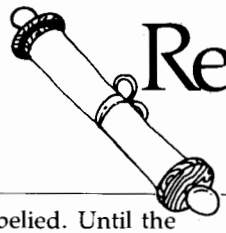

Recent Publications and Documents

THE GREAT PALACE: THE STORY OF PARLIAMENT by Christopher Jones, B.B.C., London 1983, 256 pp., and PLAYING THE PALACE: A WESTMINSTER COLLECTION selected by James Naughtie, Mainsteam Publishing Co., Edinburgh, 1984, 209 pp.

Books on historical buildings often sound like a tour guide on cassettes interspersed with vague, dusty facts forgotten from Grade Eleven. The fact that a history of the Palace of Westminster shares the advantage of chronicling the often bizarre succession of British Monarchs and the development of parliamentary democracy is, for the average reader, a questionable advantage at best. It takes a particularly gifted writer to raise this genre above the level of coffee-table history and to import an accurate feeling for what Westminster stands for and what it means today.

Christopher Jones has given us a marvellous example of how this can be achieved, largely through his sparkling, ironic and anecdotal prose. Because the text accompanied the BBC-TV series on the subject and is written to be heard rather than read silently, the style echoes an immediate voice; Jones is actually interested in claiming the reader's ear while he relates the imaginary details of historic events in Westminster.

Jones' insistence on the flavour of detail throughout his account of the development of the British Parliament consistently inspires a potentially dull account with actualities of daily life in England during any given period:

> When MPs moved into St. Stephen's in 1547... they sat in the chair stalls and made speeches at each other across the chancel of the chapel; they have been sitting in those same straight lines facing eachother ever since.... It was the fashion in Tudor times for men to wear enormous pantaloons stuffed with wool and hair which simply could not be squeezed into the pews recently vacated by the monks. So... holes, two inches square, were cut in the walls for posts which would take scaffolding on which... they could lean.... [p. 55]

Perhaps Hollywood has accustomed us to an imaginary grandeur which, for centuries, the realities of Westminster belied. Until the introduction of electricity in the 20th century, the greatest problems MPs faced were the lack of fresh air and adequate lighting. Coal fires and draughts designed to expel "unhealthy vapours" made the place hotter and stuffier than it already was, despite the first no-smoking law in Britain in 1723 forbidding the use of tobacco in the House: "It was all rather squalid. The place was dirty and it smelt; these were rats about it and it was grubby with bits and pieces of biscuits and fruits scattered around by Members." [p. 58]

The author's best chapters recount the fire of 1834 that destroyed most of Westminster, and the subsequent reconstruction of the New Palace. From the viewpoint of architectural and interior design, the new Palace of Westminster was by far the most ambitious undertaking ever completed in Britain, and Jones' account of the details of construction, the designer's problems and MPs' anxiety about the delays makes excellent reading. Included as well are remarkable photographs of the interiors of both Houses. Mr. Jones and the BBC obviously had access to parts of Westminster few people, save the Lords and MPs themselves, could ever have.

The final chapters are taken up with an explanation of the daily workings of Westminster as a modern parliament, including an historical sketch of the Press Gallery. The book is mercifully free of footnotes and includes a brief index.

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Before *Hansard* became the accurate record of debate it is now, words spoken in the British Parliament were jotted down as best they could by scribes, correspondents and journalists, and made public through journals and letters, broadsheets, newspapers, essays, diaries and magazines. The authors of these publications were some of the best prose writers in England — Dickens, Trollope, Dr. Johnson, and more recently, James Fenton of *The New Stateman*, Roy Hattersley of *The Listener* and Harry Boardman of the *Manchester Guardian*, among others. It is to all these sources that James Naughtie has gone for much of the material in his book, *Playing the Palace: A Westminster Collection*.

What we are given is more than a simple collection of snippets from great parliamentary speeches — anthologies of "greatest hits" of anything tend to be a little dull. Instead, we are invited to look down onto the floor of the House from the Press Gallery, and to read this selection of astonishing political oratory in conjunction with accounts by contemporary journalists of the day, who give to the proceedings a sense of immediate interest which the speeches out of context could not.

One example from recent times is the account of the Falklands debate that appeared in *The Scotsman* on 5 April 1982, after Argentina had invaded the Falkland Islands, and before Britain had retaliated. Other selections — from Elizabeth I, Cromwell, Wm. Pitt the Younger and Disraeli to Asquith, David Lloyd George, Churchill, Enoch Powell, Michael Foot and Bernadette Devlin, to name a few, are divided into 10, more or less random chapters: "Wars", "Four Spies", "A Government Falls" and so forth, prefaced by a short summary of the historical or political context of each. Among the stirring old chestnuts one expects are some surprisingly animated passages from lesser known Members. John Bright's speech against the Crimean War in 1855 is particularly passionate, as is Lord Byron's against a bill imposing capital punishment upon tradesmen who willingly destroy machines ("Is there not blood enough upon your penal code, that more must be poured forth to ascend to Heaven and testify against you?").

It all makes wonderful reading, especially in an age such as ours, when the level of political rhetoric is almost as low as the ability of the press to recognize and report it.

Garnet Barlow
Table Research Branch
House of Commons

SPEAKERS OF THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO 1867-1984, by Kathleen Finlay, Toronto, Legislative Library, Research and Information Services, 1985,

As explained in the forward of this book "little is known about the men