

G. W. Bernard. *Who Ruled Tudor England: Paradoxes of Power*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. 240 pp. \$115.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-350-17689-8.

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G. W. Bernard's *Who Ruled Tudor England: Paradoxes of Power* is a highly readable and thoughtful book, the core of which is serious criticism of Geoffrey Elton and his work on Thomas Cromwell and the Tudor revolution of government. Though the title is "Who Ruled Tudor England," most of the book focuses on the reign of Henry VIII.

One of the most interesting and unusual parts of this book is part 1, Bernard's discussions of the lives of significant English historians who have studied Tudor government. His study examines contested interpretations about the Tudor age and its government, but as he eloquently points out, it is valuable to not only look at these various perspectives but also at the experiences of these historians, a number of whom were his teachers and colleagues. Bernard also provides fascinating insights about his own education. Thus the first section of the book discusses the lives and careers of Geoffrey Elton, R. B. Wernham, Penry Williams, Gerald Hariss, C. S. I. Davies, Jennifer Loach, and Peter Gwyn. I was especially moved by his description of Loach, a very fine historian who died right before her fiftieth birthday. These are people that Bernard knew personally and some of the personal anecdotes provide real insight into how

these scholars found areas of specialty that fascinated them. I found this section of the book very worthwhile. Bernard declares that G. R. Elton "must be counted among the greatest of English historians" (p. 3), and his biographical sketch was thoughtful and moving. Throughout the book there is commentary about personal conversations Bernard had with other scholars.

The second part has chapters on monarchy, the power of the nobility, Parliament, finance, the military, rebellion, poverty and policy, and the Crown and religion. In the midst of this section are two chapters on Elton, and here he is highly critical of Elton's *A Tudor Revolution in Government* (1953). Bernard disagrees with Elton's assessment of Thomas Wolsey as a mere amateur and one of the worst men who ever held great power in England. Bernard has a much higher opinion of Wolsey and his role in government. Bernard also argues strenuously, as he has throughout his career, that Henry VIII was far more important than Thomas Cromwell.

Elton, of course, had argued that from the beginning of his career Thomas Cromwell had a clear plan for the transformation of government, that from 1534 Cromwell had introduced a new principle of taxation. Bernard explains as well

that Elton argued that Cromwell between 1534-36 organized the King's Council into a governing body. Elton has argued that the Council before Cromwell was insignificant, with all important decisions decided by Wolsey or Henry VIII. Elton also argued that the 1530s also saw the transformation of Parliament. Bernard states that "from the early 1950s to his death in 1994 Elton boldly and tirelessly drove his interpretation home" (p. 117).

Bernard clearly disagrees with this perspective, arguing that Elton did not really understand medieval government. Moreover, he insists that Elton was also wrong in arguing that this "revolution" produced modern government in the 1530s. Bernard maintains that Elton ignored important administrative reforms during the 1690s, the 1780s and especially those in the nineteenth century. He feels Elton was especially lacking in a discussion of how revenue was raised or spent. In an interesting if a bit contemptuous note, Bernard explains that Elton had once said to him, "I don't understand money (I still don't; throughout my life I have never known what my salary actually was)" (p. 120).

Bernard's subsequent chapter, "The Personal," deals with David Starkey's critiques of Elton, who had been his mentor, noting that Starkey presented "a vehement and gleeful denunciation of Elton's *Tudor Revolution*" (p. 130). Bernard agrees with some of Starkey's criticisms but adds that Starkey was also repeating some of Elton's mistakes. While he is somewhat critical of Starkey, he also relishes that more recently Starkey has moved toward Bernard's position about Henry's impressiveness in pursuing his strategic goals, and that Starkey offered a shout-out to Bernard, citing his book upon seeing the latter in the audience at

a lecture. Bernard has argued throughout his career about the importance of Henry VIII's own role in the Reformation: "Government was thus the king's" (p. 137), and factionalism was not significant.

There are aspects of Bernard's own conclusions about Tudor England that are controversial and perhaps problematic. A number of scholars have disagreed with his view of Henry VIII's role. Also, he argues, for example, that Anne Boleyn was quite likely guilty of at least some of the adulteries of which she was charged, a point he has written about at length elsewhere. His evidence for this claim is weak. Though most of the book deals with the earlier Tudor period, I do agree with his commentary on the positive aspects of Elizabeth's reign, and how she was wise to have "agreed to profoundly, perhaps deliberately, ambiguous settlement" (p. 170). It is also excellent that Bernard is very thoughtful about attitudes toward women and power in the Tudor period.

Bernard's epilogue deals with the serious criticisms of Elton from the historians he discusses in the first part of his book, as well as from other scholars. He mentions that he saw M. E. James the day Elton's appointment as the Regius Chair in History at Cambridge was announced. James called it "a black day for Tudor studies" (p. 186). Bernard argues that these critical historians were generous and their intense distaste for polemics allowed Elton to be in command of the field of Tudor studies for many years. He ends his book with the statement that Hilary Mantel's novels very much present Elton's personification of Cromwell, and that this has given Elton's grand claims for Cromwell's role a new lease on life. This was one of the reasons he decided to write this book.

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