



GEOFFREY ELTON

Stearn and Sons

Geoffrey Rudolph Elton 1921–1994

I

GEOFFREY ELTON BEGAN his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge with a genealogical *jeu d'esprit*. His chair had been founded in 1724 by an elector of Hanover who also happened to be king of England. In 1808 one Samuel Meyer Ehrenberg began to conduct a school at Wolfenbüttel, a few miles from Hanover but in the neighbouring duchy of Brunswick. Both George I and Samuel Ehrenberg were engaged in founding, in their different ways, dynasties: in Ehrenberg's case a scholarly Jewish dynasty which was to endure for five generations. In 1983, a descendant of the king-electors appointed to her ancestor's foundation the great great grandson of the original Ehrenberg. The elector of Hanover and the duke of Brunswick, both bearing the name of Guelph, had been, in a manner of speaking, cousins. And in 1983 it was found that the holders of the Regius chairs of history at Oxford and Cambridge were cousins too, for Geoffrey Elton's counterpart at Oxford, Professor Sir Michael Howard, is the son of a first cousin of Elton's mother.

Geoffrey Elton was born Gottfried Rudolph Otto Ehrenberg at Tübingen on 21 August 1921. His father, Victor Ehrenberg, was a classical scholar and ancient historian who withstood the damage of a sadly fragmented career to attain the great distinction acknowledged in his adopted England when, in 1966, he was awarded the Litt.D., *honoris causa*, of the University of Cambridge, the first refugee scholar to be so

honoured. Victor was the son of a banker, Otto Ehrenberg, and the nephew of a professor of jurisprudence, Victor Ehrenberg, and of the economist Richard Ehrenberg, an authority on the Fuggers. He had studied architecture, in Stuttgart and London, before devoting himself to ancient history, working in Berlin under Eduard Meyer. In 1914, while serving on the Western Front, Ehrenberg began a notable correspondence with Meyer, whom he upbraided for his conservative, nationalist views.¹

Geoffrey Elton's maternal grandfather, Siegfried Sommer, came from a more modest background, but married Helene Edinger, daughter of a wealthy merchant family of Worms. Helene was a talented artist, but her husband would not allow her to earn money through her painting. The portraits of her own family, for portraits were her forte, now adorn the Guildford home of Geoffrey's brother, Professor Lewis Elton (father of the writer and entertainer Ben Elton). The extent to which these cultured *haut bourgeois* families were assimilated into mainstream German society is indicated by the fact that the Sommers called their daughter, Geoffrey Elton's mother, Eva, after Eva in *Die Meistersinger*. If they knew about Wagner's anti-Semitism, it was not thought to apply to them. On the paternal side, Otto's son Hans, Geoffrey Elton's uncle, converted to Christianity and became a Lutheran pastor. But what happened on the maternal side of the family was the stuff of which history is made. Siegfried Sommer was sent as a child to school in Kassel, the only Jew in his class. Here his classmate and closest friend was the future Kaiser Wilhelm II. What he called the 'Experiment in Kassel' is described in detail by the historian of the youthful Wilhelm. Making extensive use of the Siegfried-Wilhelm correspondence preserved in the Ehrenberg family and now deposited in a Berlin archive, John Röhl writes: 'Der liebste Freund des künftigen deutschen Kaisers war Siegfried Sommer, der "junge Jude" aus seiner Klasse.'² No doubt the little Jewish boy was surprised to find that the boy he liked best, and who liked him, was the future Kaiser of all Germany; and we are surprised too, for the friendship suggests that Wilhelm was at this point in his life free from social and racial prejudice. After leaving school, Siegfried naturally addressed his future

¹ *Eduard Meyer-Victor Ehrenberg: Ein Briefwechsel 1914–1930*, ed. Gert Audring *et al.* (Berlin, Stuttgart, 1990).

² John C. G. Röhl, *Wilhelm II: Die Jugend des Kaisers 1859–1880* (Munich, 1993), pp. 233–9. See also Tyler Whittle, *The Last Kaiser* (London, 1977), pp. 45–6.

monarch as 'Eure Königliche Hoheit'. Siegfried Sommer was to become a judge of the Court of Appeal, but only after the Kaiser intervened to remove certain anti-Semitic obstacles to the advancement of his career. When Sommer died, in 1925, a wreath arrived from Doorn, the inscription simply 'from Wilhelm'. Geoffrey's mother grew up in the judge's house in Frankfurt, where she learned Italian through reading and translating Dante. In later life she was a published poet, writing in German and English.³

In 1929, Victor Ehrenberg was appointed to a chair of classics in the German University in Prague. A year or two later, an attempt to return to a chair at Tübingen was (fortunately) blocked by the anti-Semitic factor. Gottfried and his younger brother Ludwig were sent to the German Stephansgymnasium. Gottfried's education had started early. He was one week old when the 'Grundstück seiner Bibliothek' was laid, a collection of *Deutsche Wiegenlieder* which still exists. At the age of seven, he wrote an account of a planet inhabited by teddy bears; and at twelve, having already written a play about the Spanish Armada, he wrote and acted in a drama called 'Das Attentat in Laufe der Zeiten', three tragic scenes devoted to Caesar, Gessler, and Wallenstein; and a comic final act about Dollfuss, played by the nine-year-old Ludwig sporting a large cardboard disc, the button which had deflected the assassin's bullet in the first attempt on the life of the Austrian chancellor. This was a proleptic play, since the second attempt, a year later, succeeded, with momentous consequences for Austria and, soon, for the Ehrenbergs. At about the same time, Gottfried wrote an heroic account of 'Die Erdumreisungs expedition' to Arctic Norway. He not only wrote it. He drew the illustrations and the maps, typed the text with perfectly justified margins, and bound it: a task resembling the youthful bookmaking exploits of the future Queen Elizabeth I of England. This book too survives.

In September 1938, the Munich Agreement was signed and Eva Ehrenberg, ever the practical brains of the family, persuaded her husband that the boys must begin to learn English rather than Greek, which was now an unaffordable luxury. The future Regius professor, whose inaugural lecture forty-six years later would be an apology for the study of English history, was now in his eighteenth year and preparing to sit his leaving examination, the Matura. Friends in Prague thought that to

³ *Zweisprachig-Gedichte von Eva Ehrenberg* (Tübingen, 1971).

interrupt the boy's education at this critical juncture would be ruinous for his career. Eva Ehrenberg thought otherwise.

What happened next was improbable and, in Eva's account of it, miraculous.⁴ In her childhood, Eva had shared with her friend Netty an English governess, Irene, who married a Mr Charnley, a Methodist minister. A lifetime later Netty and her Dutch husband were travelling on a train in Wales when they asked a fellow passenger, a clergyman, whether by any chance he knew Charnley. He knew Mrs Charnley and supplied an address. The couple travelled at once to Colwyn Bay in North Wales, where Mr Charnley was chaplain to Rydal School. This led to renewed contact with Eva in Prague, and, in the autumn of 1938, with the German schools and university undergoing Nazification, a letter from Eva to Irene Charnley, pleading for help.

Plans had already been made by the Society for the Protection of Science and Learning (SPSL) to bring Victor Ehrenberg to England, and to provide him with a grant of £250 for the first year. (This was the beginning of a long family association with the SPSL and with its secretary, the redoubtable Tess Simpson.⁵) But there was as yet no provision for Victor's family and the visa option would soon expire: hence Eva's *cri de coeur*, which was immediately answered. Mr Charnley spoke to the headmaster of Rydal School, J. A. Costain (the only academic to emerge from the well-known building firm), and a governors' scholarship was offered to Ludwig, it being assumed that Gottfried was too advanced in his schooling to be moved, or to derive any advantage from Rydal. But when the Ehrenbergs stoutly refused to leave Gottfried in Prague, the school agreed to accept both the brothers.

The family left Prague on 10 February 1939, travelling first to Frankfurt, where they tried unsuccessfully to persuade Eva's sister Elisabeth to join them. (Elisabeth would be shot by the Nazis in 1941; but Uncle Hans, the Lutheran pastor, was extricated from a concentration camp by the efforts of Bishop George Bell of Chichester and taken to England.) The family then made a short and unauthorised detour to Kassel to see Victor's mother for the last time. Himmler was in Kassel that night, and there were house-to-house searches. On 14 February the family arrived at Dover. When Elton came to publish his

⁴ I am indebted to Professor Lewis Elton for sight of Eva Ehrenberg's account of 'The Emigration', which she sent to him on the twenty-fourth anniversary of the Ehrenbergs's arrival in England, 14 February 1963, translated from a published German text.

⁵ *Refugee Scholars: Conversations with Tess Simpson*, ed. R. M. Cooper (Leeds, 1992).

last book, *The English* (1992), it was an expression of gratitude for that cloudless St Valentine's Day experience. In those later years, he would say that England was the country he should have been born into, an attitude reminiscent of the anglophilia in Max Weber, whom he despised and radically misrepresented. On St Valentine's Day 1939, so anxious was Eva that nothing should go wrong that she lied (the only lie she ever told?) about her sons' proficiency in English. It was also necessary to part with two of the twenty-eight pounds the family carried, as duty on the boys' bicycles, soon to be ridden up the steep mountain passes of North Wales.

At first the Ehrenbergs lived in a single room in Bloomsbury, with a gas ring in the corner, and later in a rented house in Woodlark Road, Cambridge. When the SPSL funding came to an end, Victor Ehrenberg secured a post as classics master at a school in Carlisle. From there he moved to King's College, Newcastle, where he replaced a lecturer called up for national service. In 1946, the lecturer returned, having written *The History of the ARP in the North East*, and Victor returned to school-mastering. But soon he succeeded Professor Max Carey at Bedford College in the University of London, where he would teach for the remainder of his career, for whatever reason denied the title and status of professor, which was surely his due.

It was on 20 February 1939 that Eva took Gottfried and Ludwig to Rydal School. The school housekeeper, still alive in the 1980s, remembered the arrival of 'the Ehrenberg boys'. 'They didn't have a word of English between them!' Within a matter of weeks, the boys were sitting mock School Certificate papers in English, with the help of a dictionary, and in June came the real thing, after coaching for Ludwig by Eva in *Paradise Lost* over the Easter holidays. (Eva continued to read and criticise everything that Geoffrey Elton wrote, up to two years before her death in 1973.) The boys not only passed their School Certificate in all subjects, but Gottfried won the school English essay prize, an achievement celebrated by Headmaster Costain in a *Manchester Guardian* article headed 'Triumph of a Refugee'. After four months of life in a country whose manners and customs Gottfried found 'absolutely strange', his English style left a little room for improvement: 'The course of events is not directable by our feeble hands, which arrangement is sometimes most fortunate, sometimes less.' Well, all this had been most fortunate.

In the first winter of the war, Gottfried was entered for a scholarship at Oxford and interviewed by H. A. L. Fisher. Elton later recalled that

he had seen Fisher in New College a few days before his death, which occurred on 18 April 1940. But the interview must have happened in December 1939. There was to be no love affair with Oxford. Elton would later say: 'I've never been so pleased to have been *proxime accessit*.' He remained at Rydal, teaching German and studying for an external London degree. Now it was Victor who took on the role of coach, guiding Gottfried through his Special Subject in Roman history. Out of that experience came Geoffrey Elton's first publication, an article on 'The Terminal Date of Caesar's Gallic Proconsulate' (*Journal of Roman Studies* 36 (1946).) He took first class honours and won the coveted Derby scholarship, tenable at the University of London. He chose University College.

But first the war intervened, and some awkward choices. Should Gottfried join the Czech forces or the British Army? The Czech Government in exile wanted him, but there was marked anti-Semitism in that outfit. English naturalisation could not be taken for granted, while to choose the British Army could compromise any future the family might have back in Prague. The British option was to prove another of those most fortunate arrangements, for under a law of 1930 the Ehrenbergs were defined as Czech citizens of German nationality, and all German citizens were to be ethnically cleansed from Czechoslovakia after the war, when the remainder of the family were naturalised as British subjects. On joining the Army, Gottfried was given twenty-four hours to change his name, 'by Army Council Instruction'. He rejected Ellis as too Welsh (Elton was not over-fond of the Welsh), and Elliott as capable (like Ehrenberg) of being spelt in too many ways. So Elton it was. Geoffrey Elton saw action, briefly, at Anzio, and might have been sent to Burma but, instead, as a native German speaker, was transferred to Intelligence (Field Security), where his rank was sergeant, his posting Graz in Austria, and his function to debrief suspected Nazi prisoners-of-war. It was a position of unusual power for a young man, and it left him with a respect for law-enforcement which was intentionally echoed in the title of one of his most notable books on Tudor history, *Policy and Police* (1972). According to Lewis Elton, it was the Army which turned his brother into an Englishman, even a 'super-Englishman', with a relative lack of interest in his former life and family history. With typical generosity, but also some indifference, he was content that all the family heirlooms which had come out of Prague with the Ehrenbergs, and they are considerable, should finish up

with his brother Lewis and his family. The Army also taught Elton to drink and smoke.

II

Geoffrey Elton had already met the Elizabethan historian J. E. Neale (later Sir John Neale) when a friend of his father at University College London pointed out that the UCL History Department had been evacuated ten miles along the coast from Colwyn Bay at Bangor. Professor Neale said that he would be glad to take Elton on as a research student when (or was it, Elton later wondered, 'if') he came back from the war. More most fortunate arrangements. When Elton reappeared in 1946, Neale's teacher and his predecessor in the Astor Chair of English History at University College, A. F. Pollard, was nearing the end of his active scholarly career. He died in August 1948. G. N. Clark remarked (in the *DNB*) that as a teacher Pollard 'relied rather on force than on sympathy', and for many years he had repelled all boarders who attempted to work in his own field, the reign of Henry VIII. Now, in the late 1940s, it was like Tibet reopening to foreign travellers after many years of exclusion. Warned by two of Neale's female students (who were only allowed to write MA theses) not to touch parliamentary history, or Queen Elizabeth, Elton told Neale that he would 'do Henry VIII, sir'. Neale said that in that case he had better get stuck into the *Letters and Papers of the Reign of Henry VIII*. Elton would allege that this was the only good advice he ever received from his supervisor.

Elton began his research in September 1946 and finished his thesis, 'Thomas Cromwell: Aspects of his Administrative Work', in record time, in September 1948, typing it himself on the same machine which had earlier been used to record that epic journey to the Arctic Circle. In *The Practice of History* (1967), Elton would later insist that the historian must master the relevant evidence in its totality and must devote himself to the task single-mindedly and to the total exclusion of all distractions. Elton seldom took a holiday in the ordinary sense of the word. But as a research student, he found that five hours in the Public Record Office was all he could take, so that in mid-afternoon he would go off to Lords to watch Denis Compton, an addiction to cricket having been acquired at Rydal. In later years, and well into his sixties, he was a very good squash player. 'Joinery' was listed as a recreation in *Who's Who*. Elton was a dedicated gardener, who nurtured a lawn with

an immaculate green nap to it which was one of the wonders of Cambridge. So it was not all work and no play. But beyond his garden, Elton had no time for the open air and almost never went to the countryside. Not for him R. H. Tawney's muddy boots. There is an almost total lack in his work of that sense of place which is characteristic of so much of the best (as well as some of the worst) of English historiography. People, too, were often noticeable by their absence. *The English* (1992) is not really a history of the English at all, but of their rulers and of the state they were in.

It was Neale who told Elton that he could take Christmas Day (1946) off—and Elton rested on Boxing Day too.⁶ But Elton's stringent disciplines were self-imposed and Neale need not have bothered. Elton was to fall out with his supervisor, and even more with his shade, for his attacks on Neale continued long after the older man's death and were a necessary element of many of his public lectures, delivered in places like New Zealand and Arizona to audiences of students who may never have heard of Neale. (But Vivian Galbraith, Director of the Institute of Historical Research in Elton's time, was a different matter, and one of the few strong, personal, influences which Elton would ever acknowledge.)

The feud with Neale was up and running as early as 1955, when I was Neale's research assistant, while completing my own Ph.D. under his supervision. And yet, as late as 1972, Elton could send Neale a copy of his Ford Lectures book, *Policy and Police*, cordially inscribed with a reference to the good old days, in Neale's seminar.⁷ In the 1960s, when Neale was known to be opposing his election to the British Academy (Elton became an FBA in 1967), I even heard Elton described in public as 'that young whipper-snapper'. He was in his mid-forties, and in mid-career! The immediate circumstances were that Elton had alleged in *The Practice of History* that Pollard had rarely darkened the doors of the PRO. Later he would refer to Pollard's 'careful avoidance of manuscript'.⁸

The quarrel, though notorious, remains mysterious. Was it based entirely, so far as Elton was concerned, on a negative appraisal of Neale

⁶ G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (Sydney, 1967), p. 163, n. 1.

⁷ This copy of *Policy and Police* came on the market in 1996, part of the residue of Neale's library. I am grateful to Raymond Kilgariff of Howes Bookshop Hastings for supplying me with a photocopy of Elton's inscription, which reads: 'To Sir John Neale with best wishes and in memory of happy seminar days. Geoffrey Elton'.

⁸ Elton, *The Practice of History*, p. 69; G. R. Elton, *F. W. Maitland* (London, 1985), p. 33.

as a scholar and academic power broker, or were there more personal reasons? Neale, like Pollard before him, was notorious for consigning to outer darkness those he thought not up to scratch. Whatever happened, in Pollard's time, to E. R. Adair, or, in the Neale years, to G. B. Harrison? But Neale knew that Elton was something else, and he backed him for his first job, at Glasgow, in 1948, and for his Cambridge assistant lectureship in 1949. This was effective patronage, for Elton was one of those rank outsiders who occasionally break into the introverted Cambridge History Faculty: by no means the first, since Walter Ullmann had arrived a few months earlier, and David Knowles had been made a university lecturer in 1946. In earlier years, Lord Acton, J. P. Bury, and M. M. Postan had all been, in their various ways, *arrivistes*.

In 1952, Geoffrey Elton was married to Sheila Lambert of Hartlepool, another product of the London History School. Sheila Lambert was and is a formidably learned historian in her own right, an authority on Parliament, the press, and press censorship. For a time she worked in close association with the legendary Lord Beaverbrook. Further legend has it that once at a conference in California, or some such place, an eighteenth-century legal historian, excited to find himself in conversation with Sheila Lambert, turned to Elton and said, 'Oh, is this your husband? What does he do?'

Cambridge was yet another most fortunate arrangement. Kenneth Pickthorn of Corpus Christi had taught the Tudors whilst doubling up as MP for Cambridge. Clement Attlee's abolition of the university seats took Pickthorn elsewhere and created the vacancy which Elton filled. So began forty-five years in a Cambridge which Elton was to bestride like a colossus. But at first he was insecure, without a college fellowship, and aggressive. Not everyone found him a breath of fresh air, although that is what he was. I arrived in the university to read history in the first term of Elton's appointment, but, knowing no better, never heard him lecture, learning my Tudors from Christopher Morris of King's. No one told me that I ought to go to Elton, but by the time the MP Tom Dalyell came up in 1952, Elton's fame, even notoriety, was established. Dalyell remembers that of the great names of those days (such as Knowles and Butterfield) 'none approached in certainty of historical opinion and pungency of historical prejudice Geoffrey Elton.' His lectures were unscripted and, in the 1950s and 1960s, crowded out; although in later years the off-the-cuff attacks on the many historians of whom Elton could not approve caused offence, and, ultimately, killed interest.

Elton had no postgraduate students until 1951 (Professor J. J. Scarisbrick being the first), and as late as 1960 they could still be counted on the fingers of one hand. Soon after that there were enough swallows to make a summer, and the Cambridge Tudor seminar, meeting on a Tuesday morning, came into being, and still continues. In all, Elton supervised a total of more than seventy doctoral students, all but ten of whom completed their theses, and very many of whom still teach in the universities of three continents. It is a good question where the study of sixteenth-century England would now be without this massive input. The relationship between Elton and his doctoral students was exemplary. He never attempted to forge them into an Eltonian school, but offered not only rigorous supervision but the regular hospitality of 30, Millington Road, where Geoffrey and Sheila held open house every Sunday evening. (As the Artful Dodger sang it in 'Oliver': 'Consider yourself part of the family.') There was deep affection and much real grief when Elton died in 1994.

In 1954 Geoffrey Elton became a fellow of Clare, a college for which he had been teaching and directing studies. This was a much overdue election. Not long afterwards, Walter Ullmann was elected by Trinity, six years after his arrival in Cambridge. David Knowles, who campaigned for them both, suspected that colleges were afraid of being overwhelmed by two such dominant personalities. In an after-dinner speech, Ullmann would refer to Elton as his 'oldest and closest friend in the Faculty'. In spite of differences, 'nothing could and would shake our friendship'. Some colleagues were surprised when this warm tribute appeared in print in 1989.⁹

III

It is high time to address Elton the historian. In 1953, his first book was published and had an immediate and huge impact: *The Tudor Revolution in Government*. The phrase of the title will not be found anywhere in the Ph.D. thesis on which the book was based. Legend has it that one of Elton's examiners, Professor C. H. Williams, filled with enthusiasm, had said at the viva: 'It seems to me, Mr Elton, that what you have stumbled across is—what shall I call it?—a kind of Tudor revolution in government!' Neale's advice to Elton to immerse himself in *Letters and*

⁹ Elizabeth Ullmann, *Walter Ullmann: A Tale of Two Cultures* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 46.

Papers had not been wasted. But in those two years in the PRO, Elton had restored the documentary integrity of the original State Papers which the slavish deference to chronology of Victorian archivists and editors had disturbed, and from that rearrangement everything else followed. What Elton found these documents to contain was evidence that the 1530s constituted a great age of reform in the institutions and processes of English governance, a veritable revolution. In one decade, the English State took leave of the Middle Ages and entered a recognisably modern world. It attained full sovereignty, the sovereignty of the king in parliament, almost unchallenged authority within its own borders and marches, and a set of institutions which replaced the personal government and financial management of the king's household with a Westminster bureaucracy which had at its heart that progenitor of modern cabinet government, the Privy Council, and the king's principal secretary, no longer a clerkly body servant of the monarch but 'the chief national executive'. It was a grandly audacious thesis which was challenged at birth in the pages of the *English Historical Review* by Professor R. B. Wernham,¹⁰ but which rapidly hardened into the new orthodoxy. It survived an onslaught in the pages of *Past & Present* in the early 1960s,¹¹ but not the heavy small-arms fire mounted in the 1980s by some of Elton's own pupils, a new race of 'revisionists'.¹²

Elton fought a series of rearguard actions and modified his views, while insisting to the end on their essential correctness. In a pamphlet on Henry VIII's minister of the 1530s, Thomas Cromwell, published as late as 1991, he conceded that he might have 'overstated [Cromwell's] systematic approach to the problems and represented him as newly creating a structure of government as though he possessed the powers of a god', while continuing to insist that Cromwell was 'a principled reformer of everything that came within his purview'.¹³

It was forty-five years since Elton had first discovered Thomas Cromwell in the archives and he was not done with him yet. It is odd that Cromwell's mental world and values were the subject of more than one article-length sketch, while a full-length biography was never

¹⁰ *English Historical Review*, lxxi (1956), 92–5.

¹¹ G. L. Harriss and Penry Williams put the question 'A Revolution in Tudor History?' in *Past & Present*, no. 25 (1963). The resultant debate continued through nos. 26, 29, 31 and 32 of *Past & Present*, i.e. until 1965.

¹² Especially *Revolution Reassessed: Revisions in the History of Tudor Government and Administration*, eds. Christopher Coleman and David Starkey (Oxford, 1986).

¹³ G. R. Elton, *Thomas Cromwell* (Bangor, 1991), pp. 31–2, 34.

attempted. But Elton did not believe in historical biography. Pollard had (almost) ignored Cromwell, the relevant entries in the index to his biography of Henry VIII reading ‘anxious to make Henry despotic’, ‘anxious to make Henry rich’, ‘never in Wolsey’s position’: judgements, incidentally, which some revisionists now endorse. Cromwell had been portrayed unsympathetically in R. B. Merriman’s two-volume *Life and Letters* (1902), still described in 1959 as ‘the standard book on the subject’, in Conyers Read’s *Bibliography* for the Tudor period. Cromwell needed rescuing from his detractors, his true greatness recognised. Elton presented him as ‘the most remarkable English statesman of the sixteenth century and one of the most remarkable in the country’s history’.¹⁴ As Cromwell was elevated, so his royal master was diminished, ‘an unoriginal and unproductive mind’. Cromwell, not Henry VIII, was the author of the policy which broke with Rome, from which in a sense all else followed. In *The Tudor Revolution in Government*, Elton roundly declared: ‘Cromwell, not Henry, was really the government’. The best evidence for this, which is open to challenge, is the constant presence of Cromwell’s handwriting in the drafting and correction of parliamentary bills.

It became fashionable to say that Elton, the effective, tough but principled go-getter, formed Thomas Cromwell in his own image. Readers of Croce and Collingwood would almost assume that to have been the case. But, according to Elton, ‘Croce and Collingwood were utterly wrong’. ‘It is not true that every generation rewrites history in its own image.’¹⁵ It could even be said (and was) that far from Elton planting his mirror-image Cromwell in the archives, Cromwell came looking for Elton. ‘Elton did not go looking for Cromwell; Cromwell sought him out’.¹⁶

Cromwell was almost an incarnation of Elton’s philosophy of history, which, however, was a term which he used pejoratively, as something ‘which only hinders the practice of history’. In a late collection of lectures and papers called *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study* (1991), we read of ‘the burden of philosophy’, which meant the theory which denies ‘the very possibility

¹⁴ G. R. Elton, ‘Thomas Cromwell Redivivus’, in his *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government*, iii (Cambridge, 1983), 373.

¹⁵ G. R. Elton, *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 43, 67.

¹⁶ Robert William Fogel and G. R. Elton, *Which Road to the Past? Two Views of History* (New Haven and London, 1983), p. 127.

of treating the past as having happened independently from the historian who supposedly is at work on it'. The past had really happened, the truth could be told about it (but only at the cost of Herculean intellectual effort), and its history must be studied and written on its own terms and even for its own sake, which meant 'giving the past the right to exist within the terms of its own experience'.

These views, no longer fashionable, were first elaborated on a general scale in *The Practice of History* (1967), usually read as a response to E. H. Carr's Trevelyan Lectures *What Is History?* (1964), but in fact frying several fish who were alive and well, swimming in the currents of Cambridge history and faculty politics at the time. It is a book full of good sense and advice for practitioners and consumers, teachers and students alike. If one were to point an enquirer in the direction of what historians do, and are best at, one would send them to this book, perhaps to be read in conjunction with Philip Sidney's *An Apology for Poetry*, where the historian is represented as bound to tell things 'as they were'. But Elton's brief for history was epistemologically shaky. The past may have had a real existence and it may be possible to establish the truth about that past. But to suggest that the historian does not in some sense invent his stories, if only by a selective process (and 'invention is a necessary part of rhetoric'), to propose that he can tell the whole truth about anything (although Cicero had so defined the historian's function), would not and does not wash. The past which brings itself to the historian's attention, Cromwell crying out from *Letters and Papers*, is also self-selecting. As Elton himself remarked, 'it may be that Cromwell appears to dominate his age so much because his papers have survived'¹⁷ the accidental consequence of his attainder. Elton's parliamentary history canonised those parts of the archive which happened, fortuitously, to have survived.

Elton's uncompromising positivism and Germanic thoroughness invite comparison with Ranke. But he had little interest in or knowledge of a long-running debate in Germany about the meaning of Ranke's *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*, and he had only contempt for grand theorists like Hans-Georg Gadamer, author of *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960). Ultimately, the sole purpose of studying history 'for its own sake' was (besides enjoyment) the intellectual training it provided, for sometimes

¹⁷ G. R. Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government: Administrative Changes in the Reign of Henry VIII* (Cambridge, 1953), p. 5.

Elton was openly sceptical about any other social benefit it might confer.

But Elton's history cannot be defined, still less dismissed, as dubious epistemology. His austere insistence on the historian's 'that was' (Sidney), the ardour with which he attacked anyone with axes to grind, determinists, and teleologists, was at root a passion for liberty and order, rooted in his adolescent experience of ideological menace. Why else should he have hurled an apple across the Clare combination room in the early 1970s, after an awkward encounter with a group of trendy lefties? Hence the extremity of his reaction to the student insurgency of the late 1960s; and hence, too, the extraordinary attack on the meek and mild R. H. Tawney, which he made the centrepiece of his first inaugural, a very good man and a very bad historian. 'His history was not good, not sound, not right, not true.' Not since Peter Ramus in the sixteenth century declared that everything Aristotle had written was false had there been so comprehensive a denunciation of a revered guru.

Gadamer was German, but Elton's severest strictures were reserved for anything and everything French, and above all for French theory. Of Derrida, he wrote, memorably: 'the absurd always sounds better in French'. Of the battle of Pavia in 1525, he wrote: 'The better part of the French chivalry lay dead (a French habit this)'.¹⁸ The language may have been a difficulty. Evidently Elton, for all his interest in legal history, was not at ease with the Law-French in which English legal business was conducted for many centuries, a fact not mentioned in *The English*; and he was evidently not a student of the plea rolls. It is on record that Elton conversed with the late Fernand Braudel in Latin.¹⁹

Elton's views were most applicable to the history of government and political institutions, least helpful to the study of ideas, or, as it might be, art, or religion. In *Political History, Principles and Practice* (1970) he came close to arguing that political history was the historian's true last, to which he ought to stick. The historian who was tired of politics was—like Dr Johnson's disillusioned Londoner—tired of life.

Yet no one was more adept than Elton at violating his own principles, and he had another side which, over and above the warmth of a

¹⁸ Elton, *Return to Essentials*, p. 28; G. R. Elton, *Reformation Europe 1517–1559* (London, 1963), p. 81.

¹⁹ J. H. Plumb, 'The Uses of History', in *The Making of an Historian: The Collected Essays of J. H. Plumb* (Hemel Hempstead, 1988), p. 289.

personality that was open to all comers, was ecumenically tolerant of many, to him, alien tendencies and interests. In a series of published conversations with a friend, a historian of a very different kind, the number-crunching R. W. Fogel, *Which Road to the Past?* (1983), Elton asserted: 'We are all historians, differing only in what questions interest us, and what methods we find useful in answering them'. Elton not infrequently denounced feminist history. Yet several practitioners of women's history, whose work he thought sound, enjoyed his strong support. Most of his colleagues in Cambridge (for example, Americanists and Africanists) attest that while publicly he obstructed the advance of their subjects in the tripos, they found him an encouraging colleague. He was also an outstandingly generous person, his generosity ranging from a return-of-post response to all correspondents, to finding good homes for the journals to which he subscribed but did not want to keep; and, above all, in the arrangements he made for his estate, under which all the royalties from his books were bequeathed to the Royal Historical Society.

Meanwhile, the serious work was advancing in the practical application of these methodological principles. A steady flow of articles on critically important details of Henrician legislation and similar topics appeared in learned journals and *Festschriften* and were reprinted in what became four volumes of *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government*. At the other extreme of communication, Elton published in 1955 his first textbook, *England Under the Tudors*. The book was commissioned at the Anglo-American Conference of Historians of 1951, when the man from Methuen approached S. T. Bindoff, whose *Tudor England* in the Pelican History of England was then a runaway success. 'There's your man', said Bindoff, pointing to Elton. The book was written in eighteen months. It was not only the most widely-consumed and influential of all A level primers, on which most academic historians now working in a variety of fields cut their teeth. By obliging sixth-formers to work at something like university level it simultaneously set what were arguably inappropriately high standards in the schools and made it harder for these students to maintain their already well-informed interest in Tudor history when they were asked to repeat the experience of reading this book at university.²⁰ Much later,

²⁰ In the University Senate House, in 1966, Elton spoke of undergraduates who 'have done university work, as they think, at school therefore they come here to do school work at university' (*Cambridge University Reporter*, 96 (1965–6), p. 1018). Did Elton appreciate that these words were almost a piece of self-incrimination?

Elton would advise a younger colleague to write his textbook in his thirties: 'Firstly because you are young and zealous, and secondly because it gives you plenty of time to enjoy the royalties'.

England Under the Tudors was undergirded in 1960 by *The Tudor Constitution*, a collection of primary documents with critical commentary and apparatus, a demonstration in print and for student use of what history consisted of for Elton. Much later, in 1972, came the last fruits of those years shared between the PRO and Denis Compton's Lords: *Policy and Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell*. This, the most substantial of all Elton's books, grew from seeds planted in the 1940s, nurtured in a Cambridge Special Subject class in the 1960s, and harvested in the Ford Lectures of 1972. Through the pages of this book we look out upon the England of the Pilgrimage of Grace from behind Cromwell's desk. According to his critics, and especially to Sir John Neale's successor as Astor Professor, Joel Hurstfield, this was a book with too much of a taste for *realpolitik* for comfort. The London Carthusians were foolish enough to 'get themselves hanged'. Elton later complained: 'When I was younger I was often accused of judging the Tudor century by the standards and criteria which it itself employed, and I frankly cannot think of a more flattering comment'.²¹ In 1973 Elton published his Wiles Lectures, *Reform and Renewal: Thomas Cromwell and the Common Weal*, which dealt with Cromwell's activities as a kind of social engineer. There was ambivalence here, too, for on almost the last page Elton admitted that some of the social aspirations of the 1530s remained pipe dreams which was 'just as well, for carried into effect they might easily have become nightmares. *Utopia* should stand as a warning of what life might become if earnest reformers ever really got hold of it'.

In 1977, Elton contributed a new Tudor textbook to the Edward Arnold series, 'The New History of England': *Reform and Reformation, England 1509–1558*. This was the high-water mark of his own revisionist phase, for it acknowledged many of the modifications made by his own pupils to his original vision of Tudor history. Dr David Starkey, for example, had drawn attention to the continuing importance of the inner sanctum of the royal court and of its highly personalised and factional politics, a perception damaging to the 'Tudor Revolution in Government' thesis. At about this time, Elton wrote an essay on the Pilgrimage

²¹ Elton, *Return to Essentials*, p. 67.

of Grace (which still divides the experts on that event as to its merits) which interpreted this most threatening of Tudor rebellions as a displaced palace revolution. A revised edition of *The Tudor Constitution* in 1982 was no less reflective of a shifting agenda for Tudor historians.

Meanwhile, it should not be thought that Gottfried Ehrenberg turned his back on the history of his native Germany, or on the history of a Europe conventionally assumed to have excluded the history of England, or at least to constitute a distinct and different subject. G. N. Clark commissioned Elton to edit and contribute to the second, Reformation, volume of *The New Cambridge Modern History*, which appeared in 1958, with a new and substantially revised edition in 1975. Out of this involvement came a very successful European textbook in the Fontana History of Europe, *Reformation Europe 1517–1559* (1963), beautifully written and moving at a brisk and assured pace. This publication provides a suitable opportunity to discuss the thorny question of Elton and religion. David Knowles once said of a history of a particular monastery that it was ‘without visible religion (like Geoffrey Elton’s Reformation)’.²² But this was very unfair. *Reformation Europe* was written within a very traditional mould. No one would now write a textbook on the sixteenth century which is so dominated by Reformation themes: Luther, Zwingli, the Anabaptists, Calvin, the Counter-Reformation, topics perceived as Ranke and the church historians understood them. Luther and Calvin were ‘deeply religious men’. ‘The Nation State’ and ‘Society’ were mere appendices, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to this religious Hamlet. There was no trace here of reductionist anti-religious prejudice. Elton was an active member of the *Verein für Reformationsgeschichte*, and retained a strong interest in Martin Luther, whom the genealogists will tell us was a kind of ancestor. In the quincentenary year of 1983 he lectured on the subject of Luther in several German universities. Yet distaste for religion as something which only contributed positively to civilisation in its most moderated and compromised forms was always present. Elton could hardly forgive Thomas Cromwell for having ‘got religion’, and would have preferred to have him as a secular proto-modernist. The appearance of the Yale edition of the *Works* of Thomas More encouraged Elton to

²² Roger Lovatt, ‘David Knowles and Peterhouse’, in Christopher Brooke *et al.*, *David Knowles Remembered* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 118. Christopher Brooke would like me to say that Professor Knowles had a great deal of respect for Elton’s learning and never supposed that his private correspondence would see the light of day.

run a Cambridge Special Subject based on these texts. Probably he was not best qualified to interpret More's religious ideals, austerities and intolerances. In fact, his was an effective piece of debunking, for which the saint of Chelsea was perhaps overdue. Yet Elton served his turn as President of the Ecclesiastical History Society (1983–4), to which he was always a good patron. Like his good friend Martin Luther, he might be called a *complexio oppositorum*.

So it was with those other large segments of social existence in past times, the law and finance. Elton addressed these matters, and to significant effect, but as it were from the outside. He did important work on Tudor financial administration, but wrote little on getting and spending, and was the first to admit that he did not really understand sixteenth-century accounting. His relation to legal history was more complex, and interesting. He was a very acceptable President of the Selden Society (1983–5), but his lecture to that Society in 1978 began: 'I am not a legal historian, I am not a lawyer.'²³ He and Professor John Baker had a fruitful and interactive professional relationship. Initially, Elton was reluctant to concern himself with the processes and traditions of non-legislative law formation, although Baker had some influence in this area. Elton remained convinced that the thought processes of lawyers and historians were poles apart. He found the characteristic teleology of lawyers 'intellectually impenetrable' and in 1989 told a gathering of American lawyers in Illinois that they did not think historically. Elton's most admired model and mentor was F. W. Maitland, for Maitland's legal history was real history, and vastly superior to the work of historians (like Pollard, in his estimation) who could not be bothered to grapple with the technicalities of legal documents: 'that understanding of the law which alone unlocks the records'. His book on Maitland, a portrait of a scholar whose work was done 'well, conscientiously, circumspectly, methodically', not what Elton wrote about Thomas Cromwell, was a kind of self-portrait.

It was Parliament with which Elton felt most at home, and for him Parliament was not a forum for politics but a machine for legislation, law-making for a law-abiding polity. Between 1974 and 1977 Elton was President of the Royal Historical Society and at the height of his powers. Three of his annual presidential addresses were devoted to what was called 'Tudor Government: The Points of Contact', and

²³ G. R. Elton, *English Law in the Sixteenth Century: Reform in an Age of Change* (Selden Society Lecture, 1978).

they were vintage material. The first ‘point of contact’ was Parliament, and it led to a dozen years of work and publication on the Tudor, and more especially the Elizabethan, parliaments, culminating in his last work of substantial and deeply-researched archival scholarship, *The Parliament of England 1559–1581* (1986).

Once again we detect ambivalence. In the preface to *The Parliament of England* Elton wrote: ‘I am perhaps exceptionally relieved to be done with the Parliaments of Elizabeth’ (but he was only half-way through!), adding that the customary concentration on what was, after all, only ‘one of the Crown’s instruments of government’ was ‘entirely misleading’. So what was the motive and purpose of this work? Partly to correct Sir John Neale’s version of Elizabethan parliamentary history, although in the book and in his 1978 Neale Memorial Lecture ‘Parliament in the Sixteenth Century: Functions and Fortunes’, unlike those unscripted occasions, he was not lacking in courtesy towards Neale.

Of course the issue was not personal but concerned the true facts of the matter. Neale had worked from parliamentary diaries and speeches, many of which were his own original discoveries, to portray an over-politicised, over-confrontational House of Commons, which was engaged in a political and ideological contest with the queen that had distinctly teleological constitutional implications. Neale also took little account of the House of Lords. But bills and acts were what Parliament was about, not political issues, and bills and acts were what the historian of Parliament—with a Maitland-like serenity in the face of technical adversity—must concern himself with. Elton’s position was extreme and untenable, for Elizabethan parliaments were also political occasions, and we are now in a tertiary phase of post-revisionism so far as this matter is concerned. Nevertheless, this was the most definitively scholarly account of the English Parliament to have been written for any period in its history.

IV

The Cambridge to which Elton was initially marginal he came to dominate. In 1967 he was promoted to a personal chair and chose the unfashionable title of ‘Professor of English Constitutional History’. It was thought by some that he would become master of his own or of another college, but those who knew him, and the collegiate scene, cannot think that there was much in this. He served his stints on the

General Board of the Faculties and the Council of the Senate, 'a body designed to teach men the mortification of the spirit'.²⁴ In the Faculty of History his dominance was not uncontested for 'there were giants in the land in those days' (Genesis 6:4). But those foolish enough to wager that Geoffrey Elton would not speak to every item on the agenda at a particular meeting of Faculty Board could expect to lose their stake. Usually he spoke first.

Much of Elton's span in Cambridge was enlivened by what Sir John Plumb has referred to as 'the never-ending progress of tripos reform',²⁵ a process (rather than progress?) from time to time central to the politics of the faculty. The pressures for change and diversification came from the expansion of historical horizons beyond as well as within Cambridge, very publicly, not to say stridently, celebrated in 1966 as 'New Ways in History', an escape from a cloud of alleged stultification which had settled over academic history in England for much of the twentieth century. We are talking about Elton's kind of history. Change was also promoted, naturally enough, by those with a vested interest in such relatively new subjects as American, Asian, and African history. Elton was in favour of a modest amount of American history, but not of 'Third World' studies. And there was also the steady advance of the 'new' social history. As Edward VII almost said, 'we are all social historians now'. Undergraduates, too, were all for change, and that, in 1970, somewhat surprisingly, tilted the balance for Geoffrey Elton.

Dr Kitson Clark of Trinity liked to call himself a 'midwife to radical reform', while changes were generally resisted by Sir Herbert Butterfield and, from the younger generation, were critically if less consistently scrutinised by both Plumb and Elton. Part of the question (which other universities found it easier to answer, or to circumvent) was whether English and European history should be taught in something like their entirety, or should give way to what we have learned to call a smorgasbord or 'pick-and-mix' syllabus. Elton would have said that more fundamentally it was a matter of how hard incoming undergraduates should be hit by 'real' history.

No other faculty in Cambridge chose to wash its slightly soiled linen as publicly. In 1965–6 and in 1970, there were Reports to the University from History, recommending substantial changes in the tripos, each of these reports reflecting years of discussion and committee work

²⁴ Elton, *Maitland*, p. 9.

²⁵ *Essays of J. H. Plumb*, p. 370.

within the faculty. Because the faculty was so evenly divided, or could be massaged into the appearance of a hung parliament, on both occasions the issue came to a Discussion in the Senate House and to a ballot, with the inevitable fly-sheets. Elton, unlike some other front-runners, felt the scandal of airing these matters in public and having to depend upon the arbitration of the university at large, which is to say, of the scientists. In June 1966, while insisting that he was not opposed to change as such, the tripos needed reforming, Elton spoke with passion against a new tripos 'directed against any proper standard of scholarship', 'which proposes to reduce the study of history in this University below the proper level of university attainment'. He spoke, as usual without script. 'I may have said things that I should have left unsaid': words quoted against him in 1970.²⁶

In 1970, with Owen Chadwick the Regius professor but as Vice-Chancellor in the uncomfortable chair for the debate in the Senate House, the matter to be addressed, a critical refinement to the 1966 tripos, was whether the '1500 rule' should be rescinded, which would enable Cambridge undergraduates to avoid medieval history altogether, if they so chose. Elton had now changed sides, or so it seemed to the medievalists, headed by Walter Ullmann. Elton spoke as Chairman of the Faculty, and as the historian who had had most to do with student insurgency in the late 1960s. These were his declared motives for distancing himself from what he now called the 'apocalyptic' theory proposed by the opponents of change and defenders of the 1500 rule. 'I really think that the fears we have heard about the decay and the disappearance of medieval history are exaggerated, to put it mildly.' Elton claimed to have the best interests of medieval history at heart, and he was right to think that under the 1970 proposals those interests were not at risk, but it was widely suspected that he favoured the 1970 package (which also offered undergraduates an additional paper in English history) because it advantaged his own Tudor history. 'There has been some suggestion that this has been a product of a personal campaign or intrigue perhaps. I wish I thought I was as clever at intrigue as some people seem to have charged me with . . .'. Clever or not, the 1970 package was voted down by 203 votes to 93.²⁷

By the time Elton reached his inaugural lecture as Regius in 1984

²⁶ *Cambridge University Reporter*, 96 (1965–66), pp. 627, 1013–28, 1292, 1591, 1605, 1830, 1852–3.

²⁷ *Cambridge University Reporter*, 100 (1969–70), pp. 1182–91, 1976, 2331–2.

(‘The History of England’), he made no bones about his disillusionment with what an age of supposed reform had done to Cambridge history. ‘Our historical tripos now lacks all cohesion and with it any real understanding of what it is trying to do’. Options were said to have multiplied ‘recklessly’, ‘bits of history’, ‘Mexico and Malawi’. ‘We cannot be doing right when we send people into the world who have graduated in history and have never been made to feel the length of it’. Here he was right again, but the plea for ‘a course built around a long stretch of English history’ was not heeded. In 1996, those sitting a Part I paper on British history from 1450 to 1750 ignored the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries altogether. Out of more than eighty candidates, only one chose to answer questions on both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Elton must have turned in his grave.

There was also the politics of professorial elections and Crown appointments, which aroused more public excitement than we have witnessed in more recent years. If there were giants in those days, there were also some giant egos. In 1963, Elton and Plumb were favoured as leading candidates for the Chair of Modern History, which Butterfield had vacated on his promotion to the Regius Chair. However, the prize went to Charles Wilson, who had been thought of as the most suitable occupant of the Economic History Chair. Again in 1968 Elton and Plumb were passed over, when the Crown appointed Owen Chadwick to succeed Butterfield as Regius. It was widely assumed that Elton’s hour would come in the due course of time, which it did in 1983, rather late in the day, since he was by then only five years away from retirement.

Even in 1983 there were fears that the right decision would not be made, for with (the then) Mrs Thatcher in Downing Street, a nakedly political appointment seemed possible. Few doubted that for the Crown to appoint anyone but Elton would be a kind of affront to the historical profession as a whole. Three professors of history in a university in the north-west of England even took the unusual step of writing to Number Ten to say so. They need not have worried. The Prime Minister was well advised, and always seems to have played with a very straight bat when it came to academic appointments. There was almost universal relief and pleasure in Cambridge, while from Oxford A. J. P. Taylor wrote to say that Elton was the only Regius in his lifetime who commanded his wholehearted approval. Elton came from a hospital bed and an operation for detached retina to deliver his inaugural. For once, he had a written text, and now he could not read it. But soon he got into his stride and within fifty minutes had managed to offend

almost everybody in the hall. A colleague remembers: 'God was in his heaven, Geoffrey was still himself, and all was right with the world.'

Further stories could be told about the History Faculty building and about Clare College. The proposal to spend a great deal of money on a purpose-built home for the Faculty of History on the Sidgwick Avenue site was a late item on the agenda of a board meeting presided over by Butterfield in 1961; almost 'any other business'. But as early as 1949 the question had been put, from the central administration of the university, whether the Faculty of History 'could conveniently be accommodated on the Sidgwick Avenue site'. To take study leave is always risky. When, early in 1965, Elton returned from leave to find that he was no longer a member of the relevant committees, he wrote with some bitterness of having worked 'for some eight years on the whole question of a building for the faculty'. But he was soon back in the saddle. In 1962, Elton had appeared before the Sidgwick Avenue Committee as a representative of the Faculty of History. By April 1963, he was a full member of the Committee and appears to have played, with Professor Moses Finley, the critical role in the selection of James Stirling of Messrs Stirling and Gowan from the three rival bids for the architectural contract. Stirling's was the only bid within the target sum of £238,000, and the Committee wondered, as well it might, whether, 'having regard to the character of their building', not to speak of questions of maintenance, the Stirling and Gowan estimate was realistic. It looks as if Elton was the key player on 23 April 1963, when it was decided to recommend the award of the contract to Stirling, and when the Committee heard an explanation of how Stirling proposed to turn the building through an angle of 90 degrees in order to bring it wholly on to land not owned by Mrs Eaden Lilley of 11, West Road: a fateful decision for those destined to spend their entire working lives within the building, exposed to the merciless summer sun beating on the glass of what was now to be the west side of the triangular building.

By the summer of 1968, the building was complete, inviting comparison with glass houses designed for giraffes at the zoo or palm trees at Kew, not to forget an ingenious architectural contrivance of Jeremy Bentham. It is admired by students of architecture from all over the known world, but for those who have to work in it, in all weathers, it is not a friendly place. Writing to his Chairman, Otto Smail, about the proof for an invitation card to a grand opening which never happened, Elton wrote: 'At least the card—like the building itself—looks *different!* . . .

I expect you've heard of the latest troubles—water everywhere.' Unfortunately, this was not the last of these aqueous troubles.

Oddly enough, the many small seminar rooms which are a feature of the Stirling Building, without a single lecture room as such, were designed to accommodate those many little 'bits of history' of which Elton was to complain in 1984. In 1961–2, the faculty had specified that it would need two lecture rooms to hold 250, three to hold 150, and so on. The Stirling Building was supposed to be complemented by a purpose-built block of lecture-rooms on the same site. But in 1966 it became horribly clear that this was not going to happen, and the then secretary of the Faculty Board, the future Professor Sir John Elliott, wrote a letter of protest to the Old Schools: which was answered, negatively, seven months later: 'very little prospect of a second block of lecture-rooms'. Never mind. Soon students ceased to form lecture audiences of 150, let alone 250. However, all's well that ends well. In September 1968, the Seeley Library, the largest single-subject history library in the world, was moved into the new building, Geoffrey Elton and a small army of volunteers doing the physical work of putting the books on the shelves, while the Chairman, Otto Smail, drove the books across Cambridge in a van.²⁸ Elton (whose father, we must not forget, was trained in architecture) would never hear anything said against Sir James Stirling's striking if dreadful building. The first meeting of the Faculty Board to be held in the new boardroom was dramatically interrupted by the entrance of a posse of firemen with helmets on their heads and axes in their hands, the smoke detectors having been activated when Elton and Professor Sir Harry Hinsley lit up their pipes. Hinsley did not best please Elton with his remark that the smoke detectors at least had worked.

Clare College takes us into more architectural politics. Elton was the principal proponent of the Forbes Mellon Library which now fills up Clare's Memorial Court, obstructing the vista to the University Library. There was stiff opposition to the scheme on aesthetic grounds, and, as the man who had engaged Stirling (Arup was to be the architect on this occasion) Elton was not altogether comfortable. The Governing Body decided to go ahead by a single vote. As a sweetener, Elton disclosed his intention to bequeath his own library to the college, which in due course he did. Clare, however, was unable to accept the gift, and the books, under the terms of a further clause in Elton's will, and through

²⁸ Archives of the Faculty of History, Bay 3, Boxes 1, 2.

the good offices of the Royal Historical Society, are now to be found in the Borthwick Institute of Historical Research of the University of York. Elton would have been upset by these posthumous manoeuvres, for he was a very staunch college man, entertaining his guests in the college, usually to lunch, almost daily. Some of those younger historians whose careers he advanced, even while he had little or no interest in their work, he helped for no other reason than the Clare connection. An example is Peter Lake, now the holder of a distinguished chair at Princeton University. Making the after-lunch speech on the day Cambridge conferred on him the honorary degree of LLD, Elton boasted about his college as one of the first to admit women, and then, characteristically and off-the-cuff, caused offence by wondering whether that had been a good idea after all.

In the republic of letters beyond Cambridge, Elton was a more active and creative citizen than any other historian of our age. As President of the Royal Historical Society, his creativity was outstanding, bringing the RHS into a new age of usefulness to all members of the profession, and not least its younger members. The monograph series 'Studies in History' was his brain-child, created to enable suitably talented Ph.D.s to publish their theses. He was the editor of the series to the very end. The RHS *Annual Bibliography of British and Irish History* which was launched in 1976 ('Publications of 1975') was not merely invented by Elton; for many years he edited it, on his own typewriter. Thinking of the books which even Elton did not write, there are those who regret the many hundreds of hours spent on that useful enterprise. These bibliographies had grown out of a bibliography of British history, composed in German, which Elton had contributed to *Historische Zeitschrift* as a *Beiheft* to that journal, which was later rendered into English as *Modern Historians on British History 1485–1945: A Critical Bibliography 1945–1969* (1970). Elton was taken aback by the *naïveté* of someone who supposed that he had actually read all the 1,351 items which this bibliography contained.

The list of public services Elton performed is very long. He founded and presided over the List and Index Society which from 1965 made widely available a long series of essential guides to the public records, not only in the PRO, but, in the case of one of these volumes, the Channel Islands. At one time he was simultaneously editing major series for five leading publishers. For twenty years he presided over the annual gatherings of 'Senior Historians' at Cumberland Lodge. From 1981 to 1990, he served as Publications Secretary of the British

Academy. He had a close connection with the Wiles Lectures in Belfast, which he himself gave in 1972. He was a frequent visitor to the United States, and held visiting professorships at Pittsburgh in 1963 and Minnesota in 1976. There were also visits to Australia where, taken out of Sydney in a car to see the Blue Mountains, he saw them and asked to be taken home. All these occasions were well but sensibly lubricated with Glenfiddich or (a later, American discovery) Jack Daniels. College history societies who competed to lionise the great man knew that not the least of the arrangements which had to be made when they entertained him was a liberal supply of these substances. It was on these occasions that he was at his most informal, and robust.

Many honours came Elton's way. He was the recipient of no less than five *Festschriften*, including one from his American friends, another from Australia and New Zealand, and others reflecting his interests in parliamentary and European history respectively. Honorary degrees were conferred on him by the universities of Glasgow, Newcastle, Bristol, London, Göttingen, and Cambridge. The last was a particular cause of pleasure, for since Elton was already a Litt.D. of the University the degree awarded *honoris causa* was the LLD, Maitland's degree. In 1986 came his knighthood.

The files of letters received on such occasions are very indicative of the man he was. Professor A. G. Dickens wrote: 'You have worked harder than any other British historian for the young and even not-very-brilliant'. He was echoed by Sir Richard Southern: 'You have done more for English history than anyone living—more to help the young in their early struggles, and more for the health of our subject—words would fail me to express it all'. C. S. L. Davies thought that the knighthood ought to have been 'the Earldom of Essex' (Cromwell's ultimate honour, ultimate, we recall, in that it prepared the way for his execution!—which was probably not the point that Davies wished to make!). With very few exceptions (such as Tam Dalyell MP), those who wrote were fellow-historians. It does not appear that he mixed very much outside his own university and his own profession. He was indeed the historian's historian, for all his impact on generations, tens of thousands of school as well as university students of the subject, men and women now in Parliament, or running the Gas Board, or the National Lottery. At conferences devoted to his memory and intellectual legacy, held in Washington DC in October 1995, and in London, at the Institute of Historical Research, in March 1996, it was remarkable to observe how almost every facet of Elton's work was subjected to

radical and sometimes devastating criticism, while no one doubted for a moment that this had been a great man, and a great historian. As Dr John Morrill has written: ‘For at least thirty years everyone else defined their own position in relation to his.’

PATRICK COLLINSON

Fellow of the Academy

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