

DEFENDER OF THE FAITH: GEOFFREY ELTON AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

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1. When Sir Geoffrey Elton died in December 1994 the obituaries naturally focused on his contribution to the history of Tudor England. Elton's name will forever be identified with the Tudors and his numerous textbooks, monographs, and papers on early modern England must surely rank as one of the greatest ever achievements of historical labour. But Elton left another, equally important, legacy: a vigorous defence of traditional, narrative history--history as the reconstruction and telling of tales about past human experiences, actions, thoughts and endeavours.
2. Elton's first and most famous foray into the philosophy of history was *The Practice of History* (1967)--a manifesto, he said, setting out his experience of studying, writing and teaching history. This was followed by *Political History: Principles and Practice* (1970) in which he argued for the centrality and importance of political action in the study of the past and further developed his views on the nature of historical explanation. In *Which Road to the Past?* (1983) he debated the merits of 'traditional' versus 'scientific' history with Robert Fogel, the American economic historian. Then came the study of his hero, the great Victorian legal historian *F. W. Maitland* (1985) and, finally, *Return to Essentials: Some Reflections on the Present State of Historical Study* (1991)--a restatement of his faith in those 'old-fashioned convictions and practices' that informed his work.
3. Elton presented his writings on the nature and methods of history not as philosophy, but as an account of what working historians like himself did. To make such an account coherent and convincing it was necessary to explicate and defend the fundamental assumptions underpinning the discipline's traditional practices. The cumulative result of Elton's efforts was a sustained defence of what may be called a human action account of the past: the view that history was not the result of social structures, objective forces or (as

some postmodernists argue) linguistic discourses, but of autonomous human agents and that to explain and comprehend the past, historians must provide an account of those agents' actions in their own terms, as they were lived and played out at the time.

4. Elton's view of the nature of history and its study had a very simple starting point: in the past there were people like us, reasoning people with thoughts, feelings, ambitions, concerns and problems. These people lived and made choices and what they did produced the events, effects, creations and results which is history. When people acted in the past, exercised their will and made choices they made their futures and created our present. History for Elton was explicable, but the varieties, complexities and vagaries of human reasoning and thinking in diverse situations made it unpredictable.

5. Elton was above all concerned to assert the responsibility of those who study the past to acknowledge its humanity: 'The recognition that at every moment in the past the future was essentially unpredictable and subject to human choice lies at the heart of a study which respects the past and allows it a life of its own. If men (and women) are treated as devoid of choice, their reason is demolished; the product is a history which dehumanises mankind'.

6. In Elton's concept of history as a story of human existence and activity there was little place for those large-scale forces, trends, structures, and patterns beloved by social scientists. Everything in history--the events of the past--happens to and through people. Sociological categories may be useful descriptive shorthands of movements and outcomes over the long-run, but they remained abstractions unable to explain specific actions and events--the details and particularities of past happenings created by real people doing something. 'History deals with the activities of men, not abstractions', Elton wrote.

7. That did not mean that for Elton the past is to be taken as a site of free agents doing as they will. All events happen in a context, in particular conditions and circumstances of thought and action. But that context constituted a set of influences and constraints on action, not a transcendent force directing or determining action. If there is any transcendent force in history, Elton argued, it is the human capacity to exercise reason and thought, which enables us to transcend context, to change things and so make history.

8. Elton developed his account of causation in history (what made things happen in the past) in *Political History: Principles and Practice*. The task of historians, he argued, was to explain the events of the past. They did this by working backwards from known effects to their causes. By 'causes' he meant those

'antecedent events, actions, thoughts and situations' relevant to the explanation of the event to be explained. Such causes he divided into two types: *situational* causes and *direct* causes.

9. Situational causes are those circumstances and conditions that make an event possible or influence a particular historical outcome. Direct causes are those human factors which make something happen. And it is the latter which are decisive: while situational causes (which are anyway largely human creations themselves) produce contexts, it is direct causes--the exercise of human will--which make history. 'Direct causes explain why the event actually happened; situational causes explain why direct causes proved effective', he argued.

10. Elton illustrated his point with reference to the type of explanation he proposed in *Reformation Europe, 1517-1559* (1963). Situational causes such as the state of the church, nationalist resentment of Italian popes, spiritual dissatisfaction, the growth of humanism and the desire for ecclesiastical wealth allowed or encouraged a particular historical result (namely, the split in the Church of Rome). But that outcome was actually brought about by actions such as those of Luther and other reformers, the separatist moves by the German princes, Henry VIII's divorce petition, and Thomas Cromwell's program for a political break with Rome.

11. Elton had another reason to stress the importance of the direct, willed causes of historical events: these are the causes which an historian can (at least in principle) demonstrate. Direct causes in history are, fundamentally, human chains of action and reaction which can be reconstructed from evidence. And for Elton evidence was king, its use and interpretation was the linchpin of historical method and of the historian's claim to be able to discover and tell true stories about the past.

12. Elton claimed that what distinguished history from other approaches to the study of human affairs was the role of evidence in generating and limiting, as well as validating, the statements and conclusions of historians. By evidence Elton meant all the deposits (mainly written accounts or records) of past human thought and action and its results. In this evidence is contained the story (in so far as we are able to know it) of past human action. The historical method consists of the critical examination of this evidence, and, ideally, only this evidence to reconstruct the causes of historical events.

13. Elton called his approach to evidence the 'empirical or thesis-free' method, meaning that historians must be committed to allowing interpretations of the past to emerge from the evidence. As an illustration of this approach, he was fond of citing his own famous interpretation of 'The Tudor Revolution in Government'--

Thomas Cromwell's transformation of England into a centralised, administered, sovereign state-- which he claimed emerged from a reading of the documents.

14. In arguing for the primacy of evidence in historical work Elton had to contend with the argument that the intrusion of human subjectivity in the interpretation and selection of the 'facts' vitiated what were claimed to be true accounts of the past. Historians are human and there is biased and subjective history as well as balanced and objective history. Furthermore, argued Elton, the process of historical research should not be a matter of selecting facts to prove a thesis or an argument (bad history) but the reconstruction of a real past peopled by real individuals who did things that actually happened (good history)--and the veracity of such reconstructions should be assessed and judged against all the known evidence, not just that which is presented in a particular account.

15. Despite Elton's robust defence of 'good history', he was acutely aware of how limited a knowledge of the past was provided by historians. It was not just a question of the often inadequate and fragmented nature of surviving evidence and the necessary recourse to speculation, inference and 'filling in the gaps'. He acknowledged there were also problems inherent in the nature of the historical enterprise as an evidence-driven but also rationally-based investigation of past action.

16. In a striking passage in *The Practice of History*, Elton commented:

All assessment of evidence must be the work of the intellect, of the reasoning faculty. The historian cannot but work on the assumption that whatever happened is capable of rational explanation and that evidence is the product of an act discoverable by reason. And yet we all know that this is not quite true; that we act, react and reflect from motives which have little to do with reason and under influences--such as ill-health, a quarrel with people not involved in the transaction, whim and lack of thought--that can but rarely appear in the ... evidence.

17. Elton also perceived difficulties and limits in the manner in which the results of historical research are presented. Elton favoured the writing of history in the form of 'narratives thickened by analysis'--stories of human action and reaction over time punctuated by in- depth discussions and explanations of direct and situational causes. But no narrative, of necessity composed of a linear sequence of sentences, could adequately capture the simultaneity of thoughts and actions, the complexity and multiplicity of causes, and the interconnectedness of events. Life was a mess on which historians imposed order, shape, pattern, meaning and intelligibility. 'In a very real sense history cannot be correctly written', Elton concluded.

18. The resolution of these problems, however, lay not in abandoning reason as tool of research or in dropping the assumption of intelligible purpose, but in recognising the limits of the truths offered by historians. Elton also took solace in his belief that while 'the historian ... must concede the limits of rationality ... reason also exists and men do act upon it, consciously, much of the time'. Because of this the meaning and order which exists in history is not the invention of historians--it arises from the nature of human beings as creatures of thought and reason who on the whole consciously strive to achieve intelligible goals.

19. The assertion of the role of reason in human affairs was also at the heart of Elton's conception of the purpose of studying history. The study of history is an exercise in reason whose purpose is to enlarge the area of individual experience by teaching about human behaviour. 'History', Elton wrote in *Return to Essentials*,

... provide's the laboratory in which human experience is analysed, distilled and bottled for use. The so-called lessons of history do not teach you to do this or that now; they teach you to think more deeply, more completely, and on the basis of an enormously enlarged experience, about what it may be possible or desirable to do now ... By enormously enlarging personal experience, history can help us to grow up--to resist those who, with good will or ill, would force us all into the straitjackets of their supposed answers to the problems of existence.

20. How historians conducted this exercise in reason was, for Elton, crucial. Historians' rejection of all paradigms except the assumption of reason and human choice secured their freedom from all authorities except that of evidence. In preserving their intellectual freedom to insist on the primacy of evidence and simply to state what happened and why, historians contribute to freedom of thought and action for all. 'The historian, trained to freedom, offers the gift of sceptical criticism, which is liberty', argued Elton in his 1976 presidential address to the Royal Historical Society on 'The Historian's Social Function'.

21. Elton, as he made plain, offered to historians and students not a treatise but a manifesto--a statement of faith in the founding assumptions of their craft and a guide to the differences separating them from colleagues in the social sciences.

22. On one occasion Elton wrote: 'history is an unending search for the truth, with the only certainty at each man's end that there will be more to be said and that, before long, other's will say it'. In the case of Elton's 'philosophy', much of what he said was said by others--one thinks of Isaiah Berlin, Carl Becker, R. G.

Collingwood, Pieter Geyl, even Jack Hexter--and sometimes said better. But as one of the greatest practitioners of his craft and as one of the few outright defenders of what he saw as the 'beleaguered bastion of empiricist and non-ideological history', Elton deserves more than most to be read and listened to.

NOTES ON SOURCES

The books cited in the text are the main source for Elton's views on the philosophy of history, but a number of other important papers are published in his *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government*, IV (Cambridge 1992). There is also the transcript of an interview with Elton conducted by Bob Scribner, which may be found in the Institute of Historical Research, London. Elton's Presidential Address to the RHS is published in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1976.

Elton's work as a historian was assessed by an RHS conference on 'The Eltonian Legacy' in March, 1996. The conference papers are published in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1997. These include Quentin Skinner's paper on 'Sir Geoffrey Elton and the Practice of History'. Another assessment of Elton's historical work is B. L. Beer, 'G. R. Elton: Tudor Champion' in W.L. Arnstein (ed), *Recent Historians of Great Britain* (Iowa State University Press, 1990).

An extensive critique of Elton's philosophy of history is presented by K. Jenkins, *On 'What is History?': From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London 1995). For a riposte see G. Roberts, 'Postmodernism versus the Standpoint of Action', *History and Theory*, 36 (1997).