Queen Elizabeth I

Smartredhead

Elizabeth: The Forgotten Years

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HEglorificationanddefamationofthe

ageingElizabeth I isalmostasold asthe

queen herself. FewEnglish monarchshave

been subjected to as much historical bias

and mythmaking. She hasbeen painted as

the defiant Gloriana of Spenserian epic,

unitingthe land in religion and peace, and

the mercurial crone lustingafterher youn-

ger courtiers. Neither is true, as John Guy

showsin thisaccountofherlateryears.

Recentbiographershave focused on the

early decades, with Elizabeth’s last years

acting as a postscript to the beheading of

MaryQueen ofScotsand the defeatof the

Spanish Armada. Mr Guy argues that this

period is crucial to understanding Eliza-

beth; the threat to the realm did not abate

afterthese two episodes. Fourmore arma-

daswere sentto invade the British Isles, al-

though in the end good luck and bad

weatherscuppered theirplans.

Courtiers gained Elizabeth’s favour

through exploits of land and sea, to the

consternation of the old nobility. Walter

Ralegh dazzled hermajestywith hisvision

for an American colony. Robert Devereux,

Earl ofEssex, strove to woo her with plots

to plunderSpanish ships. Neitherwas very

successful as the old order closed ranks to

frustrate their ambitions. When Essex,

powerlessafterlosingcampaignsin Portu-

gal, France and Ireland, attempted to ignite

arebellion againstElizabeth in London, he

wasbeheaded.

The masterofthe old orderwasthe lord

high treasurer, William Cecil, Lord Burgh-

ley. He controlled access to state papers,

briefed England’s ambassadors and

drafted royal correspondence. Onlya sixth

of Elizabeth’s 15,000-odd surviving letters

and warrants were penned or dictated by

her, MrGuyreckons. Burghleywasso pow-

erful through much of Elizabeth’s reign

thatthe earlyperiod could be renamed the

Cecilian age. Butthe queen lostfaith in him

in 1586, when he plotted to accuse Mary

Queen of Scots of treason. A believer in a

divinely appointed monarchy, Elizabeth

resented having her hand forced over her

rival’sexecution and wavered overwheth-

erto kill a sovereign chosen byGod. Itwas

only when she was in her early 50s, Mr

Guy thinks, that Elizabeth at last asserted

supreme poweroverBurghley.

But the lord high treasurer was not a

man to give up easily. He wasinstrumental

in sending Essex on doomed foreign mis-

sions. Burghley hired an actor to serenade

the queen with pageantryand poetrywith

a none-too-subtle motif that she should

appoint his son to the Privy Council. Rob-

ert Cecil eventually became secretary of

state as such and survived in the role into

JamesI’sreign in true Cecilian fashion.

One crucial question is why Essex sur-

vived as long as he did. He bungled mili-

tary adventures and had little political

shrewdness, yet he held influence all

through the 1590s. Previous biographers

have hinted that the sexagenarian queen

was smitten by the buccaneer in his 30s.

Mr Guy plays down any sexual intrigue,

suggestinginstead that she sought a court-

ierto curb the Cecils’ power. Yetitisto Eliz-

abeth’sdiscreditthatshe held on to a man

who frustrated her foreign policy and

inflamed factionalism atcourt.

Admirers of Elizabeth will take solace

in few of these pages. Far from the war

leader of legend, she seeks peace with

Spain while itbuildsitsinvasion fleets. She

pays war veterans poorly and hangs her

own limping soldiers when they demand

more money. She rootsoutCatholicgentry

and is complicit in their torture. What

emerges from the author’s great efforts to

mine the archives for a truer picture is a

more flawed Elizabeth—but perhaps a

more human one.