

REVIEW

Janet Dickinson

Court Politics and the Earl of Essex, 1589-1601

London: Pickering & Chatto, 2012; pp.208. £60

ISBN 9781848930773

THE world of late-sixteenth century English politics has long proved a fascinating subject for historians, but this does not mean that there is nothing new to say on the subject. Janet Dickinson's recent monograph reveals that there are still issues to be pondered and new approaches to be taken when examining the late-Elizabethan court and its political structure. Her well-written and engaging work offers a reassessment of the arguments proposed by John Guy and Paul Hammer, which presents the last decade of Elizabeth I's reign as one of political factionalism and conflict.¹ Dickinson, by contrast, argues that this interpretation is based on a long-standing historiographical tradition stemming from pro-Essex sources, which were eager to place the blame for his downfall squarely on the Cecils. Despite its brevity (only 125 pages of text), this work presents a refreshing argument for reassessing the nature of the late Elizabethan court in light of earlier decades.

The book is divided into seven chapters, which are so concise and self-contained they could easily have been presented as individual articles. The book begins with a look at the relationship between the earl and the queen, and at Essex's position within court culture. Through an examination of Essex's use of chivalric symbolism and the language of courtly love, Dickinson places the earl into a context and court climate that differs slightly in focus and interpretation from that of Paul Hammer. The author then moves on

¹ John Guy, ed., *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade* (Cambridge, 1995); Paul E. J. Hammer, *The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics: The Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, 1585-1597* (Cambridge, 1999).

to evaluate the historiography of the Essex rebellion of 1601, reviewing the biases of the sources that have been largely accepted in the historiography at face value. From this re-examination of the sources, Dickinson begins to detail the relationship of Essex and the Cecils, and suggests that their animosity has been aggrandised throughout history and exaggerated by those who were posthumously attempting to repair Essex's reputation. In the conclusion Dickinson returns to the relationship of Essex and the queen, and brings the role of the earl into the wider discussion of late Elizabethan politics. Ultimately it is argued that Essex's perception of court politics and Elizabeth's attitudes slowly became disjointed with reality, and it was his misjudgement of his position and that of those around him which lead to his downfall in 1601.

Throughout the book the author has provided a wonderfully clear description of current English historiography, as well as useful citations to illustrate her points. If there is anything lacking from this work it is a wider context for her subject than simply England and English sources. Importantly for readers of *Northern Studies*, the Earl of Essex's relationship with James VI is mentioned only briefly, and the importance of both Cecil and Essex in foreign affairs is not described in much detail at all. No international opinions of Essex or the supposed friendship or friction between the secretary and the earl are cited, and it would have been interesting to include foreign opinions on Essex, Cecil and the situation at court when examining how contemporary and later English sources presented the case.² This absence of international sources or perspective may, however, be expected, as it is clear from the titles of both the book and the chapters that the primary subject is that of the Elizabethan court itself, and in such a condensed work there is no room for a broader contextualisation. Due to this, the book may be of little use to those whose interest in the Earl of Essex, or English politics in the late sixteenth century, lies outwith the immediate circle of the Elizabethan court or the British Isles. Nevertheless, despite its limitations, and whilst not superseding the works of Hammer or Guy, this book has provided a valuable insight into the last decade of Elizabeth's reign, making bold challenges to historiography and reminding historians of the importance of never taking sources at face value.

Cynthia Fry
University of St Andrews

2 Despite a lack of diplomatic correspondence from Christian IV of Denmark-Norway or Karl IX of Sweden discussing the Essex Rebellion, it was well known throughout Europe that both men employed informants and agents across Europe.