

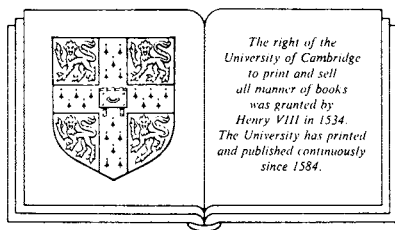
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THE PARLIAMENT OF
ENGLAND
1559–1581

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G. R. ELTON



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Preface

Virtually all the research for this book was done during a year of sabbatical leave in 1977–78; virtually all the writing of it had to wait for the next sabbatical in 1984–85. So protracted a production poses problems, and I cannot suppose that I have overcome them all. The years of gestation may on occasion have led to apparently contradictory statements, but I think that any such discrepancies arise from the uncertainties of the evidence. My purpose has been to display certain sixteenth-century Parliaments at work – to follow events in both Houses as bills turned into acts or more commonly failed to do so. Much of the available material bore on more than one of the questions I have tried to answer, for which reason it has sometimes been necessary to repeat details in two or three places. This adds to clarity but inevitably also to tedium, for which I am sorry. I have not investigated the membership of these Parliaments. For the Lords, such an analysis has little meaning, especially since we hardly ever know anything about the activities and interventions of particular individuals there; for the Commons the details have been massively collected in the relevant volumes published by the History of Parliament Trust. I take the Parliaments from the point at which, summoned and elected, they have assembled to do business, and it is that business, together with the light it throws on the role of Parliament, that has been my concern.

The chronological limits of the investigation were set by accidents of the evidence (more fully explained in Chapter 1) and by the need not to trespass on other people's preserves. The first seven sessions of Elizabeth's reign form the first period in the history of Parliament for which we have all the formal records, supplemented by some informal material of a novel kind. Before 1559, the Commons Journal is uninformatively thin; from 1584 to the end of the reign it is altogether lost. The collections made by Sir Simonds D'Ewes do help considerably in that later period, but I wished to learn about Parliament from its own

records, not from what another scholar had long ago made of them. The less formal materials drawn upon by D'Ewes were all traced by Sir John Neale and are now published in the volume edited by Dr T. E. Hartley which covers the years dealt with in this book; the appearance of his invaluable edition greatly lightened my task and also rendered D'Ewes superfluous to me. I am glad to be able here to express my appreciation for Neale's endeavours, particularly in the search for relevant matter, and I do so the more earnestly because on a great many aspects of the Elizabethan Parliament we differ profoundly. I have tried to avoid too frequent controversy, but Neale's description of a rising House of Commons, employed by a group of ardent protestants or puritans to oppose the policy of the Crown, is so drastically different from what I have come to understand about those Parliaments that I have not been able to omit all argument with my predecessor. It is therefore the more necessary to say plainly that without that predecessor's books this one could not have been written.

One possible kind of material has been used only very patchily. I feel sure that there is much to be found in local records that would further help to explain the terms and fates of bills in Parliament, but it has not been possible to explore those sources unless they were in print or in the Record Office of the Corporation of London. Country-wide searches are the prerogative of the graduate student and the man in retirement; anyone involved in normal academic life will either have to do without them or abandon the idea of ever completing an undertaking necessarily and rightly based on the central archives. It has always been my conviction that all learned works on history constitute staging posts on the road to fuller knowledge, and I prefer setting out markers along the way to leaving the map altogether blank. I hope at least to have provided a usable framework for the pursuit of parliamentary concerns into those counties and towns where they often took their origin.

The eight years that intervened between the start of excavation and the opening of the building provided many opportunities for debates and discussions around these controversial themes. I am grateful to the many fellow-scholars all over the world who patiently listened to preliminary expositions and by their questions and criticisms assisted me in clarifying my own mind on many an issue. Special thanks go to the friends who are working in the same field and have been most generously helpful – David Dean, Michael Graves, Norman Jones and David Lidington. My thanks go to Art Cosgrove and James McGuire, editors of *Parliament and Community* (Belfast, The Appletree Press, 1983), for permission to reprint, as Chapter 2, a slightly altered version of an essay which I contributed to that volume.

Preface

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The completion of a book is always a relief, but I am perhaps exceptionally relieved to be done with the Parliaments of Elizabeth. There are a good many other things that call the historian to the colours. Prolonged involvement with Parliament has in the end convinced me that the customary concentration on it as the centre of public affairs, however traditional it may be, is entirely misleading. This is a message, it seems to me, that needs to be absorbed into the general history of England. We have been misled by the Victorians and their obedient successors who read the modern Parliament back into history; and I do not except the story of Parliament in the seventeenth century from these reservations. I now wonder whether the institution – one of the Crown's instruments of government – ever really mattered all that much in the politics of the nation, except perhaps as a stage sometimes used by the real contenders over government and policy. But it was a highly sophisticated instrument for the making of law and a means available to all sorts of Englishmen in the pursuit of their ends. It gathered in the particles of the nation and in turn threw light upon their concerns. It did so in a thoroughly skilled and businesslike way, really visible to us for the first time in the reign of Elizabeth. That is the burden of this book, and I hope it will serve.

Cambridge
January 1986

G. R. ELTON

Abbreviations

APC	<i>Acts of the Privy Council of England</i> , ed. J. R. Dasent (32 vols., London, 1890–1907)
BIHR	<i>Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research</i>
BL	British Library
C _J	<i>Journals of the House of Commons</i>
CLRO	Corporation of London Record Office
CSP	<i>Calendar of State Papers</i>
D'Ewes	Sir Simonds D'Ewes, <i>The Journals of all the Parliaments during the Reign of Queen Elizabeth</i> (London, 1682)
EHR	<i>English Historical Review</i>
Ellis	Henry Ellis, ed., <i>Original Letters Illustrative of English History</i> (11 vols. in 3 series, London, 1824–46)
HLRO	Record Office of the House of Lords
HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
HPT	The History of Parliament Trust: <i>The House of Commons 1558–1603</i> , ed. P. W. Hasler (3 vols., London, 1981)
L _J	<i>Journals of the House of Lords</i>
L _J /EHR	E. J. Davis, 'The Journal of the House of Lords for April and May, 1559,' <i>EHR</i> 28 (1913), 531–42
Neale, EP	J. E. Neale, <i>Elizabeth I and her Parliaments</i> (2 vols., London, 1953, 1957)
Neale, HC	J. E. Neale, <i>The Elizabethan House of Commons</i> (London, 1948)
OA	Original Acts (at the HLRO)
Proc.	<i>Proceedings in the Parliaments of Elizabeth I, volume 1: 1558–1581</i> , ed. T. E. Hartley (Leicester, 1981)
Rep.	Repertories (at the CLRO)
SP	State Papers (at the Public Record Office)
SR	<i>Statutes of the Realm</i> (11 vols., London, 1810–28)

<i>STC</i>	<i>A Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland and Ireland and of English Books Printed Abroad, 1475–1640</i> , ed. A. W. Pollard and G. R. Redgrave (London, 1926; vol. 2 of the 2nd ed., ed. W. A. Jackson, F. S. Ferguson, K. F. Pantzer, London, 1976)
<i>Studies</i>	G. R. Elton, <i>Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government</i> (3 vols., Cambridge, 1974, 1983)
<i>TED</i>	<i>Tudor Economic Documents</i> , ed. R. H. Tawney and E. Power (3 vols., London, 1924)
<i>TRHS</i>	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
<i>TRP</i>	<i>Tudor Royal Proclamations</i> , ed. P. L. Hughes and J. F. Larkin (3 vols., New Haven, 1964–9)
<i>Tudor Const.</i>	<i>The Tudor Constitution: Documents and Commentary</i> , ed. G. R. Elton (2nd edn, Cambridge, 1982)
<i>YCR</i>	<i>York Civic Records</i> , ed. A. Raine (8 vols., York, 1939–53)

Manuscripts for which no location is given are from the Public Record Office in London. Public (printed) acts are normally cited by regnal year and chapter number without reference to *SR*; unprinted private acts are cited by the regnal year and the number given to the OA in the HLRO. I have modernized the spelling, punctuation and capitalization of all quotations. For the facts concerning members of the House of Commons see HPT; the alphabetical arrangement of those volumes usually renders page references superfluous.