

The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England, 1275-1504 (PROME)

Review Number:

643

Publish date:

Thursday, 31 January, 2008

Author:

C. Given-Wilson

ISBN:

0904628052 (CD-ROM)

Date of Publication:

2005

Price:

£50.00

Publisher:

Scholarly Digital Editions

Place of Publication:

Leicester

Reviewer:

David Grummitt

The Parliament Rolls are the principal record of the meetings of English Parliaments from the 13th to the early 16th centuries. Their importance to scholars of medieval England has long been recognised; between 1776 and 1777 they were edited, under the direction of the Reverend John Strachey, and published as the six-volume edition of *Rotuli Parliamentorum*. This new edition, funded by a major award from the Leverhulme Trust in 1997 and assisted in its publication by The National Archives and the History of Parliament Trust, supersedes Strachey's volumes and also incorporates material subsequently edited by F. W. Maitland and by Richardson and Sayles.

The text of *Rotuli Parliamentorum* has been collated with the original rolls in The National Archives (TNA, C 65), and new material added (for example, the rediscovered final membrane of the roll for the Parliament of October 1318). Unlike the old edition, [PROME](#) [2] includes notes of interlineations, erasures, damage, staining or *lacunae* in the text, marginal notes or illustrations, and other significant features in the manuscripts themselves. Translation or modernisation for all parts of the original text (in Latin, Anglo-Norman French and English) is provided in parallel text format. This latter feature is most welcome and is expertly done by the teams of researchers who collated the text under the direction of the editorial board. The translations alone will guarantee that the Parliament Rolls are more widely read by a new generation of scholars and that they are read in their entirety and in their proper context, rather than as stand-alone extracts. In addition, the electronic version contains 110 digital images from the original rolls.

As well as the text and translations of the Parliament Rolls themselves, *PROME* also includes scholarly introductions for all the Parliaments held from the reign of Edward I to Henry VII. This is the case even where the Parliament Roll is no longer extant (as is the case with the Readeption Parliament of Henry VI in 1470). These introductions discuss the records themselves, the context in which Parliament was assembled and, where possible, its business. Extra material relating to the Parliament from a wide variety of sources

(chronicles, other records of government, and records from private and local archives) is also included as an appendix to each introductory essay. Another important aspect of the introductions is that they, where possible, trace the business of Parliament through its sessions. The dates and locations of these, which are not apparent from the 18th-century edition, are given at the head of each introductory essay. This is particularly useful in the case of some of the long Parliaments of the 15th century (such as that of 1463 with its two postponements and five prorogations over a period of nearly two years).

Clearly, then, this new edition replaces its 18th-century predecessor and represents a monumental work of scholarship. Nevertheless, it is not without its problems, both of a technical and scholarly nature. The technical problems are sadly manifold and can result in an exasperating experience for the researcher. First, whereas *Rotuli Parliamentorum* contained an index volume (published subsequently in 1832), there is no index provided for *PROME*. This is a pity and it is also a shame that the editors did not see fit at least to include the 1832 index in their new edition. Second, the computerised text uses both the internal numbering of the manuscript Parliament Roll and the volume and page reference from *Rotuli Parliamentorum* to navigate, but not the printed edition of *PROME*. Each separate entry on the roll is also assigned an item number and it is possible to navigate the roll by this method, although this is sometimes easier said than done. The 1486 Act of Resumption, for instance, takes up 96 pages in the printed version and 30 membranes on the roll.

Most researchers, however, will probably use the extensive search functions on the computerised version to find their way around *PROME*. These searches can be narrowed down to individual reigns and the function searches within the introductions, texts and translations of the rolls. The problem with the search function arises principally with the question of variant spellings of place names and individual names. A wildcard ('*') function is available, but even this does safeguard against the sometimes eccentric spelling of our medieval ancestors (or sometimes careless copy-editing: Speaker Thorpe is on six occasions rendered as 'Thrope' in the translation of the Parliament of 1453). Users of *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, however, at least had the option of the index volume, where most of these variants were given, to assist them. This may sound petty, and in a way it is, but users of *PROME* need to be aware of these problems.

A more serious technical problem arises with the software developed to run the electronic version of *PROME*. First, I must clarify that these were problems principally related to the CD-ROM version, although similar (albeit less frequent) problems do occur with the internet-based subscription version. The sleeve of the CD-ROM instructs the user to copy the relevant files across to their hard drive. I followed these instructions on my laptop (running Windows XP for Professionals). For about a week the programme ran without a hitch, but subsequently I encountered problems on most of the searches I ran. The problem appears to be (and I am a historian rather than a computer expert, albeit a reasonably technically proficient one) that *PROME* uses Microsoft Internet Explorer to read and display the data. The error message, 'Internet Explorer cannot display the web page you requested' unfortunately occurs with a maddening frequency, often displaying the text but not the translation and vice versa.

The scholarly introductions written by the editorial team are useful, but again could be more so. The general introduction surveys the development of Parliament as an institution, particularly in the context of the rolls themselves and their relationship with other official records of parliamentary business. The editors posit an evolutionary phase of Parliament up to 1340 and a more settled phase thereafter. This conclusion, however, does not give sufficient weight to the dynamic and still developing nature of the parliamentary records in the 15th century. Private petitions, for instance, excluded from the rolls in 1332, crept back in increasing numbers during the course of the 15th century, while by Henry VII's reign almost every successful petition appears to have been enrolled. At the same time non-legislative material almost completely disappeared from the roll. By the end of the 15th century the Statute Rolls and printed statutes had emerged to challenge the position of the Parliament Rolls and some more sustained consideration of the reasons for the Rolls' later decline would have been welcome. Another strange editorial decision was not to include the Ancient Petitions (TNA, SC 8) beyond the reign of Edward I. This separate class of documents, some explicitly parliamentary in nature, was included by the editors of *Rotuli Parliamentorum*. So, for example, the petition presented to the Readeption Parliament of 1470-1 concerning an ordinance for the election of the Mayor of

York was printed by Strachey (v. 455-6); but, although noted in the appendix to the Readeption Parliament, it is not reproduced here. Scholars wishing to consult these petitions will therefore, frustratingly, need to have a copy of *Rotuli Parliamentorum* to hand.

It is also clear (and again, this is perhaps inevitable) that the introductions and appendices reflect the expertise and interest of the relevant members of the editorial board. Overall, the amount of extra material contained in the introductions and appendices reflects the industry and interest of the editors. I am more familiar with the 15th century and will restrict my comments to the work of Professor Curry and Dr Horrox. For the Parliaments of Henry VI, for instance, the French war looms largest, while trade matters receive less attention. For the period 1455-1504 mercantile matters and the role of merchants in counselling the King in and outside of the Commons chamber are given even less prominence. Much more could have been made of this, but instead Dr Horrox chooses to concentrate on her own area of expertise and interest: elite politics and the concerns of the land-holding classes.

This may sound very negative, but nothing should detract from the tremendous amount of work that has gone into the production of *PROME*. Professor Given-Wilson and his fellow editors are to be congratulated for overseeing the accurate transcription and translation of the rolls and also for their attempts to place the rolls in context. *PROME* is a very welcome development and one that is bound to engender more research and a better understanding of late medieval England and the formative centuries of the English Parliament. It is also to be hoped that *PROME* remains work in progress and that the electronic edition (which, I suspect, will be the more widely used in its various forms) will continue to be updated and improved as the state of our knowledge on the English Parliament develops.

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