

## Preface

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This project had its inception in pondering the cycles of academic fashion. Why did constitutional history, once the mainstay of the history curriculum in 1900, suffer such a loss of prestige by 2000? For that matter, how had it risen to such preeminence in the first place? The explanations, we found, were far more complicated than we had originally suspected. Constitutional history's loss of prestige certainly depended upon developments within academe, but it also hinged upon accelerating political, social, economic, and international transformations. Historians were expected to provide national narratives that were at once compelling and reassuring. Armed with a newly won sense of professional expertise and a belief in the scientific nature of their scholarship, historians in Britain and America fastened on a narrative of constitutional evolution within a framework of Anglophone exceptionalism. A belief in the institutional superiority of Anglo-American law and government had crystallized by the early twentieth century into a central tenet of both national identity and historical scholarship.

In this book, we seek to illuminate these processes by analyzing the public and private writings of historians, while placing them within the context of wider societal and cultural change. In addition to the relevant secondary literature and the publications of leading constitutional historians starting with William Stubbs, the book is based on over seventy different manuscript collections (mostly the letters and papers of historians) in the United Kingdom and United States. At one level, we develop the theme of the emergence of constitutional history as the dominant field in the discipline in the half century or so after the onset of professionalization, and its gradual decline as new modes of historical inquiry, chiefly in social history, took hold. At another level, we distinguish

the various strands of constitutional history (e.g., racial, institutional) and the ways in which they affected and were affected by broader cultural patterns and national policies in both societies. We show that while constitutional history became the dominant mode of discourse within the profession and influenced wider (especially elite) circles, it was by no means uncontested. Sharp “culture wars” over rival forms of national identity based on history resulted, especially in the interwar United States. We also pay considerable attention to the role of constitutional historians in promoting the growth of empire and the Anglo-American “special relationship.” Finally, the small but growing role of women historians within the field is considered in a separate chapter, as is the field of legal history.