



1990

## Review Essay: Christopher Haigh, ed., *The Reign of Elizabeth I*

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### Recommended Citation

Platt, F. J. (1990) "Review Essay: Christopher Haigh, ed., *The Reign of Elizabeth I*," *Quidditas*: Vol. 11 , Article 28.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rmmra/vol11/iss1/28>

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Venetian circumstances of Shylock, Antonio, Othello, Iago, and the others, and Levith sheds a very helpful light on those circumstances.

Other chapters and plays that travel beyond Venice show the weaknesses of the approach, which basically tries to connect a piece of local color from a play with some point of reference beyond the play. The purpose of such connection is to show Shakespeare's knowledge – more often, his ignorance – of Italy, ultimately in Levith's last chapter to suggest again that Shakespeare did not tour Italy. Because some of the plays under discussion offer little in the way of local color, Levith frequently develops his discussions as more general introductory comment of these plays, their sources, plots, themes, and characters' names. Though intelligently offered, such introductory matter does not strengthen this sketch of Shakespeare's Italy so much as it seems to try to compensate for the meagerness of survey and subject.

In general it appears that Levith is not seeing an Italy of Shakespeare's so much as he is tracing reflections of the popular imagination that he brings to the plays, perhaps thinking that Shakespeare means to flatter this popular imagination and a popular audience with his Italian settings. There is, however, another more interesting book here *in posse*. This potential book is half-visible in Levith's occasional remarks and asides concerning the *imaginary* status of this Italy, concerning the theater's *speculations* about the identity and difference of persons or of cultures. Shakespeare is too keen a social critic and satirist, and as an artist, he is too adept at the juxtaposing of fictive settings for this more modest sketch of sources, settings, and lines finally to satisfy as an adequate account of Shakespeare in Italy.

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Christopher Haigh, ed., *The Reign of Elizabeth I*, University of Georgia Press, 1987.

Christopher Haigh has brought together in this book a group of historians who represent the cutting edge of present Elizabethan scholarship. Together they explore the composition of the Elizabethan political system and “examine how its institutions responded to the issues which most worried politicians and churchmen” (2). The book's nine essays, prefaced by Haigh's stimulating introduction, cover topics as diverse as foreign policy, Parliament, the exchequer, the court, government social regulation, the Elizabethan Reformation, and English Catholics. Collectively, the essays dismantle many of the “complimentary certainties” (2) of those historians who published their major studies in the 1950s and 1960s, and each in its own way helps to emancipate Elizabeth's reign from “slavery to the origins” (19) of the seventeenth-century Civil War.

Norman Jones sets the tone of this volume by concluding that the first year of Elizabeth's reign established a conservative pattern for future policy, a pattern from which she never deviated. Simon Adams, James Alsop, and Penry Williams then focus on the workings of her government as a whole and conclude that even though its chief officials "aged steadily with the Queen" (60), and the ad hoc nature of her government seemed to operate in the interests of these men rather than the crown or public, it was still able to "secure most of its principal objectives" (146) through 1603 because court, council, and counties achieved a degree of political consensus previously unknown in Tudor England.

G. R. Elton's stimulating revisionist essay on Parliament concludes that little institutional development occurred in either Lords or Commons from 1559-1601. Lacking either power over the purse strings or an organized "opposition," Parliament was dominated by the queen and council and so was strong only when acting in concert with the throne. Here, Elton gently but persuasively unravels J. E. Neale's "evolutionary scheme" for the history of the Tudor Commons, which was supposedly led by Puritans who at the expense of the crown secured real power "just in time" to do battle with the Stuart kings.

G. D. Ramsay, the "elder statesman" of this volume's contributors, reminds us of the importance of mercantile matters in Elizabethan diplomacy but unfortunately falls prey to some of the clichés of earlier historians who insist that the Elizabethan "diplomatic organization was makeshift" (151) and its diplomats inadequately trained and reimbursed for their services. Such assumptions are rapidly collapsing in the face of recent American scholarship (led by Professor Gary Bell of Sam Houston State University), which clearly establishes that the Elizabethan diplomatic system was surprisingly well organized and filled with highly educated men who had served extensive diplomatic apprenticeships and were paid more regularly and adequately than any other Western European diplomats.

Patrick Collinson, Christopher Haigh, and Paul Slack end the volume with stimulating essays on the Elizabethan church, the response of English Roman Catholics to the same, and the impact of a paternalistic government's social propaganda on the maintenance of social order in the increasingly hard times of the late sixteenth century. Together with the other contributors, these historians have filled their well-documented essays with numerous signposts for future research and publication. This book is a must for all students of Elizabethan England.

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