

Review article: The history of Parliament as grand project*

The study of history has taken many forms and adopted many mantles. Sometimes, profound changes in perception have been inaugurated by individual essays or a series of essays by a single scholar (F. W. Maitland's work being a notable example). Sometimes, a brilliant book by a single author has created an entirely new historical landscape, though, such being the nature of the scholarly enterprise, even such landscapes are rarely immune to seismic attacks from later practitioners. There has, however, also been a liking for the 'grand project': usually, multi-volume efforts by teams of workers devoted to presenting the 'state of scholarship' at a particular time or constructing new resource materials from which more refined interpretations can be constructed.

All of these have themselves often had patchy histories, not least because of difficulties in getting individuals and even more so of getting teams to deliver on time or, as they say, to sing from the same hymn sheet, or, indeed, to use any kind of hymn sheet at all. In many ways, the most problematical have been what might be called the interpretative projects, in which a series of volumes (sometimes by single practitioners, sometimes by groups) has been organised to present, whether explicitly or implicitly, an up-to date overview of some country or some theme or field of historical enterprise. On the whole, the single-author variation has worked best, though even here delays, illnesses, even deaths have tended to string things out to unhelpful lengths. The last volume of the original *Oxford history of England*, on the reign of George III, appeared decades after the series had begun, while the *New Oxford history's* first volume was published in 1989 – another nine volumes have since appeared – but significant gaps remain after the passage of no less than twenty-one years. When volumes have been written by many hands, the problems have inevitably multiplied to such an extent that they have not infrequently provided a means by which the recently (or even not-so-recently) deceased have been given one last opportunity to address those still walking the earth. Some of the Cambridge histories and, indeed, the *New history of Ireland* furnish discouraging examples of this kind of temporal drift.

On the whole, reference-type projects have done better, though here, too, delay and an unhelpful desire to seek unattainable perfection has in some cases sucked grandly conceived undertakings into the quicksands of unconscionable procrastination. What is undoubtedly clear is that without strong, as well as supportive and diplomatic, leadership, any grand project is doomed to failure. While organising committees are all very well and can provide useful support, a single governing

* *The history of Parliament: the House of Commons, 1820–1832*. Edited by D. R. Fisher. 7 vols, pp cli, 6336. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2009. £490.

mind – efficient, forceful, yet benevolent – is best, though dual leadership has also proved successful. The late Colin Matthew, the beau idéal in this respect, very pertinently pointed out that ‘Perfectionism defeats itself, and, paradoxically, often also endangers overall balance and high standards’, while noting that the otherwise excellent *Dizionario biografico degli Italiani* had taken thirty-five years and one supplement to reach the letter *F*, with the result that it could never yield ‘a completed edition which could be said to be even approximately up to date’.¹ By contrast, both the original *Dictionary of national biography* (privately financed by the publisher George Smith, who was rendered wealthy by the manufacture of Apollinaris mineral water) and Matthew’s *New Oxford dictionary* successor are models of how to succeed when others fail. And let there be no doubt that the recent nine-volume *Dictionary of Irish biography*, produced under the auspices of the Royal Irish Academy, falls into the same category, especially as regards the inspired leadership of the two principal editors.²

Moving beyond exclusively biographical and interpretative works, one encounters the other major grand projects still current in these islands, namely the *Victoria county history* (confined to England) and *The history of Parliament* (which, for certain periods, takes in the whole of Britain and Ireland as well). The greater success of the latter is largely owing to its well-cast terms of reference and its more dependable funding. The *Victoria county history* began in quite another age, when recent, or ‘contemporary’, history was regarded as no more than journalism, and when the project’s motto might well have been drawn up as ‘If it moves, leave it out’. Finance depended (and still depends) on local conditions, so that individual county undertakings lurch from one crisis to another, with long gaps between volumes and many counties still completely blank. And despite some useful attempts to modernise the remit – more social and economic history, more *people* and fewer buildings, more recent events, and so on – the leisurely timescales of completion have meant that (as with the *New history of Ireland*) some contributors have long gone to their reward before their pieces have appeared in print.

The history of Parliament has been much more successful. Originally envisaged by the maverick M.P. Josiah Wedgwood, who, with private support, produced two volumes in 1936 and 1938 on an amateur basis, it eventually acquired Treasury funding in 1951 and, thus, got underway just as the influence of L. B. Namier on political and electoral history was at its height. Some might think this latter coincidence a strength, others might not. Certainly, Namier’s views as to the determinants of politics, the nature of parties, the role of individuals, and the relationship of ideology to practice shaped the flavour of the volumes dealing with the first two periods covered – 1754–90 (published in 1964) and 1715–54 (published in 1970) – but, subsequently, it is more in the preoccupations of the project rather than its execution that the great man’s impact is to be seen. And the initial plan of attack has, as it turns out, proved sufficiently rigorous and flexible to allow subsequent periods to be dealt with in appropriate and, in general, highly successful ways.

The present seven-volume tranche, covering the years 1820–32, follows the

¹ H. C. G. Matthew, *Leslie Stephen and the ‘New dictionary of national biography’* (Cambridge, 1997), pp 11–12.

² The present reviewer must here admit that, as one of the general editors, he played a (very minor) part in this enterprise – the palms, however, belong quite elsewhere.

established guidelines no less closely than its predecessors. An introductory volume contains overview essays on England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, on the general elections of 1820, 1826, 1830 and 1831, on Members of Parliament, on parliamentary procedure, on politics and parties, on the English reform legislation of 1832 (the bills and acts for Scotland and Ireland are dealt with elsewhere), as well as a number of appendices on speakers, Prime Ministers, officials, party lists and so forth. We then have two substantial volumes providing detailed accounts and analyses of every constituency, with universities and boroughs listed under their respective counties – a somewhat curious procedure, not least because some boroughs, like Athlone, fell into two separate counties – and Cinque Ports listed separately. The final four volumes provide valuable parliamentary biographies of all those who sat in the House of Commons between 1820 and 1832.

The overall standard is very high, and the skill of the various contributors (throughout, specifically acknowledged) in bringing their subjects – whether general, geographical or personal – into clear focus is outstanding; not least is this true of the long biographical section, to which no less than 3,982 pages are allocated. Of special interest to historians of Ireland will, of course, be the fact that in this period – indeed, from 1801 onwards (as well as for the Cromwellian period, not yet published) – M.P.s representing Ireland sat in the Westminster Parliament and are therefore included here. In the immediately previous set of volumes, dealing with 1790–1820, the presiding Irish genius was the late and very much missed Peter Jupp, whose magisterial contributions constituted a noteworthy feature both because of their high quality and because the early years of the nineteenth century (the work of scholars such as A. P. W. Malcomson and Jupp himself apart) continue to be something of a black hole in Irish historical studies. Jupp's successor with regard to much (though not all) of the Irish material for 1820–32 (when, of course, Irish politics take on a much more historically acknowledged role) is Stephen Farrell, whose contributions bear comparison with those of the master.

Two things stand out about the biographies in general and the Irish biographies in particular. First, they rescue from the condescension of history (and of historians) those lesser mortals who disputed, bribed and treated their way to Westminster, and who – though often neglectful of their duties, mostly silent and rarely original – nonetheless constituted the foot soldiers without whom the Commons could not have functioned. They may have been there for all sorts of strange and varied reasons but the fact that they were there is what ultimately matters. Indeed, just as the 'average' scientist of the past is more representative of broad intellectual currents than mighty individuals such as Galileo or Newton, so backbenchers were and are more representative of parliamentary – and of general social and political – culture than figures such as Pitt, Canning, Peel or, indeed, O'Connell.³ The second outstanding feature concerns these greater men. Any biographical dictionary faces the problem of how to deal with well-known individuals about whom much has already been written. Do we, for example, really need yet another account of the life of Pitt or Peel or, in later periods, Gladstone or Disraeli? And if they have to be included, what, to coin a phrase, is the 'added value' such accounts can provide? In the case of these volumes, the solution, while obvious, is nonetheless

³ It might be noted that each of the four biographical volumes is prefaced by a colour plate: of Canning, Hunt, Peel and Althorp (later Spencer).

brilliantly successful, for we are not given yet another general ‘biography’ but, rather, an account of *parliamentary* careers placed within the general context of the times. On occasion, this cuts ‘great men’ down to size, as when John Foster, the former Speaker of the Irish Commons, is allocated little more than a page, while his nephew, John Leslie Foster, receives no less than six. Proper weight is, indeed, generally given to notable figures: Daniel O’Connell (who gets thirty pages), Vesey Fitzgerald, William Smith O’Brien, Viscount Duncannon (John Ponsonby, and many other Ponsonbys), Castlereagh, the Henry Grattans, Frederick Shaw, Louis Perrin, J. W. Croker, T. L. Lefroy (whose relationship with Jane Austen is noted), Richard Martin and many more. As a result, we obtain both a deeper insight into individual parliamentary careers and also into what it meant to be a parliamentarian in the United Kingdom of the time. As each biography is fully annotated, we are also able to follow up references, obtain new leads, and discover new sources for further study and analysis.

The two volumes of constituency studies are equally valuable. Those for Ireland occupy pages 655–926 of volume 3. They follow the pattern set by Jupp for 1801–20, strongly evidence-based, original, detailed and revealing. As in England, Irish counties followed more or less the same kinds of franchise, though in Ireland alone Catholics were entitled to vote. The counties continued to be largely the preserve of the Irish nobility. As compared with the previous period, Irish counties produced a higher increase in contest than did their English counterparts, while the Irish Election Act of 1820 (hitherto largely ignored) proved moderately influential. Ireland also possessed a system of voter registration unknown elsewhere. The impact of the campaign for Catholic emancipation is carefully charted, as are the changes in the county franchise that resulted from its concession in 1829 – a rare example of a legislative reduction in voter numbers. Ireland, indeed, benefited from a unique set of reforms in the period before 1832: constituency and M.P. numbers in 1801, and franchise adjustments in 1829.⁴ In the case of boroughs, a thousand flowers bloomed. Though they can be divided into a number of broad categories, arrangements varied so much that each was almost a law unto itself, not only as to political culture and atmosphere but as to franchise as well. All in all, Irish M.P.s proved for the most part loyal ministerialists – probably no less than three-quarters of them in these years – though the Wellington ministry suffered badly in the general election of 1830.

Occasionally, and especially in the introductory volume, we are given almost too much information: the life expectancy of M.P.s, how many had children out of wedlock, that 221 out of 1,367 married twice, nineteen married thrice, one four times and one on an heroic five occasions, and that twenty-four married the daughters of M.P.s of the old Irish House of Commons (though it is useful to know that a sixth of the Irish M.P.s were survivors of the pre-1801 Irish Parliament). Very rarely does a minuscule error creep in, but these few are so tiny that a reviewer is almost ashamed to mention them: there was no Irish Reform Act in 1867 and that for 1868 lowered the borough franchise not to £4 but to *over* £4. And why is E. G. Stanley, chief secretary of Ireland from 1830 to 1833 and later Prime Minister, invariably and rather pedantically referred to as Smith Stanley throughout?

The history of Parliament team has succeeded brilliantly in adapting the template

⁴ Though England, without direct legislation, experienced significant increases in voter numbers in this period.

laid down when the project was conceived to the exigencies of the period immediately before the reforms of 1832 (during which, for example, exoticisms, such as the fact that three Scottish counties were disfranchised at each election, continued to exist), which, however modest in the eyes of eternity, were rightly perceived as deeply important at the time: it was as if some great dam had burst and flooded plains upon which new parliamentary and political vessels could now sail and do combat in new ways.

It is good to know, therefore, that this important enterprise is in good health, and that it is making creative plans for the future. In the first place, it is at last going to justify its title by projecting volumes dealing with the House of Lords. In the second place, work is already underway for the period after 1832. It must at times be tempting for those most closely involved to consider moving the project into more obviously interpretative modes and to provide analyses of parliamentary politics along the latest fashionable lines. Many might, however, consider this a great mistake if only because fashion and modishness in history tend to have very short sell-by dates. By contrast, the kind of by-no-means-dull pounding that can generate volumes such as these is much more likely to last; indeed, some of the most interesting sections concern highly technical (and not immediately ‘interpretative’) matters, as in the case of the essay on ‘The procedure and business of the House’ by Margaret Escott. (Perhaps, in future, it might be worth providing more information on where particular groups or parties actually sat in the chamber, because for Irish M.P.s and, say, Liberal Unionists, this can be at once revealing and interestingly obfuscating.)

All in all, *The history of Parliament* remains a thoroughly worthwhile enterprise. Its financial patrons have been amply repaid. Might it flourish and continue until the task is done. The editor and contributors to these seven volumes deserve high praise. To say that the work is ‘monumental’ is not to condemn it to marmoreal dullness but to confirm its importance, indispensability and the sometimes intentional, sometimes accidental light it sheds on the comedy of human manners.

K. THEODORE HOPPEN

Department of History, University of Hull