

# The New Political History

## Recent Trends in the Historiography of Later Medieval England

*W. M. Ormrod*

### Introduction

If the late twentieth-century demise of political history, like the much-vaunted death of medieval history itself, was always somewhat exaggerated, then its revival during the 1980s and 1990s has nonetheless been truly remarkable. Taking up the challenges posed by social and cultural theorists, political historians have found new approaches, new perspectives and new conclusions to their subject: a breath of fresh air has blown through the sub-discipline, ruffling some of its former complacency and re-invigorating many of its practitioners. In this paper, I should like to discuss some aspects of this 'new political history' with specific reference to the study of later medieval England. This subject has undergone such major changes in terms both of method and of outlook that it stands as something of a paradigm of the more general recent renaissance in political history.

If we seek to identify the character of this 'new political history' and to rationalise it in more than mere relation to the personalities and abilities of its proponents, then it is useful to look at the topic from three perspectives: source materials, methodologies, and subject-matter. I shall address each of these issues in order. While it may be argued, of course, that it is subject-matter that often drives the search both for new sources and for new methods, it is surely also true that historians are conditioned both by the pragmatic (what is, and is not, available in terms of primary sources) and the methodological (the intellectual framework in which they wish to develop their work). Indeed, I wish to suggest that the new political history promotes and perpetuates what many still regard as a hallmark of our discipline: the ability of truly innovative historians to work *from* the empirical *towards* the conceptual, rather than vice-versa.

## Sources

Most historians dream of finding ‘new’ material: to locate a single document, a dossier, even a whole archive that has been overlooked or neglected by past scholars and which provides vivid new perspectives on the past. The cult of the source is particularly evident in those microcosmic approaches to later medieval social history, epitomised in Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie’s *Montaillou*, that seek to illuminate the general by teasing out (and sometimes taking license with) the specific.<sup>1</sup> This has not, on the whole, tended to be an approach favoured by political historians, who find that their personal ‘discoveries’ in the archives are too fragmentary to allow for self-contained discussion and who continue to observe the empirical tradition of accumulation and synthesis. Yet discoveries there have been, and important ones at that. This may, in turn, be explained in two ways.

First, there is the very practical and positive consequence of the professionalisation of archive management in the United Kingdom. The extraordinary success not merely of the national archive, the Public Record Office, and of other major bodies such as the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts and the National Records Society, but also of numerous county and local record offices scattered over the country, in collecting, cataloguing and providing access to their existing and new holdings has meant that historians are now, as never before, able to explore the documentary minutiae of medieval life. The on-going process of sorting and listing has certainly transformed the usage of certain materials in The National Archives: witness the long process of sifting and recording the huge and previously largely inaccessible class known somewhat dispiritingly as ‘Chancery Miscellanea’ and the current project under way to provide a detailed computerised list of the so-called ‘lay subsidy rolls’.<sup>2</sup> But it has been in the local record offices that the transformations of the last generation have perhaps been most marked, as innumerable private collections have, for

---

1. Le Roy Ladurie 1980.

2. Full information on The National Archives’ resources may be found on its website: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>. The National Archives has ceased most of its work on printed calendars, although a project is currently under way to continue the *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem* through the fifteenth century.

the first time, been made accessible to a public and professional readership. When that herald of the new political history, K. B. McFarlane, set out to work on the later medieval English aristocracy in the inter-war period, he was constrained both by time and by access to study the high nobility; it is only since the 1970s that his disciples and successors have enjoyed the access to local record office collections that makes it possible, logistically as well as academically, to write the history of the lesser aristocracy or 'gentry'.<sup>3</sup>

The second explanation for a growth in the quantity and quality of primary source material lies in the increasing interdisciplinarity of late medieval political studies. Long before McFarlane, of course, historians were perfectly aware of the interest and utility of visual and literary materials: it was, after all, through the study of tombs, stained glass, illuminated manuscripts and vernacular poetry that the antiquarians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries made their own links with the past.<sup>4</sup> But in more recent times historians have developed a greater appreciation of the relevance of the cultural to the study of medieval politics: indeed, it is common form now to speak of politics itself as a 'culture'. The surviving fragments of that culture may therefore be used not merely as forms of illustration but as suggestive evidence that can work dynamically with (or against) the written record to provide new insights into the beliefs and value systems of the medieval polity.

A couple of examples must suffice. First, there is that most arcane of medieval artistic accomplishments, heraldry. The cluster of disputes over rights to armorial bearings brought in the Court of Chivalry at the end of the fourteenth and beginning of the fifteenth centuries has attracted much antiquarian interest since Sir Nicholas Harris Nicolas published one of them *in extenso* in the early nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup> But it is only the recent work of Maurice Keen and Andrew Ayton that has allowed us to appreciate that such material can be studied not merely to know the heraldic record of the period but also to understand why such disputes arose in the first place: namely, to defend honour, to advance status and to

---

3. McFarlane 1973; Richmond 1983; C. Carpenter 1995.

4. For recent studies of the political significance of royal and aristocratic material culture, see Binski 1995; Saul 2001; Vale 2001.

5. Nicolas, ed. 1832.

prove title to land.<sup>6</sup> A second example lies in the literary output of the period. Two collections of so-called ‘political songs’ of the later Middle Ages were published in the nineteenth century by Thomas Wright and have been regularly plundered ever since.<sup>7</sup> Yet it was only when Janet Coleman, J. R. Maddicott and P. R. Coss began to ask questions about the place of these texts in the political culture of the period that their form and circulation began to be appreciated, they lost their spuriously popular label of ‘songs’, and they began properly to be appreciated as generally sophisticated commentaries on contemporary events composed not, on the whole, with a reformist agenda in mind but as forms of political satire relevant and generally acceptable to an ‘establishment’ audience.<sup>8</sup> Now that historians can deal more confidently with such material, it is likely that this intersection of the cultural with the historical will advance and the interdisciplinary field will become one of the most fruitful approaches to the politics of later medieval England.

## Method

This brings me rapidly to the second main section of my study, a review of the new methodologies that have informed and transformed the ‘new political history’ of later medieval England. It would, of course, be difficult to summarise all the approaches that historians have taken to the study either of ‘old’ or of ‘new’ evidence, not least because there is, as already suggested, a strong and enduring commitment to empiricism in this, as in so many other areas, of English political history. However, there are three methodologies that have had a discernible impact on the study of later medieval politics, and on which I should like, in varying degrees of depth, to concentrate my attention here. They are: *propopography*; the so-called ‘new constitutional history’; and new historicism.

The *propopographical* method is one with which empirical historians feel quickly at ease and its impact on Anglophone schol-

---

6. Keen 1992; Ayton 1998.

7. T. Wright, ed. 1839 and 1859-61.

8. Coleman 1981; Maddicott 1986; Coss, ed. 1996. See also Taylor 1987; Kaeuper 1988; Justice 1994; Musson and Ormrod 1999.

arship on both sides of the Atlantic has been very marked. Prosopography, or the study of collective biography, offers the scholar the opportunity to select a collective – a nobility, a bureaucracy, a parish community, and so on – and, by building up data on the lives and careers of its members, to ask general questions about the degree of similarity or contrast, cohesion or tension, between the individual and the group.<sup>9</sup> It can usefully challenge or reinforce our own assumptions, as well as medieval perceptions, of social dynamics, hierarchies and solidarities. There is nothing particularly new about prosopography other than its name: T. F. Tout, for example, began his great study of the medieval English civil service before the First World War, and McFarlane was at work on prosopographical studies of the aristocracy long before such jargon became either accepted or desirable in historical writing.<sup>10</sup> But the more conscious inclusion of this method into the panoply of approaches to the Middle Ages during the 1970s, and the launch of its own designated journal, *Medieval Prosopography*, in 1980, has certainly helped to spur a much greater understanding of the individual motivations that informed the collective political endeavour of later medieval England.

The ‘new constitutional history’ is a label that has come to be applied to a method derived from the work of Quentin Skinner and other scholars of the early modern period.<sup>11</sup> It seeks to establish the constitution of Plantagenet, Lancastrian and Yorkist England not in terms of a grand teleological framework such as that espoused by so-called Whig historians of the nineteenth century and exemplified (brilliantly) in the work of William Stubbs,<sup>12</sup> but through an understanding of the basic principles and normative practices that governed public life in the period – a kind of ‘grass-roots’ constitutionalism that is concerned with perception and reception as much as action and reaction. Since the later 1980s, a group of historians – Christine Carpenter, Edward Powell, John Watts and Helen Castor – have created a sophisticated and quite self-conscious methodology for uncovering this more pervasive

---

9. Stone 1981, pp. 45-73; Beech 1992.

10. Tout 1920-33; McFarlane 1972, 1973 and 1981. For the application of the methodology of ‘network analysis’ to the prosopography of medieval gentry, see C. Carpenter 1994.

11. Skinner 1974.

12. Stubbs 1906.

and 'relevant' notion of the late medieval constitution.<sup>13</sup> Rejecting the rush for patronage as the prime dynamic in politics, they insist that public life was driven by ideas and principles, a set of enduring, though perhaps not entirely static, notions against which the majority of the polity judged the ability and credibility of its leaders. It was essential in such a society for those in opposition to the prevailing regime – Simon de Montfort against Henry III, Thomas of Lancaster against Edward II, Henry Bolingbroke against Richard II, or Richard, duke of York, against Henry VI – to project themselves as offering a positive programme to deliver and guarantee these principles.<sup>14</sup> It matters not, therefore, whether such figures were sincere or critical in their support for the 'common weal', as they tended increasingly to call this set of constitutional assumptions; what is significant is that they recognised the need to attach themselves to political principle at all. Thus far, these historians and their disciples have followed two principal avenues of research in aiming to uncover and reveal the nature of these underlying principles. Avoiding the timeless and formulaic political thought of the scholastics exemplified in the 'mirrors for princes' tradition, they concentrate their attention on a careful reading of that admittedly rather sparse body of discursive writing on politics composed by those within or close to secular government, such as Thomas Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes*, the anonymous *Somnium Vigilantis*, or, most famously, the work of Sir John Fortescue. Secondly, drawing on a close analysis of the official records of parliament, the royal council, and the common law courts, they argue that the fundamental guiding principle of late medieval politics was the rule of law – and, above all, the sanctity of the law of property. In this context it has been argued that late medieval political discourse was so thoroughly imbued with legal principle, legal language and legal metaphor as to make politics into a substantive expression of the law.

The use of vocabulary more usually associated with literary analysis (and which is, it should be noted, usually avoided by the 'new constitutionalists') brings us to the third of our informative meth-

---

13. C. Carpenter 1983; Powell 1989, pp. 1-20; C. Carpenter 1992; Powell 1994; Watts 1995 and 1996; C. Carpenter 1997; Castor 2000.

14. For additional studies of these individuals and episodes, see Maddicott 1970 and 1994; Johnson 1988; Harvey 1991; Saul 1997; Bennett 1999.

odologies, new historicism.<sup>15</sup> This method is presumably the best known of the three discussed here, being established in reputation, international in usage and apparently ubiquitous in its application to the cultures of the past. New historicism is, of course, by no means the only modern cultural theory available as a tool for the study of history.<sup>16</sup> But so far as we are concerned here, it offers particularly important and challenging opportunities to historians of late medieval English politics. First, it demonstrates the need for, and advantages of, the kinds of interdisciplinarity already noted in relation to source material. To read 'literary' as well as 'documentary' sources within a framework set down by modern cultural theory can be an enlightening experience for the traditional, empirical historian: the work of John Carmi Parsons on later medieval English queenship is a good example of the riches that can result from such an open-minded approach.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, and substantively, new historicism provides alternative ways of reading well-established historical documents. Paul Strohm has caused both excitement and controversy with a radically new interpretation of the Lancastrian 'revolution' of 1399, demonstrating through a series of microcosmic studies the manner in which Henry IV's usurpation of the throne from Richard II raised profound anxieties about the theme of legitimacy in the political culture of early fifteenth-century England.<sup>18</sup> Similarly Strohm, Steven Justice and Sylvia Federico have used the analytical tools derived from philology and discourse theory to find in the chroniclers' narratives of the Peasants' Revolt a kind of authentic political voice of the common man (and woman), and have thus begun to offer solutions to what has become perhaps the most urgent challenge for political historians: namely, the need to prove that there was a 'popular' as well as merely an 'elite' politics in that much-governed and troubled society that was later medieval England.<sup>19</sup>

---

15. Veetsner, ed. 1989; Brannigan 1998.

16. Rigby 1995.

17. Parsons, ed. 1993; Parsons 1995, 1996 and 1999.

18. Strohm 1998.

19. Strohm 1992, pp. 33-56; Justice 1994; Federico 2001. See also Ormrod 2000. For studies of peasant ideology and popular politics in later medieval England, see Hilton 1973; Faith 1984; Harvey 1995.

## Subject-Matter

This cursory survey of the influence of new sources and new methods on the study of later medieval English history inevitably begs the question as to their impact on the subject-matter of this branch of the discipline. I have already hinted at some of the ways in which topics of research and debate have shifted during the final decades of the twentieth century in response to some of the new challenges set both by empiricism and by theory; it is now time to address a few of those topics directly and to offer some critical appraisal of the current state of play in the study of later medieval English politics. As illustrations of recent trends in this area I take the political history of peasants, of the gentry, and of parliament.

If it once seemed that one of the hallmarks of *the peasantry* in the Middle Ages was its very exclusion from the political process, then recent studies have, as just suggested, begun to quash the notion. David Carpenter's analysis of peasant politics in the period of the Barons' War (1258-67) has revealed the growing awareness of the lower orders that their lives were conditioned not merely by seigneurial authority but increasingly by the burgeoning state.<sup>20</sup> As Alan Harding and others have shown, the huge expansion in the range and number of cases recognised by the king's courts during the second half of the thirteenth century created a decisive shift of peasant litigation away from the seigneurial and customary courts of the manor and the county and towards the local and central judicial agencies of the crown; this, coupled with the growth in statute law under Edward I and Edward III, made the free peasantry much more conscious of its rights and ability to participate actively in the legal processes provided by the crown.<sup>21</sup> By the end of the thirteenth century, even the servile peasantry was drawn into the scope of the state: the Statute of Winchester of 1285 extended to villeins the public military obligations previously the preserve of the free; and the forms of direct taxation that became regular under Edward I drew no distinction between the taxable liabilities

---

20. D. Carpenter 1996, pp. 309-48.

21. Harding 1975 and 1984; McLane 1986; Musson and Ormrod 1999; Musson 2001.

of free and unfree.<sup>22</sup> In the fourteenth century it became common form for villein tenants to use a particular legal loophole, the appeal of ancient demesne, to seek redress against unreasonable lords through the protection of the king's courts.<sup>23</sup> In turn, the inclusion of minor criminal actions (trespasses) within the scope of the king's courts and the frequent imposition of royal taxation imposed a heavy administrative burden on the lowest levels of the government hierarchy, the bailiffs of hundreds and the constables of vills, themselves mainly of substantial free peasant stock.<sup>24</sup> It was men of this standing who probably generated the petitions that went up to the king in parliament and council from the early fourteenth century addressed in the name of the 'poor commons' of manor or vill.<sup>25</sup> The ability of such kulaks to organise a common purse to fund their litigation, to obtain the legal advice necessary to compose the petition, and to take action upon the judgment given down by the crown suggests that there was an immediate causal link between the inexorable growth of the state and the rapid extension of political activity below the ranks of the landed aristocracy.

If this inclusive and participatory model of government had any reality, it was surely tested to the limits by the violent disruption to the demographic, economic and social organisation of England that came in the wake of the Black Death of 1348-9. It is now widely held that the plague had a transformative effect on politics. G. L. Harriss, Richard W. Kaeuper and others have argued that the proprietary classes, which had previously attempted to protect the peasantry from the worst depredations of the state, now recognised that their own prosperity was jeopardised by a new and acute shortage in the agricultural workforce; they therefore forged a new alliance with the crown in implementing the restrictive economic legislation contained in the Ordinance and Statute of Labourers (1349 and 1351) and the regressive forms of taxation represented by the experimental poll taxes of 1377-81.<sup>26</sup> More recently, Robert C. Palmer has developed this line of thinking further, arguing that

---

22. Goheen 1991.

23. Faith 1984.

24. Poos 1983; Ormrod 1996.

25. Maddicott 1981.

26. Harriss 1975; Kaeuper 1988; Fryde 1996.

the governing elite of the second half of the fourteenth century was driven by an almost ideological desire to devise a whole range of legislative and legal measures designed to impose a sense of obligation and accountability in social, professional and employment relationships.<sup>27</sup> This broadening of the scope of the state into forms of economic regulation and public morality has long been appreciated to have alienated the lower orders of society, who found themselves marginalised from the political process by a increasingly sectarian and exclusionist state and used the only means of political expression left to them in the so-called Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

Much remains to be done and said about the Peasants' Revolt and its place in the political culture of the later Middle Ages. What seems clear, however, is that the revolt can no longer be dismissed as arising purely from the disturbed economic conditions of the third quarter of the fourteenth century. The prosopographical work undertaken by Christopher Dyer and others on the social profile of the rebels of 1381 has confirmed what was long suspected: namely, that those who rose up against the state were not drawn merely from the unfree, from the landless labouring classes, or from the marginals and the displaced, but were often substantial free men with sizeable tenancies who had close contact with, and often direct experience of, the structures of royal government operating in the localities.<sup>28</sup> What offended such men was the fact that the justices of the peace and, above all, the special commissions appointed in the spring of 1381 to enforce the third poll tax, represented a threat to their own established role in organising the most basic functions of the state: local policing and tax collecting. Indeed, as Nicholas Brooks' work has emphasised, the revolt itself represented something of a re-assertion of those functions, as the rebel leaders actively used the administrative structures and military organisation of their areas to mobilise popular support for the rising.<sup>29</sup> If we have discredited the nineteenth-century idea that the rebel bands of 1381 were part of a 'great society' of revolutionary cells closely co-ordinated through a secret network of communications, it is interesting that recent work has tended to re-

---

27. Palmer 1993.

28. Dyer 1984; Ormrod 1996.

29. Brooks 1985.

assert both the organisational abilities and, indeed, the ideological commitment of the leaders.<sup>30</sup> Now that Richard Firth Green, Anne Hudson, Steven Justice and others have properly re-examined the role played by the *Piers Plowman* tradition and by the teachings of Lollard preachers in radicalising the rebels' programme, we can at last begin to appreciate the popular political culture engendered by the rising and perpetuated through a rich folk memory in the generations after its suppression.<sup>31</sup>

As a term used to denote the lower ranks of the English aristocracy, 'gentry' was once confined to the vocabularies of early modern and modern historians. Since at least the 1970s, however, it has been fashionable to assume that the gentry had its origins in the later Middle Ages. Although early and high medievalists would surely be perfectly entitled to point out that there was a lesser nobility long before the thirteenth century, the way in which the term is now used tends not merely to imply a status group of roughly comparable economic and social standing bound together by its common military function (providing knights and men-at-arms for the baronial contingents brought to royal armies) but also a political group drawn into alliance through the common experience of administrative service to the crown and the desire to ensure that its own interests were promoted in the government of the realm. This 'political' slant to the term helps to explain why we now conventionally place the origins of the gentry in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when there was a sudden proliferation of royal offices in the regions and when lesser landed society first began to articulate collective concerns about the impact of state-building on an earlier and enduring tradition of local self-government.<sup>32</sup>

The basic unit in which these new office-holders exercised authority was the shire or county. (The two words mean the same thing, but the former is of Anglo-Saxon original, the latter Latin.) The shire was an ancient tribal and jurisdictional region which had been applied throughout England during the process of conquest and unification in the tenth and eleventh centuries; by the later

---

30. Hilton 1973; Dobson 1983; Faith 1984; Justice 1994.

31. Green 1992; Crane 1992; Hudson 1994; Justice 1994; Harvey 1995; Green 1998.

32. Palmer 1993; Harriss 1993; Coss 1995.

Middle Ages, it was already therefore an 'ancient' institution and created an obvious focus of political, and to some degree of cultural, identity among the landed classes. The county court, which met in most shires once a month at a prescribed urban centre, was an important political, administrative and social occasion for the elite: it was in the county court, for example, that the representatives of the shires were 'elected' for service in parliament.<sup>33</sup> Most of the historians who have undertaken prosopographical studies of the later medieval gentry have therefore used the county as their starting point and the means of defining and limiting the sample of families within their research.<sup>34</sup> Yet they have reached radically different conclusions about what the shire actually meant to these individuals and groups.<sup>35</sup> One school of thought sees the so-called 'county community' as an expression of the powerful horizontal bonds that linked the lesser aristocracy in a common set of economic concerns and social interests. Other scholars, however, have emphasized that the most powerful sense of identity among the lesser aristocracy remained the 'vertical' bonds created by association with great lords. This latter phenomenon explains the continued interest in, and research on, the subject of 'bastard feudalism': that is, the forms of patronage and clientage that gradually replaced tenurial feudalism as the basis upon which the lesser aristocracy of late medieval England provided service to the titled nobility.<sup>36</sup> Recent work on the crown's own experiments in bastard feudalism has also served to emphasise the social and political importance of this phenomenon in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>37</sup>

In the current state of our knowledge, there is no overwhelming argument, and possibly no particular need, to argue that English political society was more inclined to the vertical or the horizontal forms of association in the later Middle Ages. Those historians who have stressed the importance of noble influence in the localities have also been at pains to emphasise its fragility, above all because of its very personal nature: the unexpected removal of

---

33. Maddicott 1978; Palmer 1982.

34. Saul 1981; Bennett 1983; S. Wright 1983; Saul 1986; Payling 1991; Acheson 1992; C. Carpenter 1992. For a regional approach, see Pollard 1990.

35. C. Carpenter 1994.

36. The most recent summary of work in this area is Hicks 1995.

37. Given-Wilson 1986; Horrox 1989; Castor 2000.

the 'good' lordship of a family as a result of dynastic or political accident could significantly alter the power structures and political identities of the area in which it had once held sway.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, there is a strong argument that, for all its apparent cohesiveness, the kingdom of England in fact accommodated a whole series of local polities whose forms of identity derived from many different and diverse influences.<sup>39</sup> What is reasonably clear is the sense that attempts to extend noble (and royal) lordship became more widespread, and more politically charged, in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries than had previously been the case. Even so, many scholars are now strongly critical of the nineteenth-century historiography which attributed the political instability of the mid-fifteenth century, and the breakdown of central authority that resulted in the Wars of the Roses, merely to the practice of bastard feudalism: rather, there has been a general tendency to reinforce McFarlane's argument that the political troubles of the period are to be attributed to the crown itself, and to Henry VI's failure to sustain the political and moral authority of the crown in the provinces.<sup>40</sup> The new emphasis on a public debate driven by local concerns and constitutional issues does not negate the relevance of patronage and personality in the turmoil of the mid-fifteenth century; but it does help to demonstrate how much more sophisticated and multi-valenced is our new understanding of late medieval politics in England.

*Parliament* is such an 'old' subject of English medieval political history that its inclusion in a discussion of 'new approaches' may seem anomalous. Parliament has never really been out of fashion as a subject of study, even if there was something of a lull with regard to published work on the later Middle Ages between the 1930s and the 1970s. It was in the 1950s and 1960s that scholars first began to apply to this period the prosopographical method earlier championed by Sir Lewis Namier with reference to the eighteenth century and slowly thereafter applied, with painstaking thoroughness, in the huge biographical index of Members of the House of Commons still in development by the History of Par-

---

38. See, for example, Walker 1990.

39. Ormrod 1995.

40. McFarlane 1981; Watts 1996; C. Carpenter 1997.

liament Trust.<sup>41</sup> The publication in 1993 of the first fully comprehensive collection of biographies relating to the medieval period, those covering the parliaments of 1386-1421, was recognised as a defining moment in the study of later medieval politics, even if the sheer weight of the evidence therein amassed could ironically be seen as something of a disincentive to interpretative analysis.<sup>42</sup> The principal effect of this publication is not surprisingly to stress the human face of the medieval commons: to represent parliament less as an institution (which, in any case, it never really was before the seventeenth century) and more as a collection of individuals, a network of lobbyists and legislators, a complex of private and public interests – above all a *social*, as well as a purely ‘political’, occasion.

Illuminating and accurate as this picture may be, however, it demonstrates the reductionist tendency of the prosopographical method and its limitations in deducing the *corporate* nature of parliament. Earlier work by historians such as Helen Cam, Sir Goronwy Edwards and May McKisack, more recently picked up and developed by Susan Reynolds and others, has demonstrated that those elected to parliament from the late thirteenth century had a very clear sense of their relationship both with their electors and with each other: in other words, that the ‘commons’, as the knights of the shire and the citizens and burgesses tended generally to become known from the 1330s, identified and functioned as a collective with a responsibility to articulate the ‘common’ concerns of the realm.<sup>43</sup> It is therefore only through a close reading of the records of parliament that we can reach a proper understanding of the significance of those concerns and of the substance, manner and timing of their articulation. The rolls of parliament were edited in the late eighteenth century in the original mixture of Latin, Anglo-Norman French and Middle English; remarkably, even the great political set pieces such as the Good Parliament (1376) or the Merciless Parliament (1388) remained almost en-

---

41. Namier 1929; Wedgwood 1938; Roskell 1953 and 1965.

42. Roskell, Clark and Rawcliffe 1993; Harriss 1994. Wedgwood 1938 is being replaced by new Commons’ biographies in progress with the History of Parliament Trust.

43. McKisack 1932; Cam 1962 and 1963; Edwards 1979; Ormrod 1990(a); Prestwich 1990; Reynolds 1997.

tirely untranslated for the following two hundred years.<sup>44</sup> In 1997, however, Chris Given-Wilson set up a team of scholars, funded by the Leverhulme Trust, to provide a modern critical edition and parallel translation of the complete run of extant parliament rolls from the reign of Edward I to that of Henry VII. The production of this edition in the form of an internet site and a CD-ROM will allow for elaborate, electronically-assisted searching in a manner impossible in conventional published formats. By also providing an accessible, continuous translation, the edition will greatly encourage close reading of the parliamentary record and generate new appreciations of the place of parliament in the late medieval polity.

Those appreciations are certainly long overdue. For a number of reasons, the new constitutional historians have tended to eschew parliament. First, they have concentrated their attention not on the fourteenth century (when they acknowledge that parliament was the forum for major constitutional debate over the crown's feudal, fiscal and legislative rights), but on the fifteenth, when parliament met only rarely and tended to concentrate merely on short-term political issues. The search for a more profound sense of the late medieval constitution has therefore shifted away from parliament and towards the courts, where a contemporary understanding of the common weal can arguably be more readily detected through the promotion of public propriety and the punishment of the aberrant.<sup>45</sup> Secondly, close analysis of contemporary political thought has itself promoted the view that public discourses were predominantly legal: that is, that all issues in politics tended to be articulated through the language of the courts. This means that, when the parliament rolls are examined, they are exploited only selectively, to generate examples of common petitions that relate directly to the law or which deploy the imagery of the law; there is no real discussion of the substance of those petitions that actually deal with other issues.<sup>46</sup>

This seems unnecessarily limiting. One alternative approach (of many) is to concentrate not on the landed classes' undoubted pre-occupation with the law of property but on the mercantile inter-

---

44. Topham, Morant and Astle, eds. 1783.

45. Powell 1989; C. Carpenter 1997.

46. C. Carpenter 1983.

est represented by the citizens and burgesses in the parliamentary commons. At least until the fifteenth century, when they tended to be taken over by lawyers and gentlemen, the urban constituencies usually elected prosperous and prominent merchants to parliament. Their agenda – the prosperity and ‘worship’ of their towns, the promotion and protection of internal and external trade, the encouragement of bullion into the country and the guarantee of an abundance of ready coin within the realm – might be dismissed as merely ‘political’ rather than constitutional, but they were nonetheless fundamental and consistent, representing the principles of a discernible late medieval ‘political economy’.<sup>47</sup> Such a perspective is also a reminder that constitutional issues about fiscal policy were not altogether concluded in the mid-fourteenth century: the final elements in the cluster of late medieval taxes on overseas trade were not properly established until the reigns of Richard II and Henry IV; and the reign of Henry V witnessed some vitally important discussion – and a decisive defeat for the crown – on the important issue of peacetime direct taxation.<sup>48</sup> Above all, the determination of fifteenth-century parliaments to maintain the limits earlier established on the legitimacy and the scale of direct and indirect taxation speaks of more than a mere disingenuousness over the supposed abundance of the king’s resources; it also betrays a profound belief in the notions of financial rectitude, public accountability and ‘value for money’ – matters that seem just as significant as legal principle in the contemporary sense of the ‘constitution’.<sup>49</sup> In the matter of political economy, then, on which scholarship is as yet relatively undeveloped, the parliament rolls in particular may yet help us to elucidate important new facets of the political culture of the later Middle Ages.

## Conclusion

This survey of current trends and new directions in later medieval English political history has, I hope, demonstrated not only that much is being done, but also that much still remains to be done.

---

47. Ormrod 1990(b); Liddy 2001.

48. Harriss 1982; Harriss, ed. 1985; Ormrod 1999.

49. Harriss, ed. 1985; Harriss 1988; Britnell 1993 and 1998.

Historians of this subject, predominantly British or American and trained in the empirical and positivist traditions, have often been resistant to the new theoretical approaches that are now so much the vogue in cultural history. This is very largely a function of the archival resource: the sheer magnitude of the available primary material inevitably provokes the response that we have neither the time nor the need for theory. Nevertheless, the techniques both of the new constitutionalists and of the new historicists have, in their very different ways, opened up for us a new awareness of the importance of language in determining and signifying the political ideas and political debates of the later Middle Ages. Jean-Philippe Genet has even used the literary technique of close reading to help identify the end of a medieval tradition of political discourse at the close of the fifteenth century, and thus to rekindle the previously redundant debate about the so-called 'new monarchy' of Edward IV and Henry VII.<sup>50</sup> If these and other novel approaches of the late twentieth century have indeed re-invigorated the sub-discipline and are set to establish a discernible 'new political history', then the future of the subject seems assured.

## Bibliography

- Acheson, Eric 1992. *A Gentry Community: Leicestershire in the Fifteenth Century, c. 1422-c. 1485*. Cambridge.
- Ayton, Andrew 1998. 'Knights, Esquires and Military Service: The Evidence of the Armorial Cases before the Court of Chivalry', in Andrew Ayton and J. L. Price, eds. *The Medieval Military Revolution: State, Society, and Military Change in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. London & New York, pp. 81-104.
- Beech, George 1992. 'Prosopography', in J. Powell, ed. *Medieval Studies: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Syracuse, pp. 185-212.
- Bennett, Michael 1983. *Community, Class and Careerism: Cheshire and Lancashire Society in the Age of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Cambridge.
- Bennett, Michael 1999. *Richard II and the Revolution of 1399*. Stroud.
- Binski, Paul 1995. *Westminster Abbey and the Plantagenets: Kingship and the Representation of Power 1200-1400*. New Haven & London.
- Brannigan, John 1998. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism*. Basingstoke.

---

50. Genet 1998.

- Britnell, R. H. 1993. *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1100-1500*. Cambridge.
- Britnell, R. H. 1998. 'The English Economy and the Government, 1450-1550', in John L. Watts, ed. *The End of the Middle Ages? England in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*. Stroud, pp. 89-116.
- Brooks, Nicholas 1985. 'The Organization and Achievements of the Peasants of Kent and Essex in 1381', in H. Mayr-Harting and R. I. Moore, eds. *Studies in Medieval History Presented to R. H. C. Davis*. London, pp. 247-70.
- Cam, Helen M. 1962. *Law-Finders and Law-Makers in Medieval England: Collected Studies in Legal and Constitutional History*. London.
- Cam, Helen M. 1963. *Liberties and Communities in Medieval England*. London.
- Carpenter, Christine 1983. 'Law, Justice and Landowners in Later Medieval England', *Law and History Review*, 1, pp. 205-37.
- Carpenter, Christine 1992. *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Land-Ed Society, 1401-1499*. Cambridge.
- Carpenter, Christine 1994. 'Gentry and Community in Medieval England', *Journal of British Studies*, 33, pp. 340-80.
- Carpenter, Christine 1995. 'Political and Constitutional History: Before and After McFarlane', in R. H. Britnell and A. J. Pollard, eds. *The McFarlane Legacy: Studies in Late Medieval Politics and Society*. Stroud, pp. 175-206.
- Carpenter, Christine 1997. *The Wars of the Roses: Politics and the Constitution in England, c. 1437-1509*. Cambridge.
- Carpenter, David 1996. *The Reign of Henry III*. London.
- Castor, Helen 2000. *The King, the Crown, and the Duchy of Lancaster: Public Authority and Private Power, 1399-1461*. Oxford.
- Coleman, Janet 1981. *English Literature in History, 1350-1400: Medieval Readers and Writers*. London.
- Coss, Peter R. 1995. 'The Formation of the English Gentry', *Past and Present*, 147, pp. 38-64.
- Coss, Peter R., ed. 1996. *Thomas Wright's Political Songs of England*. Cambridge.
- Crane, Susan 1992. 'The Writing Lesson of 1381', in Barbara A. Hanawalt, ed. *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*. Minneapolis, pp. 201-21.
- Dobson, R. B. 1983. *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*. 2nd ed. London.
- Dyer, Christopher 1984. 'The Social and Economic Background to the Rural Revolt of 1381', in R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston, eds. *The English Rising of 1381*. Cambridge, pp. 9-42.
- Edwards, Sir Goronwy 1979. *The Second Century of the English Parliament*. Oxford.

- Faith, Rosamond 1984. 'The "Great Rumour" of 1377 and Peasant Ideology', in R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston, eds. *The English Rising of 1381*. Cambridge, pp. 43-73.
- Federico, Sylvia 2001. 'The Imaginary Society: Women in 1381', *Journal of British Studies*, 40, pp. 159-83.
- Fryde, E. B. 1996. *Peasants and Landlords in Later Medieval England*. Stroud.
- Genet, Jean-Philippe 1998. 'New Politics or New Language? The Words of Politics in Yorkist and Early Tudor England', in John L. Watts, ed. *The End of the Middle Ages? England in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*. Stroud, pp. 23-64.
- Given-Wilson, Chris 1986. *The Royal Household and the King's Affinity: Service, Politics and Finance in England 1360-1413*. New Haven & London.
- Goheen, R. B. 1991. 'Peasant Politics? Village Communities and the Crown in Fifteenth-Century England', *American Historical Review*, 96, pp. 42-62.
- Green, Richard Firth 1992. 'John Ball's Letters: Literary History and Historical Literature', in Barbara A. Hanawalt, ed. *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*. Minneapolis, pp. 176-200.
- Green, Richard Firth 1998. *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England*. Philadelphia.
- Harding, Alan 1975. 'Plaints and Bills in the History of English Law', in D. Jenkins, ed. *Legal History Studies 1972*. Cardiff, pp. 65-86.
- Harding, Alan 1984. 'The Revolt against the Justices', in R. H. Hilton and T. H. Aston, eds. *The English Rising of 1381*. Cambridge, pp. 165-93.
- Harriss, G. L. 1975. *King, Parliament and Public Finance in Medieval England to 1369*. Oxford.
- Harriss, G. L. 1982. 'Theory and Practice in Royal Taxation: Some Observations', *English Historical Review*, 97, pp. 811-19.
- Harriss, G. L. 1988. *Cardinal Beaufort: A Study of Lancastrian Ascendancy and Decline*. Oxford.
- Harriss, G. L. 1993. 'Political Society and the Growth of Government in Late Medieval England', *Past and Present*, 138, pp. 28-57.
- Harriss, G. L. 1994. 'The Medieval Parliament', *Parliamentary History*, 13, pp. 206-26.
- Harriss, G. L., ed. 1985. *Henry V: The Practice of Kingship*. Oxford.
- Harvey, I. M. W. 1991. *Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450*. Oxford.
- Harvey, I. M. W. 1995. 'Was there Popular Politics in Fifteenth-Century England?', in R. H. Britnell and A. J. Pollard, eds. *The McFarlane Legacy: Studies in Late Medieval Politics and Society*. Stroud, pp. 155-74.
- Hicks, Michael 1995. *Bastard Feudalism*. Harlow.
- Hilton, Rodney 1973. *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381*. London.
- Horrox, Rosemary 1989. *Richard III: A Study of Service*. Cambridge.

- Hudson, Anne 1994. 'Piers Plowman and the Peasants' Revolt: A Problem Revisited', *Yearbook of Langland Studies*, 8, pp. 85-106.
- Johnson, P. A. 1988. *Duke Richard of York, 1411-1460*. Oxford.
- Justice, Steven 1994. *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381*. Berkeley, Los Angeles & London.
- Kaeuper, Richard W. 1988. *War, Justice, and Public Order: England and France in the Later Middle Ages*. Oxford.
- Keen, Maurice 1992. 'English Military Experience and the Court of Chivalry: The Case of Grey v. Hastings', in Philippe Contamine, Charles Giry-DeLoison and Maurice Keen, eds. *Guerre et société en France, en Angleterre et en Bourgogne, XIV<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*. Lille, pp. 123-42.
- Le Roy Ladurie, Emmanuel 1980. *Montailou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village 1294-1324*. Translated by Barbara Bray. Harmondsworth.
- Liddy, Christian D. 2001. 'The Estate of Merchants in the Parliament of 1381', *Historical Research*, 74, pp. 331-45.
- McFarlane, K. B. 1972. *Lancastrian Kings and Lollard Knights*. Oxford.
- McFarlane, K. B. 1973. *The Nobility of Later Medieval England*. Oxford.
- McFarlane, K. B. 1981. *England in the Fifteenth Century*. London.
- McKisack, May 1932. *The Parliamentary Representation of the English Boroughs during the Middle Ages*. Oxford.
- McLane, Bernard William 1986: 'Changes in the Court of King's Bench, 1291-1340', in W. M. Ormrod, ed. *England in the Fourteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1985 Harlaxton Symposium*. Woodbridge, pp. 152-60.
- Maddicott, J. R. 1970. *Thomas of Lancaster*. Oxford.
- Maddicott, J. R. 1978. 'The County Community and the Making of Public Opinion in Fourteenth-Century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 28, pp. 27-43.
- Maddicott, J. R. 1981. 'Parliament and the Constituencies, 1272-1377', in R. G. Davies and J. H. Denton, eds. *The English Parliament in the Middle Ages*. Manchester, pp. 61-87.
- Maddicott, J. R. 1986. 'Poems of Social Protest in Early Fourteenth-Century England', in W. M. Ormrod, ed. *England in the Fourteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1985 Harlaxton Symposium*. Woodbridge, pp. 130-44.
- Maddicott, J. R. 1994. *Simon de Montfort*. Cambridge.
- Musson, Anthony 2001. *Medieval Law in Context: The Growth of Legal Consciousness from Magna Carta to the Peasants' Revolt*. Manchester.
- Musson, Anthony and W. M. Ormrod 1999. *The Evolution of English Justice: Law, Politics and Society in the Fourteenth Century*. Basingstoke.
- Namier, Sir Lewis 1929. *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III*. London.
- Nicolas, Nicholas Harris, ed. 1832. *The Scrope and Grosvenor Controversy*. 2 vols. London.

- Ormrod, W. M. 1990(a). 'Agenda for Legislation, 1322-c.1340', *English Historical Review*, 105, pp. 1-33.
- Ormrod, W. M. 1990(b). *The Reign of Edward III: Crown and Political Society in England, 1327-1377*. New Haven & London.
- Ormrod, W. M. 1995. *Political Life in Medieval England, 1300-1450*. Basingstoke.
- Ormrod, W. M. 1996. 'The Politics of Pestilence: Government in England after the Black Death', in W. M. Ormrod and P. G. Lindley, eds. *The Black Death in England*. Stamford, pp. 147-81.
- Ormrod, W. M. 1999. 'Finance and Trade under Richard II', in Anthony Goodman and James Gillespie, eds. *Richard II: The Art of Kingship*. Oxford, pp. 155-86.
- Ormrod, W. M. 2000. 'In Bed with Joan of Kent: The King's Mother and the Peasants' Revolt', in J. Wogan Browne *et al.*, eds. *Medieval Women: Texts and Contexts in Late Medieval Britain*. Turnhout, pp. 277-92.
- Palmer, Robert C. 1982. *The County Courts of Medieval England, 1150-1350*. Princeton.
- Palmer, Robert C. 1993. *English Law in the Age of the Black Death, 1348-1381: A Transformation of Governance and Law*. Chapel Hill.
- Parsons, John Carmi 1995. *Eleanor of Castile: Queen and Society in Thirteenth-Century England*. Basingstoke.
- Parsons, John Carmi 1996. 'The Pregnant Queen as Counsellor and the Medieval Construction of Motherhood', in John Carmi Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, eds. *Medieval Mothering*. New York, pp. 39-61.
- Parsons, John Carmi 1999. "'Loved Him – Hated Her": Honor and Shame at the Medieval Court', in Jacqueline Murray, ed. *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*. New York & London, pp. 279-98.
- Parsons, John Carmi, ed. 1993. *Medieval Queenship*. Stroud.
- Payling, Simon 1991. *Political Society in Lancastrian England: The Greater Gentry of Nottinghamshire*. Oxford.
- Pollard, A. J. 1990. *North-Eastern England during the Wars of the Roses: Law, Society, War, and Politics 1450-1500*. Oxford.
- Poos, L. R. 1983. 'The Social Context of Statute of Labourers Enforcement', *Law and History Review*, 1, pp. 27-52.
- Powell, Edward 1989. *Kingship, Law, and Society: Criminal Justice in the Reign of Henry V*. Oxford.
- Powell, Edward 1994. 'After "After McFarlane": The Poverty of Patronage and the Case for Constitutional History', in Dorothy J. Clayton, Richard G. Davies and Peter McNiven, eds. *Trade, Devotion and Governance: Papers in Later Medieval History*. Stroud, pp. 1-16.
- Prestwich, Michael 1990. *English Politics in the Thirteenth Century*. Basingstoke.

- Reynolds, Susan 1997. *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe 900-1300*. 2nd ed. Oxford.
- Richmond, C. F. 1983. 'After McFarlane', *History*, 68, pp. 46-60.
- Rigby, S. H. 1995. *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class, Status and Gender*. Basingstoke.
- Roskell, John S. 1953. *The Commons in the Parliament of 1422: Political Society and Parliamentary Representation under the Lancastrians*. Manchester.
- Roskell, John S. 1965. *The Commons and their Speakers in English Parliaments, 1376-1523*. Manchester.
- Roskell, John S., Linda S. Clark and Carole Rawcliffe 1993. *The House of Commons, 1386-1421*. 4 vols. Stroud.
- Saul, Nigel 1981. *Knights and Esquires: The Gloucestershire Gentry in the Fourteenth Century*. Oxford.
- Saul, Nigel 1986. *Scenes from Provincial Life: Knightly Families in Sussex, 1280-1400*. Oxford.
- Saul, Nigel 1997. *Richard II*. New Haven & London.
- Saul, Nigel 2001. *Death, Art, and Memory in Medieval England: The Cobham Family and their Monuments 1300-1500*. Oxford.
- Skinner, Quentin R. D. 1974. 'The Principles and Practices of Opposition: The Case of Bolingbroke vs Walpole', in N. McKendrick, ed. *Historical Perspectives: Studies in English Thought and Society*. London, pp. 93-128.
- Stone, Lawrence 1981. *The Past and the Present*. London.
- Strohm, Paul 1992. *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts*. Princeton.
- Strohm, Paul 1998. *England's Empty Throne: Usurpation and the Language of Legitimation, 1399-1422*. New Haven & London.
- Stubbs, William 1906. *The Constitutional History of England*. 3 vols. 4th ed. Oxford.
- Taylor, John 1987. *English Historical Literature in the Fourteenth Century*. Oxford.
- Topham, John, Philip Morant and Thomas Astle, eds. 1783. *Rotuli Parliamentorum*. London.
- Tout, Thomas Frederick 1920-33. *Chapters in the Administrative History of Mediaeval England*. 6 vols. Manchester.
- Vale, Malcolm 2001. *The Princely Court: Medieval Courts and Culture in North-West Europe*. Oxford.
- Veesner, Harold Aram, ed. 1989. *The New Historicism*. New York & London.
- Walker, Simon 1990. *The Lancastrian Affinity 1361-1399*. Oxford.
- Watts, John 1995. 'Ideas, Principles and Politics', in A. J. Pollard, ed. *The Wars of the Roses*. Basingstoke, pp. 110-33.
- Watts, John 1996. *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship*. Cambridge.

- Wedgwood, J. C. 1938. *History of Parliament: Register of the Ministers and of the Members of Both Houses, 1439-1509*. London.
- Wright, Susan 1983. *The Derbyshire Gentry in the Fifteenth Century*. Chesterfield.
- Wright, Thomas, ed. 1839. *The Political Songs of England*. London.
- Wright, Thomas, ed. 1859-61. *Political Poems and Songs Relating to English History*. 2 vols. London.