



***The Reign and Life of
Queen Elizabeth I:
Politics, Culture, and Society
By Carole Levin
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Reviewed by: Melita Thomas***



The Reign and Life of Queen Elizabeth I: Politics, Culture, and Society. By Carole Levin. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. ISBN 978-3-030-93009-7 (ebook) xvii + 287 pp. £19.99.

A cursory search on Elizabeth I soon reveals that dozens, if not hundreds, of books and articles have been published on the queen even since the turn of the century, so what can a new publication add to the debate? Carole Levin's contribution is a move away from a recent focus on cultural aspects of Elizabeth's reign, such as Cole's *The Portable Queen: Elizabeth I and the Politics of Ceremony* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2000) or very specific investigations of aspects of the queen herself, an example being Evans' interdisciplinary *The Language of Queen Elizabeth I: a sociolinguistic perspective on royal style and identity* (Blackwell, 2013), to a broad view of Elizabeth in both her political and her private context. This holistic approach necessarily has less detail, but it gives a wide-ranging overview of Elizabeth I and the institutions and individuals surrounding her, both as a queen and as a woman. It will be of enormous value to those students seeking a comprehensive introduction to the queen and her reign, while encompassing material of benefit to specialists.

The introduction contains a biography of Elizabeth and a chronological account of her reign. Whilst Levin is clearly an admirer of the queen, she does foreground some of the low points that are often overlooked, such as the tough economic situation in the 1590s and the disastrous wars in Ireland. Following this, the work is divided into two parts, *Politics and Religion*, and *Court and Society*. Each of these contains chapters covering the mechanisms of government in the first part, and more cultural aspects of the reign in the second. In Part One, Levin briefly outlines the roles of the privy council and of parliament. The description of the privy council's duties is followed by short biographies of some of the most notable councillors, especially helpful for understanding the interplay of power and influence between councillors, secretaries, and clerks. In an interesting discussion of William Davison, Levin suggests that he was deliberately placed as a principal secretary to bear the brunt of the consequences that Elizabeth's councillors knew would follow the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, an insight into the conduct of politics that reflects Levin's vast knowledge of the period. It is clear that Levin has used the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* as a key research tool, and some of its sectarian bias towards Protestantism has crept in—Protestants epitomise virtue, while the Catholics are usually the troublemakers. Similarly, the unreferenced suggestion that recusancy fines were used

to help the poor is a very generous interpretation of what might be considered an aggressive assertion of state control of religion.

Particularly useful in Part One is the summary of what was undertaken and achieved—or not—in each of Elizabeth's nine parliaments. The arguments over free speech associated with the parliamentarian Peter Wentworth are touched upon, of which, had Levin had a greater word count available, it would have been interesting to read more.

A comparable structure of topic followed by information about pertinent individuals is used for the second part. These pen portraits introduce many people likely to be previously unknown to the reader. For example, the section about visitors to England includes information not just about well-known figures such as Helena Snakenborg, who arrived in England in the train of Cecilia of Sweden but remained as a friend of Elizabeth, but also obscure figures plucked from their homelands to be brought to England, one example being two Indigenous Americans, lodged with Sir Walter Raleigh. The section on Russian exchanges is also full of new information—one curious example being the suggestion that Ivan the Terrible, in search of an eighth wife (although number seven was still alive) wished to open negotiations for a match with the queen's relative, Mary Hastings.

The chapter on plots and assassination attempts against the queen is comprehensive. It suggests that Elizabeth's councillors lived in a state of paranoia, which may or may not have been justified: it was hard for them, and for us, to disentangle real plots from the ramblings of the mentally or emotionally disturbed, or from the entrapment tactics used by Burghley and Walsingham in their drive to protect Elizabeth and Protestantism.

For advanced scholars, the most innovative chapters are those on mirrors and dreams. That on mirrors delves into the use of mirrors, both actual and metaphorical, in Elizabethan society. High-quality glasses were greatly prized, and seen not just as practical items, but as having metaphysical properties—enabling insight into the soul. In the intangible sense, mirrors were also guides to ethical conduct. Levin explores how this concept of mirrors as reflections of virtue was frequently used in petitions to the queen, or in Elizabeth's own work, one of her earliest literary triumphs being her translation of Marguerite of Angoulême's *Mirror of the Sinful Soul* for her stepmother, Katherine Parr. Whilst Elizabeth was apparently delighted by what her astrologer, Dr Dee, could show her in his scrying mirror, Burghley was concerned that they might be used for devilish purposes: mirrors were ambiguous and obscure, and not always worthy of trust.

The following chapter also moves out of the purely practical and analytical space to consider how Elizabeth and her courtiers engaged with dreams. With the alleged prophetic dream of Catherine de' Medici, Queen of France, apparently being fulfilled when Henri II was killed in a jousting incident, the atmosphere was ripe for interpretation of dreams as harbingers of the future. Levin has researched a number of dreams that Elizabeth either experienced herself, or that were described to her—including one experienced by one Mary Cocker, of Hertfordshire. Although she was of humble background, Mary's information was deemed important enough by the county officials to be recorded.

There is also an in-depth analysis of the rumours and gossip that Elizabeth was subjected to all her life, and even after her death, with one particularly bizarre anecdote popularised by Bram Stoker, author of *Dracula*: the story being that the real Elizabeth died aged about eleven, and was ever afterwards impersonated by a boy. In Levin's view, as she tersely notes, the idea that Elizabeth was really a man, which continues to circulate in various guises, is born out of people's reluctance to believe that a great ruler could be a woman. Levin focuses on the content of the slanders, identifying that they are often sexual in nature. She does not discuss them in the wider context of the political battle for the soul of the nation, which was the focus of Lake's *Bad Queen Bess? Libels, Secret Histories, and the Politics of Publicity in the Reign of Queen Elizabeth I* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

This is an accessible volume which packs in enormous quantities of information about the queen and her reign in a well-organised, readable, form and includes interesting and engaging nuances and perspectives beyond politics and religion. It will be invaluable not just to students but to any reader wishing to understand Elizabeth's reign, and the mentalités of the queen, her councillors, and courtiers.

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