



BOOK REVIEW

## Lucy Wooding. *Tudor England: A History*

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Routledge Classics recently published a new edition of G. R. Elton's brilliant and characterful *England under the Tudors* (first published in 1955), with a foreword by his former student, Diarmaid MacCulloch. Elton's book has aged well. It is so good, in fact, that only a few historians since have ventured to write a full-length general history of Tudor England. The most significant attempt is John Guy's *Tudor England*, published in 1988. Lucy Wooding's new book, *Tudor England: A History*, is therefore welcome, promising to serve as a guide to the Tudor period that takes full account of scholarship published over the last few generations. The 1950s was a good time to be a Tudor historian. Today, the academic study of history is under threat, and traditional research areas doubly so. Tudor history is not a favored research specialism at most universities, with an honorable exception for the University of Oxford, where Wooding holds a fellowship. Some historians have even doubted whether there was a Tudor period at all, though in truth nothing could be more natural than structuring history by dynasties. This is one of those common situations where professional historians are at odds with the history-reading public. Outside academia, the Tudor period is still one of the most popular areas of English history. Wooding's book may therefore appeal to a broad audience, not only to scholars and students but also to serious enthusiasts.

Wooding has organized her material into fourteen long chapters. Five chapters focusing on the reigns of individual Tudor monarchs are interspersed with other chapters on themes ranging from Tudor living standards to drama. Though satisfactory, this structure sometimes leads to repetition or odd arrangement of material. For example, the discussion of Reformation ideologies in Chapter 13 could either have been cut out or integrated into earlier chapters on religion. It is nice to see attention paid to topics that were rarely discussed in older surveys and textbooks—landscape and seascape, the ritual year, domestic arrangements, and so on—but this has the perhaps inevitable effect of pushing out other important material. There is hardly anything substantial on the constitution, central and local government, parliament, the law, the church, industry, social structure, the military, or the navy. Wooding deserves thanks for keeping discussions of the historiography to a minimum, even if this leads to a tendency of presenting established interpretations as if they were novel. For instance, she insists that Henry VII was not a money-grubbing miser (50–52), an argument vigorously proposed and defended by Elton in the fifties and sixties, and though she cites Elton's articles, it would not be sufficiently clear to a novice reader that Elton was the main proponent of this view. While Wooding follows the prevailing consensus on most subjects, there are some pleasing moments of independence, as when she challenges the modern preference for describing early Protestants as “evangelicals” (248).

Some of the ideas and phrases scattered throughout Wooding's book would have landed a male author in trouble—e.g., “This was not a man casting off his frumpy middle-aged wife to

embrace a younger model ... Anne Boleyn was not a nubile teenager..." (177)—though this reviewer quite enjoyed the political incorrectness. The prose is clear, if occasionally let down by mixed metaphors and other lapses of style. Factual errors seem to be few and far between, testament to the great effort Wooding has made in researching this book. There are a few errors, or at least moments where more qualification would have been useful. For example, whereas Wooding says that there was little access to fresh drinking water in the Tudor period (146), internet-savvy readers may know that this assumption has been often, and convincingly, challenged on the r/AskHistorians subreddit.

Wooding's book seems to be aimed at students and the general public. At nearly six hundred pages, however, it is not a quick or easy read. Many of the details will interest specialists above all, who are least in need of a survey book. The least successful parts read like accumulations of facts, with the signposting doing a lot of work to bring order to the material. Cutting out some material might have helped; did readers really need the information about Christ Church Priory, Canterbury, incongruously located in the middle of a discussion of the politics of Henry VII's reign (56)? Undergraduate students might be better served by Richard Rex's *The Tudors* (2003), which can be read almost in an afternoon. Overall, though, Wooding's book is a splendid achievement. It covers a lot of ground, has something to teach everyone, looks lovely, and will no doubt make a popular gift.