

A CONSTITUTIONAL HISTORY OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

William Forbes

“Tell me,” he said, “who came first, Napoleon or Charlemagne.” We had been showing our guests the sights, had taken them to Aachen (Aix-la-Chapelle) to see Charlemagne’s cathedral, planned to take them on the morrow to see the field of Waterloo, and had already learned from them that practically nothing of European history had been taught in their schools. But even so!

Of course, those schools were in another continent, and much of our history is perhaps of little relevance there, but the devaluation of history has now spread to state schools in England also. It began with the progressive idea that monarchs and lords were of no real importance, that schoolchildren should be taught how the “ordinary people” lived, and that a knowledge of the succession and dates of our kings and queens, that framework to which we glue all the facts we have to remember, was unimportant. Instead of examination questions asking for the causes of the conflict that led to the *Magna Carta* (and influenced the development of the British constitution), candidates are asked to describe how difficult life was for “ordinary people” under King John.

Not only in English schools is history attacked. At the highest levels of government it is treated with contempt, perhaps never better expressed than with the disaster of The Dome, an exhibition deliberately filled with “modernisation” (the favoured buzz-word of our Socialist rulers) which the crowds they foolishly anticipated chose not to visit, instead of with the great achievements of the English-speaking peoples during the last thousand years, which annually attract many millions of tourists to the British Isles.

For all those who now learn history by following BBC documentaries (of which there are some very good ones), for those schoolteachers trying to fill the gaps in the government’s issued curricula, and for those about to go on to university (where for most subjects a well-structured familiarity with our past is valuable, probably essential), there is now published a splendid one-volume British history that deserves a place on every bookshelf. Its perhaps forbidding title of *Constitutional History of the United Kingdom* may suggest why Ann Lyon wrote it, but its content is best described as an easily understood survey of how history created the much-admired British system of government (much-admired, that is,

until the present Socialist administration – “New Labour” – began to deconstruct it).

Under another hat and with another name the author is a successful novelist and this shows in the easy readability of her text. Her work and experience as a university law lecturer obviously dictated the structure of her narrative, so that it includes all the basic constitutional history a law student should know, but her gifts as a storyteller ensure that the reader is swept along by her acute analysis of personality and a stream of significant anecdotes. Here she is on Richard II:

The main events of the Peasants’ revolt are well known. The king and his leading counsellors retreated to the Tower of London as the mob burned the Savoy Palace, opened the gates of the prisons, sacked the premises of the Knights Hospitaller at Clerkenwell (the Treasurer was the Prior of the Order) and murdered both Chancellor and Treasurer. The great confrontation occurred at Smithfield, where the Mayor of London struck down Wat Tyler, now the leading figure among the rebels, and the 14 year old king pre-empted an immediate return to bloodshed by spurring his horse forward and shouting to the mob: “I am your king. I am your captain and your leader; follow me into the field and you shall have anything it pleases you to ask for.”

Richard’s personal intervention, demonstrating the almost mystical authority of a king who ruled by divine grace, marked the end of the great revolt. Never again would the government of the realm be threatened by a popular uprising on anything like that scale, and it was not long before the full authority of the king’s ministers and counsellors was restored. In the longer term, the Peasants’ Revolt is most significant in relation to the development of Richard’s sense of his kingly power and destiny. In those days of crisis it had been the boy king’s assertion of the power and mystique of monarchy, and the sense that there was a direct tie between him and the lowliest of his subjects which was the most important single factor in preventing the uprising from escalating any further. At the critical moment, it was Richard, not his ministers nor his absent uncles, who had held a violent mob in the palm of his hand and persuaded them to draw back from a further orgy of murder and violence —

rich meat for an adolescent who was now beginning to emerge as a ruler in his own right.

Ann Lyon earns our plaudits too for a precision of terminology all too rare in popular histories. She carefully explains, for example, that the man known to English schoolchildren as Lord Darnley, the second husband of Mary Queen of Scots, was in Scotland the Master of Lennox before being created by Mary Earl of Ross and Duke of Albany. By his marriage he became King Henry, a development of which most Scottish children seem to be unaware, although they all know well the circumstances of his murder. On the English side of the border too she takes the opportunity to guide historical novelists away from one of their most common mistakes, the anachronistic use of Prince as a title, describing King Edward I during his father's lifetime correctly as Lord Edward.

King Stephen, unusually in an English history, is treated well. Too often he is dismissed as the man who ruled “when God and his Saints slept” and anarchy prevailed”, but Ann Lyon describes him as a brave and chivalrous man, generous and of great personal charm. With the name of Plantagenet she again steers novelists away from a common mistake — although the dynasty began in the mid-twelfth century with Geoffrey of Anjou whose by-name it was, it was first used as an hereditary surname in 1460, three hundred years later. (Katherine Hepburn playing Richard Lionheart's mother, Queen Eleanor, was given the immortal line: “War, war, that's all you think about, Dickie Plantagenet!” That's Hollywood, folks!)

Occasionally the content shocks, as with a footnote to the fourth of the four definitions listed in the 1329 Statute of Treasons (violating the chastity of the queen, the wife of the king's eldest son, and the king's eldest daughter unmarried) — a footnote that states: “No prosecution has ever been brought under these provisions, although it has been suggested that James Hewitt, as the lover of Diana, Princess of Wales during her marriage, could be regarded as guilty of treason under this head.” And then again, describing the coronation of Henry IV: “The head on which Archbishop Arundel placed the crown swarmed with lice

Although this book will deservedly find a ready market as a popular history, it is probably as a constitutional history that it will contribute most — for the timing of its appearance is most fortunate. Britain's parliamentary system of government, once so widely envied, has been emasculated by the removal of that stability the House of Lords ensured

for so many centuries, and by the executive's contemptuous dismissal of the duties of the House of Commons. In the former the hereditary peers are being replaced by political appointees drawn from Prime Ministerial friends and patrons, while in the latter the cowed majority line up to perform as dictated. Increasingly the dictation comes from Brussels as the consequence of a surrendered sovereignty never approved by the British people, while within the United Kingdom Scotland and Wales have been politically detached from Westminster with the gifts of a parliament in Scotland and an assembly in Wales towards which the Scottish and Welsh people are increasingly apathetic.

In Northern Ireland democracy is governed by the veto of convicted murderers released from prison by a Prime Minister willing to wage war on terrorists in every country but his own, a Prime Minister whose presidential style and personal aggrandisement encourages the ambitions of the many republicans in his party. In Brussels a European Constitution is planned from which, once the United Kingdom has been surrendered to it by this Prime Minister, it will be impossible for the people of the United Kingdom to withdraw. British law practice developed during the 1,400 years covered by Ann Lyon's book is being changed violently at Westminster and surreptitiously by European treaties. *Habeas corpus*, trial by jury, the presumption of innocence — the many comforting features taken for granted for so long are threatened by the criminal code planned by the European Union, *Corpus juris*.

The defence against the dangers which the British people now face is in the hands of the British people alone. To prepare that defence a proper knowledge of our constitution and a clear understanding of how it was developed over the last 1,400 years is vital. Ann Lyon has done the nation a great service in gathering this knowledge and understanding into one very readable volume.

Constitutional History of the United Kingdom by Ann Lyon is available in Europe from Amazon (but not yet from Amazon in North America).