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Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

House of Lords Reform: A History, Volume I: The Origins to 1937: Proposals Deferred, Peter Raina (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011).

The British, and before 1707 the English, House of Lords has a long, distinctive, class-based, essential constitutional role, beginning at least in the thirteenth century as a royal council of peers of the realm,¹ but you will not learn much more about origins and growth from these two scissors-and-paste volumes. The author's method is simple: provide his own linking paragraph between pages of excerpts from quoted primary and secondary sources.

The first chapter races through to the Restoration (1660), relying heavily on Luke Owen Pike's 1894 survey² and that of Powell and Wallis (1968).³ Barrister Pike was identified by a contemporary as "a clever, hard-working man, with a great fund of self-confidence, [and] a profound contempt for previous inquirers."⁴ The same may apply to Mr. Raina, who cavalierly ignores most of the recent scholarship on the House of Lords.⁵ He streaks through the eighteenth century in less than 30 pages, to the Reform Bill of 1832, rather like Mel Brooks' history of the world minus the hilarity!

The next 1131 pages and 52 chapters take the reader through a series of events, cases, bills, committees, statutes, and personalities hell-bent either for

¹ Peter Raina, *House of Lords Reform: A History*, Vol 1: Book 1 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011) at 5 [Raina, Book 1].

² Luke Owen Pike, *Constitutional History of the House of Lords* (New York: Franklin, 1894).

³ J Enoch Powell & Keith Wallis, *The House of Lords in the Middle Ages: A History of the English House of Lords to 1540* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1968).

⁴ John Foster Kirk, *Supplement to Allibone's Critical Dictionary of English Literature and British and American Authors*, Vol 2 (Philadelphia: JB Lippincott Company, 1902) at 1236.

⁵ For example, there is nary a notice of separate scholarly monographs by Richard W. Davis, Elizabeth Read Foster, Michael A.R. Graves, Robert B. Stevens, Andrew Swatland, and Corinne Comstock Weston, any one of which would have enriched reader understanding and Raina's presentation.

or against “reform”. Book One gets us to 1911, past Earl Russell’s 1869 “Life Peerages Bill”, the Earl of Rosebery’s 1888 Select Committee, and the Marquess of Salisbury’s 1888 “Life Peerages Bill”, to the great Rosebery-Salisbury-Asquith debates in 1910. Book Two, 1911–37,⁶ opens with the Marquess of Lansdowne’s “House of Lords Reconstitution Bill”, proceeds through the attempt to abolish hereditary titles in 1914, and addresses all sorts of reform motions introduced by Sutherland, Baldwin, FitzAlan, Clarendon, Salisbury, and finally Lord Strickland in 1937. The last “begged leave to withdraw the motion and, by leave, it was withdrawn.”⁷ And thus the author and his reader beg leave to withdraw, with Volume 1 of the *House of Lords Reform* ending in 1937.

The redeeming feature to all of this is Mr. Raina’s method. Each chapter attempts to capture the text and atmosphere of its topic’s primary evidence. He chooses to let each attempted legal reform’s story be told by its key primary document, so we are supplied with pages of excerpts, select paragraphs, and whole texts of bills and statutes, but virtually no case-law citations and judgments. Parliamentary debates are generously presented in bits-and-pieces, with Mr. Raina’s connecting comments. A few texts have not been previously published, including excerpts of Sir Arthur Bigge’s 1911 notebooks from the Royal Archives, Windsor Castle,⁸ revealing wonderful anecdotal political maneuvering. While there is do-it-yourself virtue in keeping new primary evidence raw, leaving the reader to make sense of it, one must worry about what was not included.

In the end, one can relish details from private correspondences, as peers and politicians exchange ideas and innuendoes, but overall the sheer tedium of each parliamentary committee report and draft bill smothers reader enthusiasm and insight. The author-editor-collector, Peter Raina, comes to this self-appointed task as a prolific author of Polish post-war political history, mainly on church–state issues and the Solidarity movement. Now resident in Oxford, he can boast over 175 published works in four languages,

⁶ Peter Raina, *House of Lords Reform: A History*, Vol 1: Book 2 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011).

⁷ *Ibid* at 606.

⁸ Raina, Book 1, *supra* note 1 at 550–67.

most recently on A.V. Dicey, English legal history's champion of parliamentary supremacy, in *A.V. Dicey: General Characteristics of English Constitutionalism, Six Unpublished Lectures*.⁹ He has produced this eccentric two-book volume of excerpts by relying largely on previously published whole collections and archaic secondary sources. The topic of *House of Lords Reform* is too important to not have serious scholarly attention, especially for what remains of the institution after Thatcher and Blair. Perhaps Mr. Raina's efforts can at least provide encouragement for future students of parliamentary history.

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⁹ Peter Raina, ed, *A.V. Dicey: General Characteristics of English Constitutionalism, Six Unpublished Lectures* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009).

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