

John Guy,
Elizabeth: The Forgotten Years
(New York: Viking, 2016), xviii+493 pages.

There is little doubt that of all of the major eras of English history since the Middle Ages, that of the Tudors is currently the most popular. The political intrigue and violence, the overt sexual escapades and religious turmoil make for great press in our day, and there seem to be no end of books, documentaries, and movies about the Tudor monarchs and their times. This new work of John Guy, though, is head and shoulders above the vast majority of these accounts. His in-depth knowledge of the Tudor era—displayed in a lifetime of major studies on the period—serves him in good stead as he provides a definitive reflection and analysis of the years of Elizabeth I's life between the assassination of William the Silent in 1584 and her own death in 1603.

He calls these twenty years—which include the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots in 1587, the defeat of the Spanish Armada the following year (there were actually four other similar attempts by the Spanish during Elizabeth's reign to conquer England), and the political folly of Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex—the forgotten years. But, according to Guy's analysis, they might equally be named the “misunderstood years,” for by the skillful use of a variety of relatively newly-discovered documents, Guy reinterprets certain key aspects of these two decades. Contrary to much twentieth-century scholarship on Elizabeth, he argues that the critical issue of these years for the English queen was not so much the external threat of the Spanish Empire, but what Elizabeth was to do with her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots (p.403). Her execution of Mary—which she sought to blame on others, an example of the political deviousness that could characterize her at times—goes to the heart of Elizabeth's self-consciousness.

For Elizabeth, earthly monarchs were divinely appointed, ultimately only accountable to God, and their person well-nigh untouchable. Her involvement in the death of Mary thus haunted her. This conviction also underlay her ultimate rejection of the narcissistic and hubristic Earl of Essex, once a favourite, who had the effrontery to suggest princes can err and publicly said in her hearing that “her conditions were as crooked as her carcass” (p.284). In her mind, a failure to respect her royal person was also a failure to respect God. This also explains her stern opposition to radical Puritanism (detailed in chapter 9, “The Enemy Within”), which essentially disputed her right to be the head of the church in England. In fact, Elizabeth was one of the first to actually employ the term “Puritan” (p.162–163). Here is much help in understanding the trials of Tudor Puritanism.

Despite her fierce opposition to the Puritans, Elizabeth saw herself as a God-appointed defender of Protestantism, hence her support of the French Huguenot king Henri IV (and her deep disappointment when he became a Catholic) and of the Dutch revolt against Catholic Spain who ruled the Netherlands. Indeed, if she had not provided Henri IV and his French allies as well as the Dutch Calvinists with military and financial aid, both groups would have been defeated and European—and church—history would have turned out quite different (p.398). And although she sought to create a cult about her person, she was too wise to believe her own propaganda. Nevertheless, she did come to think definitely after the amazing English defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 that God was on the side of Protestantism (p.401).

Her military defence of continental Protestantism had its limits, though. Contrary to the way that Elizabeth has been depicted, especially in some twentieth-century films, Elizabeth was not a warrior queen. Given the limitations on England's resources, she wisely saw the danger of committing large numbers of soldiers to land campaigns on the European continent. During the crisis of the Spanish Armada, of course, she rose to the occasion with the splendid address to her troops at Tilbury, where she publicly declared she was willing to "lay down for my God, and for my kingdom and for my people, my Honour and my blood even in the dust" (p.108). But this was a defensive occasion; Guy demonstrates that she was much more reticent in launching campaigns against the great Spanish threat to European Protestantism.

After reading this superb biography, I think historian Andrew Roberts may well be right when he recently stated in his *Wall Street Journal* review of Guy's book that Elizabeth I should be seen as "the most remarkable individual to have worn a European crown between Charlemagne and Napoleon."

Michael A.G. Haykin
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary