Book Review/Compte rendu

G.R. Elton. *Reform and Reformation England, 1509-1558*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1977. Pp. vi, 423. \$15.00

In his preface to the published version of his 1972 Wiles Lectures (*Reform and Renewal: Thomas Cromwell and The Commonweal*. Cambridge, 1973), G.R. Elton wrote that "this is to be my last engagement with Thomas Cromwell, at least at book length." Such is not the case. *Reform and Reformation* is a study of Cromwell as much as it is an analysis of its stated theme. Indeed, the two subjects are mutually dependent in Elton's mind: he has predicated the successful development of the commonwealth's reform and the Church's Reformation on the personality, ability and principles of Thomas Cromwell whom Elton argues was the real architect of the Tudor Revolution — Henry VIII supplying only the necessary authority and managing the proceedings only very occasionally, and then to the detriment of the nation.

This interpretation of the Tudor century has become very much Elton's trademark over the past twenty-five years. In his earlier studies, especially *England Under the Tudors* (Methuen, 1955) and "King or Minister? The Man Behind the Henrician Reformation" (*History*, 1954), Elton introduced and developed the idea that Cromwell was in fact the motive power, the factotum and, to some extent, the theoretician behind the events of the 1530's. And, although he claims to have refined and reconsidered this opinion in the light of later scholarship, Elton's pre-occupation remains essentially unchanged, despite the appearance of such contrary and authoritative studies as J.J. Scarisbrick's *Henry VIII* (California, 1968), which argues strongly for the King's active participation in the proceedings of his reign.

In a strange but characteristic way, Elton's worship of Cromwell's genius has provided a very neat and coherent structure for a book that covers fifty of the most momentous years in English history. Since in Elton's analysis reform and Reformation were improbable — if not impossible — without the advent of Cromwell because of the temperament of the King, the generally unintelligent, pedestrain character of his noble councillors, and the lack of a national consensus and realistic programme, the book neatly divides into three sections: England before, during, and after Cromwell's exercise of power.

The first division necessarily centres on the rule of Cardinal Wolsey, a man Elton clearly admires as a "superb amateur in government" (62), one who "had all the

energy and much of the competence required, though he lacked intellectual foundations, larger beliefs and bureaucratic expertise" (49). Wolsey's failure to construct much lasting reform in the commonwealth or any Reformation of the Church, despite his good intentions, resulted from his inability to create structures that could survive him and operate independently of him. That reform was needed there was no question. Elton masterfully traces the growth of reformist literature, appeals, and programmes in the early part of the reign, from Dudley's *Tree of Commonwealth* through *Utopia* to the appearance of works of manifestly Protestant sympathies. But Wolsey was not the kind of man to accomplish a transformation of the English state and Church: his authority rested only on the twin supports of the personal favour of a wilful, irresponsible King and his legatine power, neither of which could outlast his tenure of office, neither of which could withstand the contrary pressure that any significant assault on tradition and vested interests would occasion, neither of which did survive the Cardinal's failure to procure Henry's divorce from Catherine of Aragon. It was to be the responsibility of one of Wolsey's former – and surprisingly loyal – servants, Thomas Cromwell, to overcome these deficiencies by instituting reform by Parliamentary statute and allying it integrally with the cause of the Reformation in the Church in order to create the Tudor Revolution.

Naturally, Elton devotes by far the greatest proportion of his book to this second era of the reign of Henry VIII: the ascendancy of Cromwell (1532-1540). Certainly, the events of these years merit the most detailed attention, and Elton analyses them with such authority and with so intimate a knowledge of the sources that his conclusions appear as the necessary result of his material. Behind this manifestly revolutionary age was Cromwell's mind and "vision – a vision of order, improvement, the active removal of all that was bad, corrupt or merely inefficient, and the creation of a better life here and now in preparation for the life to come" (172).

Elton argues for Cromwell brilliantly. The character of the King (whose "reign owed its successes and virtues to better and greater men about him; most of its horrors and failures sprang directly from himself", 332) is dismissed with a catalogue of pejoratives, such as "savage" or "stupendously egotistical." Similarly, Henry's natural councillors were "noblemen of high degree and low intelligence who had no solution to offer" (137) or clerical careerists, like Stephen Gardiner, who refused to contemplate the restriction of their clerical liberties and authority. Cromwell and only Cromwell, concludes Elton, had the necessary qualities to preside over a revolution in both Church and state.

How Cromwell actually instituted this reform and Reformation reveals Elton's greatest asset: his intimate and comprehensive knowledge of the documentary history of the age. Armed with this mass of evidence and fortified by the conclusions of his students' doctoral dissertations on various specific aspects of the period (all dutifully acknowledged), Elton traces the progress of the constitutional history of the 1530's with such skill and ease that the reader is truly left with the impression of a coherent programme organized by Cromwell who, through control of the King, the management of Parliament, and the confounding of his enemies, brought to fruition the plans of those reformers of the Church and commonwealth whose principles he shared. Indeed, the argument is so well drawn and so skilfully conducted that the obvious objections are obscured. For example, can one accept that Cromwell had promoted the Reformation by legislative disguise in advance of that "savage" but

highly intelligent King whose views on religion were much more conservative than his own, or can one subscribe to Elton's rather lame explanation of the fact that the justification and mechanism for the royal supremacy, the keystone of the revolution, had been compiled in 1530 (*Collectanea satis copiosa*, see 135 ff.) and annotated by Henry before Cromwell's ascendancy? Without doubt, Cromwell was an organizational innovator, a genius who shaped, ordered, and even initiated legislation. However, Henry VIII remained the King, and as such ultimately determined policy, as Cromwell was to learn in 1540. The minister did Henry's will. When their principles and methods coincided, Cromwell and his programme prospered; when they diverged the minister was crushed and his policies discontinued.

The third section of *Reform and Reformation* is the shortest and consequently the weakest of the book. The last eighteen years of the period under discussion deserve a more detailed study than Elton has provided, especially given that they encompass three reigns. It is almost as though Elton is punishing History for assenting to the fall and execution of his hero. Nevertheless, just as there are pre-figurations of Cromwell's rule in the first section of the book, so are there shadows of it in the third. The characteristic neologism "Cromwellian" becomes the term of highest praise in Elton's vocabulary, and the continued functioning of the government in the face of executive crises is attributed to the great minister's skill at building a bureaucratic form of government independent of King or minister.

Still, there is much of interest in this epilogue, such as Elton's revisionist views on the relative characters and policies of Somerset and Northumberland, opinions that are both attractive and suggestive, despite their comparatively brief analysis. Also, Elton's assessment of the reign of Mary, although subscribing to the general belief that it was an almost unmitigated disaster, indicates quite justly the few positive contributions of these years, such as the rebuilding of the navy and the construction of border defences. However, other elements of some importance are left tantalizingly obscure, most notably, Elton's dismissal as a *canard* (377) of the traditional belief that Mary's Council was divided between factions led by Gardiner and Paget, citing only an unpublished dissertation as his source and rejecting as unreliable the mass of material found in the reports of the Spanish and Venetian ambassadors that gave rise to the received opinion.

In short then, *Reform and Reformation* is a book that both fails and succeeds because of its author's *idée fixe*. Elton has given a coherence and a thematic unity to a period of enormous complexity in its issues, institutions, personalities, and historiography by interpreting the critical years of Henry VIII as the Age of Cromwell, discussing those previous to 1532 as a prelude to the rise of that minister and those subsequent as a decline, except in areas where Cromwell's bureaucracy and disciples survived. Never is the central focus of reform of the commonwealth and Reformation in the Church lost; and through Elton's identification of these principles and their institutionalization with the person of Thomas Cromwell they acquire a special significance befitting the programme of a man whom Elton nominates as the patron saint of the secular age.

However, this encomium of Cromwell equally detracts from a wider understanding of the period. The very real and immediate power of Tudor kingship is obscured by Elton's superficial portrait of Henry VIII, by his caricatures of Edward VI ("a boy tyrant") and Mary ("bigoted, stubborn, suspicious and . . . rather stupid"), and

by his attendant elevation of their servants. Similarly, the substantial contributions of lesser men are eclipsed by the successes of the all-powerful minister, reducing the complex development of the history of ideas and policy to the omniscience of one great man.

Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that Elton's latest discussion of Tudor history is a masterpiece of synthesis, and, within its necessary limitations, a significant contribution to the field. Much new material is introduced, the objections of his earlier critics are answered, and certain revisions of opinion are duly noted. One can only hope that Professor Elton has now exorcised himself of the potent spirit of Thomas Cromwell.

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