
J.R. Maddicott has long been recognised as one of the outstanding historians of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century English political history. His 1994 biography of Simon de Montfort, seen by many as the pioneer of representative government in England, has become the standard text on that controversial figure. In 2004, Maddicott gave a series of lectures on the origins of English parliament as part of the Ford lectures on British History. These lectures form the basis for *The Origins of English Parliament 924-1327*, a period book-ended between the Anglo-Saxon king Aethelstan, described by Maddicott as the first English king to “rule something like a united England” (p.3), and Edward II, who was deposed in part by parliamentary proceedings in 1327.

In writing this work, Maddicott notes that: “no general account of the English parliament’s origins has appeared in the last hundred years.” (p.vii) Maddicott hopes to redress this imbalance of parliamentary works that usually rush quite quickly through the Anglo-Saxon and early Norman period before getting to the oft-told thirteenth-century narrative of the Magna Carta, leading to the Oxford Provisions, and then on to the entrenching of parliament in the reign of Edward I. In doing so, he has placed a great deal of emphasis on the Anglo-Saxon period, going as far as to claim that: “Aethelstan might be thought to have a better claim than the popularly recognized Simon de Montfort to be the true if unwitting father of the English parliament.” (p.4) In tracing the Anglo-Saxon period Maddicott makes an argument that certain Anglo-Saxon kings like Aethelstan and even Aethelred anticipated a number of the innovations of their Norman and Plantagenet successors. In this instance Maddicott is generous to those scholars who came before him, citing Frank Stenton’s classic work *Anglo-Saxon England* to reinforce his points about pre-Invasion kings.

Various representative bodies met during the Norman era, in which the Great Council replaced the *witena gemot*. During the reign of Henry II the French term *parlement* came to be used to describe these bodies, probably the most notable of which met in 1164 to impose the Constitutions of Clarendon upon Thomas Becket and the church. It was not until the reign of Henry II’s son John, and later Henry III, that this representative group came into its own. Maddicott here combines well-rehearsed facts (John’s disastrous relationship with his barons, Henry III’s long minority) with other, less well known arguments. During the reign of John, for example, Maddicott argues that changes in local politics at the county level were just as significant as what was happening in the upper levels of power.

As well as tracing parliament’s growth, Maddicott pays close attention to its cultural impact, using illustrations from Arthurian stories in the twelfth century to highlight the perception of the king having access to “good counsel.” Growing national identity in England played a part as well, particularly during the reign of King John, where the loss of continental territories such as Normandy forced the English baronial classes to move away from an overtly Norman-French identity, which would become more obvious in the reign of Henry III and the attacks against “foreign born” favourites. It was during Henry’s reign that the term parliament came into common usage, with the baronial wars and the reforms of Simon de
Montfort playing an important role. Despite de Montfort’s death, Henry III’s son Edward I knew that parliament would be needed, particularly for the massive taxes he needed to raise for his wars against Wales, France, and Scotland. In these chapters, Maddicott traces the conflicts that emerged between Edward I and parliament, arguing that, “the five years between 1297 and 1301 were marked by the most intensive and concentrated parliamentary conflicts that England had yet to see.” (p.323)

Perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the most accessible, chapter of this work is the final one, in which Maddicott examines the idea of English exceptionalism by tracing representative groups in other European states during this period. There were parallels to the Magna Carta in Catalonia, Germany, and Hungary between the years 1205 to 1220. Where England differed, Maddicott argues, was “in the strength of its monarchy and in the extent of popular participation in the processes of government and politics on which that strength partly rested.” (p.450) This strength ensured that while England’s parliamentary traditions waxed and waned over the centuries, they never vanished entirely. The Origins of the English Parliament 924-1327 will stand out as a notable text for parliamentary history. While the depth of the central chapters will appeal to specialists, there is certainly enough in the final chapter to appeal to the more casual student of this fascinating part of English political history.

Andrew Broertjes

The University of Western Australia