

The Queen's Revels

By JAMES SHAPIRO July 13, 2012 [The New York Times](#)

Review of THE ELIZABETHANS By A. N. Wilson

Two stories compete for our attention in “The Elizabethans.” One recalls an intense period of discovery, creativity and strife; the other is a polemic about what lessons can be salvaged from the past. Only in the final paragraph of the book do the two converge. A. N. Wilson, a prolific journalist, novelist and biographer (who has written more than 40 books in the past 35 years), previously took on the challenge of capturing an era in his “Eminent Victorians.” He might well have called his new book “Eminent Elizabethans,” since what interests him are not the largely anonymous four million inhabitants of late-Tudor England, but rather a few dozen of those who made the age so memorable, including the most remarkable of them all, Queen Elizabeth.

Wilson’s book chronicles how Elizabeth went from imprisonment in the Tower of London (confined there by her half sister and queen, Mary) to a triumphant reign that spanned nearly a half-century. He brings a novelist’s touch to the portraits of the era’s key figures, especially the devoted councilor William Cecil; the queen’s favorites (Robert Dudley and Robert Devereux); and Elizabeth’s plotting rival, the Queen of Scots, executed on her orders. Wilson is also strong on the great maritime adventures of the day, including Sir Francis Drake’s circumnavigation of the globe and Sir Walter Raleigh’s attempts to find riches and establish colonies in the Americas. Drake and Raleigh, along with Sir John Hawkins, were among the skilled mariners who helped save the nation in 1588 when the Spanish sent a formidable armada to depose Elizabeth and restore Catholicism. In Wilson’s hands these familiar stories make for gripping reading.

There is fresher material here too, including his account of the contributions of Elizabethans who have long stood in the shadows. The most notable of these is Richard Hakluyt, an unassuming geographer as responsible for the British Empire and the establishment of a permanent colony in North America as any Elizabethan. His “Principall Navigations” “did for explorers and navigators,” Wilson writes, “what John Foxe did for the Protestant martyrs” in his “Acts and Monuments.” It was an age in which writing made a difference, and Wilson shows how these books, along with the antiquarian John Stow’s “Survey of London,” Raphael Holinshed’s “Chronicles” and

Shakespeare's history plays, profoundly shaped English "collective national identity."

Wilson derives much of his sense of the age from its writers, and he quotes to great effect from the works of Shakespeare, Sir Philip Sidney, Christopher Marlowe and especially Edmund Spenser, who, for Wilson, embodied a "radical conservatism" he clearly admires. But Wilson's immersion in Elizabethan literature lands him in trouble when he extrapolates from imaginative writing what life must have been like back then. Social historians will cringe when reading the old canard that "for Elizabethans, 14 was an ideal age to be married." Wilson's evidence? "Shakespeare's Juliet is, as her nurse reminds us, 'not 14.'" In fact, Elizabethan men and women, excepting a handful of aristocrats, typically didn't marry until their mid-20s — and perhaps a sixth never married at all.

When you write a book that covers this much ground, mistakes are inevitable. But there is a difference between factual errors (and there are too many of these) and fundamental misunderstandings of how a vast majority of Elizabethans lived their lives. Wilson unwittingly acknowledges the unreliability of his sources when he claims that "monogamy, chastity and even celibacy must have been practiced by some Elizabethans, but one does not derive the impression *from their writings* that such conditions of life were the norm" (my italics). Surviving evidence from parish records (which show, for example, very low rates of illegitimacy) calls such sweeping generalizations into question. More troublingly, Wilson then links this sexual license to the period's creativity: "The Berlin of the Weimar Republic, or the New York of Andy Warhol's generation, was perhaps comparable in this respect to Elizabethan London." The opposite argument might as easily be made: the suppression of desire — a byproduct of the long delay between sexual maturity and marriage — helps explain why Elizabethan readers were drawn to writing so obsessed with romance and sex.

The tradition of using the Elizabethan era to highlight modern failings goes back to the immediate aftermath of the queen's reign, when Godfrey Goodman (who lived through these times) noted that a nation that had so recently been "weary of an old woman's government" was soon nostalgic for it after a taste of King James's rule. Wilson, like Goodman and many others since, has scores to settle. He recognizes what he calls "the Difficulty" of writing about an age whose heroes turn out to be, from a modern vantage point, villains: Hawkins, of armada fame, helped introduce the English slave

trade; Spenser, who left us the glorious “Faerie Queene,” also wrote a tract calling for the brutal subjugation of the Irish. But even as the age of uncritical adoration has passed, so too, Wilson argues, should an age in which the Elizabethans are routinely vilified for their legacy of colonialism and imperialism. What enables his fresh appraisal is that the English have at last “lived to see the Elizabethan world come to an end”: the empire is lost, Ireland is no longer bloody and the powerful families that once ruled England have long been stripped of their influence. While there is much truth to this, the period nonetheless remains a cultural touchstone. At the Olympics in London, the opening ceremonies will commence with the ringing of a giant bell inscribed with the words of Shakespeare’s Caliban: “Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises.” The ironies are rich, as the colonized victim gets in the last, oddly reassuring word.

Religion has dominated much of Wilson’s recent writing, from his declaration of atheism in the 1980s to his rediscovery of his Christian faith in 2009. He is especially sensitive to the delicate balancing act that Queen Elizabeth maintained between Puritans clamoring for further reformation and Catholics calling for greater tolerance. In the closing paragraph of the book he finds in Elizabeth’s “last statement to the world” a defining message of the age, and by implication, of his book. He describes how Elizabeth “was buried at her request” in Westminster Abbey “in the unmarked grave of her half sister, Mary,” and sees in this “a humble nod to her Roman Catholic subjects and a pious aspiration for the flourishing of truth, unity and concord.”

For Wilson, “Elizabeth in her burial held out the hope that the English people” — then, and presumably now as well — “might learn the lessons she imparted.” It is a stirring conclusion (and a sharp dig at the modern world) that ties together the book’s two narrative strands. But this is not what happened 400 years ago. Yes, Elizabeth’s remains are now interred along with Queen Mary’s, but only because three years after her death King James had her dug up from where she had been buried, in the tomb of her grandfather Henry VII; he then dumped her bones with Mary’s in an area restricted to childless, dead-end queens and princesses. James would subsequently be buried in the very tomb from which he had evicted Elizabeth. So much for a lesson in truth, unity and concord.

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