



BOOK REVIEW

Joanne Paul. *The House of Dudley. A New History of Tudor England*

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James Ross 

University of Winchester
James.Ross@winchester.ac.uk

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Joanne Paul's *The House of Dudley* is a historical trade book. The term is not intended in a derogatory way; it is a useful way of categorizing work that aims at a general market, in part through a focus on narrative and story rather than theme or argument. This is not to categorize such works as popular or simplistic. A good trade book is not a short popular history—*The House of Dudley* is just over 500 pages long and is not a textbook or an entry level study—and can embody research of real significance to academic historians. Not unimportant also, in an age of pressure on history (and the humanities more generally) at almost every level, is the fact that such works interest and involve new readers in history. While this review will focus on the academic merits of the work, its wider context and audience is important and should be appreciated.

The House of Dudley recounts the story of the Dudley family from the late fifteenth century until the later sixteenth. Much of the story focuses on the three leading figures, Edmund Dudley, executed in 1510, John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, executed in 1553, and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, who died—unusually for a Dudley—of natural causes in 1588. However, the wider Dudley family are also covered, with a notable emphasis on the role of the women who by birth or marriage were part of the clan. Part one details the rise of Edmund Dudley from fairly lowly origins to Henry VII's minister through his own talents, ambition, and ruthlessness, exploiting the unique opportunities of the last, grim years of Henry VII's reign. Yet in his single-minded concentration on squeezing all of Henry's subjects who came within his orbit for cash, he neglected his own alliances and at the king's death was left friendless and an easy scapegoat for a new regime keen to cast off the shadow of the old. Part two, from 1509 to 1547, covering the minority of Edmund's eldest son, John, and his ascent, through military and courtly service, to prestige at court and (through inheritance) the title of Viscount Lisle, is the least satisfying. It is the second longest section at almost a hundred pages (part one on Edmund Dudley is 56 pages) and very episodic. John Dudley is not the major player in most of the events described; much more central is the well-known narrative of Henry VIII's reign and tortuous marital history. While some background to John's eminence by 1547 is essential, one wonders if this could have been done in a more concise and focused way.

Part three, covering Edward VI's reign feels more coherent, given the central importance of John Dudley to the dramatic events of the reign and its immediate aftermath. While Dudley's hard-nosed approach to politics and warfare does come through, Paul does not push the evidence too far in reading character and motives. Indeed, there are times when perhaps a little more speculation, and a little more authorial voice, could be offered, notably

in part four, covering the reigns of Mary I and Elizabeth I. The potential physical relationship between Robert Dudley and Elizabeth is left simply as recounted gossip and it is not clear if Paul thinks there was more to it than the emotional bond, which is certainly sympathetically outlined.

Beyond the narrative of the Dudleys, there is a wealth of contextual description to ensure the more general reader is comfortable in the surroundings of sixteenth-century England, ranging, for example, from marital sex in pre-Reformation England (26–27) to the defenses of Calais (77–79). There is overstatement, error, and omission at times. For example, Edmund Dudley's notebook of 1504–08 did indeed contain bonds and other financial instruments to the value of £220,000 but it did not double the crown's income—much of it was potential, not real, income, dependent on a whole set of conditions. The other “ravening wolf” in Henry VII's service alongside Edmund Dudley was Sir Richard Empson, but he is barely mentioned despite their close association before and after their fall, other than an imaginative description of their executions together on the block at Tower Hill. Paul has read widely, though there are some odd omissions in the bibliography. She has also engaged with a good deal of primary source material—some manuscript, some printed—particularly the copious correspondence of the period contained in the State Papers, and with the records of the material culture that the Dudleys liked to surround themselves with. A significant set of aids is offered, mainly aimed at the more general reader, including a timeline, glossary of names and terms, and notes on further reading and the sources. The more scholarly apparatus includes endnotes totaling 48 pages and a 25-page bibliography. It is much to be regretted, however, that an index is unaccountably omitted from the study.

The rise of the Dudley family was extraordinary; their leading figures were talented, ambitious, and prone to overreach. There is, however, no overarching argument beyond the family story. It is not quite, to quote the sub-title, “a new history of Tudor England.” There is insufficient analysis, weighing of evidence, and insight into the broader political context to shape academic debate on Tudor politics. Nonetheless, assembling all the material on the Dudleys is valuable, and the alternative focus on a leading Tudor noble family is welcome. The study certainly demonstrates the multifaceted roles they were required to play. The prose is lively and readable, though prone to convert recounted evidence in letters and other sources into direct speech and occasionally strays beyond what we can possibly know by way of coloring a scene. *The House of Dudley* is, fundamentally, a very good story well told.