

## Books on Elizabethan and Stuart History for Schools

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THE PURPOSE of this article is to provide some guidance for seventh-form teachers involved in the preparation of candidates for the University Bursary and Entrance Scholarships Examination. It is concerned only with the literature for the compulsory section on England between 1558-1700. And it cannot be emphasized too strongly that, because of the limitations of space, the following constitutes a selective, not comprehensive, list of recommendations: inclusion does not mean that these works *ought* to be used; exclusion does not mean that omitted items are unsuitable. On the other hand the survey does not confine itself to recent publications. The adopted terms of reference are essentially practical ones – suitability, availability, and reasonable cost – and frequently the older histories, particularly amongst the general texts, are more appropriate to the new syllabus.

The new emphasis on the thematic treatment of Elizabethan and Stuart England provokes two related problems: about the continued relevance of those works already held by schools and the availability and cost of new thematically-structured books which might be more appropriate to the new prescription. One question which has frequently been asked in recent months concerns the fate of the specialized texts and monographs acquired by many of the schools which taught the now defunct Elizabethan option. Is it impracticable to employ them now that Elizabeth's reign has ceased to be an in-depth study and has become instead part of a thematic broad survey course? Whilst this is not a question which can be answered in general terms, it should not be assumed that such monographs have been automatically rendered redundant. The extended chronological limits may inhibit the thorough exploitation of such specialized collections as the *Essays in Elizabethan Government and Society*.<sup>1</sup> Some items in the old staple diet, however, should be adaptable to the new prescription. Notable amongst these is A.G.R. Smith's *The Government of Elizabethan England*.<sup>2</sup> It is compact, logically structured, and relatively cheap, which qualities make it perhaps the

<sup>1</sup>S.T. Bindoff, J. Hurstfield and C.H. Williams (eds.), *Essays in Elizabethan Government and Society*, London, 1961.

<sup>2</sup>A.G.R. Smith, *The Government of Elizabethan England*, Arnold paperback, 1972.

most suitable and available study of Elizabethan government in a broad survey course. Moreover it has successfully bridged the gap between the older, institutionally-orientated studies and the current concern to extract the political juices from the contemporary system of government. Smith's doctoral thesis on Michael Hicckes, the Cecils' secretariat, and the patronage system which Hicckes operated on their behalf, makes him particularly qualified to perform this task. In this respect he follows in the footsteps and builds upon the pioneer work of J.E. Neale and W.T. MacCaffrey.<sup>3</sup>

On the other hand conveniently discarded historical baggage can include almost anything written on 'the rise of the gentry'. It is one of the saddest symptoms of the lack of communication between ivy-covered academics and front-line schoolteachers that once-fashionable theses are discarded in the universities at precisely the same time that they are being adopted enthusiastically by the schools. When J.H. Hexter published his 'Storm over the Gentry',<sup>4</sup> in 1958, the death-knell of that largely futile debate was sounded and the academic inadequacies of its participants were rigorously laid bare. Doubtless the most dramatic episode in that long drawn-out gladiatorial combat was H.R. Trevor Roper's assault on Lawrence Stone in 1951.<sup>5</sup> In contrast J.H. Hexter's exposé was more judicious, albeit not without its occasional boisterousness. His particular achievement was to demonstrate the inadequacy of the evidential and evaluative techniques employed by all of the major participants in the controversy. R.H. Tawney retired, lamenting and protesting that 'an erring colleague is not an Amalekite to be smitten hip and thigh'.<sup>6</sup> Stone withdrew from the transatlantic security of Princeton where he soaked himself (and later swamped his readers) in sociological jargon (e.g. post-marital patriloquial residence was the norm!) and statistical formulae and data. The end-product of his work was *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641*,<sup>7</sup> the unabridged (and uncompromising) version of which runs to some 740 pages. The shortened paperback version, stripped of much of its statistical complexity, whilst retaining much of the wealth of anecdotal and illustrative material which he amassed, remains advisable and stimulating material for those who would tackle the social and economic theme in the new prescription. His *Social Change and Revolution*, one of the better examples of the commentary-and-documents genre, is equally valuable. His introduction incorporates a painless review of 'the rise of the gentry' debate, whilst his abridged essays and edited documents should

<sup>3</sup>J.E. Neale, 'The Elizabethan Political Scene', in *The Age of Catherine de Medici and Essays in Elizabethan History*, Cape, 1971; W.T. MacCaffrey, 'Place and Patronage in Elizabethan Politics', in S.T. Bindoff et al. (eds.), *Essays in Elizabethan Government and Society*, London, 1961.

<sup>4</sup>J.H. Hexter, 'Storm over the Gentry', *Encounter*, X, 5 (May 1958), 22-34, and in *Reappraisals in History*, London, 1967.

<sup>5</sup>L. Stone, 'The Anatomy of the Elizabethan Aristocracy', *Economic History Review*, 1st Ser, XVIII (1948); H.R. Trevor Roper, 'The Elizabethan Aristocracy: an Anatomy Anatomised', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, III (1951).

<sup>6</sup>L. Stone, *Social Change and Revolution, England, 1540-1640*, Longman paperback, 1973, p.xv.

<sup>7</sup>L. Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy, 1558-1641*, O.U.P., 1965.

satisfy the lingering nostalgia of those who are reluctant to set aside this old historical chestnut.

Since the coming of Hexter, historians have tended to move away from the earlier unrewarding generalizations about social mobility and to explore instead more fruitful avenues to an understanding of the origins of the Civil War. Most rewarding of those are Perez Zagorin's study of the Court/Country dichotomy<sup>8</sup> and some of the county studies which appeared in the sixties and early seventies.<sup>9</sup> County studies may be derided as parochial history; or dismissed as too specialized for a broad survey course. They should not be regarded as such, however, for any period before the nineteenth century at least. For they are a gloss upon the fundamental fact of English political organization: that effective government particularly between 1558 and 1700 depended upon a harmony between the Crown and the governing class. Political harmony was a normal if not inevitable consequence of the interdependence of these two partners in the business of governing the realm. In turn that interdependence derived partly from general acceptance of the natural political order and partly from political necessity: that the monarch, the Lord's anointed, ruled, that the governing class managed the affairs of the realm at his direction, and that they needed each other to maintain their respective positions of status and authority. The Crown alone could elevate socially and advance materially the more deserving members of its governing class. Conversely, without the revenue to create a standing army, a police force, and a salaried bureaucracy throughout the country, it had to look to the nobility and gentry to perform these functions, without adequate recompense and often with no payment at all. Thus local government was the preserve of an independent-tempered, largely unpaid, governing class. In brief 'self-government at the king's command' was the principle on which control of the countryside rested. A class of men with status and income independent of the Crown was bound to enjoy a certain freedom of action; selecting those royal policies which it chose to enforce, and neglecting, obstructing, or rejecting those of which it disapproved. Nevertheless an essential identity of interests between the Tudors and the governing class avoided any serious strains in this working relationship. It was only Charles I's invasion of governing-class-autonomy in the counties which led to a serious rupture and created the near-universal resentment which confronted him when the Long Parliament met in 1640. Hence the importance of county studies between 1540 and 1640 and especially in the period of personal rule. Whilst teachers would not be advised to invest in such weighty and detailed volumes as J.T. Cliffe's *The Yorkshire Gentry from the Reformation to the Civil War*,<sup>10</sup> it is recommended that they dip into a recent historiography of the English Revolution written by R.C. Richardson.<sup>11</sup> He has included a chapter on local

<sup>8</sup>P. Zagorin, *The Court and the Country*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969.

<sup>9</sup>A stimulating survey of these is to be found in R.C. Richardson's recent publication which is discussed below.

<sup>10</sup>J.T. Cliffe, *The Yorkshire Gentry from the Reformation to the Civil War*, London, 1969.

<sup>11</sup>R.C. Richardson, *The Debate on the English Revolution*, Methuen paperback, 1977.

and regional studies which provides a survey of the recent literature and will at least acquaint teachers with the work done in this field – and why it is so important.

The most important decision facing the seventh-form teacher is the choice of a suitable general text. Here we encounter a problem imposed upon us by convention and fashion in historical writing and publication, in particular the production of histories within the often unrealistic chronological limits of a reign, a dynasty, or a century. The separation of Elizabeth's reign from the Stuart century, for example, obscures the essential continuity between the 1590s and the first twenty-five years of Stuart rule. It is true that R.H. Tawney set a new fashion with his examination of the period 1540-1640 and indeed much of the more recent literature has adopted 'Tawney's century' as a meaningful period of study. One unfortunate consequence of this, however, has been to diminish the independent significance of the sixteenth century, threatening to relegate it to a mere prologue to seventeenth-century conflict. This effect was doubtless unintentional and Stuart historians have rightly assumed that the origins of such a profound and complex upheaval must be searched for in the previous century. The result, however, has too often been a ransacking of the Tudor period for lines of causation, and an accompanying concern to examine that century in relation to the 1640s rather than in its own right.

Sir John Neale provides the classic case. His declared purpose, in studying the Elizabethan parliaments was 'to banish the old illusion that early-Stuart Parliaments had few roots in the sixteenth century'.<sup>12</sup> The result was a parliamentary history which ignored the general harmony, cooperation, and identity of interests, as well as the great bulk of uncontentious legislation, and which instead singled out the apparent seeds of Stuart conflict. To concentrate exclusively on opposition and conflict and to ignore the rest is to distort the perspective and to miss the whole point, purpose, and achievement of the Tudor parliaments. In the continuing absence of an accessible critical literature,<sup>13</sup> however, Sir John Neale's interpretation must stand for the time being. In the meantime his work cannot be ignored by any serious student of Elizabethan parliamentary history. Its very size, however, may be an indigestible and impracticable proposition for seventh formers who may prefer the distilled essence of his labours as set forth in the later works of S.T. Bindoff, Joel Hurstfield and A.G.R. Smith.<sup>14</sup>

A more recent, acceptable, and appropriate approach to parliament, (and indeed to the general political history of two-thirds of the period), may be

<sup>12</sup> J.E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments, 1559-1581*, London, 1971, p.11.

<sup>13</sup> A convincing criticism of the 'rise of parliament' thesis, as expounded by A.F. Pollard, G.R. Elton and J.E. Neale, is to be found in J.S. Roskell, 'Perspectives in English Parliamentary History', *Bulletin of the John Ryland Library*, 46, 2 (March 1964), 448-75.

<sup>14</sup> S.T. Bindoff, *Tudor England*, Harmondsworth, 1950; J. Hurstfield, *Elizabeth I and the Unity of England*, London, 1960; A.G.R. Smith, *Government of Elizabethan England*.

found in the general surveys of Conrad Russell and D.M. Loades.<sup>15</sup> The latter is preferable, partly at least for the negative reason of Russell's title, *The Crisis of Parliaments*. It is time that historians – and students alike – escaped from the parliamentary straitjacket, the assumption that parliament was in any way central to Elizabethan life – or that, because in 1640 its prominence was assured and in 1688-89 its pre-eminence was established, it was of fundamental importance in the political system in the previous century. In the conditions of Elizabethan stability, when parliaments met briefly and infrequently and there was an essential crown-governing-class harmony, the monarch, not parliament was the focal point of the political nation. Parliament, in contrast, was simply a mechanism which enabled the crown to obtain the necessary laws and supplements of money for effective government, and peers, gentry, and merchants to redress grievances against government and to underwrite their grants and assurances, covenants and contracts, patents and privileges in statutory form. The sixteenth century was a litigious, not a warlike age – in itself a tribute to the Tudor dynasty. Statutory support for legal instruments was an important weapon in litigation, a consideration which shunts parliament off centre stage in favour of the law courts.

Indeed the law courts constituted the centrepiece of Tudor government under the crown – a mark of what D.M. Loades calls 'good lordship'. The essence of good lordship was the Crown's ability to care for and patronize its governing class, to redress their grievances in a non-partisan spirit, to adjudicate impartially in their disagreements, and to distribute offices, honours and other rewards impartially amongst them. In some of these activities the law courts had a vital part to play. Likewise Loades diagnoses the Stuart failure as the breakdown of 'good lordship'. When James I and his son obstructed the redress of grievances through the law courts,<sup>16</sup> the sole remaining avenue to remedy was parliament – hence its novel importance in the early seventeenth century. Charles I's failure to summon it for eleven years denied his governing class even that recourse. This is not to deny that the roots and origins of the crisis and civil war lie embedded in the sixteenth century, but it demolishes the conception of Elizabeth's reign as a mere curtain-raiser to the revolutionary acts of 1640s and 1650s. Her regime deserves to be studied in its own right as a period both formative and fruitful. It can of course be read in two ways: through the more uncritical eyes of Sir John Neale, A.L. Rowse and the other Gloriana cultists, or via the tentative revisionism of Joel Hurstfield and Beckingsale.<sup>17</sup> The latter are obviously preferable, if only because they do recognize a deterioration in government, during the last third of the reign, the first stage of what used to be regarded as

<sup>15</sup>C. Russell, *The Crisis of Parliaments: English History, 1509-1660*, O.U.P. paperback, 1971; D.M. Loades, *Politics and the Nation, 1450-1660*, Fontana paperback, 1974.

<sup>16</sup>For the political role of the early Stuart judges see W.J. Jones, *Politics and the Bench: The Judges and the Origins of the English Civil War*, Allen and Unwin paperback, 1971.

<sup>17</sup>J. Hurstfield, *Elizabeth I*; B.W. Beckingsale, *Elizabeth I*, London, 1963.

a merely Stuart decline. In other words a two-pronged approach to Elizabeth's reign is essential: an examination of its achievements, especially during the High Elizabethan period of the seventies and eighties, and a recognition that the period 1590-1628 (or even 1640) constitutes a unified period and so is worthy of study as such.

Unfortunately many general histories are written within a framework of dynasties or centuries (although an increasing number of Stuart histories terminate at the 1688 Revolution instead of at the death of Queen Anne). Yet, paradoxically, I would still recommend two general texts cast (more or less) in the traditional mould, those of G.E. Aylmer and Christopher Hill.<sup>18</sup> Aylmer's particular virtue is clear, crisp, and concise narrative. There is probably no more economically-written and incisive account of events between 1603 and 1688 than his *Struggle for the Constitution*, and it maintains a nice balance between description and evaluation throughout.

It remains, however, an essentially constitutional and political study, which requires to be supplemented by Hill's *Century of Revolution*. He designed a volume seemingly intended to be the last word in logical structure: a chronological framework of four periods but within each period a topical arrangement. The topical structure is repeated within each chronological phase: a narrative, followed by sections on economics, politics and the constitution, and religion and ideas. His sketchy superficial narrative should be ignored. How, for example, can one hope to provide a meaningful record of the revolutionary forties and fifties in a mere six pages? Set that aside (in favour of Aylmer) and you have an exploratory text which goes far beyond the limits of Aylmer. Teachers, however, need to act as a corrective to Hill's excessive enthusiasm for (and over-emphasis on) the role of the bourgeoisie and the growth of capitalism. Nevertheless, in the hands of the discerning teacher, Aylmer and Hill constitute an admirable pair in harness.

Sooner or later – and one cannot avoid it – it is necessary to give some consideration to that most intractable of historical problems, the origins of the English Civil War and Revolution. Any recommendation for reading, like any explanation of the causes, is bound to be challenged and doubtless there will be critics of my choice, Lawrence Stone's *The Causes of the English Revolution, 1529-1642*.<sup>19</sup> Proceeding naturally from his sociological-statistical treatment of the aristocracy, it offers an explanation of causation within three time-spans: the 'preconditions' (or long-term developments between 1529 and 1629), the 'precipitants' (or short-term causes, 1629-39) and the 'triggers' (1640-42). The more traditional and austere historian may deplore the terminology, but it does present a pattern of causation, a precise and concise explanation of a complex process in a clear, digestible, and relatively cheap form.

<sup>18</sup>G.E. Aylmer, *The Struggle for the Constitution, 1603-1689*, Blandford Press, 1965, and published as *A Short History of Seventeenth Century England*, in Mentor paperback; C. Hill, *The Century of Revolution, 1603-1714*, Sphere paperback, 1975.

<sup>19</sup>L. Stone, *The Causes of the English Revolution, 1529-1642*, Routledge and Kegan Paul paperback, 1973.

It remains to talk selectively of more specialized texts; and in particular of several genres of historical publication, unmistakably aimed at the senior school and undergraduate market. First of these is the potted 'history-without-tears' pamphlet. Many of those are concerned with economic history which has a bad reputation, the consequence of dull writing and an unreceptive audience. It is a sad but mistaken assumption that economic history is essentially tedious. Publishers have attempted to combat this with series of brief (and therefore theoretically more palatable) monographs. Notable amongst those are the Macmillan *Studies in Economic History*, which provide, in that fashionable but ugly word so beloved by publishers, an 'overview' of such topics as Tudor and early Stuart inflation, English trade and industry.<sup>20</sup>

The second kind is the historiographical debate cast in the form of either a discursive and evaluative commentary, or edited selections of extracts from contributors to the debate, or both in combination. The best recent example of this is R.C. Richardson's examination of the debate on the English Revolution to which reference has already been made. Finally there is the published collection of original sources accompanied by a commentary. In theory this combination offers to the reader the opportunity for independent evaluation; in practice it can dictate opinion by the presentation of material designed only to illustrate the interpretation set forth in the preceding commentary. Pasteurized documentation of this kind can have the Namierite effect of taking the mind out of history. Nevertheless there are exceptions, especially in the *Historical Problems* series published by Allen and Unwin.<sup>21</sup> In any case whatever the possible dangers and disadvantages inherent in this kind of publication, they do enjoy one common advantage: their *relative* cheapness. And it must be conceded that nowadays dollars and cents in the purse are almost as important as intellectual independence.

M.A.R. GRAVES

*University of Auckland*

<sup>20</sup>R.B. Outhwaite, *Inflation in Tudor and Early Stuart England*, 1970; R. Davis, *English Overseas Trade, 1500-1700*, 1973; D.C. Coleman, *Industry in Tudor and Stuart England*, 1975.

<sup>21</sup>E.g. C. Cross, *The Royal Supremacy in the Elizabethan Church*, no.8, 1969; and the most recent addition, S.M. Jack, *Trade and Industry in Tudor and Stuart England*, no.27, 1977.