

Renaissance period, when book hunters such as Poggio Bracciolini and Coluccio Salutati scoured the library for remnants of classical Roman manuscripts and brought many previously unknown texts to light. Towards the end of the seventh century, Bobbio scribes reused leaves from a pre-Jerome Old Testament in order to copy a number of grammatical texts associated with the famous name of Probus. What survived of the original seven fascicles became a single codex, fated to be removed from Bobbio in 1493, to come into the possession of Aulo Giano Parrasio, to pass to the library of the Augustinians of S. Giovanni a Carbonara, to be taken to Vienna in 1718, to be handed over to the Italian state in 1919, and to come to rest eventually in the Biblioteca Nazionale in Naples (Cod. Lat. 1). It is arguably one of the most important collections of Latin grammars from late antiquity. The most spectacular find of the Renaissance period, however, was the palimpsest copy of Cicero's *De re publica* (the only surviving fragment of that work). The classic account (and still the most comprehensive) is Amadeo Peyron's (Latin) introduction to the 1824 facsimile edition. Almost equally sensational was the rediscovery in the Bobbio library in 1493 of Rutilius Claudius Namatianus's poem in two books, *De reditu suo* (composed in 417) by Giorgio Merula, historian to the house of Ludovico Maria Sforza, duke of Milan. Professor Ferrari discovered and published further fragments of the same manuscript twenty-five years ago.

The Bobbio catalogue – probably the richest of all from the early Middle Ages – has been the object of numerous studies, not the least important being that by 'our own' indefatigable Mario Esposito (1931, though curiously omitted from his collected essays, vol. 2, 1990). It was Esposito who pointed out that, but for the chance purchase (in 1803) of the Bobbio manuscripts now housed in Turin by an Irishman, Edward Butler (who took his medical degree at the University of Pavia), that collection might have been lost for ever. Of all this, however, there is no mention; instead, Dr Richter, unfortunately, repeats outdated discussions of those Bobbio manuscripts that were glossed in Old Irish (in particular, MS C 301 inf., the supposed psalm commentary of Columbanus). He would have rendered a far greater service if he had simply reproduced Michele Tosi's magnificent 1985 edition of the Bobbio catalogues.

On the whole, however, the author is to be commended for having at least provided (most of) the raw materials for the first half-century of Bobbio's history. Where the book is deficient (for example, in its treatment of the Bobbio library and scriptorium), he is not to be too severely criticised as he admits quite candidly that he is 'not a trained palaeographer' (p. 10). The bibliography of works cited is useful, if not comprehensive. There is food for thought in the occasional questioning of previously held views. In that regard, it is perhaps apposite to cite one of the author's statements in his epilogue: 'It must be emphasized that when we look at Ireland in this same period, there is no monastery that offers a comparable variegated richness of information' (p. 187).

Finally, it is appropriate to praise the late lamented Michael Adams, whose Four Courts Press did so much over so many years to make possible the publication of studies such as this one. The quality of production – enhanced by a set of excellent plates – reflects his high standards. *Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam dílis.*

DÁIBHÍ Ó CRÓINÍN

*Department of History, National University of Ireland, Galway*

A SHORT HISTORY OF PARLIAMENT: ENGLAND, GREAT BRITAIN, THE UNITED KINGDOM, IRELAND AND SCOTLAND. Edited by Clyve Jones. Pp 400. Woodbridge: Boydell Press. 2009. £75.

Even when members of the public affect surprise and disgust at the behaviour of their elected representatives, fascination with the institution through which they are governed remains undimmed. Equally, while the study of representative assemblies is no longer the highest priority for academic historians, there remains a solid constituency for traditional political

history, to which the success of the British journal *Parliamentary History* bears witness. Capitalising on the residual appeal of the subject (enhanced by constitutional innovations in the constituent parts of the United Kingdom, and no doubt given further spice by recent financial scandals), the Boydell Press has commissioned the long-time editor of *Parliamentary History*, Clyde Jones, to put together a multi-authored reference work covering every aspect of the history of representative institutions in Britain and Ireland from their origin to the present day. The resulting book consists of a succession of analytical essays by experts on their respective periods, interspersed with factual ‘inserts’ in the form of brief encyclopaedia-style entries on particular features, episodes and, occasionally, individuals.

While the central focus of the book is on Westminster – the parliaments of England, then of Great Britain, and then of the United Kingdom – there are separate essays on the pre-Union Scottish and Irish parliaments (the latter by Charles Ivar McGrath), the Northern Ireland parliament and Assembly (by Graham Walker), and other institutions, including what are described as the ‘post-devolution legislatures’ in Edinburgh and Cardiff. As one might expect, both Irish experts do a very professional job. Professor Walker’s essay on Stormont and its successors provides a model for a concise history of the subject that manages to be more than a digest of existing scholarship. By contrast, Dr McGrath has much more to compress and can put less of a personal stamp on his contribution, but gives a sound and sensible overview of five and a half centuries of Irish parliamentary history. The Oireachtas gets even shorter shrift, and, it must be said, a rather poor deal: a little over a page in a short ‘miscellaneous’ essay by the editor that also takes in Tynwald (Isle of Man) and the assemblies of Jersey and Guernsey.

But it is on its account of the history of the Westminster parliament that the book will be judged. All the essays are good, and some are very good indeed, John Maddicott’s opening essay on the origins of parliament setting the standard for magisterial scholarship and stylish presentation. The contributors were obviously working to a tight brief, being required to cover all aspects of the life of parliament rather than writing a political history, and the way the book is organised reflects this purpose: each broad chronological section after 1307 begins with essays on the Lords, and continues to do so long after the Commons has become the more important of the two houses in terms of governance.

Such a work of reference requires a particular tone, one that is authoritative without being dogmatic: this would not be the place for speculation. Each contributor succeeds in striking the right note, even when (as with the essays on 1601–60) the prospect of launching into stormy historiographical debates must have tantalised. Nonetheless, it is surprising how much in the way of new discoveries has been included, even in the short inserts. A number of the essays give us the fruits of ongoing research, most notably from unpublished sections of the official *History of Parliament*, from whose staff (past and present) many contributors are drawn. Among the most successful are Simon Payling (the Commons, 1307–1529), Alasdair Hawkyard (the Commons, 1529–1601), Stephen K. Roberts (the Commons, 1640–60), Jason Peacey (the Lords, 1640–60), Robin Eagles (the Lords, 1660–1707) and Philip Salmon (the Commons, 1801–1911). But it really is invidious to single out particular essays, since the quality of the writing is consistently good.

It is difficult to see quite what market the publisher had in mind. On the one hand, the price is probably too high for the general reader, and there are no illustrations. On the other, many of the essays are too wide-ranging for an academic market: the relatively truncated coverage of the nineteenth century, in two essays, is particularly disappointing, the more so when compared to the five and a half provided for the seventeenth. That being said, the book can be read with interest and profit by all manner of readers, professional and amateur, and it answers questions about parliamentary history that other reference works fail to address. It should find a place in any self-respecting library, and on the bookshelves of anyone with more than a passing interest in parliamentary history.

D. W. HAYTON

*School of History and Anthropology, Queen’s University Belfast*