

The Oxford Illustrated History of Tudor and Stuart Britain

Review Number: 19

Publish date: Wednesday, 1 January, 1997

Author: John Morrill

ISBN: 9780198203254

Date of Publication: 1996

Price: £25.00

Pages: 487pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <http://www.oup.com>

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Anthony Fletcher

The only appropriate beginning to this review is to salute a tremendous collective achievement: as a publishing project the book is stupendous and this must owe much to the picture researcher Gill Metcalfe, the OUP production team and the editor; as a parade of high scholarship the book does great credit to its eighteen contributors. John Morrill deserves the credit for the conception of the book which is original, clever and accomplished with great aplomb. He stitches together politics and government, religion and society with a flexible use of chapters which survey the whole or the parts of the period and which weave a story in and out of each other. There are two strong building blocks. Three chapters, by Diarmaid MacCulloch, Steven Ellis and John Morrill himself, which come early in the book, deal with government and the British problem. Three more, towards its end, deal consecutively with politics. Here Wallace MacCaffrey is followed by Christopher Haigh and he is followed, in a second chapter, by the editor. These are all well-known names and the writing, command and sureness of touch is as we would expect. Diarmaid MacCulloch's exposition of the mentality of monarchs and noblemen regarding consolidation of the Tudor kingdom is especially noteworthy. It also has a more original slant than most of this part of the book. One of the advantages of the general approach is that we learn about the foundations of political stability and continuity before we engage with courts and propaganda, the makings of political culture. This seems the right way round in a general history designed to bring the last thirty years of research together in a way that will make sense of the story for the reader who has not meanwhile been inhabiting academe.

The point about well-known names applies throughout. John Morrill has picked his team with care and his confidence in the contributors is rewarded by essays that are never less than competent and are sometimes - like MacCulloch's - quite brilliant. Simon Adams and John Reeve on foreign policy are efficient, Mark Goldie on the search for religious liberty between 1640 and 1690 is persistently illuminating, John Guy and Kevin Sharpe handle monarchy and political culture with the zest and acuteness that one would expect from them. But a chapter that springs out at one as a quite exemplary miniature is Conrad Russell's on the Reformation and the creation of the Church of England between 1500 and 1640. Written in his limpid and often epigrammatic style, his sheer feel for what religion was and did for people in the period is overwhelming. Some of what he says here has been said before, some of it indeed goes back to articles published thirty years ago, but it has never been said better or with such power and conviction. Along the way in all these chapters many revisions, presented succinctly and almost in passing, confront the reader

who may have studied the period in the 1960s, 1970s or 1980s at 'A' level or university or who may have been a consumer for sheer interest and pleasure of previous books on Tudor and Stuart England. John Guy, for example, neatly in a paragraph or two, buries the hoary crisis of mid-Tudor monarchy; Kevin Sharpe persuasively smoothes out the seventeenth century with his stress on Cromwell and his court accelerating 'the political flow that led to the Restoration'.

We are left with a splendid introductory chapter in which Tom Webster deploys a mass of recent research on the landscape to produce a compelling synthesis matched by superb aerial photographs of the face of England and, together with this, a series of chapters that can be broadly called social history. This, it should be noted, is only in very limited ways a history of the British economy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though there is good material on agriculture, work more generally and overseas trade in the context of foreign policy contained in the volume. John Morrill's claim in his Foreword is that the book deliberately gives some short shrift to 'high culture', so that it can 'bring to light the lives of ordinary men and women as they 'experienced and contributed to an age of opportunity'. How far, we may ask, does it succeed in this bearing in mind that its main focus is political? At a material level the claim is well upheld by Amy Erickson's well-argued and detailed chapter on the family, household and community, by Christopher Brooks's able exposition of how the courts worked and how people used them and by Andrew Gurr's account of London theatre going. It seems a pity in all these chapters though that editorial direction did not put more emphasis on the mental and emotional experience rather than simply the conditions of social life. Andrew Gurr's previous work has provided fascinating material on what it was actually like or what commentators tell us it was like attending the playhouses, but this is not picked up in this account although as he says 'playgoing was standard' in Elizabethan and Early Stuart London.

The exploration of the mental worlds of the period is left to John Adamson and John Walter. It is Walter, tackling the mental worlds of the commons, who has produced the more satisfying overall synthesis. His chapter is lucid and rich in apt illustrative detail. Just occasionally there is a judgement that makes one pause: is it really the case, taking the recorded examples of an event that generally went unrecorded, that skimmington rides were notably more common in the south-west than elsewhere? But the reflectiveness that Walter brings to the discussion of religion, magic, superstition and of attitudes to the natural world and his thoughtfulness about the newly burgeoning print culture of the time is impressive. He sees not simple solutions to the problems raised by the sources for popular culture, by the ballads for example which can be read or heard by different audiences and given myriad different meanings. Yet overall he is surely right to insist that while literature 'actively constructs a culture's sense of reality', it may for the most part have done so in a way which underwrote 'existing representations of society'. Adamson is interesting on country houses arising from monarchic ruins but Leez priory in Essex, taken over by the Rich family, can hardly be positioned as 'near Colchester'. He is convincing in the stress he puts on lineage and virtue among the gentry and aristocracy and he is good on the significance of funerals, but his argument about the fashion for gothic in the secular architecture of the period is taken much too far. To suggest that the restored Warwick Castle or Sir Henry Montagu's fantasy medieval fortress at Kimbolton are characteristic expressions of the architectural preference of the age is simply wrongheaded. Adamson, meanwhile, omits any proper exploration of the social and mental world of those Elizabethan mansions, with their rooftop walks and banqueting houses where the ladies watched the men out hunting, which were a complete expression of a new world of confident and sophisticated upper class culture. The irony strikes one the harder since the book's superb jacket is illustrated by a view of Hardwick Hall - more 'glass than wall' - which perfectly captures its bombastic pride. Pictures elsewhere in the text of Blickling and Hatfield, it can also be noted, are not referenced to this chapter.

Perhaps the least successful chapter is Rosemary O'Day's on education. It is just about adequate as an account of boys' schooling and of the universities but the short section on the education of women is feeble and at times misleading. It makes no sense to declare that girls' absence from the grammar schools was not a gender issue but a vocational one since gender and vocation are almost synonymous at this time. O'Day makes much of the exceptional educational regime undertaken by a few girls from noble and gentry families and then slides over the gulf in time between Thomas More and John Locke, without noting the very strong

reaction against any kind of academic training for women during the early seventeenth century. Moreover, it confuses the issue mightily to talk of a 'direct progression' from More to Locke when the latter's admonitions, brief though they were, about girls make it clear he did not share More's notion of the appropriateness of classical learning for the female mind. O'Day also fails to explain the sense in which she calls the new boarding schools of the seventeenth century 'finishing schools', distracting attention from their social role by a reference to the extension of the medieval tradition of convent education. These schools are an important and little noticed development in the gender polarisation of English society and deserve more attention as such, but it would be hard to substantiate O'Day's statement that by around 1650 'every town of any size' possessed one.

The volume then is a very considerable success: it will inform and delight in equal measure. If it expresses the state of the art it also opens questions about what a history of a period of two hundred years of British history should essentially be about. The balance of the book is such that people's experience of life in the widest sense is not the main focus. This is still a history of politics and government with the social, religious and mental context ably sketched in as background. It is much more a history of Britain than a history of the British people, but as such, in presenting the best of modern scholarship to a wider audience, it is magnificent.

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/19#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/216>

[2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>