

# HISTORY EXTENSION I

## Historians, Context and Elizabeth I

***“Account for the influence of the historian's own context on their differing interpretations of Elizabethan History. You must refer to Sir John Neale and at least one other historian.”***

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The rule of Elizabeth I is a subject of contentious debate among historians. As a female monarch, Elizabeth broke the natural assumption of male authority in the Tudor period. The manner of her control over the British parliamentary system, as well as the methods of those who purportedly served to undermine her, are a constant source of disagreement. Many have claimed that the images of Elizabeth presented in varying works reflect the context of the individual historian who produced them. Sir John Neale, perhaps the most famous of these historians, was the first to question the traditional accounts of Elizabeth's reign. With Neale's work having become the status quo, other historians such as G R Elton were eventually forced to further revise the traditional interpretations of Elizabethan history.

Neale was the first revisionist to question the well-accepted views of Townsend and D'Ewes. (Ironically, for a period after Neale's writing no-one questioned his own authority on the subject.) As a student at the University of London, he was unsatisfied with the old accounts of Elizabeth's reign. However, his traditional upbringing instilled a patriotism that occasionally effected the outcomes and conclusions reached in his works. His subsequent knighting shows that he published historical accounts that were acceptable to the British establishment. (as opposed to Benjamin Britten's historical opera 'Gloriana,' which somewhat negatively portrayed Elizabeth I and purportedly offended those in the Royal family).

Neale was writing during a deeply divided period in British politics. Similarly, his works showed a strong division between the monarch and the House of Commons, which often reflected his patriotic ideals and love of Elizabeth. Neale's goals in writing a biography of the queen are also questionable; deeply conscious of the stigma surrounding *intelligentia* at the time, he decided to publish his first biography '*Queen Elizabeth*' without footnotes, omitting the title 'Professor' from the cover. This suggests that Neale intended his work for a mass audience, rather than the tightly-knit scholar community of the British institutions.

How this consciousness of the needs of the public has effected Neale's work is a source of disagreement. It has been suggested by some that in order to make the Story of Elizabeth's reign more palatable to a General audience, Neale has unwittingly dramatised some of the features of her relationship with lawmakers. Certainly, the strong rhetoric employed throughout Neale's original biography suggests that such is the case. Neale's work focuses on the conflict between a conservative monarch and a radical commons, a theme that was shown by subsequent revision to have been somewhat overrepresented.

This idea has manifested in Neale's description of Elizabeth's use of her power of veto. His works suggest that this was used to resist the wishes of MPs and the puritan movement within the Commons.

Others have argued that Elizabeth simply used her powers to block poorly drafted legislation from becoming law.

Neale's portrayal of the 'Puritan choir' is a point of major dispute between himself and the revisionists who followed him. '*Queen Elizabeth*' and Neale's subsequent work '*Elizabeth I and her Parliaments*' asserted that the House of Commons was plagued by an outspoken 'choir' of puritan protestant reformists, whose primary goals were to promote further religious reform and force Elizabeth into marriage.

It has also been suggested that as a result of the historical debates to which he was exposed as a history student of the early 20th century, Neale has attempted to fulfill the Empirical goal of discovering an overriding cause for the English civil war in the Government policies of the sixteenth century.

G R Elton is another pre-eminent Elizabethan historian, of a slightly later period in the twentieth century. (Though Neale and Elton could certainly still be considered contemporaries.) Elton's background differs greatly from Neale's. His Jewish family fled continental Europe in the late 1930's, and Elton served the Allies in Italy during the latter half of the second world war. Such experiences resulted in Elton's staunch conservatism, which is often reflected in his political interpretations of Elizabeth's reign.

Both of Elton's parents were well regarded scholars who led him to become a proponent of an Empirical or 'scientific' method of history. Elton was a modernist who believed that the personal views of a historian are inherently presented in any historical work, but that this is unavoidable and best ignored.

Elton's experiences as a refugee and soldier fostered a fierce interest in politics, which led him to the belief that political history is the most important kind of history. He attempted to study politics within the wider context of society, and was one of the first to stress the influence of the House of Lords on lawmaking decisions.

Elton notably opposed Neale's views on the conflict between parliament and royalty. His strong belief in empirical method led him to the conclusion that there was insufficient evidence to suggest that the great political rift described by Neale was present in Tudor society. It was Elton's view that Parliament dealt effectively with local issues, bills and taxes and rarely presented a worthy challenge to Elizabeth.

Elton once again stuck to his traditionalist values by employing a strict empirical method examining the power of the puritan choir. He questioned Neale's original source, a pamphlet naming more than forty MP's as puritans, finding that there was no evidence to support such a labelling of many of the featured figures.

Elton's conclusion was that the puritans were less united and powerful than once thought, failing to bring in any substantial religious reforms and losing the struggle for the Queen's marriage.

Elton was at times writing in a period characterised by a return to traditional values regarding the roles of women in society, which concurred with his conservative political outlook.

Such values are seen to effect Elton's perspective of Elizabeth's role as a female monarch, when he states that she had some "pretty obvious failings as a woman," for example her refusal to marry and produce an heir. This theme was further exploited as Elton tended to identify most of Elizabeth's negative qualities as 'feminine qualities,' while praising the aspects of her personality which made her more like her male counterparts.

Elizabeth's monarchy remains a contentious issue among historians, her image throughout history continually changing to suit the individual context of each particular writer. The advent of a strong female leader presented a challenge to the pre-conceived ideas of the roles of women in society. Elizabeth's method of political control has been the subject of much scrutiny, as different historians with contrasting political, social and historiographical backgrounds such as Neale and Elton present their unique views, giving us different interpretations of events and allowing us to gain a deeper and more diverse understanding of her reign.

## **Bibliography**

<http://www.jstor.org/pss/1872838>