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The Reformation 1520-1559

Edited by G. R. Elton

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521345361](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521345361)

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First published 1990

Reprinted 2004

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

The New Cambridge modern history.

Bibliography:

Contents – v.2 The Reformation, 1520–1559.

1. History, Modern I. Elton, G. R. (Geoffrey Rudolf)

D208.N4 1990 940.2 89–9938 ISBN 0 521 34536 7 (v.2)

ISBN 0 521 34536 7

ISBN 978-0-521-34536-1 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-34765-5 Paperback

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CONTENTS

|  |          |
|--|----------|
| Introduction to the second edition, by G. R. Elton, <i>Regius Professor Emeritus of Modern History in the University of Cambridge</i>                                  | page vii |
| I. The age of the Reformation, by G. R. ELTON  | 1        |
| II. Economic change  |          |
| 1. European agriculture, by HEIDE WUNDER, <i>Professor of the Social and Constitutional History of Early-Modern Europe at the University of Kassel</i>                 | 23       |
| 2. The greatness of Antwerp, by the late S. T. BINDOFF, <i>formerly Professor of History at Queen Mary College, University of London</i>                               | 47       |
| III. The Reformation movements in Germany, by R. W. SCRIBNER, <i>Fellow of Clare College and University Lecturer in History in the University of Cambridge</i>         | 69       |
| IV. The Reformation in Zurich, Strassburg and Geneva, by the late E. G. RUPP, <i>formerly Dixie Professor of Ecclesiastical History in the University of Cambridge</i> | 94       |
| V. The Anabaptists and the sects, by JAMES M. STAYER, <i>Professor of History at Queen's University, Kingston, Canada</i>  | 118      |
| VI. The Reformation in Scandinavia and the Baltic, by the late N. K. ANDERSEN, <i>formerly Professor of Theology in the University of Copenhagen</i>                   | 144      |
| VII. Politics and the institutionalisation of reform in Germany, by R. W. SCRIBNER   | 172      |
| VIII. Poland, Bohemia and Hungary, by the late R. R. BETTS, <i>formerly Masaryk Professor of Central European History in the University of London</i>                  | 198      |
| IX. The Reformation in France, 1515-1559, by F. C. SPOONER, <i>formerly Professor of Economic History in the University of Durham</i>                                  | 223      |
| X. The Reformation in England, by G. R. ELTON  | 262      |
| XI. Italy and the papacy, by the late DELIO CANTIMORI, <i>formerly Professor of History in the University of Florence</i>  | 288      |

|    |  |     |
|----|--|-----|
| vi | <i>Contents</i>  |     |
|    | XII. The new orders, by the late H. O. EVENNETT, <i>formerly Fellow of Trinity College and University Lecturer in History in the University of Cambridge</i>   | 313 |
|    | XIII. The empire of Charles V in Europe, by H. G. KOENIGSBERGER, <i>formerly Professor of History at King's College, University of London</i>  | 339 |
|    | XIV. The Habsburg-Valois wars, by MARIA J. RODRIGUEZ-SALGADO, <i>Lecturer in History at the London School of Economics and Political Science</i>   | 377 |
|    | XV. Intellectual tendencies  |     |
|    | 1. Literature, by DENYS HAY, <i>formerly Professor of Medieval History in the University of Edinburgh</i>  | 401 |
|    | 2. Science, by A. R. HALL, <i>formerly Professor of the History of Science and Technology at Imperial College, University of London</i>  | 422 |
|    | XVI. Schools and universities, by DENYS HAY  | 452 |
|    | XVII. Constitutional development and political thought in western Europe, by G. R. ELTON   | 478 |
|    | XVIII. Constitutional development and political thought in the Holy Roman Empire, by VOLKER PRESS, <i>Professor of Early Modern History in the University of Tübingen</i>  | 505 |
|    | XIX. Constitutional development and political thought in eastern Europe, by R. R. BETTS  | 526 |
|    | XX. Armies, navies and the art of war, by J. R. HALE, <i>formerly Professor of History at University College, University of London</i>   | 540 |
|    | XXI. The Ottoman empire, 1520-1566, by the late V. J. PARRY, <i>formerly Reader in the History of the Near and Middle East, School of Oriental and African History, University of London</i>   | 570 |
|    | XXII. Russia, 1462-1584, by J. L. I. FENNELL, <i>formerly Professor of Russian in the University of Oxford</i>   | 595 |
|    | XXIII. The New World, 1521-1580, by the late J. H. PARRY, <i>formerly Gardner Professor at Harvard University</i> , revised by G. V. SCAMMELL, <i>Fellow of Pembroke College and University Lecturer in History in the University of Cambridge</i> | 624 |
|    | XXIV. Europe and the East, by the late I. A. MACGREGOR, <i>formerly Senior Lecturer at Achimota, Ghana</i> , revised by G. V. SCAMMELL   | 656 |
|    | <i>Index</i>   | 683 |

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Edited by G. R. Elton

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

THE first edition of this volume was written between 1953 and 1956, and the more than three decades since that time have witnessed an exceptional outburst of new research and fresh interpretations. Thus it has unquestionably become desirable to offer to readers and students a revised version of the Reformation story. Perhaps the volume should have been replaced by a totally new one, but so drastic a step was neither feasible nor yet, as it turned out, necessary. The revision was undertaken in part by the original contributors: all survivors have had the opportunity to review and where necessary rewrite their chapters. Several pieces contributed by authors no longer with us have been replaced or rewritten by living scholars. For one chapter (xviii), which the intended author's ill health had caused to be replaced by a short and sadly inadequate note from the editor's pen, an expert hand has now been found. In the course of the operation, it became apparent that the bulk of the volume has survived the accidents of ageing remarkably well: we feel able to put this moderately revised version before the reader with a good heart.

As a matter of fact – such things will happen – the passage of time and labour has helped to justify some of the interpretations which in between appeared to be called in much doubt. Thus work on Luther himself, while placing him more carefully within his medieval inheritance, has also re-emphasized his predominant concern with matters spiritual, contrary to occasional efforts to show that he was pursuing social and political ends.<sup>1</sup> A major break in Reformation studies looked likely to spring from the argument that it was the towns rather than the principalities that helped to advance the new churches and faiths;<sup>2</sup> another appeared on the horizon when it was suggested that so far from sweeping all before it the Reformation failed because it did not achieve the complete conversion of Europe and more particularly did not lead to a social revolution.<sup>3</sup> Such

1 See the writings of Heiko A. Oberman, more especially *Werden und Wertung der Reformation* (1977; Eng. trans. 1981) and *Luther: Mensch zwischen Gott und Teufel* (1982).

2 Bernd Moeller, *Reichsstadt und Reformation* (1962; Eng. trans. 1972); A. G. Dickens, *The German Nation and Martin Luther* (1974).

3 Peter Blickle, *Die Revolution von 1525* (2 edn 1981; Eng. trans. of 1st edn 1981); Hans-Christoph Rublack, *Gescheiterte Reformation: frühreformatorische und protestantische Bewegungen in süd- und westdeutschen geistlichen Residenzen* (1978).

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

extremes positions have by now had to be reconsidered, though they have unquestionably contributed to a much revised version of more traditional views (ch. vii). At the same time, it remains true that old notions of triumphant progress need to be further reconsidered, as important recent work on the circumference of the main story has urgently reminded us.<sup>1</sup> Quite possibly, the next recension of this volume, by hands not yet engaged in the work, will look very different, but the time for that has manifestly not yet come.

Two issues call for brief notice here. Despite the attention paid to cities and peasants, we lack at present a really formed understanding of the social structure, the economic setting and indeed the fortunes of the many political entities within the upheaval of the Reformation, both inside and outside the Holy Roman Empire. In these respects we feel less confident than at one time we did. The Marxist interpretation, discovering there a successful bourgeois revolution, has had to be altogether discarded, and the attempts to substitute a failed proletarian uprising have proved unconvincing: it is evident that we need to concentrate on studying the age by means of its own conceptual framework and avoid imposing anachronistic schemes upon it. Valuable indications are found in two new chapters in this volume (ii.1 and xviii), nor did two earlier contributions (chs. xvii, xix) altogether neglect such problems. Even so, we need to learn more, for instance, about the nobility of Europe to balance our supposed better understanding of middling and lower ranks. We need to restore comprehensibility to the story of the great inflation, once so simple (Spanish silver did it all) and now so complicatedly obscure. Administrative and political structures could do with more investigation, especially as earlier analyses have been followed up by argument only for England. The English debates on these topics, though confusing to the outsider, are a sign of life in historical studies of which one would like to see more. Commendable as is the return of Reformation scholars to a preoccupation with minds, souls and beliefs, the time has come for them once again to descend to those other realities – courts and offices, farmsteads and estates.

The other problem is perhaps more marginal but needs drawing attention to. At one time and for a brief period, it looked as though the familiar central themes of Reformation history might be put into the shadows by the so-called ‘radical Reformation’ – supposedly more sincere, more widespread, and more forward-looking. For a while it was believed that sectarianism, regarded as a cohesive movement, really rivalled the state-supported denominations in their hold on the people of the sixteenth century. Its appeal was supposed to be spiritual (a better way

1 Gerald Strauss, *Luther's House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation* (1978); *Law, Resistance and the State: the Opposition to Roman Law in Reformation Germany* (1986).



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Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Introduction to the Second Edition*

ix

to God), social (the teaching of equality between the classes and the sexes), economic (resistance to upper-class exploitation), and moral (emphasis on amity and meekness). The widespread persecution suffered by the sects could thus be supposed to be the deplorable reaction of an order which had good reason to feel threatened by this upheaval from below. However, research less inspired by political predilections or ancestor-worship has left little of this standing. On closer inspection, the sects do not appear to have swept more than a small minority even of the lower orders into their embrace; they never formed a movement because brotherly co-operation was more commonly replaced by recriminations and dislike; their internal organisation remained hierarchical and especially conceded nothing to women. The sects never got a firm foothold in any region in which either Catholicism or Protestantism was well organised, and not even the failure of the Peasants' War drove the commonalty of Germany into sectarian ranks. The 'radicals' of all kinds – Müntzerian eschatologists, Schwenckfeldian pietists, Hutterite communists, Mennonite separatists – formed a fringe phenomenon quite familiar from earlier phases of the Christian church, exploiting the extremes of popular spirituality on the one hand and available social discontents on the other, without providing for either a really significant place in the history of religion or politics. It was truly unfortunate that the sectaries had an unhappy knack of using the most incendiary language to be found in the Bible in support of their pacifist convictions, and the outburst at Münster was naturally hard to live down for people to whom the imagery of the Apocalypse made so abiding an appeal. There should be no doubt that the authorities had little need to be as frightened as they were, especially in Catholic territories, for under Protestant rule the sects survived in penny packets; that the pitiful men and women they punished and so often slaughtered provoked those fears by their exaltation is also clear.<sup>1</sup>

In this edition, then, many details have been altered. The Reformation in England looks today less like a revolution produced by the conscious labours of Thomas Cromwell, though I remain convinced that it constituted a major break in the history of English society, law and government as well as religion, and that Cromwell's contribution to this outcome stood central to affairs (ch. x). Developments within both the great powers of the day – Charles V's empire and royal France – have gained greater complexity and occasionally better definition, though the outlines of the story remain reasonably familiar (chs. xi, xiii). Necessary changes and corrections will be found in just about every chapter. Nevertheless, in the upshot it looks as though the major effects of this half-century identified in

<sup>1</sup> E.g. G. H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (1962) and E. G. Rupp, *Patterns of Reform* (1968); but Claus-Peter Clasen, *Anabaptism: a Social History, 1528–1618* (1972) and James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (1972); and see ch. v.

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Edited by G. R. Elton

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

x

*Introduction to the Second Edition*

the original (ch. i) still seem convincing. The end of the universal church and the emergence of national states took their force from the backward-looking explosion touched off by Luther, and the age witnessed the unmistakable beginnings of European ascendancy over the habitable part of the globe.