**What is Parliamentary History now?**

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The fortieth anniversary of *Parliamentary History* in 2022 seems an appropriate moment to reflect on the nature of the journal, and the broader environment in which it sits. It might be assumed that the remit of a publication devoted to research into ‘the history of parliamentary institutions in the British Isles (including the Scottish and Irish Parliaments) from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century’, plus the legislatures of former British colonies before independence, would be clear enough.[[1]](#footnote-1) On closer inspection, however, even such an apparently straightforward description raises relevant questions: of chronology (the ‘Middle Ages’ potentially covering anything from the fabled Witanagemot to the eve of the Reformation Parliament; from when should we date our parliamentary institutions?); how to define a parliament (artfully declined plural in the mission statement just cited; when did they become ‘institutions’, and cease being merely ‘events’?); and concerning the relationship between the English/British/UK parliament domiciled at Westminster and other representative institutions in Edinburgh, Dublin, Belfast and Cardiff (the historic and devolved assemblies of Scotland and Wales may be encompassed by the British Isles, but what about Ireland)?[[2]](#footnote-2)

In an essay introducing the fortieth issue of *Parliamentary History*, Paul Seaward reflected on some of the absences at the core of what would otherwise seem to be a well-defined subject: for instance, the lack of a full-scale modern synthesis of the history of parliament, for all the vast body of work that has gone into its constituent parts.[[3]](#footnote-3) The lively and well-researched two-volume ‘biography’ of parliament by Chris Bryant MP is the most recent attempt to bridge that gap, albeit aimed more at a general reader and addressing politics as much as parliament.[[4]](#footnote-4) We have a long-running History of Parliament project, generating volumes of excellent research. We have a dedicated journal and companion series, including the special issues and Texts & Studies strands, with a specialist editorial team and board of trustees. But how are we to distinguish between the history of parliament as an institution, and the political and biographical histories that the Lords and Commons have hosted? How should we approach trajectories of change and evolution, now that the whiggish certainties of the past have (mostly) passed away? What, in short, is parliamentary history now?

While not offering comprehensive answers to those questions, this editorial essay reviews some of the ways in which *Parliamentary History* has helped over the past forty years to characterise, to carry forward, and to push the parameters of research into the representative assemblies of Britain and other territories historically tied to it. We also offer some observations about recent developments in the field, and one or two hopes for the future.

1

The idea for a journal devoted to parliamentary history goes back at least as far as Sir Lewis Namier (1888-1960), for whom it was the natural complement to his project to revive the History of Parliament begun by Josiah Wedgwood in the 1930s. Namier’s early work had been praised for its efforts ‘to discover the actual workings of the political system of the eighteenth century’[[5]](#footnote-5): an approach that has continued to inform the work of both *Parliamentary History* and the History of Parliament volumes, albeit in ways that Namier himself could hardly have predicted. But Namier’s innovative understanding of parliamentary history was also the subject of sustained criticism following his death, and it fell to another generation of historians to establish a journal devoted to the history of parliamentary institutions in the British Isles.

*Parliamentary History* was launched in 1982 on the initiative of Eveline Cruickshanks, who was then working on the History of Parliament volumes for the House of Commons between 1690 and 1715.[[6]](#footnote-6) Cruickshanks was the prime mover in the enterprise, receiving strong encouragement from Sir John Sainty (who was appointed Clerk of the Parliaments in 1983) and Clyve Jones (a librarian at the Institute of Historical Research). They quickly recruited Richard Davis, a historian of 19th-century parliamentary history based in the United States, Aubrey Newman, from the University of Leicester, and David Hayton, Eveline’s colleague at the History of Parliament, who became the first reviews editor. Together, they formed the journal’s inaugural editorial committee.

For Cruickshanks, Jones and Hayton, the foundation of the journal was a product of the discoveries which they were making in their research on early 18th century parliaments, and in particular their use of parliamentary lists. Introducing the journal in 1982, Cruickshanks (its first editor) observed that it was being ‘launched in response to growing interest and current controversies in parliamentary history on both sides of the Atlantic’.[[7]](#footnote-7) In some respects, the journal harked back to an earlier age, when parliament and politics were very much at the heart of historians’ agendas. Nevertheless, the post-Namier wave of research, especially on the late 17th and early 18th centuries, which had reached its apogee with the publication of Geoffrey Holmes’ *British Politics in the Age of Anne* (1967), still had a good deal of life in it, with historians including W.A. Speck and Henry Horwitz producing important work, encouraged by the results of the History of Parliament. Equally important was the revisionism of Conrad Russell and others, which had reignited interest in the early Stuart period, placing parliament at the centre of attention. From the United States, the journal received important support from Derek Hirst. Equally lively interventions in parliamentary history came from the work of Geoffrey Elton, his pupils and followers (including Michael Graves, David Dean and Norman Jones), in respect of the Tudor period.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The *Parliamentary History Yearbook* appeared as an annual hardback volume, published by Alan Sutton publishing, and administered by the Parliamentary History Yearbook Trust, between 1982 and 1986. The Trust subsequently became the foundation for the administration of the journal as a registered charity – a necessary resort for ‘starting a successful new academic journal in the economically inauspicious days of the 1980s’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Generous grants from the British Academy and the Twenty-Seven Foundation had been essential in the publication of the first volume. In addition to the trustees (the first seven of whom included M.H. Port, F.M.L. Thompson, and Harry Cobb), there was also an American associate committee, chaired by Richard Davis, and an editorial advisory board which comprised such distinguished political and parliamentary historians as Jack Hexter and Norman Gash, both of whom published original work in the first *Yearbook*.

In 1987 the journal took the opportunity provided by changing its publisher to Oxford University Press to adapt its format and title. *Parliamentary History* retained its administrative and editorial structures but now appeared every May and October, with Clyve Jones succeeding Eveline Cruickshanks as editor. Announcing the change, Jones reiterated the journal’s wide-ranging scope:

to provide an open platform for current research into parliamentary history … the history of parliamentary institutions in the British Isles (including the Scottish and Irish Parliaments) from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, their origin, development and historical importance … including the history of legislation and procedure, parliamentary management and political “structure”, elections and the electorate, as well as the architecture and representative art of the various Parliaments.

The first five years of the journal had established it, according to Jones, ‘as the main vehicle of publication for parliamentary historians’ with an international authorship.

From the start, the journal was closely connected with the History of Parliament – spiritually and geographically – although it has never been formally part of that project. The editorial team was housed at the Institute of Historical Research, later moving to the History of Parliament’s offices in Bloomsbury. The journal has retained close connections with the various sections of the History, stretching from the medieval period to the 19th century, in terms of attracting contributors, reviewers, members of the editorial committee, and trustees, from amongst its staff. Since the millennium, the journal has also been closely connected with the new sections of the History devoted to the House of Lords.

The change of format in 1987 established a characteristic pattern of content for subsequent volumes of the journal: the first issue contained six full articles, two ‘notes and documents’, an extended review article, and 24 book reviews. The notes and documents feature was a useful mechanism for publishing short original manuscripts with a scholarly analysis, whilst longer book reviews allowed for deeper historiographical reflection, after the fashion of those in the *Historical Journal*. The establishment of the *Parliamentary History Record Series* in 1998, with three hardback volumes published by Boydell and Brewer up to 2006, allowed greater scope for the publishing of longer original manuscripts. This subsequently led to the institution of *Parliamentary History Texts and Studies*, an annual series which widened the journal’s reach into the production of stand-alone monographs as well as fully annotated critical editions of important parliamentary sources; the 17th volume in the series will be published this year.

Much of the journal’s capacity to retain its core shape, function, and style, while also being able to innovate, can be traced to its durable relationship with its publishers: OUP (volumes 6-11) from 1987-92, Edinburgh University Press (volumes 12-26) from 1993-2007, and Wiley-Blackwell (since volume 27) after 2008, as well as the remarkable continuity in editorial service. Clyve Jones continued as sole editor of the journal until 2013, when Richard Gaunt took over as co-editor with responsibility for special issues. Hayton succeeded Jones the following year, serving until 2019 when he was succeeded by Gaunt. The current co-editorial partnership (with Cooper looking after special issues) was formed as the journal attained its 40th volume.

One of the most significant changes in the journal’s coverage, since the early-1990s, has been the steady growth in the amount of material relating to the 20th century. Stuart Ball was the first author to publish work on that period in 1986. Five years later, he was guest editor of a special issue on ‘Parliament, Government and Party Politics 1900-1951’, which contained six articles and a bibliography. It was commissioned because of the continuing lack of submissions relating to the 20th century, and the special issue was intended to raise the journal's profile in that field. The success of this venture may be evidenced by the subsequent flood of new articles on the period which has been published in the journal. As Alex Middleton has recently noted, renewed interest in the work of Maurice Cowling, amongst others, has also helped to stimulate new research agendas in respect of the more recent past.[[10]](#footnote-10)

An equally significant innovation was the commencement of the regular series of special issues after 1994. This initiative expanded the journal to its now-familiar three issues per year, the ‘special’ being published as both the first issue of the journal, and as a stand-alone book with an ISBN. The first such volume, on *Computing and Parliamentary History,* edited by John Phillips, can be regarded as introducing more of a strategic element to the journal, with invited guest editors who commissioned articles rather than responding to open submissions and addressing emerging subjects of interest. The breadth of the themes covered in early volumes – including *Parliament and the Atlantic Empire, The Scots and Parliament, Parliament and Locality, Parliament and the Church, Parliament and Dissent, Parliament and the Press,* and *The Print Culture of Parliament* – can be seen as an attempt to look forward to new directions in the writing of parliamentary history. In recent years, the special issues have not only marked significant parliamentary anniversaries such as the 1867 and 1918 Reform Acts but have also enabled the journal to pay tribute to long-serving editorial colleagues including Sir John Sainty, David Hayton and Clyve Jones. The 2019 special issue presented research arising from the St Stephen’s Chapel Westminster project. Further issues deriving from major research projects are planned over the next few years, offering the opportunity to pursue an integrated set of themes across broad chronologies or from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, whilst also ensuring that publicly-funded research is published in a timely manner and to a high standard.

2

David Hayton has observed that *Parliamentary History* has never had an over-arching agenda but has set out to reflect the state of what is sometimes referred to as ‘the field’.[[11]](#footnote-11) However, during the lifespan of the journal, that field has become noticeably less familiar to historians accustomed to older traditions of parliamentary history of the sort which dominated the journal during its early years. The growing influence of social and cultural history, the decentring of the primacy of parliamentary and (to an even greater extent) political history, and the methodological challenge of postmodernist critical theory, may be counted the three biggest challenges to established approaches.[[12]](#footnote-12) Michael Bentley has gone so far as to argue that parliamentary history (the discipline, and perhaps even the journal) ‘is unlikely to survive in the forms once taken as axiomatic’. Bentley doubts that resituating the discipline in terms of the public sphere, or of political culture, or of global history, will be sufficient to stave off incipient decline.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This is a striking challenge, but one which, as editors, we aspire to meet in a spirit of optimism rather than despair. The new ways of approaching parliamentary history, sketched out below, are serving to enrich the subject in new and important ways without precluding continuing work along the lines undertaken by many of the journal's distinguished contributors. Parliamentary history (the journal and the discipline) will continue to survive and thrive because it will continue to evolve. There has not been a ‘turn’ in the last four decades which has not generated new kinds of interest in parliament, and new ways of thinking about it, and exploring it. One case in point is the growth of interest in petitioning – not all of which is focused exclusively upon parliament but which nevertheless offers considerable possibilities for exploring still under-worked material in (amongst other places) the Parliamentary Archives. Equally, the new ways in which sources become available to historians of parliament, through the application of digital technology, will also continue to provide opportunities.[[14]](#footnote-14)

As a responsive journal, *Parliamentary History* can only influence its own future to a limited extent. If the flow of doctoral students working in this area begins to ebb, or supervisors capable of directing projects in parliamentary history are not replaced as they retire, then what was once mainstream could indeed become a niche pursuit. Unlike *Parliaments, Estates and Representation* (1981-present), which ostensibly set out to cover European developments ‘in a wide and comparative way’, *Parliamentary History* has overwhelmingly retained its central focus on the British Isles and Ireland. In this, it has reflected the tendency of historians of modern British politics to think in less comparative ways than their European counterparts.[[15]](#footnote-15) There are, nonetheless, ways in which the journal's reach can be extended. Given the importance of post-imperial and post-colonial history, and its legacies, the editors would particularly encourage an expansion in the scope of contributions to encompass the histories and development of colonial and imperial legislatures with which Britain is connected. This would be a natural (if somewhat belated) analogue to the ‘westward’ turn in parliamentary history which was proclaimed by Philip Lawson as far back as 1995. As Bentley has noted, the Atlantic perspective is far from exhausted as a seam for parliamentary historians to mine.[[16]](#footnote-16) A proactive, unshrinking, but also historically contextualised investigation of parliament and the slave trade would be another valuable step forward, along the lines that other historic institutions are attempting.[[17]](#footnote-17)

There are other signs that parliamentary history(the journal and the discipline) is capable of re-aligning to address emerging areas of research. Histories of women and gender are hardly new, but the flood of innovative work is undoubtedly carving out new features in a landscape once dominated (as parliament itself was dominated) by men.[[18]](#footnote-18) The growth of interest in the place of women in parliamentary history has widened out from an incidental to a central concern of the field. Bentley describes Pat Thane’s important review article as the ‘first’ to appear in the journal, in 1989. But the subject was hard-wired into early issues of *Parliamentary History*, not least as a result of Frances Harris’ ground-breaking work on the electoral interests of aristocratic women such as Sarah, duchess of Marlborough. The journal benefited from leadership by women from the outset, including its founding editor, Cruickshanks.[[19]](#footnote-19) A special issue to be published in 2023, brought together by Sarah Richardson andNatalie Hanley-Smith around the theme of passion in politics, will showcase the work of women historians of parliament (as distinct from those working on the history of women or gender in parliament, though several contributors do tackle that theme). The pros and cons of commissioning an all-female volume were considered carefully, given the potential sensitivity of the issue. But the decision was taken positively by the editors based on feedback received, in hope that an impetus will be created towards greater gender equality across the board in future. Questions of gender and sexuality more broadly defined will surely continue to emerge, building on welcome interventions relating, for example, to masculinity.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The 2023 special issue will also be notable for featuring contributions from early career researchers. The journal has always sought to encourage the next generation of parliamentary historians. In recent years, the annual *Parliamentary History* essay prize has led to a welcome uptake in the journal’s connection with new and emerging postdoctoral talent, such as Max Skjönsberg’s prize-winning essay in the current issue.[[21]](#footnote-21) In days gone by, eyebrows might have been raised if a journal featured work by a current PhD student. In fact an article like Jennifer Caddick’s study of the ceremonial openings of 15th-century English parliaments, based on maturing doctoral research, can offer a valuable glimpse of research in progress; the student benefits in turn from editorial advice and mentoring at what can be a crucial stage of their early career.[[22]](#footnote-22) Anyone who attends academic conferences will recognise that the energy of new ideas is particularly evident amongst PhD and postdoctoral students, and it seems only sensible to capture the best of this new work. Ritual and ceremony, the architecture of parliamentary institutions in the British Isles, questions of access, and the soundscapes of parliament, have all featured in recent issues of *Parliamentary History*, as have studies of record-keeping and memory. But these continue to keep company with more traditional considerations of electioneering and procedure, parliamentary institutions such as the Speakership, and what might be called the ‘new institutional history’ focusing on the interaction between parliament and other bodies. As such, *Parliamentary History* continues to offer an outlet for articles which look ‘down into workings and practice’ as well as those which reach ‘out into a wider world’.[[23]](#footnote-23)

3

In his book *Who Governs Britain?*, the political scientist Anthony King characterised the Westminster parliament as ‘simultaneously one of the most influential of Britain’s governing institutions and also one of the feeblest’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Parliamentary history has gained an unexpected political currency in recent years, as the Brexit debate about sovereignty has revived half-forgotten controversies about ‘Henry VIII clauses’ and the various statutes governing the Union between England, Wales, Scotland and part of Ireland. The ‘Restoration and Renewal’ programme at the Palace of Westminster, frequently touted and just as regularly stalled, when finally undertaken, will focus attention on the relationship between the historicity and the modernity of parliament to a degree not seen since the competition to design a new national legislature following the Palace fire of 1834.[[25]](#footnote-25) Meanwhile, the Covid pandemic has called into question such hallowed practices as voting by division, which dates back at least to Elizabethan times and was enshrined in the lobbies designed for the Gothic Revival Palace of Westminster.[[26]](#footnote-26) Acknowledging that the UK parliament is an historical construct, with a deep (if sometimes faulty) recollection of its inherited practices and located within a complex of buildings that very consciously evoke the past, does not automatically generate an argument for the essential value of that sense of history; indeed, it might prompt the opposite response. But the relevance of a sense of the past to modern politics and government is a conversation that parliamentary history, and indeed *Parliamentary History*, may be uniquely well placed to inform.

1. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/17500206/homepage/productinformation.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The journal has recently published work on the Irish Free State: Mel Farrell, ‘Structures and Members: An Overview of The Cumann na nGaedheal Party Organisation, 1923–33’, *Parliamentary History,* xxxviii (2019), 387-407. More submissions in this area are encouraged. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Paul Seaward, ‘Why the History of Parliament Has Not Been Written’, in *Historians and Parliament*, ed.David Hayton and Linda Clark (Chichester, 2021), 6-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Chris Bryant, *Parliament: The Biography* (2 vols, 2014-15). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *ODNB,* s.v. Namier, Sir Lewis Bernstein, quoting *English Historical Review,* 44 (1929), 657. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons, 1690-1715,* ed. Eveline Cruickshanks, Stuart Handley and D.W. Hayton (5 vols, Cambridge, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Eveline Cruickshanks’ editorial preface to the *Parliamentary History Yearbook,* i (1982). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *British Politics in the Age of Holmes,* ed. Clyve Jones (Chichester, 2009); *Managing Tudor and Stuart Parliaments: Essays in Memory of Michael Graves*, ed. Chris Kyle (Chichester, 2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Clyve Jones’ editorial preface to the first issue of *Parliamentary History,* vi (1987), from which subsequent quotations are also taken. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Stuart Ball, ‘Failure of an opposition?: the Conservative Party in Parliament 1929-31’, *Parliamentary History Yearbook*, v (1986), 83-98; *Parliamentary History*, x (1991), 243-386; Alex Middleton, ‘“High Politics” and its Intellectual Contexts’ in *Historians and Parliament,* 168-91. Also see Alex Middleton, ‘The State of Modern British Political History’, *Parliamentary History,* xxxviii (2019), 278-85. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. e-mail correspondence, D.W. Hayton to Richard Gaunt, 24 May 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Seaward, ‘Why the History of Parliament Has Not Been Written’, 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Michael Bentley, ‘Parliamentary History: An Oblique Glance’, in *Historians and Parliament*, 244. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. On petitions, for example, Richard Huzzey and Henry Miller’s Leverhulme-funded research project ‘Rethinking Petitions, Parliament, and People in the Long Nineteenth Century’ (RPG-2016-097); the journal increasingly publishes longer works and supporting data online: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/page/journal/17500206/homepage/productinformation.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Bentley, ‘Oblique Glance’, 230, 239-40; Susan Pedersen, ‘What is Political History Now?’, in David Cannadine, ed., *What is History Now?* (Basingstoke, 2002). Also see Alex Middleton’s works, cited at n.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Philip Lawson, ‘Onward and Westward: Expanding Parliamentary History over the Atlantic’, *Parliaments, Estates and Representation,* xiv, 1995, 4; Bentley, ‘An Oblique Glance’, 230, 242-3. For recent work in this area, see Aaron Graham, ‘Legislatures, Legislation and Legislating in the British Atlantic, 1692–1800’, *Parliamentary History,* xxxvii (2018), 369-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The Parliamentary History Yearbook Trust published *The British Slave Trade: Abolition, Parliament and People,* ed. Stephen Farrell, Melanie Unwin, and James Walvin (Edinburgh, 2007), at the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. One recent example is Mark Ormrod, *Women and Parliament in Later Medieval England* (Houndmills, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Bentley, ‘An Oblique Glance’, 241; Pat Thane, ‘Women, Sex and Politics, 1860–1918’, *Parliamentary* History, viii (1989), 153-5; C.J. Wright, ‘Frances Harris (1950-2021)’, *Parliamentary History,* xl, 255-60. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Kathryn Gleadle, ‘Masculinity, Age and Life Cycle in the Age of Reform’ in Robert Saunders, ed., *‘Shooting Niagara – and After’? The Second Reform Act and its World* (Chichester, 2017), 31-45; Alvar Blomgren, ‘“Shew Yourselves as Men”: Gender, Citizenship and Political Propaganda in the 1773 and 1774 Worcester Election Contests’, *Parliamentary History,* xxxvi (2017), 346-60; Paul Johnson, ‘Buggery and Parliament, 1533–2017’, *Parliamentary History,* xxxviii (2019), 325-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See below, **ooo-ooo.** [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Jennifer Caddick, ‘The Painted Chamber at Westminster and the Openings of Parliament, 1399-1484’, in *Space and Sound in the British Parliament: Architecture, Access and Acoustics*, ed. J.P.D. Cooper and Richard A. Gaunt (Chichester, 2019), 17-33. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Thereby adapting Bentley’s words in ‘Oblique Glance’, 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Anthony King, *Who Governs Britain?* (2015), 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Leanne-Marie Cotter and Matthew Flinders, ‘The Palace of Westminster: Another Window of Opportunity?’, in *Space and Sound*, 149-65. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Roland Quinault, ‘Westminster and the Victorian Constitution’, *TRHS*, 6th series, ii (1992), 79-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)