press the analogy) senior academics are not so much smallholders as crofters, farming their two or three acres of rocky soil in moments snatched from a variety of other pieces of by-employment, which fill a quite inordinate amount of time with the awesome responsibility of for ever passing judgment on the work of others, as examiner, referee, elector, reviewer, appraiser. So in what follows those who already know my work should not expect to hear something altogether new.

Let me belatedly explain and introduce myself to those who do not know me, which I take to be the purpose of an inaugural. When I am not sitting in that seat of judgment, or professing the whole of modern history (which, according to the terms of my appointment, includes the whole of medieval history as well), I am an early modernist with a prime interest in the history of England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. And, by the way, if nowadays one defines oneself as an early modernist rather than a historian of the Tudors and Stuarts, or of the Reformation, that is some indication that one wishes to be taken as a historian with some social scope, even as a holistic historian, and not as a student only of high politics or of established religion. It also means, as my colleagues well know, that I am irritated and even feel personally inconvenienced by the convention which in the organisation of Part I of the Tripos puts the politics into one set of British History papers and the economic and social history into another. If I had to be classified in any restrictive and exclusive sense, it would have to be as an ecclesiastical and religious historian. But I try to take some interest in politics as well as in social structure and social change.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England was a monarchy, even in some sense, an absolute monarchy, 'farre more absolute', wrote the mid-Tudor intellectual-in-office Sir Thomas Smith, 'than either the dukedom of Venice is, or the kingdome of the Lacedemonians was'.[43] That was in the book *De Republica Anglorum* which has supplied the title for this lecture. Queen Elizabeth I on one occasion expressed astonishment that her cousin and enforced guest, Mary, queen of Scots, should not have known that she

[42] Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities*, p. 332.

[43] *De Republica Anglorum by Sir Thomas Smith*, ed. Mary Dewar (Cambridge, 1982), p. 85.



DE
REPVBLICA
ANGLORVM.

*The maner of Gouernement or* policie of the Realme of England, compiled by the Honorable man Thomas Smyth, Doctor of the ciuil lawes, Knight, and principall Secretarie vnto the two most worthie Princes, King Edwarde the first, and Queene Elizabeth.

*Seene and allowed.*

*AT LONDON,*
Printed by Henrie Midleton for Gregorie Seton.

Anno Domini
1583.

Title-page of Sir Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, an anatomy of the social, political and legal fabric of Tudor England. Written in the detachment of a French embassy and posthumously published in 1583, it enjoyed a long after-life. The tenth edition appeared in 1640, at the time of the Short Parliament. (*Cambridge University Library*)

was an absolute monarch. Did Mary 'repute her to be in her minority'?[44] The sixteenth-century English state had some experience of a royal minority, but only for six years, not as much as Mary Stuart's Scotland, where kings and queens usually came to the throne before they could speak. Minorities and other little local difficulties, when the fiction of personal monarchy wore thin, are a reminder of what late medieval political commentators had learned, directly or indirectly, from the political philosophy of Aristotle: that monarchy was, or ought to be, not so much absolute as mitigated by the principle of the *ius politicum*, supporting a mixed polity partaking of elements both royal and political, which is to say, popular and representative. To quote one of Smith's chapter headings: 'Common wealthes or governements are not most commonly simple but mixt.' In *The Governance of England* (1470), Sir John Fortescue wrote patriotically of *dominium politicum et regale* as if England had invented the only constitutional monarchy on earth. In fact, Professor Koenigsberger assures us, a balanced constitution such as Fortescue described had prevailed, in principle, from Poland to Portugal, Norway to Sicily. '*Dominium politicum et regale* was the norm, not the exception.' It was a French parliamentarian who claimed in 1489 that 'history and tradition tell us that the kings were originally created by the votes of the sovereign people', so that in the circumstances of a royal minority such as then prevailed in France, 'the people must resume a power which is their own': which is more than history and tradition were to tell Sir Thomas Smith.[45]

Our understanding of the political elements of the early modern English monarchy is currently improving at three levels definable hierarchically as bottom, middle and top, or, spatially as local community, county community and commonwealth, or community of the realm. Within the formal framework of a monarchy, and subject always to direct royal intervention at any of these levels (for personal monarchy was not always what Kantorowicz called it, 'an abstract physiological fiction),[46] it is apparent that early modern England consisted of a series of overlapping, superimposed communities which were also semi-autonomous, self-governing political cultures. These may be called, but always in quotes, 'republics': village republics; in the counties, gentry republics; and at a transcendent level, the commonwealth of England, which Sir Thomas Smith thought it proper to render in Latin as *Republica Anglorum*. These features of past political culture appear so ineluctable and obvious that I am almost ashamed to spend time discussing them. And yet it is not so many years since a leading

[44] Edmund Lodge, *Illustrations of British History* (1791), ii, pp. 276-7.

[45] H.G. Koenigsberger, '*Dominium Regale* or *Dominium Politicum et Regale*: Monarchies and Parliaments in Early Modern Europe', in his *Politicians and Virtuosi: Essays in Early Modern History* (1986), pp. 1-25.

[46] Ernest H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theory* (Princeton, 1957), p. 4.

historian of the sixteenth century, having posed the question 'Was There a Tudor Despotism After All?', concluded that there was, and that Tudor England was subject to what he called 'minority rule', the rule of the Crown and of a very small élite.[47] Well, in a sense England was governed by a single person, described by Smith as 'the life, the head and the authoritie of all thinges that be doone in the realme of England'. Meditating on the latest communication from Inland Revenue in its O.H.M.S. envelope, one realises that nothing has changed. But Smith also defined the commonwealth as 'a society or common doing of a multitude of free men collected together and united by common accord and covenauntes among themselves, for the conservation of themselves as well in peace as in warre'.[48] And this 'common doing' evidently took historical precedence over the monarchical office, although Smith, who had not read John Locke, does not tell us how a multitude of free men came to be subject to a monarch who for some purposes was absolute.

More's *Utopia*, a fictive republic, was founded by a conqueror king, Utopus, whereas, according to Smith, England, a real monarchy, originated in some kind of republic, albeit a republic shaped like a family and subject throughout its development to patriarchy: which is to say that Smith anticipated Filmer. (And had he fully integrated Aristotle?) Yet by defining England as a realm, Smith was not denying its political status as a commonwealth, even as a kind of republic, a term not yet incompatible with monarchy. Sir Thomas Elyot, a conservative political commentator, was nervous about the demotic resonances of the word 'commonwealth', and substituted 'public weal' or 'weal public'.[49] But that was to accentuate, at least in my ears, the republican potential of the old constitution. 'Commonwealth', 'common', 'absolute', are all terms in the historical-political lectionary which have been extensively explored. But have we yet paid enough attention to 'public' and to its resonances in the sixteenth century? Did 'the public', in the sense of 'the great British public', already exist?

No less an authority than John Pocock has thought not.[50] What we find in Sir Thomas Smith and comparable texts is merely an ideal, historical-mythical reconstruction of how states, including monarchies, originated: 'a theoretical means of constituting a people as a body intelligent enough to recognise that it had a head'. Pocock calls this a stalagmite of intelligence, rising up towards the descending stalactite of authority: and I suppose, if we pursue the full implications of that metaphor, stalagmites are formed by

[47] Joel Hurstfield, 'Was there a Tudor Despotism After All?' in his *Freedom, Corruption and Government in Elizabethan England* (1973), pp. 23-49.

[48] *De Republica Anglorum*, p. 57.

[49] Stanford E. Lehmberg, *Sir Thomas Elyot: Tudor Humanist* (Austin, TX, 1960), pp. 40-1.

[50] J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, 1975), p. 334.

drips falling to the floor of the cave from the stalactite above. Fortescue's *corpus misticum* assumed intelligence, but it was not 'a fellowship of action'. Englishmen who had been to school or even to the theatre, perhaps to see *Coriolanus*, were familiar with republican terminology and institutions and knew something of the history of the Roman republic. But it was not open to them to practise active republican virtues. The notion of sixteenth-century intellectuals enduring a kind of internal exile, natural republicans and citizens forced to be subjects, is powerful and appealing; and clearly it applies to More as the author of *Utopia* and to his friend Erasmus, who was a devastating exponent of the irrationality of hereditary monarchy.[51] Erasmus and More were citizens, but of an invisible republic of letters.

But for England to become a *polis* and its inhabitants citizens was dependent, according to Pocock, upon further and extraneous modes of consciousness, such as Puritanism.[52] To me as a historian of Puritanism that does not seem to ring entirely true, although it is certainly true that a biblical, prophetic mode of discourse sharpened the rhetorical edge of what I think we can call public criticism of the Crown, not only in the form of the 'resistance theory' deployed against a catholic ruler like Mary Tudor, but in the reign of her protestant sister.[53] And it cannot be denied, somewhat beyond the sixteenth century, that the sectarian religious experience born out of Puritanism, English Nonconformity, would prove a crucible of radical political consciousness and action. However, I think that Pocock underestimated what I should call quasi-republican modes of political reflection and action within the intellectual and active reach of existing modes of consciousness and established constitutional parameters. These survived the suppression, or at least subsidence, of any public discussion of the principle of mixed government in the later sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, before the mid-century constitutional crisis revived it. (And already Smith failed to define England as a mixed monarchy, but on the contrary reported that it enjoyed no other government than that of 'the royal and kingly majesty'.)[54]

It is hardly surprising that this perspective should be accessible to a historian (like myself) of the Elizabethan age rather than (as it might be) of the 'despotism' of Henry VIII. For in spite of Elizabeth's absoluteness and charisma, with the stream of Tudor blood running dry (Maitland's phrase),[55]

[51] See especially the adages 'Aut fatuum aut regem nasci oportere' and 'Scarabeus aquilam quaerit', in M.M. Phillips, ed., *Erasmus on his Times: A Shortened Version of the 'Adages' of Erasmus* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 34-44, 47-72.

[52] Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, pp. 338-48.

[53] G.W. Bowler, 'English Protestant and Resistance Writings, 1553-1603' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of London, 1981).

[54] Michael Mendle, *Dangerous Positions: Mixed Government, the Estates of the Realm, and the Making of the 'Answer to the Six Propositions'* (University of Alabama, 1985), pp. 52-6.

[55] F.W. Maitland, in *The Cambridge Modern History*, ii, *The Reformation* (Cambridge, 1907), p. 560.

Elizabethan politicians already lived, proleptically, with their queen's death, and already imagined the dangerous hiatus which that death would leave behind, so long as the succession to the crown was not limited or determined. Already they (and 'they' included the prime minister of the day, William Cecil, Lord Burghley) envisaged themselves conducting business in an acephalous commonwealth in which the great offices of state and the institutions of consultation and government, council and parliament, would continue in being, as if there were no hiatus, no vacancy. For such a hiatus was, in the last resort, intolerable. 'The government of the realm shall continue in all respectes', wrote Burghley, in drafting the terms for an interregnum which was unconstitutional and unprecedented in recent experience, albeit, given the far from smooth operation of the laws of succession in England, not wholly unprecedented. To be sure the realm was still a realm and the interregnum was intended for an emergency device, to last no longer than it was needed. But the capacity and readiness to make plans of this kind is an indication that any degree of political incapacity in the crown, actual or threatened, strengthened rather than diminished the political capacity of the crown's servants, who were also the leading representatives of the commonwealth or public weal, whether in their 'natural' capacity as members of the titled nobility, or as those most recently elevated to positions of trust in court and council. More than that, it tended to suggest that, when it came to the crunch, the realm took precedence over the ruler. So citizens were concealed within subjects. The notion was freely accessible that the crown itself was a public office, which existed only to conserve the public safety: even if the public safety was often spoken of, in terms, as the personal safety of the monarch.[56]

So even under Elizabeth, alive rather than dead, the high political scene is not adequately described as consisting of the crown and its subjects, a stalagmite of intelligent obedience formed by drips from the descending stalactite above it. The active complexity of that scene has, I believe, been obscured (and this is to make a somewhat paradoxical point) by a long-standing and conventional preoccupation with Parliament, which for many (but not for Fortescue) was the embodiment of the political elements of the constitution. The Elizabethan bishop, John Aylmer, having defined 'the regiment of England' as not a mere monarchy, nor a mere oligarchy, nor yet a democracy, but a rule 'mixte of all these', at once observed that 'thimage whereof, and not the image but the thinge in deede', was to be 'seene in the parliament house'.[57] But Smith devoted only two chapters out of fifty-eight to parliament, which he described not as the repository of the political elements of the constitution but as 'the highest court of the realm'.

[56] See below, 'The Monarchical Republic of Queen Elizabeth I', pp. 51-5.

[57] John Aylmer, *An Harborowe for Faithfull and Trewe Subiectes* ('at Strasborowe', but *recte* London, 1559), sig. H.3 r.

Recent revisionist parliamentary history tells us that the role of the sixteenth-century parliament was not one of political balance, still less of institutionalised opposition. Parliament was not primarily, or even at all, a political body in that sense but an instrument of government in its legislative expression.[58]

That may go too far. There were Elizabethan parliaments which made their mark as political sounding boards: not, to be sure, for a House of Commons intent on realising its manifest destiny of seizing sovereignty from the crown, but in response to a more broadly based and complex contention between representative elements of the 'political nation' (even, we may dare to say, of the public) and a politically isolated queen. This contention was mostly about the future of a political nation in which the queen, subject as she was to mortality, would not herself have a share.[59]

But parliament was an occasional, even exceptional forum for a contention which continued, in all its implications for policy, both foreign and domestic, elsewhere, not always or often within the earshot of historians. Pocock, following the lead of a half-forgotten book called *The Articulate Citizen and the English Renaissance*, was looking in the right direction when he found the embryonic citizen not so much in the parliamentarian as in the humanist turned statesman, the intellectual in office who possessed 'awareness and skills which the prince did not', so that an almost even balance was struck with the monarch in terms of reciprocal obligations to seek counsel and to give it.[60] In pursuit of this kind of emergent citizen we are not narrowly interested in the small body of sworn counsel usually known from the 1530s on as the privy council, although that body could and did recruit political intelligence of a high order, under Elizabeth men like Sir Thomas Wilson, Sir Francis Walsingham and Smith himself. Of somewhat greater interest are the experts outside the council and of inferior rank who were the think-tanks (if only one-man think-tanks) of the age, the writers of position papers which survive and (we must assume) prolific in verbal advice which has usually not survived. The true significance of these well-informed and often very self-possessed men is not fully conveyed in the phrase 'men-of-business' which it is now the fashion to apply to them. They included not only notable lawyers and 'parliament men' but also mathematical and other specialists in engineering and navigation, and other practical matters. For these too were political animals, using their own initiatives to draw attention to their talents and ideas, operating freely and resourcefully within the constraints of a code of public decorum which they overstepped at some personal risk but which they were also capable of manipulating with sophistication and a heightened sense of the public

[58] G.R. Elton, *The Parliament of England, 1559-1581* (Cambridge, 1986).

[59] 'Puritans, Men of Business and Elizabethan Parliaments', below, chap. 3, passim.

[60] A.B. Ferguson, *The Articulate Citizen and the English Renaissance* (Durham, NC, 1965).

interest, with which they normally claimed to be in true alignment. Men like the learned clerk of the council, Robert Beale, or the engineer Thomas Digges, or the magus John Dee, knew, or thought that they knew, that if the councillors and courtiers to whom they addressed themselves possessed an awareness and skill beyond the capacity of the prince, then their own intelligences operated at a higher level still.[61]

If these experts and intellectuals, who were not very numerous, had communicated only with the monarch or the privy council, and privily, they would have represented a very small body of citizens indeed, hardly enough swallows to make a political summer, and their impact would have been limited. But in fact some of them were also publicists and authors, and in this capacity they are pointers to a much wider body of citizenry, roughly equivalent to what Louis B. Wright, making a virtue of flagrant anachronism, called 'middle-class culture',[62] and which we may dare to identify with public opinion. When John Stubbs opposed the proposed French marriage in the cour-ageously outspoken manifesto *The Gaping Gulf* (1579) and lost his right hand for it, how large was the audience he aspired to address?[63] It was perhaps not quite the same audience which consumed that elaborate fiction *Arcadia*, which Sir Philip Sidney began to compose in that same year, but *Arcadia* too contained coded political messages which its readers were capable of deciphering.[64] The potential and no doubt actual appeal of religion was wider still, and so too the religious public. Preachers in the line established by Hugh Latimer indulged the illusion of apostrophising the entire nation – Oh England! England! – to which they attributed a public intelligence as well as a public conscience.[65] In *The Obedience of a Christian Man* William Tyndale had instructed the mind and conscience of Henry VIII, not privily but in print, for all the world to see and, if it chose, to draw the most critical of conclusions.

I shall not say much on this occasion about the middle-ground politics of what we have begun to call gentry republics, and nothing at all about the government and politics of towns. 'Gentry republic' is not, needless to say, an expression authorised by contemporary usage. But it fits the circum-

[61] M.A.R. Graves, 'The Management of the Elizabethan House of Commons: The Council's "Men-of-Business"', *Parliamentary History*, 2 (1983), pp. 11-38; 'The Common Lawyers and the Privy Council's Parliamentary Men-of-Business, 1584-1601', *Parliamentary History*, 8 (1989), pp. 189-215. See below, pp. 51-3, 72-82, for remarks on Thomas Norton, Robert Beale and Thomas Digges. I have benefited from discussing John Dee as an author of 'position papers' with Dr William Sherman. See Dr Sherman's unpublished Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, '"A Living Library": The Readings and Writings of John Dee' (1992).

[62] Louis B. Wright, *Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1935).

[63] *John Stubb's 'Gaping Gulf' ... With Letters and Other Relevant Documents* (Charlottesville, VA, 1968).

[64] Richard C. McCoy, *Sir Philip Sidney: Rebellion in Arcadia* (Hassocks, 1979); David C. Norbrook, *Poetry and Politics in the English Renaissance* (1984), chap. 4 'Sidney and Political Pastoral'.

[65] Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1988).

stances especially of those counties where there was no resident lay or spiritual magnate of consequence, and where ruling gentry consequently established and operated as it were their own peerage: an aspect of the alleged rise of the gentry which is more demonstrable than most.[66] Norfolk and Suffolk after the political extinction in East Anglia of the house of Howard provide good examples of gentry republics. But a measure of gentry collegiality, whether stable as (allegedly) in Suffolk or chronically unstable and factious as (notoriously) in Norfolk, was a general feature of regional political cultures everywhere, as the institutions of local government were strengthened to bear heavier burdens and as opportunities increased for political and social interaction.

Twenty or thirty years ago it was a considerable advance on previous knowledge to grasp that the county existed, as a prime political unit. At first these provincial worlds were discussed as if they were hermetically sealed in upon themselves and resistant to the intrusive attention of the centre. My country, in the sense of my county, right or wrong. The political society of the county was also described as if it were a thinnish carpet with no underlay, no social depth. Now we begin to know more about the complex patterns of social and political alliance among the gentry, across county boundaries as much as within them, and about those interactions with the centre which were a principal force in the consolidation of the county community and its self-consciousness and self-defensiveness; and also about the verticality as well as the horizontality of county society and county politics.[67] That very public-spirited Norfolk gentleman Nathaniel Bacon (Francis Bacon's half-brother) never threw away any of his letters or accounts. These papers tell us that he had far more to do with his socially inferior neighbours, in the farmyard, at market, at the sermon, than he had with his fellow J.P.s, whom he apparently only met on the Bench and at the Assizes in Norwich.[68] If that was not untypical and eccentric behaviour, we need to take serious account of it in our unremitting efforts to explain the English Civil War. In this society, downward deference was an important principle, almost a way of life, like upward deference. In Suffolk, the landed gentry made friends with the local townspeople and helped them to pursue

[66] A. Hassell Smith, *County and Court: Government and Politics in Norfolk, 1558-1603* (Oxford, 1974); MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors*; R.H. Fritze, 'Faith and Faction: Religious Changes, National Politics and the Development of Local Factionalism in Hampshire, 1485-1570' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1982).

[67] Alan Everitt, *The Community of Kent and the Great Rebellion, 1640-60* (Leicester, 1966); Clive Holmes, 'The County Community in Stuart Historiography', *Journal of British Studies*, 19 (1979), 54-73; idem, *Seventeenth-Century Lincolnshire* (Lincoln, 1980); Ann Hughes, 'Militancy and Localism: Warwickshire Politics and Westminster Politics', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 31 (1981), pp. 51-68.

[68] I am grateful to Professor A.H. Smith for sharing with me continuing work on Sir Nathaniel Bacon, reflecting the content of the third and fourth volumes of his edition of *The Papers of Nathaniel Bacon of Stiffkey*, which are forthcoming.

their lawsuits against other gentry, as a means of pursuing their own private vendettas, and no doubt in the hope of profiting in other ways.[69] According to precious evidence preserved by George Puttenham in *The Art of English Poesie*, the gentry and professional intelligentsia of the sixteenth century were perfectly capable of pronouncing 'received English' but chose to 'condescend' in their speech to the rustic vernacular of meaner persons.[70]

It would be nice to be able to say that this growing depth of knowledge is helping us to an explanatory understanding of the politics of the pre-Civil War years or, for that matter, of the post-Civil War Restoration to which similar methods are being belatedly applied.[71] But in some ways they make an intelligent over-view more elusive than ever. That is the nature of progress in history, which differs from some other subjects where advances in research yield clarification, refinement and simplicity.

It is at a lower, if not quite the lowest, level of the social hierarchies that the opportunities for a new and extended political history are greatest, and where there is most need to undo G.M. Trevelyan's handiwork by putting the politics back into the history of a people, indeed the history of *the* people, who G.K. Chesterton thought never had spoken yet. But to repeat and restate in specific form a point made generally earlier: who ever supposed that the people in the shape of villagers or, if you like to call them that, peasants, had a politics? Who ever suspected that Swallowfield, too, was a republic?

It may be that not everyone has heard of Swallowfield. This was a parish consisting of a number of hamlets, Shepperidge Magna, Shepperidge Parva, Farleigh Hill and Diddenham, geographically part of Berkshire but because of a boundary anomaly administratively a detached portion of Wiltshire, from which it was about twenty miles distant. In 1596, Swallowfield proved that it too could act as 'a society or common doing of a multitude of free men collected together and united by common accord and covenautes among themselves'. On 4 December of that year, the principal inhabitants (very much those 'parochiani meliores et antiquiores' of whom we have already heard) held a town meeting at which it was agreed to hold further regular meetings, under an adopted constitution, 'to the end we may the better and more quyetly lyve together in good love and amytie, to the praise of God and for the better servynge of her Majestie'. And they would keep a book, 'to register all our doynges'.[72]

[69] MacCulloch, *Suffolk and the Tudors*, pp. 321-31.

[70] *The Art of English Poesie by George Puttenham*, ed. G.D. Willock and A. Walker (Cambridge, 1970), p. 145.

[71] Andrew Coleby, *Central Government and the Localities: Hampshire, 1649-1689* (Cambridge, 1987).

[72] Huntington Library, San Marino, CA, MS Ellesmere 6162, fos. 34a-36. The Swallowfield document has no matrix in the volume of Ellesmere papers in which it occurs, which appears to be a miscellaneous *omnium gatherum*.

The purpose of the Swallowfield town meeting was not sociable but administrative and corrective, with a special emphasis on providing remedies for the problems arising from the dearth and hard times prevailing in one of the most arduous decades which ordinary working people in this country have ever had to endure: poverty, bastardy, petty theft, disorderly drunkenness, insubordination. One of the aspirations of the men of Swallowfield was to forestall the marriage of those who lacked 'a convenyent house to lyve in', presumably by preventing the calling of their banns. In that same year, 1596, in neighbouring Oxfordshire, some of the angry young men who found themselves unable to marry, unemployed and so prevented from crossing the threshold into fully adult life (a step they could normally expect to take in their late twenties), tried to organise an armed rising, with some talk of cutting throats. The Swallowfield arrangements help to explain why they failed, why in 1596 there was to be no replay of 1549.[73]

The thoroughly political character of the Swallowfield proceedings is implied first in the field of what may be called foreign relations. So far as possible, Swallowfield would sort out its own problems with its own informal jurisdiction, troubling the justices as seldom as possible. In the second place, politics are implied in the distance created between these 'cheiffe inhabitantes' and their social inferiors, the poor, whether deserving ('the honest poore') or otherwise, who will be made to suffer if they 'malapertly compare with their betters and sette them at nought'. And thirdly, and most significantly, politics is found to be living and breathing in the formal and as it were republican parity which was to prevail among the men of Swallowfield themselves. In their meetings, they were to speak in turn, without fearing interruption or the contempt of open censure from their colleagues: 'synce none of us is ruler of hym sellfe, but the whole Company or the most parte is ruler of us all' – 'as wee wilbe esteemed to be men of discretion, good credence, honest myndes and christian-lyke behaveour, one towards another'. I regard this as expressive of an authentic, indigenous sentiment which also found a voice in the century to follow in the religious movements known as Presbyterianism and Independency, although these experiments in ecclesiastical self-government doubtless owed something, how much would be hard to measure, to what Pocock called 'extraneous modes of consciousness'.

Swallowfield was admittedly a special case. It was partly because the magistrates to whom it was responsible were, as was said, 'far off', in Wiltshire, that it made itself for most practical purposes a self-governing commonwealth. If a murder were to be committed in Swallowfield, somebody would have to ride to Amesbury. Otherwise not. But the desire to

[73] John Walter, 'A "Rising of the People"? The Oxfordshire Rising of 1596', *Past and Present*, 107 (1985), pp. 90-143.

settle less heinous matters informally and out of court, technically the 'non-curial settlement of disputes', was by no means a peculiarity of Swallowfield. Dr Richard Hoyle, who is making a study of this phenomenon, will tell us of the survival from elsewhere of other minute books of the kind which Swallowfield used to record its town meetings. And, more generally, the capacities of the 'chief inhabitants' of this southern English village are not likely to have been exceptional but the kind of qualities which Dr Reynolds and Professor Blickle have attributed to other village communities in other parts of Europe and in other centuries. These were the capacities which the East Anglian yeomanry demonstrated in 1549 in the incident very misleadingly known as Ket's Rebellion. This was without doubt a commotion, but it was entered into with the serious and responsible purpose of taking the king's justice into hands which were thought, not without reason, to be more capable than those of the ruling gentry. Here was no wild lawless *jacquerie* but a well organised system of 'camps' given over to what Dr Diarmaid MacCulloch calls 'fiestas of justice'.[74]

It was a similar instinct for self-governing self-preservation which a hundred years later motivated the Clubmen who took responsibility for the defence of their homes against the depradations of both sides in the Civil War. In Dorset, the Clubmen, meeting in traditional gathering places like Maiden Castle and perhaps with some historical sense of what had been done in such places in earlier generations, were represented from each parish by 'three or four of the ablest men for wisdom, valour, and estate, inhabitants of the same'.[75] Such capacities were taken for granted when the Levellers proposed a general enfranchisement, not so much of the entire population as of male householders of a certain class and standing. It was a capacity proved from day to day, year in and year out, by service on all kinds of juries, juries not merely to find a man guilty or innocent but to determine the responsibility for the clearing of a drain or the repair of a road or river bank; and in the time and effort spent in parish vestries, courts baron and courts leet, all with powers to appoint officers, levy local rates, and fine and otherwise discipline their members. These were the constables, church-wardens and overseers of the poor in nine thousand parishes, the bottom line of early modern government. The orderly distribution of the goods of deceased persons was a matter of concern to almost everyone, and the probate of wills was, in England, business for the spiritual courts. But the courts could do nothing without the numerous private persons who assumed a kind of public responsibility in writing and witnessing wills, and in executing their contents.

In *De Republica Anglorum*, Sir Thomas Smith at first wrote off all these

[74] MacCulloch, 'Kett's Rebellion in Context'.

[75] John Morrill, *Revolt of the Provinces: Conservatives and Radicals in the English Civil War, 1630-1650* (1976), pp. 199-200.

sorts of people (the fourth sort or class amongst us, *proletarii*) as 'onelie to be ruled, not to rule other'. 'These have no voice nor authoritie in our common wealth and no account is made of them.' But then Smith remembered that these despised persons were not to be 'altogether neglected', since they made up juries and filled the parish offices. To save his snobbish face and not to make a total nonsense of what he had just written, Smith then made up a small piece of mythical history. 'At the first', such responsibilities had not been 'imployed uppon such lowe and base persons'.[76]

Such functions were as much political as administrative, since the human material with which these petty officers had to deal (much like the air-raid warden in *Dad's Army*), enforcing the peace, discouraging fornication, distinguishing between the deserving and undeserving poor, consisted of their neighbours and kindred, friends and enemies. Administratively, the churchwarden was under oath to present all offenders. Politically, so far as his oath would allow him, he might exercise his discretion in whom he presented, whom not. He was in office for only a couple of years, and perhaps presentable material himself.

There is something here for all of us, whether we choose to be known as social historians or political historians, and we have hardly started. Historians of crime, like bomb disposal experts, grope for those delicate devices and mechanisms which brought some offenders into court and exempted others.[77] If Stephen Greenblatt wants to talk with the dead, all the dead, ecclesiastical and social historians should have a particular desire to interview the consciences, minds and pockets of extinct churchwardens, complementing work already done on village constables.[78] These are indeed, as Peter Laslett has taught us to call them, so many worlds we have lost,[79] but they are partly retrievable worlds. And since those 'chief men' in their parishes represent what historians of many cultures have learned to call 'brokers', mediating between the higher and lower echelons of an hierarchical society, it is at this level, along this interface, that we can hope

[76] *De Republica Anglorum*, pp. 76-7. Since these words were written, the Cambridge doctoral thesis by John Craig (1992) 'Reformation, Politics and Polemics in Sixteenth-Century East Anglian Market Towns', incorporating his work on churchwardens, suggests that Smith may not have been giving an entirely mythical account of changes in the social status of local and petty office-holders. See also the forthcoming Cambridge doctoral thesis by Mr Henry French on office-holding and status in the parishes and townships of Essex and East Anglia.

[77] See 'The Rule of Law', in the introduction to A. Fletcher and J. Stevenson, eds., *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 15-26; together with J.A. Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England, 1550-1750* (1984) and Cynthia B. Herrup, *The Common Peace: Participation and the Criminal Law in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1987).

[78] Joan R. Kent, *The English Village Constable, 1580-1642: A Social and Administrative Study* (Oxford, 1986). This work will be undertaken by the Cambridge historians Dr John Craig and Dr Beat Kümin.

[79] Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (successive editions).

to understand how nine thousand parishes composed at a higher level a single political society.

'We are all social historians now', as King Edward VII (or was it Sir William Harcourt?) very nearly said; and if social historians, political historians too, whether Sir John Seeley would have acknowledged us as such. And surely this is progressive and hopeful, for history and for this faculty. With all the considerable respect I hold for him as another of the Cambridge greats still living among us, I cannot agree with Sir John Plumb's opinion (expressed only a year or two ago) that 'for decades nothing exciting, nothing original, nothing creative, has been attempted in the teaching of history'.[80] I can agree with Plumb that (as Tory backbenchers are prone to complain) there has been some failure in presentation, academic history failing to offer sustenance to the 'vast and hungry audience, longing to hear about the past', the successors of Trevelyan's countless readers. And in that failure I for one am fully complicit. But the subject itself has surely never been more exciting, more original, more creative. And I am more proud than I can say to profess it and in some measure to represent it, in this, my own university.

[80] *The Making of an Historian: The Collected Essays of J.H. Plumb* (Hemel Hempstead, 1988), p. 370.

## *De Republica Anglorum:* A Retrospective Note, 1993

Inaugural lectures are occasional addresses, not affirmations for all time. The date of this lecture was as recent as November 1989, but occasion and context appear now, as 1992 turns into 1993, very remote. At the time, the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe were poised on the brink of a disintegrative process of revolution, more ethnic than democratic, the full extent of which we had hardly begun to grasp. Within six weeks the unspeakable Ceascescus would be dead, but we were still two years away from the failed Moscow *coup* and the fall of Gorbachev. Yugoslavia was still intact and for another three years there would still be a state called Czechoslovakia. In 1989 the Desert War and the 'New World Order' had not been heard of. Mrs Thatcher was still in office, resolved to go on and on.

Such has been the unprecedented pace of change that the standpoint from which these retrospective remarks are made, on the first day of 1993, may itself be thoroughly historicised by the time of their publication. What will happen to that limited if expanding portion of Europe which we call the European Community, both in its internal integration and in relation to the remainder of the Continent, is still uncertain, but like most world questions, more sombre in prospect than it was in 1989. The future constitution of the British Isles, and even what to call the archipelago if it is deemed, as it must be, to include Ireland, historically no part of Britain,[1] will not long remain on the back burner, and this too will prove a question as much for historians as for politicians.

The implications of recent events for the study and teaching of history have scarcely been addressed, let alone absorbed. Select groups of historians are currently travelling to Moscow to discuss with their Russian hosts and counterparts how to rewrite their history in the aftermath of Communism. Such are the shifts in our own historiographical perspective that there is no reason why the compliment should not be returned. Russian historians, having become experts in the revisionary reconstruction of their subject, may yet advise us.

1989 was, now it appears, an unsuitable moment at which to set the historical syllabus even in wet concrete. Yet the background to this inaugural lecture was the national debate about the place of history, and what kinds of history, within the National Curriculum for schools which had proceeded with some vigour in the public prints throughout that year, a debate about inclusion and exclusion, method and content, nationality and ecumenicity. How to reconcile the potential infinitude of history with

[1] However there was not much sensitivity on this question in sixteenth-century England, when William Camden called his book *Britannia sive florentissimorum regnorum Angliae, Scotiae, Hiberniae, et insularum adjacantium descriptio* (1586). See also the title of the first English edition: *Britain, or a chorographicall description of the most flourishing kingdoms, England, Scotland, and Ireland.*

the necessary finiteness of any academic history syllabus led in this lecture to more particular reflections on the relation of social history, potentially limitless and holistic in scope, to the more carefully circumscribed bounds of political history, which for my predecessor Sir Geoffrey Elton is a sovereign discipline with some hegemonistic claims. This is a question with local, Cambridge resonances, for in Cambridge undergraduate students of history are confronted with separate examination papers on the social and economic and the political and constitutional history of Britain. It may be, of course, that the point of this dichotomy is to demonstrate the meaningless of the one without the other, which was the burden of this inaugural lecture.

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