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G. R. Elton
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THE SOURCES OF HISTORY:
STUDIES IN THE USES OF HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

GENERAL EDITOR: G. R. ELTON

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Introduction

By what right do historians claim that their reconstructions of the past are true, or at least on the road to truth? How much of the past can they hope to recover, are there areas that will remain for ever dark, questions that will never receive an answer? These are problems which should and do engage not only the scholar and student but every serious reader of history. In the debates on the nature of history, however, attention commonly concentrates on philosophic doubts about the nature of historical knowledge and explanation, or on the progress that might be made by adopting supposedly new methods of analysis. The disputants hardly ever turn to consider the materials with which historians work and which must always lie at the foundation of their structures. Yet, whatever theories or methods the scholar may embrace, unless he knows his sources and rests upon them he will not deserve the name of historian. The bulk of historical evidence is much larger and more complex than most laymen and some professionals seem to know, and a proper acquaintance with it tends to prove both exhilarating and sobering—exhilarating because it opens the road to unending enquiry, and sobering because it reduces the inspiring theory and the new method to their proper subordinate place in the scheme of things. It is the purpose of this series to bring this fact to notice by showing what we have and how it may be used.

G. R. E.

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Preface

Four and a half centuries are a long period, and though I hope to show that thanks to the predominance of official sources they possess a unity based on the nature of their historical evidence, the period they form is also sufficiently diverse. No one can have first-hand experience of all the types of material that survive, and I certainly make no claim of that sort. I am, indeed, very conscious of my rashness in straying so far outside the years to which in the main I have devoted my professional labours. Nevertheless, it has proved a risk worth taking: I have learned a lot and can only hope that I may be able to convey this better understanding to others. I shall be astonished if my errors should all prove minor ones and grateful for corrections from the experts. To two such experts, Mr Philip Grierson and Dr R. S. Schofield, who have helped me to look in the right places and to avoid mistakes, I am already most grateful. Many others have assisted me through their writings; if I have in some way misused them, I beg their pardon. One thing that I certainly suspected I have found to be entirely true: far more history than is written remains unwritten. We are still a long way from the evening of our labours.

Clare College
Cambridge

G. R. ELTON

April 1968