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# Elizabethan Life in Town and Country

M. St. Clare Byrne



## Elizabethan Life in Town and Country

Since its first appearance in 1925, *Elizabethan Life in Town and Country* (1961) has securely established itself both for the general reader and the student as an accepted authority for the social history of the age. Its range and method are indicated by the reviewer who hailed it as 'more enthralling than a best-seller', and by the *Times Literary Supplement* which described it as having 'almost every sentence based on contemporary description'.



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Elizabethan Life in  
Town and Country



Loe here the pearle,  
Whom God and man doth loue:  
Loe here on earth,  
The onely starre of light:  
Loe here the Queene,  
Whom no mishap can moue:  
To chaunge her mynde,  
From vertues chiefe delight:

Loe here the heart,  
that lo hath honord God:  
That for her loue,  
We feele not of his rod:  
Pray for her health,  
such as good subiectes bee:  
(Oh Princely Dame.)  
there is none like to thee.

I. QUEEN ELIZABETH I

Woodcut portrait, with verses by Giles Godhead, 1563  
From the Huth Ballads

Elizabethan Life  
in Town and Country

BY

M. ST. CLARE BYRNE

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## Acknowledgments

My grateful thanks for their courtesy in permitting the following items to be used to illustrate this book are due to: His Grace the Duke of Bedford for Plate 7 (*d*), (Woburn Abbey Collection); The Most Honourable the Marquess of Bath for Plate 7 (*c*), (Longleat Collection); The Right Honourable the Earl of Verulam for Plate 7 (*b*), (Gorhambury Collection: copyright photograph, Courtauld Institute of Art); The National Portrait Gallery for Plate 7 (*a*): The British Museum for the Frontispiece, Plates 4 and 5, and the line-blocks a, b, c and d: The Victoria and Albert Museum for four photographs, Plates 3 and 8: The National Buildings Record for Plate 6 (*a*), (copyright photograph); Lady Greg for the late Sir Walter Greg's photograph of Moreton Old Hall, Plate 6 (*b*): Mr. C. Walter Hodges and his publishers, Messrs. Ernest Benn, for his wall-sheet drawing of The Globe Theatre, p. 265.

## Preface

I OWE A debt to this book which is, in effect, a debt of gratitude to its readers. When it was being written, interest in things Elizabethan was at a low ebb. As successive editions were called for, in order to maintain its usefulness I had to keep in touch with the progress of Elizabethan studies; and instead of a perfunctory task, the changes that were taking place in our attitude to the age made this a stimulating and rewarding experience which I might otherwise have missed, as my own research activities had taken me back to the earlier half of the Tudor century. It was a book that I had enjoyed writing, which was reward in itself; but that it should have continued to meet with this live response, while new books on the subject multiplied steadily, was reward beyond anything that the young writer of 1925 could have dared to hope. To revise it thoroughly, and to expand and rewrite where necessary, seems, therefore, the best way of saying Thank you, in 1961. Its inclusion in the University Paper Backs series has given me the opportunity to incorporate in the text most of the material added in the second, fourth, sixth and seventh editions and to make further additions in many of the chapters. The original second chapter has become two chapters and now includes an account of the Queen's palaces. The chapter on *Childhood and Education* has been expanded and rewritten in parts: Appendices III, IV and V have been almost entirely re-written. The Bibliography has been revised throughout and brought up to 1961. Six line blocks have been added to the text and four of the half-tone plates are new. In character and purpose, however, the book remains unaltered. It was originally planned as a general introduction to the age for the general reader, the university student and the sixth-former; and I hope it may still help the student of literature to go exploring in some of the

byways of history and encourage the history student in the enjoyment of literary material.

Except for a few alterations in tense and phrasing the Introduction added in 1934 and its 1944 Postscript remain as first written. I think, in this form, they may give today's readers a more vivid idea not only of the impact of changes in attitude while they were taking place in the years between the two World Wars, but also of the disinherited mood in which the nineteen-twenties had confronted the Elizabethans. Something had been taken from us that our Victorian parents and grandparents had enjoyed. My own reaction was touched-off by nineteenth-century romantic criticism: if this was the correct thing, received opinion about the lesser dramatists, then the Elizabethans were not for me nor I for them, in 1914. This was not a solitary reaction, nor was it merely brash and perverse. And what happened to me in the intervening years before I began writing this book in 1923 was significant of a readjustment to that mood which had already begun to find expression in serious bibliographical and historical scholarship. I fell in love with the documents – inventories and bills, letters, household accounts statutes, wage-assessments, houses and furniture – with the ordinariness of life which gave this book its theme, and, consequently, its continuing usefulness, as by the nineteen-forties everybody had fallen in love with social history. In 1934 the Introduction was deliberate, conscious advocacy of the belief that in this kind of approach the ordinary reader would find ample and satisfying recompense for that earlier, lost enthusiasm, as I had done. In 1944 it was obvious that the position had been consolidated and that readers and writers alike were intent upon adding to the picture of society a more profound understanding of the social organism and its modes and habits of thought. The ground that had seemed lost when the mood of disenchantment fell upon us had been more than recovered. By now it is probably true to say that Elizabethan studies have never stood higher in the general esteem – hence my gratitude for encouragement to return and enjoy them from time to time.

This is the debt I can, in a manner, repay. What I have owed to the encouragement of my friends the late Dr A. W. Pollard and the late Sir Walter Greg is something which can only be acknowledged by such adherence to standards of which they first made me

aware as I have tried to achieve in all work attempted. One other personal debt is equally general, and due upon the whole sum of what I have written, to my friend Miss M. M. Barber, to whom, in 1925, I was indebted for the practical help of careful proof-reading and indexing, as I am again in this new edition.

MURIEL ST. CLARE BYRNE

LONDON

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## Introduction

THE NINETEENTH CENTURY sang and shouted with enthusiasm when it stumbled upon the treasure trove of the Elizabethans and their literature. Critics and historians united to lavish approval upon these progenitors after their own hearts. The echoes were still reverberating in the early nineteen hundreds. Even as late as 1914, Symonds, who in the eighties had so completely included and exemplified the view of the ultra-romantics, was still entirely acceptable. His brilliant colours were habitually borrowed to splash most canvases. The age was picturesque – ‘one of those rare periods when the past and the future are both coloured by imagination, and both shed a glory on the present. The medieval order was in dissolution: the modern order was in process of formation. Men stood, as it were, between two dreams – a dream of the past, thronged with sinister and splendid reminiscences: a dream of the future, bright with unlimited aspirations and indefinite hopes. Neither the retreating forces of the Middle Ages, nor the advancing forces of the modern era pressed upon them with the iron weight of actuality’.<sup>1</sup>

*Nous avons changé tout cela.* The First World War made a difference to our temper. When our tercentenary homage to Shakespeare had been well and truly paid, Elizabethan enthusiasm cooled down somewhat. Scholarly and literary interests focused themselves on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; Elizabethan dramatists were at a discount, except as material for bibliographical research; and veracious and scandalous narratives unearthed in the Public Record Office began to give the impression that Hobbes’s description of the natural state of man was an accurate summary of Elizabethan life – ‘poor, nasty, brutish, and short’. By 1925 Mr E. M. Forster was expressing what many had thought, but few had the courage to say: ‘Do you wish you had lived in the days of Queen

<sup>1</sup>J. A. Symonds: *Shakespeare and his Predecessors*. 1884.

Elizabeth? I am thankful to have escaped them. The noise, the hopefulness, the vitality, the cant about chastity – I should have found them hard to bear, nor would a Reformed Religion have consoled. Gone was the dear Pope, overseas, underground; gone the traditions that echoed out of the past and whispered of future unity, and in their place, closing every vista, stood a portentous figure shaped like a dinner-bell. The hard reverberations of this creature filled the air, her feet twinkled in a septuagenarian dance, she made progresses and rude metallic jokes, she exploited a temper naturally violent, she was a public virgin – and all she did she did for the honour of England.’ It is the counterblast comprehensive to Symonds, and its final word is that the Elizabethans ‘were at once too violent and too hazy to contribute much towards the development of the human mind’.<sup>1</sup>

It was inevitable that Symonds’s fancy picture should be roughly handled. His ‘past and future coloured by imagination’ and both ‘shedding a glory on the present’ was sheer nonsense. Elizabeth’s grandfather won the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. The past that people still remembered as the experience of their grandfathers – far too near to be splendid or glamorous or anything but a terrible memory – was the Wars of the Roses. Civil war, cutting – so far as the nationally-minded Elizabethan could see – at the very roots of England’s existence, impoverishing her, destroying her princes and nobles – that was the past which gave fearful point to Shakespeare’s frequent utterances on the subject of national unity. Nor was the immediate past any more favourable to glorified reminiscence. ‘Sinister’, indeed, it was, with the blazing fires of Smithfield as the background against which was silhouetted for the whole of Mary’s reign the vision of an England doomed to become a mere appanage of Spain. There was little glory or satisfaction in retrospect for either religious party – little but bitterness and hatred. The old order of life had been left stricken by the intensity and vigour of Henry’s attack upon it: the new had as yet no roots. Calais was lost, and with it the last of our military credit abroad. The Treasury was empty; the coinage debased, the country impoverished – and on all sides powerful and potentially hostile nations were waiting to see what they could get out of England under the rule of a young woman of twenty-five. And as for the ‘dream of the future, bright

<sup>1</sup> E. M. Forster: *Peeping at Elizabeth. Nation and Athenæum*. August 8, 1925.

with unlimited aspirations and indefinite hopes' – it is even more sentimental and hopelessly opposed to the actuality. For monarch and ministers it is doubtful if the foreign sky has ever looked much gloomier. For the Protestant party there was trouble brewing from the very beginning of the reign, as soon as they realized that a compromise, based on national expediency, and not a wholesale reformation based upon religious principles, was to govern the Queen's policy towards the Church throughout. On the other side, never, assuredly, has there been a more unhappy position than that of the honest Catholic patriot in Elizabeth's reign – forced, in the end, to choose between his country and his religion.

We can dismiss more quickly the nasty and brutish anecdote. Police-court news was no more the real clue to an age, nor its brief epitome, then, than it is now. It can never sum up a civilization. Mr Forster is more elusive. It is more difficult to demonstrate one's conviction that his neo-Georgian imagery and idiom are only a little nearer the truth than Symonds's Victorian equivalent. But his final joke – entertaining though it may be – is double-edged, and dangerous. To call Elizabeth 'a public virgin' is to say the thing well enough to make us think; and that is fatal – to the joke. For as soon as we begin to think we begin to realize the tremendous implications of the phrase. *It is true*: what, therefore, does it mean? It means that while Elizabeth calculated to a nicety the practical and political uses of her perpetual virginity, it had, in itself, an infinitely greater and quite incalculable 'metaphysical' value. We need not seek to understand the worship accorded to virginity from earliest times, nor even the later romantic devotion to spotless maidenhood which was such a large part of the chivalric ideal. It is enough to recognize that when the Roman Catholic Church directed this stream of feeling throughout the Middle Ages into the especial cult of Our Lady it was canalizing and harnessing something amazingly powerful, something instinctive, and deeply rooted in the more emotional and imaginative side of the religion of simple people. For energy of this kind a channel must always be found, and it is by no means fanciful, therefore, to suggest that when the Reformation left this tremendous force undirected and unorganized, it found in the Virgin Queen of England a not altogether unsatisfactory substitute for the Virgin Queen of Heaven, as a focus of devotion. It is difficult otherwise to account for the emotional response amounting almost to worship

which the name and idea of Elizabeth inspired in the men of her time. Henry VIII might commandeer legislation to establish the supremacy of State over Church: but the hearts of men are not altered by act of parliament. Elizabeth of England, virgin queen, earthly divinity, set star-like in the midst of the somewhat austere intellectualities of the reformed theology, met the psychological need of her people as no Tudor prince could ever have done, and thus lured their hearts to that new devotion which made possible the triumphs of her reign.

The modern mood, in certain of its manifestations, may be expected to find Elizabeth and the Elizabethans altogether too hearty. Wit, at their expense, however, will only appeal to the few. For most people romance still touches their figures with a legendary brightness; and the pronouncement which has carried most weight, and has been most frequently quoted of recent years, is that of the late Lytton Strachey, in the first chapter of his *Elizabeth and Essex*. He speaks of our desire to 'reach to an imaginative comprehension of those beings of three centuries ago,' but concludes that 'the path seems closed to us'. He finds the Elizabethan strangers: 'The more clearly we perceive it, the more remote that singular universe becomes. With very few exceptions—possibly with the single exception of Shakespeare—the creatures in it meet us without intimacy.' 'It is, above all,' he continues, 'the contradictions of the age that baffle our imagination and perplex our intelligence. Human beings, no doubt, would cease to be human beings unless they were inconsistent; but the inconsistency of the Elizabethans exceeds the limits permitted to man. . . . How is it possible to give a coherent account of their subtlety and their naïveté, their delicacy and their brutality, their piety, and their lust? . . . How is it conceivable that the puritans were the brothers of the dramatists? What kind of mental fabric could that have been which had for its warp the habits of filth and savagery of sixteenth-century London, and for its woof an impassioned familiarity with the splendour of *Tamburlaine* and the exquisiteness of *Venus and Adonis*? Who can reconstruct those iron nerved beings who passed with rapture from some divine madrigal sung to a lute by a bewitching boy in a tavern to the spectacle of mauled dogs tearing a bear to pieces?'

It is a passage seriously written, and for rhetorical appeal and force is worthy to be put beside Symonds'; but the view of the age

which it presents is, I believe, as fundamentally false. Boiled down, or stripped of its glitter, that paragraph means that the contrasts and contradictions with which the age presents us are too great to allow us to accept the Elizabethans as credible human beings. It is as profitable to ask whether we can believe that the *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Troilus and Cressida* are the work of the same artist, as to ask if it is credible that the puritans were the brothers of the dramatists. The 'filth and savagery of sixteenth-century London' make an admirable background to *Tamburlaine*, which is certainly a splendid thing, but neither a delicate nor a subtle one, and with a good share of savagery. The 'exquisiteness' of *Venus and Adonis* might be alien to the filthy alleys and gutters of Elizabethan London, but it was certainly at home in the lovely London gardens which were just as much a part of the city scene. And as for the purely rhetorical juxtaposition of the madrigal and the bear-baiting – it is the type of contrast which can be found in any age. Our own contemporaries can enjoy the exquisite delicacy of a book like *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, and pass on to the spectacle of a stag-hunt, or of an otter being torn to pieces by terriers. Contrast and contradiction we must allow, but not therefore Mr Strachey's denial of intimacy. We might as well deny our intimacy with our own age, on the ground that the inconsistencies between the pictures of our civilization presented by James Joyce and Mrs Virginia Woolf 'exceed the limits permitted to man'. To accept Mr Strachey's argument is equivalent to allowing that the contrast between the vulgarity, the crudeness and the immensity of life in *Ulysses*, and the exquisiteness, the delicacy, the sensitiveness and the seclusion of spirit in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* 'baffle our imagination'.

The modern novel and modern drama should by now have taught us something of the selection and use of significant detail for the purpose of characterization. The settings described in a novel like Wells's *Marriage*, in the stage directions of Granville-Barker's *Voysey Inheritance* or *The Madras House* should give us the clue for the method of our own approach to another age. As the significant detail accumulates so it should lead us towards intimacy – not, indeed, a particular intimacy with the individual, but that general intimacy with the average man and his ordinary ways of thought, which is the first step if we are to go on to an understanding of a

Francis Bacon or any other remarkable personality. We know exactly what to think of the rectory family in *Marriage* when we discover that their black and gold piano is 'surmounted by a Benares brass jar, enveloping a scarlet geranium in a pot'. The literature and even more particularly the records of the Elizabethan age are rich in just this kind of detail. The effigy of the Elizabethan ancestor looks a forbidding object – distorted by buckram and busks of steel, swollen by puffs and padding, deformed by peascod-bellied doublets, telescoped by enormous ruffs and farthingales. But strip it of these lendings, and it becomes the poor forked radish who liked a fire in his bedroom and flowers about his house, and who wanted his shirt and his sheets properly aired. He went sightseeing, and delighted to scribble or carve his name upon ancient monuments; he thrust and jostled for glimpses of royalty; and he had second-best tablecloths to lay over his best table-carpets for ordinary occasions. He gave, or expected tips, according to his social standing – 'a shilling to drink' is the phrase provided by the conversation manuals for the guidance of the foreigner. And being an Englishman he had already begun to cook his cabbage as abominably as he still does, so that a Frenchman was driven to remark of this national dish, 'They say commonly in England that God sendeth us meat and the Devil cooks!' Surely it is the height of pedantry to deny our intimacy with him.

Schoolboys disliked early rising, little girls slouched over their lesson-books, or else lost them, great ladies bought their silk stockings by the half-dozen, and in Sir John Harington's household the stairs were 'done' regularly every Friday. Could we ask for a more illuminating comment upon both the life and character of their owner, and upon the age, when the Kenilworth Castle inventory reveals the fact that in his gallery the Earl of Leicester kept the portraits of Counts Egmont and Horn, and, also, the portrait of Alva of the unspeakable atrocities?<sup>1</sup> Fitting mementoes for a Protestant nobleman, leader of the English troops in the Low Countries, who

<sup>1</sup> Counts Egmont and Horn were Flemish patriots during the period of Philip of Spain's dominion in the Netherlands. With William the Silent they had refused to be instrumental in enforcing upon the Protestant Netherlands the Catholic edict of the Council of Trent. In consequence, as soon as opportunity offered, they were judicially murdered by Alva, Philip's general, as part of his regime of terrorism. They were arrested for treason; and although as Knights of the Golden Fleece they could only be condemned by their peers of that order, they were executed without trial in 1568.

had also managed skilfully to weather the Catholic storm of Mary's reign, and had at one time been willing to intrigue with Philip of Spain, in return for the promise of that monarch's support of his wild scheme for marriage with Elizabeth! Even when the Elizabethan manner of life appears to show the widest divergence from ours a solitary phrase will often take us straight to the core of their thought. The Elizabethan use of the word 'housekeeping' has to be explained for us, if we are to realize that it meant the keeping of open house, the offering of hospitality to any stranger at the gate who claimed it. Read, however, an Elizabethan nobleman's instructions to his domestics for dealing with the departure of such guests: 'See the chambers to be well and handsomely dressed up, *and that nothing be missing.*' Their ways may be strange, but their behaviour, we realize from the last five words, was as our own would have to be, if we lived as they did. Is it possible to deny consanguinity and intimacy with the minds and characters that lie behind and are revealed by such details?

Admittedly there are stumbling blocks – the filth and brutality, for example, that perplexed Mr Strachey and which it would be absurd to attempt to deny. It is unsound, however, to over-emphasize this aspect of Elizabethan life. Such things are always relative, and it is doubtful if we shall fare much better ourselves, at the hands of the impressionist writer in the twenty-third century. Emphatic assertion of the filth and squalor of another age makes the picture generally accepted because it is vigorous and definite. In consequence, the evidence for filth has been given *in extenso* and too much stress laid upon the unpleasant habits of our Elizabethan ancestors by those in search of the picturesque. Here again, however, if we are on the look-out for instructive detail we shall realize that the truth lies in some more modified description, such as we ourselves might give if attempting to handle modern conditions. As an example – in Chapter II of this book reference is inevitably made to the Elizabethan custom of strewing the floor with rushes; and, as usual, Erasmus's unflattering description of the appalling filth that was allowed to accumulate in them and to be left lying for years is also cited. Every schoolboy knows Erasmus and the rushes: the description is lurid, and not easily forgotten; whereas the abundant evidence, given by household accounts, to show that fresh rushes were continually supplied, and that rooms were cleaned and

swept, is not in the least picturesque. We can, however, give Erasmus picture for picture – not to cancel, but to balance. In his *English Romayne Lyfe* (1582) Anthony Munday has occasion to comment upon the cleanliness of a flight of steps in the church of St John Lateran in Rome. He describes how the worshippers go up and down these stairs on their knees, and then, looking round for an image to drive home vigorously his own acute sense of their appearance, and realizing instinctively that the homely and familiar is the best image to make vivid something remote and strange, he writes, ‘with the number that creep up and down these stairs daily *they are kept as clean as the fine houses in London, where you may see your face in the boards*’.

Symonds and Mr Strachey gave us their own imaginative reactions to the general atmosphere of the Elizabethan age, which is a very different thing from the background of daily life against which we want to place the Elizabethans and their literature. A superb gesture like the defeat of the Armada, or the trumpet-blast that we call *Tamburlaine*, are not, in the real and contemporary sense, part of the background. Background, to the Elizabethan, was an affair of ‘shoes and ships and sealing wax, of cabbages and kings’ – a mixture, like the conversational efforts of the Walrus, but a familiar mixture, and definitely comprehensible, within our imaginative grasp. It is difficult to approach the Elizabethan mind by way of anything so perfectly of its period as *The Faerie Queene*: it is easy to approach by way of the Elizabethan abundance of significant detail. Shoes and sealing wax . . . Roger, Lord North, losing hundreds of pounds to the Queen ‘at play’, and sending his shoes to be resoled at a shilling a pair . . . the typical school seal of the period – in idea, a mixture of benevolence and violence, symbolized by some such design as an elderly gentleman, accompanied by an open book and several small children, flanked by a birch-rod of superhuman dimensions . . . In things like these the trend and range of the contemporary imagination express themselves in the simplest terms.

And if we follow up the Walrus’s catalogue it will bring us to an aspect of the Elizabethan background of which little mention can be made in the following pages, owing to the natural limitations of the book, which is concerned not with the speculation of the Elizabethan mind but with the detail of daily life. Midway between these two realms, however, partaking of the nature of both, compact at

once of factual and imaginative value, lies Drake's world-encompassing *Golden Hind*. Before the time of the Tudor dynasty the larger background of life was the cosmos as limited when seen through the distorting glass of authority and the medieval church. After the Tudors it becomes much more the microcosmos of the individual soul. But the Elizabethan, in his life and literature, bestrides the *theatrum orbis terrarum*, literally and imaginatively. It is significant that his literature contains not one but two epics of his seven-leagued boots – Hakluyt and Purchas. His great historical enterprise is nothing less than a 'History of the World': even in prison nothing short of the world will satisfy a Raleigh for his subject matter. The mind of a Bacon cannot be content with less than an *Instauratio Magna*, or scientific process for the acquisition of all knowledge. Symonds describes the age as free from the iron weight of actuality, but as a matter of fact the actuality of life was terrific. When Drake circumnavigates the globe in the *Golden Hind* human endeavour and adventure have caught up on the human spirit, and go hand in hand with it. The reach of man no longer exceeds his grasp. He is master of his circumstance. His world is spanned – set in the scheme of things as something comprehended by his mind. It is the beginning of the actuality in which we have lived ever since, and it gives us yet another bearing upon the Elizabethan imagination.

So by way of those immortal English cabbages, badly cooked, we should come to the climax – kings. To realize that, from the Elizabethan point of view, it is the real climax, is quite essential to an understanding of the age. It is the fashion, nowadays, in the biographies of great individuals of the past to insist upon their private lives; and to aim at depicting first and foremost a credible human being. It is a method which provides good reading, but is often of singularly little use if we happen to wish to recapture something of the contemporary impression. In the present instance, argument and conjecture as to the amiability of Elizabeth's character are of no help: what matters is the apprehension and acceptance not of a human being of genius, but of that image of a queen which she herself created of herself for the adoration of her people.

In the following chapters no attempt is made to chronicle the achievements of the age. They are concerned entirely with the ordinary things. They aim at substituting for the highly coloured and rhetorical descriptions of the Elizabethans and their manner of life

something more nearly related to contemporary fact. The romantics have given us, each in his own way, an imaginative synthesis, evolved too exclusively from the literature of the age. It gives us something, but at a distance of more than three hundred years not nearly enough. The brutal anecdotists suggest what should be added, sending us whenever possible to all the books that are not literature – letters, diaries, state papers, accounts, documents, legal records. We read in the records of the Privy Council notes of annual payments of £10 to one Jones for keeping the Council Room clean and supplied with flowers: we realize, from his laundry bills, that a country gentleman staying in London sent half a dozen shirts and six or eight handkerchiefs to the wash each week; and we soon find ourselves echoing Dr G. B. Harrison: ‘Even in Elizabethan England the majority of men were reasonably honest and genuinely charitable. They paid their debts, they were faithful to their wives, fond of their children, and they died in their beds as peacefully as the physician would allow them.’ The idea of the Elizabethan background which can be built up in this way from significant detail will not compare for picturesqueness with the impressionist versions. It will be too homely and unsensational. Background is not a thing to be conveyed to other people in terms of one’s own perception of effective and dramatic contrasts. We need to make up our minds as to what was normal to the Elizabethans, before allowing the imagination to play over the surface and isolate the telling moments. For any real understanding we must first perceive the normal pattern of human thought and activity.

*January 1934.*

It was significant of the lack of illuminating specialist comment that in 1934 one turned for expression of the modern attitude to writers such as Strachey and E. M. Forster – eminent as critics, but neither of them fundamentally in sympathy with the essential qualities of the Elizabethan age. Writing a postscript to this Introduction in 1944, it seemed to me a sign of a healthier state of affairs that in those ten intervening years scholarship had again begun to tackle its own business. I quoted Strachey’s rhetorical question in order to protest against the uncritical acceptance of the answer which its form implied and encouraged; but also because its real core – that is, ‘What kind of mental fabric . . .?’ – was a key question. The

basic material for a reasoned answer had been assembled before he wrote: notably in Henry Osborn Taylor's *Thought and Expression in the Sixteenth Century* (1920) and Lewis Einstein's *Tudor Ideals* (1921), which gave simple objective accounts of the characteristics of renaissance culture and of the carry-over of the ideas of the Middle Ages into the Tudor period. But with the honourable exception of Hardin Craig's *The Enchanted Glass* (1936) – still, I think, the foremost as well as the first of its kind – literary studies were slow to follow the historian's lead; and not until recently was it obvious that investigation of the background of thought and of the commonly accepted ideas of the age had become the focal point of inquiry. It is disconcerting, however, to find the 'meddling intellect' in danger of manufacturing difficulties which for the ordinary man do not and need not exist; and to find, still, a tendency to echo Strachey and emphasize the strangeness, the queerness, the otherness of the age. Unless this challenge is met more comprehensively than is possible here, we shall find ourselves burdened with a conception that is a positive hindrance both to literary appreciation and to historical understanding.

It seems ungracious to quarrel with so lucid an exposition of the thought of the age as Dr Tillyard's recent *Elizabethan World Picture*; but when he concludes with the verdict that to us it is 'a very queer age', and the substance of his book 'a very queer affair', it would be dishonest for a writer concerned to show Elizabethan life as on the whole a very normal affair to ignore his opinion. It is true that we have examined different sets of facts; but ultimately we are dealing with the same thing – the Elizabethans and their age. If he is concerned with their idea of cosmic order, I am concerned with their idea of order as displayed in their methods of running their state, their institutions, their households. And if a particular way of thinking is rightly to be described as queer, then its reflexion in matter and action which we call 'the life of the time' must be queer too. We cannot both be right in our opposed conclusions; and when he re-affirms Strachey's view by attributing to Elizabethan England 'standards of hygiene, decency and humanitarianism which would make a modern sick' it is time to ask, 'Which modern?' 'Which standards?' and finally, 'Why?' Unless we are equally sickened by the material and spiritual standards of twentieth-century England revealed in such documents as *Our Towns*, *Branch Street*, *Working*

*Class Wives, The Road to Wigan Pier, Brighton Rock, None but the Lonely Heart*, and others too numerous to mention, it is unreasonable to stress the alien quality and the 'other-ness' of the Elizabethan mentality which tolerated such standards until this 'modern' England has set its own house in order. For dirt, squalor and 'man's inhumanity to man' there is not a ha'porth to choose between them.

'To see ourselves again we need not wait for Plato's year': and of this, I think, Dr Tillyard is as fully convinced as I am. But to insist on the differences without balancing them with the kinship is to get the picture out of focus, and also to confess ourselves out of touch with the comprehensive reality of our own time. In seeking to understand the Elizabethan mind it is just as necessary to notice the carry-over of metaphor as the discarding of so-called facts – more necessary, indeed, if we are not to underestimate continuity and tradition and their absolute importance in literary and historical criticism, for today's fact is tomorrow's discarded theory, but the metaphor tends to persist, in life as in literature. The sun does not rise and set, but the metaphor remains valid as description of experience: it is not merely fossilized fact. We cannot very well quarrel with the Elizabethans' idea that the plague was God's punishment for their sins, when among many sections of the community today we find the same metaphor in use, and this present war felt and described and understood as God's punishment for our sins. A generation which has taken astrology sufficiently seriously to make it one of the most paying features of popular journalism is ill-qualified to regard Elizabethan ideas as curious. Our secular superstitions may differ, but in their quality they imply a similar level of credulity in large masses of the population; and that they do not necessarily differ even in kind is suggested by the following extract from a recent letter in one of our most popular dailies (offered for comparison with p. 283): 'This is not so old-fashioned. A friend of mine, with a child three years old, is at present giving the mite stewed mice for bladder trouble – and is curing her. Of course, she buys clean healthy mice from a pets' store.'

To stress an affinity in social standards and the ways of daily life and thought, however, will not meet the other part of Dr Tillyard's contention, that the Elizabethan way of thinking about the nature of the universe and of the social organism was 'queer'. And there is, I think, a real danger in this insistence: the danger not only of

encouraging in the tyro the attitude of 'ere's a stranger – 'eave 'arf a brick at 'im!', but of leaving out of count for oneself the very basis and procedure of poetry. A single example must serve – the statement that it is a measure of this Elizabethan queerness that 'it should really *matter* to Spenser that he should insert Platonic ideas into the order of Heaven'. One does not have to be a Spenser nor born into the Renaissance to know the moment of illumination when the idea of the Platonic Ideas is first grasped and known as something of infinite worth. Allowing that great literature is concerned with fundamental truths, and that serious thought is concerned with the problem of including all such truths in the current scheme of belief, the only thing I find impossible is that it should *not* have mattered to Spenser to make such truth fit into the contemporary scheme of heavenly order. If this is 'queer', then it is equally queer that it should really matter to Tennyson to find some way of including in his picture of world order the idea of evolution as well as the idea of personal immortality, and equally queer that we should seek to reconcile the truths of religion and science.

It is unwise to overlook the pictorial or essentially picturesque quality of the Elizabethan world picture. It was not a record of fact, but of imaginative response to sensation and perception, expressed almost entirely by image, analogy and metaphor. And because it was embodied in the great literature of the age it is still very largely our picture. Balance the affinities in outlook and metaphor against changed notions of the material universe brought about by the progress of scientific inquiry, and although the sum will be different from ours it will not be any queerer. In a sense the shoe is on the other foot. The average half-educated modern, reared on what Dr Joad has called 'the petrified science of fifty years ago', and lagging well behind the physicists in his belief that only the material world is real, accepts the idea that his world is as insignificant in relation to the universal scheme of things as a grain of sand is to this great globe, and that he himself, far from being the central point of creation, is a mere accident or by-product. This he 'knows' as his world picture; yet he still feels and behaves as if 'the last utterance of doom' is nothing, and 'the bearing of man facing it is all'. Which was reasonable for his Elizabethan brothers-in-arms at Flores or Arnhem, but is surely very queer – or Elizabethan – of the man who fights such immortal actions as the *Jervis Bay* or the bridge at

Arnhem, at a time when the human race has so successfully convinced us by practical demonstration of its power and will to wipe itself off this purposeless planet.

Of significant differences in the pattern of ordinary life I am as convinced as Dr Tillyard – notably the supreme importance of religion and the fundamental seriousness of life: differences which I stressed in 1925 as I would still (see pp. 155, 257, etc.). But ‘queerness’ is another matter – a matter of opinion, which must, I believe, be challenged. To give a clear account of the notions reflected in the Elizabethan picture he has presented them as so many facts, as annotations of the Elizabethan text: insisting, rightly, that the Elizabethans took these notions seriously. Seriously, yes; but also much more pictorially than we take our facts today, and more as Sir Thomas Browne took them: ‘The severe Schools shall never laugh me out of the Philosophy of *Hermes*, that this visible World is but a picture of the Invisible, wherein as in a Pourtrait, things are not truly, but in equivocal shapes.’ It is not the facts themselves that give us real insight into the Elizabethan mind, but the way the poet handles them, the use to which literature puts the facts then available in order to give us a reading of life that can still be understood and admired, can still satisfy. That is the ultimate standard of measurement. In the historical sense, the Elizabethan comment is not queer: it is not alien to our feeling and our understanding, not unaccountable as a development, not a pocket in human continuity. I would rather hazard a guess that future historians may find us a good deal queerer. (Summer, 1944)

Looking back again after the lapse of another sixteen years I am inclined to think that major works such as Sir John Neale’s noble portrait of Elizabeth herself, and Dr A. L. Rowse’s magnificent full-length ‘portrait of the age’ in *The England of Elizabeth* (1950) have more than adjusted the balance. Had I but known, it was in 1944 that Harley Granville-Barker, lecturing at Princeton, was saying: ‘It is astonishing how little out of touch with Shakespeare and his age we are . . . We have changed in the things we *do*: but how little yet have those things changed us in what we *are*, in our ways of thinking, our moral standards, the religions we profess, our week-day creeds besides.’ And it may have been in that very year, for all

I know, that Dr Rowse penned his first chapter which challenged us, under the title of 'A Living Age', to recognize it not as 'something dead and apart from us' but as 'alive and all round us and within us' – 'part of our living experience, entering into our conscious tradition and into the secret channels of heart and blood'. The historical scholarship of four decades has left us immeasurably better informed about Elizabeth and her England, and it has also given us back that delight and admiration of which we had robbed ourselves by our own inevitable reaction against the uncritical extravagances of the nineteenth century.

## CHAPTER I

# England's Elizabeth and Elizabeth's England

IT IS NO mere literalism to say that without Elizabeth there would have been no Elizabethan age. The Tudors all had powerful and interesting personalities, but it is significant that only the last of them has given her name to an epoch. With all the faults of her remarkable race, all its admitted kinks and perversions, she yet created in a whole people a passionate loyalty, half personal, half national, wholly English, which was the one thing necessary if the promise of the destiny of Tudor England was to be fulfilled. It is perhaps most simply explained by saying that she possessed that touch of genius for kingship which had been denied to her calculating grandfather and lost by her undisciplined father. It is difficult to form a sober estimate of her character. It has been blackened by many: and it has obviously baffled many an otherwise competent historian. Vain she may have been, fickle, unreasonable, hard, vacillating, contradictory: the list of her unpleasant traits is familiar to everyone. Burghley may have saved her from disaster on occasion; it is Froude's now discredited thesis that his was the real directing brain. As speculation it is most of it beside the point; take away 'England's Elizabeth', put in her place some docile figure-head of a monarch, and not all the statesmanship of two Burghleys could have piloted the age to its splendid destiny. It was no grey-bearded minister who elicited that amazing efflorescence of national enthusiasm which bound together high and low, Catholic and Protestant, into one people, so that the nation was enabled to resist the aggression of Spain at that most crucial period in its history. It was a young woman of twenty-five, beautiful then, whatever havoc the years may afterwards have made; a princess, who by her sufferings and persecution had already won the sympathies of all classes; a Tudor, with all the mental vigour and dominating qualities of that

family – it was, finally, a naturally gifted and extremely well-educated young woman, with all her father's charm of personality, who had been schooled and disciplined for over ten years by some of the most bitter experience that has probably ever fallen to the lot of young royalty. Burghley may be responsible for much, but he is not so fundamental to our understanding of the age as the fact of the queenship of Elizabeth.

Opinions may well differ as to whether or not her character was an estimable one, but here again argument tends to obscure the essential fact; estimable or not, her character was the right one for the situation – it made her alive to the needs of the moment, and it made her sensitive to the feeling of the nation as none of her predecessors had ever been. Whatever she may have lacked she was at one with her people in their national ardour and their hatred of Spanish aggression. Hence she became to them almost the incarnation of their own nationalism, as well as its focus and its directive genius. When we venture farther we tend to find ourselves on slippery ground; all her life Elizabeth managed to disappoint and mislead conjecture, and we today fare little better than those ambassadors and others who in committing their opinions to paper have left us due warning of the difficulty of fathoming her motives and her methods. Tudor, queen, and woman; through that threefold obscurity of statecraft, officialdom, and femininity what documentary searchlight can really hope to penetrate?

The secret does not lie open in any archives, but it does perhaps lie in her tremendous vitality and her supreme sense of vocation as a ruler, and she herself helps to pluck out the heart of her mystery if we listen to her utterances. She listened to advice but made her own decisions. 'I will never by violence be constrained to do anything,' she once told her Parliament, and on another occasion, referring to the necessity for the co-existence of Catholic and Protestant, told the members, 'I mean to guide them both by God's holy true rule.' She was a ruler by character as well as vocation, and also a supreme actress. She did what she meant to do, and she knew precisely how and when to use the charm which helped to make her a legend in her own lifetime. 'A great prince,' De Maisse the Frenchman called her, 'whom nothing escapes.'<sup>1</sup> The judgement of one of the most impartially-minded of modern historians, A. O. Meyer, is

<sup>1</sup> 'Une grande princesse, qui n'ignore rien.'

that even as a young woman and 'in all moments of peril', she had 'a masculine and statesmanlike greatness which made up for all that was petty in her character'.

It is not difficult, however, to know what the people she ruled thought about her. Elizabeth herself may escape us, but the impression she made is fully recorded, and somehow a great many essentials seem to have crept in. One thing, for example, which is always being repeated, not only in the avowed panegyrics, but as a commonplace, is the statement that she gave her country peace. It sounds curious, when we think of such facts as the Spanish Armada, of expeditions to the Netherlands, of the unceasing Irish troubles, of conspiracies and Jesuit alarms at home. Nevertheless it is substantially the truth; what her people instinctively recognized was that, under Elizabeth, strong and stable government, concentrating solely on the good of the country, had replaced politicians with axes of their own to grind, and had out of civil chaos evolved order and 'the Queen's Peace'. The court might be the haunt of speculators, and the scene of a greedy scramble for wealth and position; favourites might come and go, and the mere courtier who was up one moment might be down the next: but Burghley stood firm. Troubles might arise, but they would not involve the ordinary individual in disaster, because there was a strong central authority to deal with them. An Essex might bring his rash head to the block, but there was no great dramatic ministerial fall throughout the whole reign. At the centre of things there was a feeling of stability which the country had not known since Henry VII's time or the early years of his son's reign. Restoration of the coinage, rigid national economy, compromise on difficult problems such as religion, cautious avoidance of collision with foreign powers – the whole policy of the early part of the reign gave a materially exhausted but spiritually vigorous nation the opportunity to recuperate after the troublous years of Edward VI and Mary.

Naunton's assertion that 'she ruled much by faction and parties, which she herself both made, upheld and weakened'<sup>1</sup> is also very revealing. The cautious Burghley might be her minister, and able, according to Leicester to 'do more with her in an hour than others in seven years', but Leicester the favourite was also of her Council, and leader of a more progressive and belligerent section. One faction

<sup>1</sup> *Fragmenta Regalia*, 1641.

balanced the other, and neither was all-powerful; both sides of a question might be fully thrashed out in a Council meeting, but while there was a forward party and a conservative party there could be no doubt at all that the final and deciding factor was the Queen. No one was permitted to encroach upon the royal prerogative; the nation realized this, and expressed its realization, quite naïvely, partly in its amazement that a woman could do what she did:

She rul'd this Nation by her selfe,  
And was beholden to no man;  
O she bore the sway and of all affairs,  
And yet she was but a woman.

So runs one of the popular ballads that laments her death.<sup>1</sup> Her people were certainly not under the impression that Burghley was the Queen; Essex may have persuaded himself that he could twist her round his little finger, but both Burghley and Leicester knew far too well the real state of affairs; it is not from their correspondence that a puppet queen can be pieced together. As Bishop Creighton says of her, 'She represented England as no other ruler ever did', and her contemporaries had no doubt as to who was the real ruler.

Two other verses of this same funeral ballad show us again some of the traits upon which the nation had seized:

A wiser Queen never was to be seen  
For a woman, or yet a stouter;  
For if anything vext her, with that which came next her,  
O how she would lay about her!

And her scholarship I may not let slip,  
For there she did so excel  
That amongst the rout, without all doubt,  
Queen Bess she bore the bell.

Elizabeth chose wise ministers, but she chose them to carry out her will for her people. In pursuit of England's welfare she was

<sup>1</sup> Ashmole MS. 36, 37; fol. 296r and v.

absolutely single-minded and stout-hearted all her days, and this England realized, so that even her imperious temper becomes matter for elegiac praise. The temper which could deal out to a foolishly presuming courtier a box on the ear was also the temper which showed a fearless front to any personal danger, and which spoke unhesitatingly for herself and her people when she reviewed the troops at Tilbury before the Armada: 'My loving people, we have been persuaded by some that are careful of our safety to take heed how we commit ourselves to armed multitudes for fear of treachery. But I do assure you I do not desire to live to distrust my faithful and loving people. Let tyrants fear: I have always so behaved myself that, under God, I have placed my chiefest strength and safeguard in the loyal hearts and goodwill of my subjects. . . . I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and stomach of a King – and of a King of England too, and think foul scorn that Parma or Spain or any prince of Europe should dare to invade the borders of my realm.' Doubts have been cast upon the authenticity of this famous speech, partly, perhaps, because there are differing versions and none is contemporary. The evidence given on its behalf by Sir John Neale should convince most people;<sup>1</sup> but whether it is literally authentic is in a sense beside the point here, because if we were to imagine that some zealous historian was driven to compose it himself, from hearsay, it illustrates even more forcibly the thing about Elizabeth which really matters – the fact that this was the kind of utterance she had been able to make people imagine would be hers.

That her people understood Elizabeth's devotion to her country comes out even in the officialese of the time such as the long-winded preamble to the grant of subsidies passed by the Commons in 1601. Elizabeth and her Commons might – and did – clash, for Elizabeth's peace was rapidly educating a vigorous and self-assertive nation to think and manage for itself; nevertheless, each realized their

<sup>1</sup> See J. Neale in *History*, N.S.X., pp. 226–7 (1925), reviewing F. Chamberlin's *The Sayings of Queen Elizabeth*. The earliest known version was printed in *Cabala*, an anonymous collection of letters of the great, published 1651. Dr Leonel Sharp at one time chaplain to the Queen and also to the Earl of Essex, sent a copy of the speech in a letter to George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, stating 'No man hath it but myself'. His explanation is that 'The Queen made an excellent oration to her army, which the next day after her departure I was commanded to redeliver to all the army together'.

interdependence and the unanimity of their aim. Like any formal address, a preamble has its stock phrases, but you can read all the others concocted for the previous occasions when subsidies were granted without finding in them quite this warmth of feeling.<sup>1</sup> Nor, indeed, had the Commons ever before risen to the challenge of the moment in such an ample manner. For one thing, as the preamble justly points out, instead of being postponed till the end of the session as usual, the grant is given priority; and the reference to the 'great and inestimable charges' the Queen has sustained for many years to protect the country from foreign aggression is no polite fiction, for it was well known that she was still selling both lands and jewels to pay for the wars that, in one place or another and especially in Ireland, had dragged on ever since the defeat of the Armada. 'And where it is apparent to all the world that if your Majesty had not exhausted the greatest portion of your private treasures . . . we should long before this day have been exposed to the danger of many sudden and dangerous attempts of our enemies, and failed in all those happy successes which have accompanied your royal actions taken in hand for the defence of this estate; . . . for as much as we do seriously consider that your Majesty and we your faithful and obedient subjects are but one body politic . . . and that no good or felicity, peril or adversity can come to the one but the other shall partake thereof . . . being fully resolved to leave both lands, goods, and whatsoever else that is dearest unto us, yea and this mortal life, rather than we would suffer your royal estate to be in any part diminished, or the imperial crown of this realm deprived of any honour, title, right or interest thereunto belonging . . . we have thought meet not only to make it one of our first works to consult of that matter . . . but so to enlarge and improve the measure of this oblation which we shall offer to your royal person, as it may give your Majesty an assured testimony of our internal zeals and duties . . . *in a manner far exceeding any former precedent, because no age either hath or can produce the like precedent of so much happiness under any prince's reign nor of so continual gracious care for our preservation as your Majesty hath shewed in all your actions, having never stuck to hazard, or rather neglect for our preservation any part of those*

<sup>1</sup> Some of them are brief and businesslike in comparison, and polite in tone, but no more (e.g. 13 Eliz. cap. 27). 23 Eliz. cap. 15 is cool in tone, in comparison, as is 18 Eliz. cap. 23.