Helen Hackett

Review of Lucy Wooding, *Tudor England: A History*

In the spring of 1549, in Bodmin, a fight broke out between two gangs of schoolchildren, 'the one whereof they called the old religion, the other the new'. Lucy Wooding's description of this incident typifies her eye for an engaging anecdote, and her method throughout her new book on Tudor England: colouring in the big picture with granular details from local lived experience. She also calls on us to engage our imaginations; so we sit with members of parish congregations up and down the land as, soon after the Bodmin incident, on Whitsunday 1549, they heard for the first time the English liturgy of Thomas Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer in place of the ancient and familiar Latin mass, and experienced widely varying personal responses.

For one book to narrate and analyse the reigns of all five Tudor monarchs is a daunting task. To add to this an interwoven account of the social and cultural contexts of the period – including the natural and built environment, the structures and practices of local communities, developments in the arts, and of course religious change – might seem impossible; yet this is what Wooding has achieved in this impressive book. Each monarch and their regime gets a chapter of their own, with nine other chapters on their subjects' lives, experiences, and beliefs positioned around and between them. As this description implies, the book is monumental; yet the technique of zooming in on striking details and zooming out to debate big questions creates a reading experience which at once engages, enlightens, and provokes further reflection. These effects are enhanced by the combination of precision and panache in Wooding's prose style.

An absorbing first chapter sets the scene by evoking the material world inhabited by the people of the Tudor age: its landscapes and seascapes, its towns and castles. Both here and in what follows, Wooding draws upon a vast range of both vivid primary sources and pertinent secondary sources as she demonstrates how our understanding of Tudor history has changed in recent decades, and why this new survey is needed. This version of Tudor England is informed by the findings of ‘history from below’, exploring the lives not only of the social elite, but of urban and rural working people, women inside and outside the home, black Tudors, and the poor and destitute. Mercy Gould, a Sussex woman whose illegitimate baby died soon after birth in 1578, has a place here alongside monarchs and ministers. Indeed, her case exemplifies the connections between different elements in society, since a row about whether she had tried to abort the child became caught up in religious divisions in her village, Cuckfield; these in turn escalated and came to the attention of Francis Walsingham, one of Elizabeth I’s chief ministers.

Some of the revisionist history assimilated here has been around for a while and is now familiar; indeed, in some cases perhaps even a new orthodoxy. It’s no longer surprising to learn that pre-Reformation Catholic piety was in many ways in a flourishing state in England, or that Catholicism did not become extinct here when the Elizabethan Settlement of 1559 conclusively established the Church of England as Protestant. Nevertheless, religion is so central to the eventfulness of the sixteenth century that it is imperative to give it extensive attention, and Wooding’s clear yet nuanced account of the schism from Rome and its consequences participates entirely in the book’s valuable project of informing all readers about the current state of knowledge, analysis, and interpretation. Indeed, the chapter on pre-Reformation religious culture is among the richest and most resonant in the book; while later chapters give a striking picture of an increasingly traumatised nation, riven by divisions not only between Protestant and Catholic, but also between violently antagonistic factions within Protestantism itself.

Similarly, it has been some time since historians began questioning G. R. Elton’s view of a Tudor revolution in government. According to Elton’s once-dominant account, Thomas

Cromwell in the 1530s masterminded a new model of the state, no longer controlled by the royal household, but run by officers in departments – an embryonic Civil Service. Parliament, too, according to this account, gained increasing powers as Henry VIII and Cromwell deployed it to ratify their Reformation legislation. Wooding recognises that the efficiency and impact of the Henrician Reformation owed much to Cromwell's talents and energy; that through the sixteenth century there were developments in the role and workings of Parliament; and that Tudor monarchs were unable to rule solely through personal authority. Nevertheless, she finds that the foundations for this collaborative model of government often lay not in innovations, but in traditional values: a recognition in all institutions and at all levels of society 'that the exercise of authority rested on reciprocal rights and duties'. Meanwhile, outside Wooding's book, we are now preoccupied with a Cromwell who is less Elton's master-legislator and bureaucrat than the psychologically complex protagonist of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy – wily, manipulative, tough, yet curiously sympathetic – whose principal field of operation is the shadowy corners of the court.

Wooding also guides us through new ways of understanding Tudor foreign policy, which no longer looks like the exploits of an enterprising nation purposefully laying the foundations of a future international empire, but instead becomes 'nothing more than a series of *ad hoc* responses to often unforeseen developments'. Individual monarchs are viewed from fresh perspectives too. The hitherto 'shadowy and unappreciated' Henry VII is reappraised as a successful military leader, diplomat, and administrator who understood the importance of courtly magnificence and display, and who laid the groundwork for all subsequent Tudor achievements. If we have not realised this before, blame can be laid with his son, Henry VIII, whose self-promotion as a youthful, glamorous, munificent king entailed diminishing the reputation of his father. Indeed, this disparagement of each Tudor monarch by their successor, and the ways in which these demolition jobs have distorted subsequent historiography, is a recurrent theme. Henry VIII himself started well; if he had died halfway through his reign, we would remember him as he wished, as ‘a valorous, gifted, beautiful warrior king’ like Henry V. However, he goes on to become a study in hubris, obsessed with overseas wars, and lacking the personal or practical capabilities to turn his many aspirations into reality. His Reformation, Wooding argues, could not avoid getting mired in difficulties, since he was the only person who fully understood his own conceptualisation of it, meaning that he and the ministers implementing his seismically transformative policies (including, of course, Cromwell) were often working to different agendas. Henry’s example highlights the multiple and perhaps impossible demands on a Tudor monarch, who had to lead wars, make laws, manage the national finances, and run the government, while also projecting ‘all the style and charisma of a modern celebrity’.

Wooding finds that Edward VI’s reputation as an ardent religious reformer was largely built by frustrated Elizabethan Protestants; while we have come to learn that ‘we may have been almost completely wrong about Mary’, who tried to restore the lost unity of pre-Reformation England without being merely nostalgic, retaining and developing some of the innovations of her predecessors, and participating in new forms of Catholic practice emerging from the continental Counter-Reformation. She also did much work to define and establish the challenging (and challenged) role of queen regnant, efforts from which her sister would benefit. Even so, debates about the validity of female rule continued, and while Elizabeth’s gender could sometimes even be an advantage to her supporters, ‘to her detractors, it made her an easier target’. Wooding emphasises that far from presiding over a much-mythologised golden age, Elizabeth was always working against a backdrop of ‘uncertainty and strife’. As she demonstrates, almost every term in J. E. Neale’s renowned 1936 hagiography of Elizabeth as Gloriana and a kind of proto-Britannia can now be questioned or dismissed.

Instead, Wooding's last word on her reign is decidedly muted: 'She could at least say that she had tried hard to keep everyone safe.'

The social place of women in general is another recurrent theme, with Wooding taking what might be called a post-feminist position. Reviving the question asked by Joan Kelly-Gadol in the 1970s, 'Did women have a Renaissance?', Wooding finds a 'complicated and variegated picture'. Misogyny and restrictions upon women certainly existed, but at the same time they 'could own property, run businesses, litigate, manage estates'. Female authors emerged, and women could be politically active, with notable examples including Henry VII's mother and wife, Lady Margaret Beaufort and Elizabeth of York. Wooding highlights how noble and gentry women operated resourcefully within structures of kinship, class, and religious affiliation, and suggests intriguingly that they sometimes found paradoxical opportunities in 'their relative invisibility as women'.

As in her account of the achievements of female writers like Isabella Whitney and Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke, Wooding makes productive use of her knowledge of literary culture. She underlines how literature was a useful medium for making political comment and criticism while safely disclaiming topical applications; and how many Tudor works posed challenging questions and opened up debates rather than offering simple dogmatic answers, a prime example being Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*. Classical learning could be deployed to draw attention to troubling parallels in present times, while translation could be used to voice disquiet in the persona of a respected authority. A whole chapter is dedicated to drama: a good choice of genre, since, as Wooding shows, many aspects of Tudor culture, from the court outwards, were inherently performative. From the 1570s onwards, the large, purpose-built, commercial playhouses which were erected in London created an unprecedented and expressive medium through which this society could view itself, examining its past and present, its beliefs and doubts, its anxieties and aspirations.

Wooding's own book offers a comprehensive, authoritative, up-to-date account of the Tudor monarchs and the England they governed. Throughout, it provides a sense of what it felt like to live through the many tumultuous changes of the period; and its combination of broad sweep with vivid stories and snapshots will provide a rewarding read for scholars, students, and general readers alike.

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For note on contributor: Helen Hackett is Professor of English Literature at University College London. Her latest book is *The Elizabethan Mind: Searching for the Self in an Age of Uncertainty*.