

**THE PAGEANT OF
PARLIAMENT.
VOL. I**

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The pageant of Parliament. Vol. I by Michael MacDonagh

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MICHAEL MACDONAGH

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THE PAGEANT OF PARLIAMENT

BY
MICHAEL MacDONAGH

AUTHOR OF "THE SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE"
AND "THE REPORTERS' GALLERY"

VOL. I

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PREFACE

THE purpose of this book, briefly stated, is to describe Parliament doing its work, as a living organization, in the framing of laws, in the levying of taxes and in their spending, and in the consideration of the discontents, anxieties and necessities of the Commonwealth, with a view to their removal or amelioration. I have embodied in my book—if I may say so without sounding the loud timbrel too vain-gloriously—considerable experience as a journalist of General Elections and by-elections in all parts of Great Britain and Ireland, and of thirty-five years' observation of the two Houses of Parliament from the Reporters' Gallery, supplemented by a study of their history and traditions, laws and procedure, the careers of leading statesmen, and the political principles by which they guided their management of public affairs.

There are many valuable text-books on the Constitution by learned lawyers and philosophical writers. My book does not aspire to be classed with these grave and profound treatises. They are of high documentary value, but I think it is doubtful whether one can really get to know Parliament from a study of them alone. They ignore the human side of Parliament. Often they seem to present Parliament as a mere abstraction—a thing of rules, principles and theories unrelated to the human personalities who compose its membership. Parliament cannot be divorced from life any more than Literature. Rightly to appreciate Parliament in its strength and in its weakness you must have an acquaintance with it in being, and an understanding of the politicians who, whether in office or out of office, whether in Government or Opposition, bend it, or try to bend it, to their will. Mr. Speaker Lowther, presiding at a lecture on the House

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of Commons, told a story which serves to illustrate the difference between theory and experience. When Sir William Anson, the author, as Mr. Lowther truly said, of "a very grave and almost classical work" on the British Constitution, was being escorted up the floor of the House of Commons to take the oath and his seat for the first time, an old and witty Radical member who happened to be sitting beside Mr. Lowther said to him: "Is this the gentleman who has written a great work on the House of Commons?" "Yes, that is the very man," replied Mr. Lowther. "Well," the other remarked, "he will find it a very different place from what he thought it was." It is idle for historical writers to try to depreciate the importance of personality in affairs. Certainly in Parliament it is personality that, even more than opinion, is the determining factor in every great political crisis.

I trace the progress of a Parliament, its unfolding and development, from the General Election, when it is constituted by the votes of the people, until the day the Sovereign, on the advice of the Cabinet, pronounces the sentence of its dissolution. I describe its framework and machinery, its chief officers, its ceremonies, usages and customs, its contrasts of solemnity and gaiety; the Party forces which move it and direct its course; how Administrations are made; the duties of Ministers; the pleasures and woes of the M.P.; how Public and Private Bills are passed; how Supplies are voted; the mode in which the proceedings of both Houses are reported for the newspapers; and the varied elements, aspects and usages of Parliament, whether it be regarded as the historic temple of British liberties, equally ancient and venerable with Westminster Abbey over the way; the scene of great achievements in oratory and statesmanship; the institution by which, as the incarnation of the current political thought of the day, questions affecting the well-being of the community are determined by legislators and administrators, or the field upon which the continuous and exciting duel between Parties is fought at close quarters, with all the whims, oddities, weaknesses of human nature as well as with its noble qualities. I have made some excursions into the domain of history.

That, of course, was inevitable in writing about Parliament, whose roots lie so deep in the past. But I have avoided as much as possible the broad beaten tracks, and have turned down unfrequented or little-trodden by-ways in search of fresh and apt anecdotes to enliven my descriptions, in fact and in experience, of the Pageant of Parliament.

There is one general observation which I should like to make, and it may not be out of place to make it here. My studies have led to the discovery that there has hardly ever been a time when it has not been asserted by some one or other, in writing or in speech, that the authority of Parliament and the esteem in which it is held have sadly declined. There is nothing surprising in that. Cynics and wits of all ages have tried their hand at making great institutions, as well as great men, butts at which to shoot their ridicule and contempt. Parliament has not escaped the common fate of the mighty and the sublime. It has been described as inefficient and corrupt. Its downfall has often been prophesied. Yet its foundations were never deeper or better laid than they are to-day, broad-based as they are on electoral comprehensiveness and the people's will. Parliament as I have presented it—even with all reverence and admiration—may not be perfect. It has its faults. After all, its legislators and administrators are but human. But it is, perhaps, as fine and perfect an instrument of democratic government as can humanly be devised. Ancient and renowned as it is, it stands not remote and apart. On the contrary, it is of the fabric of the life of the people. It makes a living reality of the great principle—"Government of the people, by the people, for the people." It is the country's chief political instrument of progressive civilization. It is idle, in the light of experience, to talk of its being clumsy, inefficient, slow. More than ever does it make possible the closest and quickest impact of the country's mind upon government and administration. In the World War it signally proved its practical and speedy utility. Statesmen obtained quickly and surely all the measures they deemed necessary for the national safety and the enemy's defeat. Whenever Parliament seems to have lost caste the cause may be traced, not to the institution