



SIR JOHN ERNEST NEALE

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1890-1975

JOHN ERNEST NEALE was born in Liverpool in 1890, one of three sons of a mother who had been widowed early in her marriage; and he enjoyed none of the physical or professional advantages of a comfortable middle-class home. In a retrospective essay on his old master he quoted with approval A. F. Pollard's dictum: 'What a man does depends on what he does without'.¹ It touched a puritan chord in his own mind. He described it as a 'stern creed' but he followed it himself.

He remained throughout his life a systematic worker whose studies (second only to his love of family) enjoyed a primacy throughout the day. His diversions were few: a pleasure in gardening, country walks, and occasional holidays. He had a single-minded devotion to his chosen cause, and from his students he expected that same total commitment to Elizabethan studies. He was once asked to inaugurate with a series of lectures a very distinguished endowment. He was conscious of the honour—and he declined it. He told me that it would have deflected him from the research to which he was committed over the next few years. I can think of few other historians who could have had the stubborn self-denial which the decision required. In any case he would not and could not offer an audience a slipshod, hastily begotten farrago of commonplaces which sometimes passes for a public lecture. His standards were exacting: if he imposed them on his pupils, he imposed them most rigorously on himself.

Yet if there was an austerity in his methods and attitude to life (clearly visible to those who knew him well), there was no less a warmth and a robust humour which was rapidly manifest whatever the occasion. He would roar with laughter at some witty sally by a companion or by himself; and his infectious delight would spread through a whole seminar, whether prompted by an amusing episode of the Elizabethan or any other period or by a new insight into a piece of historical research. He had been an ambitious man, ambitious in the sense that he wanted to prove himself as a scholar and make his department at University College, London one of the greatest in the country,

¹ J. E. Neale, *Essays in Elizabethan History* (1958), 247.

a nursery of professors as he once called it, and which in fact it became. In his early days he could sometimes wound sensitive spirits; but, in his mellow years and the long golden age of his retirement, one saw to the full his sympathy and loving kindness for younger scholars and that generosity of spirit which made possible his equable temperament.

I

Sheer hard work and sacrifice carried Neale through his undergraduate career at the University of Liverpool where he subsequently did some graduate work under Ramsey Muir on William Cobbett. But it was to University College, London that he was drawn and, shortly before the First World War, he was engaged on Tudor research under A. F. Pollard, which he resumed after the war, to be appointed in 1919 to a junior post at the college. His association with University College and the Institute of Historical Research (an institute conceived by Pollard whose drive brought it into being in 1921), lasted for Neale virtually until the end of his life, except for two years at Manchester from 1925 to 1927, as Professor of Modern History. He occupied the Astor Chair of English History at University College for twenty-nine years, from 1927 to 1956, and continued to preside over his famous graduate seminar at the Institute until almost his eightieth birthday. He was especially proud that it attracted as many American graduate students and senior scholars as British. 'To my research students', he once wrote, 'now a goodly company in this and other countries—America in particular—my thanks blend with pride in their work.'¹ His first article, which he published in 1916 in the *English Historical Review*, though extending over no more than nine pages, forecast the character and quality of his later work. In it he printed a hitherto unknown speech by the Lord Keeper accompanied by his own analysis of the text. As ever in his case, it was marked already by a skill in identifying his source and a meticulous examination of its form and content.² The same methods were applied in his next article which appeared in 1919³ and his successive contributions of a like kind over the following decades. But he could not only think like a research scholar, he could

¹ J. E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments*, (1953, 1957), i 12.

² 'The Lord Keeper's Speech to the Parliament of 1592/3', *English Historical Review*, 31 (1916), 128-37.

³ 'Queen Elizabeth's Quashing of Bills in 1597/8', *ibid.* 34 (1919), 586-8.

write with a fluency and an attractive style on the highly technical problem of the Commons Journals, qualities which were displayed again in his contribution on the Commons' privilege of free speech (a truly seminal article) to the Pollard *Festschrift* of 1924.¹

The next decade was spent in two major and related occupations: a massive search, already begun before the war, through the public and private materials on the Elizabethan parliaments, the results of which continued to be published in the learned journals; and secondly, the writing of his biography of Elizabeth I. The appearance of the biography in 1934 was in fact something of a literary event.

More than forty years have passed since then and it is almost impossible to recover and describe the state of historical biography at that time. With some important exceptions, studies of both monarchs and their subjects still bore the marks of their nineteenth-century pattern. They tended to fall into the *Life and Times* . . . category, sometimes extending over three or more volumes, in which the evolution of a man's life was accompanied by a detailed account of the year's events, whether relevant or not. When successful, they were both scholarly and fascinating and brought delight and instruction to a generation more leisured than our own. When they failed—and there were more failures than successes—they could be, or so at least they seem to us, monumentally boring. In one sense, Froude's *A History of England*, from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada,² was an exemplar of the best of this genre for it included, in effect, a series of biographies of all the Tudor monarchs, except Henry VII, set against the background of the time. Nares's *Life of William Cecil, Lord Burghley*,³ in three volumes, by contrast was a pedestrian, detailed affair whose weight of paper rather than weight of learning appalled Macaulay, hardly himself a man of few words. It should be added that Pollard never fell into this category. His *Henry VIII*⁴ and his *Wolsey*,⁵ whatever their faults, were superb in their craftsmanship in placing the man in his times without obscuring focus or losing

¹ *Tudor Studies*, ed. R. W. Seton-Watson (1924), 257–86.

² J. A. Froude, *A History of England, from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada* (1856–70).

³ E. Nares, *Memoirs of the Life and Administration of . . . William Cecil, Lord Burghley* (1828–31). Macaulay's review appeared in the *Edinburgh Review* for 1832.

⁴ A. F. Pollard, *Henry VIII* (1902).

⁵ A. F. Pollard, *Wolsey*, (1929).

proportion. On a much smaller scale, Bishop Creighton's now forgotten short study of Queen Elizabeth¹ was a percipient analysis of her complex character and tortuous ways.

The large-scale historical biography was already beginning to pass out of fashion when Neale began work; but another trend was taking its place. These works were being written, not by academic historians, but by writers who moved in the coteries of the day and whose subjective biographies owed more to their literary qualities than their historical evidence. André Maurois, who said that one important gain from writing a biography of Shelley was that it helped him to understand himself, wrote sensitive and lively biographies which were widely read.² Lytton Strachey added to these qualities a scepticism and cynicism which diminished the stature of his central character as was intended and gave his biographies some of the engaging qualities of *chroniques scandaleuses*. In his warmly received short biography in double harness of *Elizabeth and Essex*³ he used, though with greater restraint than later exponents, some of the psycho-analytical approaches of Sigmund Freud, just beginning to make their impact upon the world of letters.

His volume appeared in 1928 when Neale was already at work on his *Queen Elizabeth*. Strachey's book presented both a challenge and a problem. If Strachey, with no real historical sense of the period, could attract a large readership could the truly professional historian, rejecting sensation and faithful to his sources, succeed as well and, in so doing, win over a large public to serious historical reading? Neale had already dismissed the idea of a *Life and Times*. . . . He never wrote a textbook or the political history of a period, and never wanted to. But what sacrifice would be called for if he was to reach a readership beyond his colleagues and students?

Here an unresolved question enters into the account. Neale *did* make a sacrifice. When he published his biography in 1934 it carried none of the conventional scholarly apparatus of footnotes and bibliography. At which stage this decision was taken and on whose advice it is impossible now to determine. My own view is that it originated with Jonathan Cape, his publisher, though this is no more than speculative. I met Cape on several occasions. He was a brilliant and dedicated publisher, and a tough business man with a flair for detecting works of high literary standards

¹ Mandell Creighton, *Queen Elizabeth* (1896).

² André Maurois, *Ariel or the Life of Shelley* (1923).

³ Lytton Strachey, *Elizabeth and Essex* (1928).

which would appeal to the educated public. He may also have had good reason to believe that Neale's *Elizabeth* could be selected as a choice of the Book Society (which in fact it was), in those days the accolade for works of acknowledged literary merit. Whether he urged Neale to abandon footnotes or Neale came to that conclusion independently, we do not know.

Neale himself shrewdly grasped what Lytton Strachey had achieved; and, though he spoke of his imitators with contempt, declared himself 'an admirer as well as a critic of his work'. Strachey had tried to understand human beings as human beings, whatever public office they held: the 'historical portraits may have been partly or largely fictional but they lived'. Hence Neale posed the question: 'For our part, as professional historians, our traditions and scholarship ensure that our portraits are factual. May we not learn something from the literary experts and make them also live?'¹

These were retrospective reflections written long after his *Queen Elizabeth* had appeared but they conform to the belief that he had always held and never abandoned. More than this, Neale envisaged the historian's task as recovering in their full human stature not simply the great figures of the past but the lesser men and women who played some part in the developing society of the time. One of the many remarkable features of his later volumes is that he brought out of the shadows a host of parliamentarians who for the first time since their own day emerged in their strength and weakness of character, with their little foibles and mannerisms, their personal ambitions and their political aims, their intrigues, their courage, their hopes and failures. To read his books or to listen to him talk, made one feel that he was calling to mind men whom he had known intimately. The comparison will seem a strange one, even though I use it in only one particular: but he seemed to me to have the capacity of the novelist Charles Dickens to people his books with a host of lesser men and women as living and individualistic as the most eminent of their generation. Dickens was using the creative imagination of the novelist. Neale was using the re-creative imagination of the historian, for it rested securely on the sources to which he was loyal in every respect.

Neale's faith that there was an educated public eager to read what trained scholars had to say about the past was triumphantly vindicated. His biography of Elizabeth I was widely reviewed in the most laudatory terms, was an immediate best seller, and

¹ *Essays in Elizabethan History*, 226.

was in due course translated into several foreign languages. It was no less remarkable that the book was equally warmly received by the scholars when in due course they came to review it in the learned journals. Even the absence of footnotes received no more than a passing comment of dissent. 'Professional historians will regret', wrote one reviewer, that this decision was taken, but he at once added that 'they will be safe in accepting the author's erudition as a guarantee of the facts presented'.¹ 'Professor Neale has shown us', wrote another reviewer, '... how skilfully a garment of literary expression can be woven round the most rigorous historical studies.' It was 'the sort of book, in fact, that only an alert mind, working with patience and insight and fully versed in the documents of the period, could have evolved'.² In the United States the reception was equally warm. As one reviewer put it, 'Here is a rare and happy achievement—a book which is a product of careful research, the first fruits of the scholarship of one of the leading authorities on the Elizabethan age, and at the same time a brilliantly written best-seller'.³

Did any criticism come from scholarly quarters? On one central theme some of his reviewers joined issue with him. Had he, they asked, in breaking away from the tradition that a biography of a monarch must be a history of the reign, in effect made the queen larger than her context, indeed larger than life? In reversing Froude's judgement of her as a wayward, vacillating creature, dependent on her ministers for their wisdom, and relying on herself for her follies, had Neale restored Gloriana to the pinnacle of a goddess, wise in policy, just in its exercise, the true mistress of her state who guided her ministers rather than depended on their counsel? '... It will be obvious to all who read his pages', wrote one critic, 'that the heroine is sometimes judged on a standard different from that applied to her rivals.' The writer was the Scottish historian, J. D. Mackie, who regretted that 'Mary, indeed, gets scant justice all through...'. Neale, he had said, was 'reluctant to admit the necessary failings of that supreme egoism whose triumph he acclaims. For him Elizabeth, and with Elizabeth England, are always right. Their success proves it.' '*Real-politik*', he said later in the review,

¹ J. D. Mackie, *History*, n.s. 19 (1935), 343-4.

² J. B. Black, *Eng. Hist. Rev.* 100 (1935), 331.

³ F. C. Dietz, *Journal of Modern History*, 5 (1934), 324-5. Conyers Read in the *American Historical Review*, 39 (1934), 718-19, in the course of a very favourable review, regretted the absence of footnotes.

'has an ugly side which is plainly exposed when the author deals with Elizabeth's contemporaries, but is decently veiled when Gloriana holds the stage. Henry IV of France appears only as a "parasite", and the English heroine becomes too much of a Faerie Queene.'¹ Something comparable was said by the American reviewer, F. C. Dietz, when he wrote, 'Elizabeth comes too close to a new apotheosis'.² In other contexts, orally rather than in print, the observation was made that in writing his great biography Neale had fallen in love with the queen. He several times laughingly told me that he was well aware that this was said. Long afterwards he got a full questionnaire from a school-girl who told him that as she was doing her 'project' on him as a biographer could he please tell her whether it was true that he had fallen in love with the queen or was there some other explanation? Where would historians be without waste-paper baskets!

But the fundamental question, posed by his critics, as to whether he had depicted Elizabeth as larger than life remained to be answered. Answer it he did in his formidable volumes on the Elizabethan parliaments. For, by the time that Neale's biography was finished, he had already amassed a weight of material (soon to be still further enlarged) which he was convinced revealed Elizabeth as anything but the romantic, headstrong termagant of uncertain principles and faulty judgement. Here was a European statesman of great subtlety and moderation, with a true sense that politics was the art of the possible. She was a ruler who knew where to go for the best advice and use it in the best interest of the nation so that its unity, stability, and strength would be preserved. This was the case he made with a wealth of documentation. Neale was by now satisfied that public taste had changed and the intelligent reader would not be hostile to footnotes, as was confirmed by the reception of the later volumes on *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments*; but almost two decades were to pass before they appeared. Meanwhile he was writing the first historical study ever to have been attempted on the shape and content of the Elizabethan parliamentary system. A contemporary, Sir Thomas Smith, had written such an analysis in 1565 in a book entitled *De Republica*

¹ J. D. Mackie, *op. cit.* 343-4. F. C. Dietz, by contrast, makes the curious remark that 'idealisation of Elizabeth has one great value in that it enables him to be the complete realist in his handling of Mary, Queen of Scots' (*loc. cit.*).

² F. C. Dietz, *loc. cit.*

Anglorum.¹ Now Neale brought to bear upon the same problems his deep understanding of the men and the age, and of their constitutional processes. The book was called *The Elizabethan House of Commons*² and was published in 1949. It was greeted by the leading Elizabethan scholar in the United States, Conyers Read, a man not given to extravagant praise, with unqualified acclaim: 'This is a very important book, probably the most important book on the politics of Elizabethan England that has ever appeared.'³ In the quarter of a century which has passed since its publication it has nowhere been significantly challenged in either its detail or its conclusions.

If *The Elizabethan House of Commons* was a major work on constitutional history it also, by its very approach, questioned at its fundamentals the contemporary concept of what constitutional history in fact was about. No one understood better than Neale the minutiae of the institutional processes of the legislature or had devoted so much effort to unravelling its complexities. The second part of the book, and a good deal of the earlier part indeed, reveals for the first time how the constitutional machinery worked. But he had recognized from the early days of his researches that an account of an institution, its law and practice, can be a sterile exercise if it has no regard to the men and society it was meant to serve. Pollard in calling his book *The Evolution of Parliament*⁴ had reflected the Darwinian approach now coming into general vogue, but had, in seeking the evolution, found medieval origins which have not stood the test of critical examination. Neale sought part of his answer in the evolution of Elizabethan *society*. Pollard had argued that Parliament was one of the agents for turning Tudor England into a unified nation, though he put this achievement too early in the period. Neale saw the House of Commons as the voice of provincial England with its *diversity* of accents, interests, and personalities. He proved beyond doubt also that the House of Commons was not the instrument of Elizabeth's personal rule but the product of an elaborate patronage system operated by the great men in the capital and the constituencies. He had found and established this pattern by exploring the modes and personalities of provincial life.

L. B. Namier had, before the war, brought out his *Structure of*

¹ Sir Thomas Smith, *De Republica Anglorum*, ed. L. Alston (Camb., 1906).

² J. E. Neale, *The Elizabethan House of Commons* (1949).

³ Conyers Read, *Journal of Modern History*, 23 (1951), 75.

⁴ A. F. Pollard, *The Evolution of Parliament* (1920).

*Politics at the Accession of George III*¹ which both in its methods and conclusions radically altered the direction of eighteenth-century studies. The questions to which Namier directed his colleagues and students were not questions of constitutional principles or political ideals, though he of course fully recognized their historical importance, but private and family interest, patronage, faction as the power base for political and personal aspiration. Neale's field of study was two centuries earlier when different issues and conditions prevailed. But he paid tribute to the contribution that Namier had made. 'It is a book', he wrote, 'which in retrospect must be regarded in this country as one of the supremely influential historical works.'² It is interesting also to recall a passage in the same paragraph, written in 1950, where Neale commented on early signs of what he called the 'biographical' approach:

I do not know how old this type of historical approach may be. The first modern book in my range of reading to apply it was Charles Beard's *Economic Interpretation of the American Constitution*, the basis of which was a series of biographical studies of the framers of the constitution, keyed into the two rival economic interests of creditor and debtor in the United States. How much of Beard's thesis has survived subsequent critical examination, I am unaware; but clearly, within properly controlled limits his method was a great and promising advance upon what we may call the conventional approach to constitutional history, just as the latter was upon the legal-minded approach of still earlier generations.³

The Elizabethan House of Commons is then an analysis of the social foundations of political action. A year after its appearance, when coming to the end of his Creighton Lecture on *The Elizabethan Age*, Neale had directed his mind to the problem that, so soon after the queen's death, there was a marked decline in the quality and character of government. He sought his answer in the generalization: 'Like other societies, the Elizabethan age contained the seeds of its own decay.'⁴ In a sense this was a truism though it would require a whole book to examine and explain what exactly the expression may be taken to mean in the Elizabethan/Jacobean historical processes. But we may perhaps see the application of that generalization in much of Neale's later work. In essence, he argued, the Tudors were faced

¹ L. B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (1929).

² J. E. Neale, *Essays in Elizabethan History*, 227.

³ *Ibid.* 226-7.

⁴ *Ibid.* 44.

with an institution governed by medieval precedents and procedures but constantly subject to the pressures of a post-medieval society involved in comparatively rapid change. His question was: how far could these pressures express themselves in parliament, indeed how far could they change the institution itself? But first he had to identify the pressures.

The importance of Neale's method (and in this significant respect, as of course in others, it differed from Namier's), was that it did not look down from above on the political and social structure at a given point in time, the accession of a monarch, invaluable though that analysis was. Rather he was concerned with the *dynamics* of social change. What was happening in the provinces and in the capital which was changing Parliament, more specifically the House of Commons, during the forty-five years of Elizabeth's rule?

The answer which Neale reached, and he had come to it independently though concurrently with Tawney's work, was the enlarging influence of the gentry and the bonds they had with the magnates. He was concerned not with conflict between gentry and magnate, an interpretation which was to breed so much controversy in the 1950s, but association, collaboration, dependence, all to be summed up in the one word 'clientage'. Neale, of course, did not invent the term. But it was he who applied it to the conditions of political and social cohesion of the Elizabethan period. Clientage was not feudalism or bastard feudalism, appropriate terms for earlier periods, or patronage and connection, appropriate for later periods though, as is inevitable in the historical process, it had something in common with all of them. Clientage was essentially Elizabethan and it could operate as a force for change as well as with greater flexibility than the feudal relationship.

It is not necessary here to rehearse in detail the themes which Neale developed in his book but simply to draw attention to some of his methods. If a useful phrase had not become a cliché one would say that Neale went back to the grass roots because he believed that the answer to his central question—what made the Elizabethan parliaments different from their medieval predecessors?—must first be sought there. Since four-fifths of the Members of Parliament held borough seats and only one-fifth sat for the shires, he concluded that the answer would be found in the boroughs. So began the exhaustive search by Neale and his students into the borough records (where these had survived) and into every possible biographical source as he began the

painstaking processes of counting heads, listing each man's place of birth, family, class, profession, wealth. From it, among much else, there emerged one dominant conclusion. It is now assimilated into Tudor historiography but, when Neale was writing, it was novel enough to make a major impact upon both his readers and on his own approach to the problem: namely the overwhelming majority of the borough representatives were not borough citizens. This was contrary to the constitution but it was a fact of life. It was in the nature of the dialectic: an institution, medieval, monarchical, feudal in origin yet adjusted to represent also the chartered corporations of the later Middle Ages, was now confronted with new and severe pressures to which it was ill adapted. A class of people, which would be called the nobility on the Continent but, in the English context, were gentry, sought a voice in government or, at least, a place in Parliament. True, each shire had already the right to send two knights to Parliament and these were drawn from the gentry. But now their demand for a place had vastly increased. In England, as compared with many continental countries, no urban patriciate had developed. London was in many ways an exception. But elsewhere the city fathers were men of modest means and equally modest ambitions: their comprehension and aims scarcely went beyond the city walls. To incur the costs (even with municipal support) and the inconveniences of going to Westminster in order to approve legislation and commit their fellow citizens to taxation was a delight they could well dispense with. In any case many municipalities were scarcely more than the private franchises of some territorial magnate. He sent them one or two names and, again with some exceptions, they duly sent them forward for election. This was apparently a mutually beneficial arrangement. The boroughs were spared local squabbles and, more important, the expense of sending someone to the capital. The patron gained prestige and confirmation among his dependants of his power and standing. (Conyers Read went further and saw in these arrangements 'a sort of later-day [*sic*] livery and maintenance within the accepted framework of Tudor despotism'.)¹ And what did the gentry gain? To Neale, the 'invasion of the gentry' of the House of Commons was not motivated by a class-conscious desire to change the established order, less still was it motivated by ideological purposes. They went to Westminster because they rated a seat in Parliament as itself a sign of their social standing; because they valued the

¹ C. Read, *Journ. of Mod. Hist.* 23 (1951), 75.

contacts they gained with influential men in the capital; because if they were lawyers or interested in land transactions or commerce—or all three—they were going to the nerve centre of all these activities; and because they and their families could enjoy the social life of the capital with its shops, theatres, fashions, the sight of the great men of the time, and of the queen herself.

But Neale saw, of course, that among these men there were a number, rarely more than a quarter of the total, who had political, religious, economic aims which they wanted to press on the Government. They were not a party or even a consolidated faction of interests and principles but a disparate body of men who could on occasion coalesce to press an agreed purpose. And there was among them a smaller, hard core of committed ideologues, numerous enough in times of tension or danger to carry a much larger part of the House with them, even as far as forcing policy on the Government but more often in frustrating it. It is this element, covered not altogether satisfactorily by the term Puritan, whose membership Neale was to analyse in rich and marvellous detail and whose rise and decline he was to chronicle in his later books.

But before turning from the *Elizabethan House of Commons* we must consider the second important contribution it made. Here for the first time, gleaned from contemporary treatises and a deep familiarity with daily practice, Neale made available a coherent, detailed account of the procedures of the Elizabethan parliaments, from the arrival of Members on through the formalities of the election of the Speaker, the official opening by the queen, the debates, the committees, the defence of privilege, the discipline of Members on to its proroguing or dissolution. Henceforth indispensable to any study of the period it could be said that *The Elizabethan House of Commons* in its double contribution, a social analysis of the politics of provincial society and its elucidation of the processes of Parliament, ensured that students of the age were now able to see the Lower House with an added dimension of depth and a richer variety of colour.

It represented the completion of a task which Neale had set himself as a young man; and now, in his middle age, at the height of his powers and with an unrivalled knowledge of his sources, he moved to the parallel task of revealing and analysing the series of dramatic episodes, as well as the constant development and change, of this community of men who came to share in the government of England. And here attention must be drawn to the title of the two volumes, the first spanning the

years 1559–81 which appeared in 1953, and the second, dealing with the latter half of the reign, published in 1957. It is important to notice that he did not call them a *History of the Elizabethan Parliaments* but *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments*. He was quite clear that he was not writing a narrative of the political evolution of the reign—though in the event his is the greatest contribution in the field—but a study of the relationship between queen and Parliament, in conflict and collaboration, which he considered the key to an understanding of the age. If, in the process, he left out important statutes or issues he did so deliberately (though in some cases it was simply that the material did not exist). Where an event, for example the passage of the Statute of Artificers of 1563, did not in his view significantly reflect the queen's relations with her Parliament, it plays no part in his story. It would lengthen the book without developing the argument.

I shall return to this and other questions of Neale's methodology shortly. What, however, are the outstanding contributions of these two volumes must, all too briefly, be summarized under several heads. He was the first scholar to reveal the queen in her relations with Parliament as a statesman of power, subtlety, and with a deep understanding of its processes, its strength and its weakness. Compared with her, some leading parliamentarians of her day, and ours, seem often no more than gifted amateurs. If this appears a large claim to make—the language by the way is not Neale's but mine—we should not forget the obvious point that she served longer in Parliament than any Member of Parliament in the sixteenth century. Neale had closely studied all her speeches which have survived; he had read all the known diaries and discovered others for himself; he had watched her every manoeuvre, drawing together scraps of evidence from a multiplicity of unlikely sources. Even though it may be possible to suggest variants of Neale's interpretation of the 1559 Supremacy and Uniformity Acts, there can be no question that the manner in which he probed into all the sources in the true exercise of the historical imagination was a triumph of craftsmanship. His account of her mastery of the Puritan opposition in Parliament belongs to the same high order.

To have restored the queen to her full parliamentary stature as contemporaries knew her was only one of Neale's achievements. He accomplished the same thing for many of her counselors and subjects. The name of Peter Wentworth will always be associated with Neale who brought to life that doughty,

cantankerous Puritan leader, born before his time. But he also displayed a whole company of men, including Norton, Fleetwood, Arthur Hall, Morrice, Cope, some of them only names to Elizabethan scholars themselves. At the same time he revealed the hitherto unrecognized parliamentary and oratorical talents of leading statesmen such as the Cecils, Walsingham, Knollys, Raleigh, and, most strikingly, Christopher Hatton, for too long dismissed as a political lightweight who owed his high office of Lord Chancellor, of all things, to personal charm. For no earlier period do we possess so rich a series of character studies of its parliamentarians. This may of course in part be attributed to the more limited supply of sources than we possess for the Elizabethan period. But the fact remains that without Neale's work we should still be poorly served in our knowledge and understanding of these men and issues.

The queen, the parliamentarians, the institution of Parliament, have never looked the same since Neale did his work. But there emerged also another uncovenanted benefit. He showed the Privy Council in action through its Members of both Houses; the inner conflicts within its organization, reflected sometimes in the use made of Parliament by individuals; the pressures placed upon the queen through Parliament by her own councillors, for example in attacks on Mary, Queen of Scots. This was, to students of the period, a new facet to the Privy Council and has, incidentally, led to fruitful lines of inquiry into the politics of the early seventeenth century.

It is appropriate also to add, what becomes manifest in any reading of Neale's books and articles, that Neale not only recovered hitherto unused parliamentary documents such as the now famous Cromwell diary in Trinity College, Dublin, but he also taught historians how to extract from both familiar and unfamiliar records information and understanding which no one had hitherto considered within the historian's grasp.

II

I have so far been concerned, in my account of these works by Neale, to survey rather than to criticize the pattern and content of his achievement. I want briefly to complete that story. The last of the parliamentary trilogy appeared in 1957, a year after his retirement from his Chair at University College. He continued to write occasional articles and reviews, to read the Elizabethan sources and secondary works, to preside over his

seminar, to correspond with and meet scholars from both sides of the Atlantic—he went on attending the Anglo-American conferences until almost the year of his death—and to serve as an editor and member of the Editorial Board of the *Official History of Parliament* which had been set in motion in 1951. He paid his only visit to the United States in 1958, the fourth centenary of the queen's accession. He had been knighted in 1955.

Long ago Neale had hoped that he would spend his retirement writing a biography of the Earl of Essex. Had he done so it would, as it were, have completed the symmetry of his life's work, beginning and ending with a biography, the second one perhaps measuring up to the first in its knowledge, its insight, and its art. But it was not to be. In accepting the invitation to participate in the 'parliamentary history' he abandoned the other project, which would have been one of the delights of his old age; and we are all the losers. The 'parliamentary history' in which he was now involved, with its committee system, its quasi-Civil Service structure, its machinery for survey and revision irked him; and, as his work began to slow down he found the pressure of date-lines, inevitable in projects involving public funds, as well as some well-intentioned but inapposite detailed revision, irritating and obstructive. As far as Neale was concerned his commitment to the scheme was a mistake and it proved a millstone round his neck. It is necessary, for the record, to add that the final revision of the book was not in his hands nor was it seen by him.

It remains now to attempt a critical assessment of his work though I acknowledge that four decades after the biography and two decades after the completion of his parliamentary studies may be too close in time, and myself too close in friendship, for these conclusions to be anything but interim.

III

I have throughout this paper, except on a few occasions, set forth Neale's approach in his own terms; and because I did not want the coherent pattern of his life's work to be obscured I have largely reserved the critical approaches to his methods and conclusions to my final section. Some at least of these criticisms will be familiar to students of the period and I will therefore present them in summary form.

More than one friendly critic put his finger on two weaknesses

to which none of us who work in his field can plead innocence: that the approach was insular in space and time; in short that it had nothing to say about continental developments during the second half of the sixteenth century and little about the medieval parliamentary growth. The first element of this criticism can, I think, be fairly easily countered. Neale was not writing a history of European institutions. He did not possess the necessary equipment to do so and, in any case, the material was not accessible to him. He wrote a delightful short book on the *Age of Catherine de Medici* but it was not designed as a piece of research. If he had attempted this larger survey, or even developed comparable analyses, his major works could never have been written and we should have gained little in the process. The inadequate grasp on medieval developments is a harder criticism to counter. J. S. Roskell,¹ May McKisack,² and others have pointed out that the conquest of the boroughs by the gentry can be traced to a process going well back into the fifteenth century. More especially Professor Roskell's article, published in the *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* in 1964, forms an essential companion piece to the Neale corpus.³ For in the process of a searching inquiry into the changing fortunes of the House of Commons he challenged Neale's conclusion that the House had made notable strides in legislative influence during the time of Elizabeth.

Professor Roskell fully acknowledged that, as Neale had undoubtedly established, the Commons had gained considerable powers of self-discipline and institutional identity which were to serve it well. But he also pointed out that those M.P.s who spoke up for freedom of speech were few in number and that the most outstanding exponent of this minority opinion, Peter Wentworth, was suppressed by the *Commons themselves*. He underlined, what was being borne in upon some of us from repeated readings of *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments*, how little influence the Commons in effect exercised upon either the legislation or the executive acts of the Government. (I can think of only four occasions when Commons intervention was decisive: in the religious legislation of 1559, though thereafter their intervention in this area was stubbornly resisted by the queen; in ensuring

¹ J. S. Roskell, *The Commons in the Parliament of 1422* (Manchester, 1954).

² May McKisack, *The Parliamentary Representation of the English Boroughs during the Middle Ages* (1932).

³ J. S. Roskell, 'Perspectives in English Parliamentary History', *Bull. of the John Rylands Library*, 46 (1964), 448-75.

the execution of the Duke of Norfolk in 1572 and of Mary, Queen of Scots in 1587; and in the temporary reform in monopolies achieved in 1601. And it must be remembered that the Commons were often supported by at least a section of the Privy Council, otherwise they might not have got away with it.

Professor Roskell also showed the relative maturity of the medieval House of Commons during some phases of its development: that it used the processes of impeachment to gain a degree of control over the king's ministers, a piece of machinery not employed at all under the Tudors; that some late medieval parliaments had greater control over crown revenues than did their Elizabethan successors, both in their grants and in their appropriation; and that it was not until the late seventeenth century that some of the powers and influence of the medieval Commons were restored. A formidable case has been made and I am unaware of any answer which has been offered for this revision of Tudor parliamentary history. It should, however, be said that while Professor Roskell's case is a powerful one, full allowance should be made for the very considerable informal influence which the Commons exercised time and time again on the queen's ministers who had to use every skill of parliamentary management to contain these pressures. When, under the early Stuarts, as Notestein showed, this management became incompetent and weak, the lid was off.¹ It is true that the Commons could usually only exercise a negative force upon government policy, and for that reason it is extremely difficult to measure; but it is perfectly clear that men like Burghley and Robert Cecil were always attentive to these latent powers. Nor, I am sure, would Professor Roskell want to argue that his criticisms in any way diminish the unique and impressive account of a parliamentary institution in action which Neale contributed to Tudor scholarship.

There is another criticism which may be offered to Neale's parliamentary studies: that is that his two volumes are a study of conflict, or at least confrontation, between Crown and Commons and therefore minimize the overwhelming degree of co-operation which existed and which alone could make good legislation and good government possible. This criticism Neale in part anticipated. In the preface to the first of his two volumes on *Elizabeth I and her Parliament* he wrote: 'I have focused the narrative on the relations between the Crown and Parliament:

¹ W. Notestein, 'The Winning of the Initiative by the House of Commons', *Proc. of the Brit. Academy*, 11 (1924-5), 125-75.

partly because the story would have been formless and unreadable if I had attempted to discuss all the business that came before Parliament; and partly because my purpose is to reveal the significance of the Elizabethan period in the constitutional evolution of England, and, more specifically, to banish the old illusion that early Stuart Parliaments had few roots in the sixteenth century.¹ This is important but I think that the challenge has not been wholly met. Nor indeed can one entirely remove the impression that religion, especially Puritanism, claims so much of the centre of the stage that economic and related issues disappear in the shadows or are banished to the wings. Related to this is the point that Professor R. B. Wernham raised in a review in which he asked whether Neale was right in declaring that 'Elizabethan England, as mirrored in the House of Commons, was overwhelmingly Puritan in its sympathies.'² Professor Wernham uses Neale's own evidence to show that throughout the period the Puritans remained a minority in the House and, for a variety of reasons, could carry with them only a diminishing proportion of the parliamentarians and the gentry.

There remain other questions, too complex to raise in a paper of this kind and on this occasion, which could and should be examined at the appropriate time. Central to all this is the role of the queen. Did Neale over-emphasize the power of the queen and was her influence on the preservation of liberty or the welfare of England wholly beneficent? I have indicated elsewhere my growing conviction that her approach during the first three decades of her reign represented statesmanship of the highest order in healing the nation's wounds and in skilfully pursuing a foreign policy which gave full regard to her own precarious position, her limited financial resources, and the defence of the national interests. In the process she skilfully resisted the ideological and other forces which sought to drive her in more adventurous directions. But I have also come to believe that the last third of her reign witnessed a failure in not adapting her policies to changing needs, and in not modernizing her financial methods and organization or preparing her subjects for the changing conditions under her successor. For this failure Burghley shares a good deal of responsibility; and though his son, Robert Cecil, accomplished his first major task of ensuring a peaceful succession,

¹ J. E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments*, i. 11.

² R. B. Wernham, *Eng. Hist. Rev.* 69 (1954), 634, citing Neale's *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments*, i. 418.

the inherited dead weight of outdated principles and organization, and the lack of support from a new and uncomprehending monarch, destroyed the massive scheme of renovation to which Cecil had dedicated himself so late in the day.

Yet none of these observations can affect the basic evaluation of Neale's contributions. In those three major volumes, each a masterpiece in its own right, he portrayed a great institution, in its structure and action, in all the richness of its texture and variety, through his incomparable grasp of its sources and deep, almost uncanny, understanding of its day-by-day handling of its affairs. At the same time he brought to life the queen and her subjects through the creative exercise of his historical imagination of which the Elizabethans themselves would have been proud.

IV

In the Preface to his final volume on the Elizabethan parliaments Neale declared:

I have now completed a task that was planned when I was young and that has occupied most of my leisure, chiefly in the search for material. I find pleasure in the thought that it has been finished—though I shall miss the deadline in publication—while I still hold the Astor Chair of English History at University College, London. In my mind it is an offering—the discharge of my stewardship—to a College that I have delighted to serve for so many years.¹

It is perhaps appropriate to leave it to an American, Conyers Read, to pronounce a final word in this context:

... his Tudor seminar then may fairly be regarded as the focal point of nearly everything that has been done in Elizabethan history for the last generation both in England and in America. It will not be extravagant to say that he has done more than any other living English historian to draw English and American scholars into a fellowship in which, without national bias or private envy, they pursue together their common search for the truth.²

We who follow Neale count ourselves fortunate in our day and generation that the seeds planted by him have borne such a magnificent harvest for our instruction, sustenance, and delight.

JOEL HURSTFIELD

¹ J. E. Neale, *Elizabeth I and her Parliaments*, ii. 9.

² C. Read, *Am. Hist. Rev.* 59 (1954), 610.