

Lucy Wooding, *Tudor England: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. xii, 708 pp. ISBN 978-0-300-16272-1.

Lucy Wooding's book begins with several timely warnings: readers need to be wary of popular accounts of the period, which are variously "fabricated," "prettified," and which present it in "misleading" ways: "Tudor England in its own time was nothing like it looks on a screen." For Wooding, as for most readers of this review, the period is "more complicated, more intractable and much more interesting" (1-2). This is a big book with a vast canvas, and many excisions and economies to make room for its incisive portrait of these difficult pasts. It is more focused on England and Wales than much recent work (though finding space for illuminating coverage of Ireland and the successive foreign policy debacles of different regimes), and is as interested in the evidence of how ordinary people behaved as it is in elite ideologies. Its animating contribution is its commitment to revisionist historiography around the Reformation, where changes in public ideology are offset by the evidence of people on the ground.

Wooding's structure intersperses chapters on the five Tudor reigns with thematic discussions of topography, authority, writing and language, the wider world, drama and performance, and three closely linked chapters covering the breadth of sixteenth-century religious practice and change. It is at once a white-knuckle ride through a period of intense change, and a reminder of the ways in which Tudor intellectuals thought about the past, even to the extent of manipulations we almost no longer notice. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of John Foxe, who Wooding shows using history to advance his "deeply partisan purpose" of making England's religious past "proto-Protestant"—for Foxe even the invention of print was ultimately (if wrongly) a divinely ordained, Protestant innovation (5, 103). The more objective William Camden is delicately poised against Foxe as a more "dispassionate" practitioner of historical writing, whose work anticipates Wooding's own desire to dispel "our prejudices and assumptions about Tudor England" (5).

The overviews of the Tudor monarchs, and the particular challenges they each faced, provide the book with its narrative impetus. Henry VII emerges as an effective general and administrator, mischaracterized as "avaricious" and "dull" (49). In contrast, Henry VIII failed to understand key lessons he might have learned from his father: the limitations of royal power and the importance of cultivating individual loyalty (204). Henry fails precisely because of his inability to understand that effective monarchical power depended less on divine sanction than "on popular cooperation"; the consequence of these failures was a kingdom where conflict around religion was "endemic" (196, 198). Edward VI's reign is burdened by the weight of unrealistic expectations, touchingly witnessed in Holbein's portrait of him as baby with a rattle standing in place of a sceptre (279, plate 9). For Wooding, previous historians have relied too much on the idea of Edward's reign as a period of continuous religious and political crisis with not enough emphasis on the "capacity of Tudor society for coping with disaster" (311). As with her grandfather, Wooding offers an empathetic account of Mary's reign: she appears as a queen negotiating a new and problematic form of authority, not fully understood by her male counsellors, while she vainly attempts to rebuild community and "the ideal of Catholic Church and commonwealth" (388). The extraordinary, botched "political theatre" of the execution of Cranmer is thus carefully offset by Mary's contemporaneous reputation for mercy (377-78). Wooding's chapter on Elizabeth is a bravura essay in empathy and nuance; as she states at the outset in a balanced and lucid summary, "it is hard not to cheer for this brilliant and indomitable woman, who battled so untiringly to do an extraordinarily difficult job, and managed to do it reasonably well" (426). This is not so much to reinscribe the myth of Gloriana but to stress (as in the chapter's title), its "Invention" as a means of coping with vast tensions in religious and

political ideology as well as conventional patriarchal assumptions around the theory and practice of queenship.

Alongside this narrative strand, the thematic chapters enable a more discursive approach which gives generous attention to the lives of ordinary people. At one extreme is the brutal execution of the parish priest Robert Welsh, who was hung in chains outside his own church in Cowick (outside Exeter) in 1549, dressed in the sacred vestments of a Catholic priest in “a theatrical attempt to discredit the faith for which [Welsh] had fought” (481). Wooding’s account of religious conflict is nevertheless keen to stress that those like Welsh who died for their beliefs were “probably least representative of the population as a whole,” leading to the broader argument that a distinctively Protestant culture emerges as late as the 1570s, at the point when Catholics “became the intriguing minority” (245). In this light, the fall of the archbishop of Canterbury, Edmund Grindal, after his “breath-taking” telling-off of Elizabeth for meddling with doctrinal issues (glanced at in the “Julye” eclogue of *The Shepheardes Calender*), points to the intimate relationship between religious practice and political positioning. Grindal’s fate of being consigned to a political “limbo” was at least preferable to Welsh’s (463). Throughout this work, Wooding is sensitive to the ways in which recent historiography emphasises the complexity of individual motivations, which are often in tension with the well-known dictats of official ideology. Thus in a different context, patriarchal expectations and norms around sexuality are felt to oppress both women and men; the Tudor male was as much an anxious subject, prone to tears and the butt of cuckold jokes, as he was an aspirant Petruccio (129-39).

The book’s central point of gravity is religion and corrective ways of reframing the narratives of religious change. Wooding insists on the formalism of early Protestantism: despite the rhetoric of radical change, continuity is a key aspect of religious experience during the period with disagreements centring around a religion of the word versus a religion of visual embodiment (272). Her account is particularly sensitive to the tension between (for example) the Edwardian campaign to destroy religious imagery and the “more enduring loyalties” of the people to precisely those visual forms (118). In this context, more might have been said about changing attitudes towards the visual arts, itself the topic of much recent scholarship, around for example the development of the “Citizen Portrait” genre. But this is a minor point in the context of what is a sustained rethinking of how Tudors felt about their religion as a practical endeavour as much as a series of theological problems. A nice example of this is the work of the Yorkshire clergyman and gardener, William Lawson, whose cultivation of orchards (places of “unspeakeable pleasure, and infinite commoditie”) dovetails with a conception of “Christian harmony [which] bore a strong resemblance to those expressed at the start of the Tudor era” (17, 521).

This practical, almost untheoretical approach, is evident in Wooding’s use of Tudor literature. Thus the humour of much Renaissance writing (jest-books, broadsides, and satire) is contested by the views of elite writers like Sidney and Spenser, for whom imaginative writing was more tied to the promotion of inculcating “civic and moral duties” among the educated classes (318, 323). More broadly still in the final chapter, drama becomes a key metaphor for understanding a society which keenly debated its troubled and ethics through its literature. Historians must therefore look to the literary record for “the patterns of human emotion and endeavour” and “the stuff of life which escapes other kinds of historical record” to flesh out their understanding of “this turbulent era” (560). Though literary scholars might reasonably cavil at some of these generalizations, that should not distract from both the value Wooding sees in literature as source material, and the important place she gives it in the assessment of the period. Since the pursuit of fame is such an animating trope in sixteenth-century writing, the continuing salience of that writing to the sense we make of the past is a compensation in kind.

Overall, then, this is a readable and often brilliant book, which should serve students extremely well as a starting point for understanding the complexity of the Tudor period. There are inevitable omissions: despite the generous space given to literature, little is said about music or architecture. Nevertheless, the reader will not come away from this work with any sense of shortfall, but rather with an abiding sense of Wooding's compassionate and serious engagement with the lives of Tudor people, whether these are the victims of religious change or ordinary people doing their best to survive in uncertain times. Spenser called Camden a "lanterne vnto late succeeding age"; Wooding herself sheds a salutary and illuminating light on the Tudor past for the specialist and student alike.

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