

The Elizabethan Renaissance

The Life of the Society

A.L.Rowse

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To Generalize is to be an Idiot. To Particularize is the Alone Distinction of Merit Those words by William Blake, the author takes to his heart. It might not be true in mathematics and philosophy he concedes, but definitely true in history. As a result the book is a hodgepodge of various facts that the author has happily dredged from the bottoms of the archives. It is not clear what his aim and perspective are, it seems almost as if the retrieval from obscurity and extinction is enough of a motive. This of course is the ambition and pleasure of a true antiquarian. Much can be said for eschewing theory in historical presentation, and so to speak, make the facts speak for themselves, an empirical approach which has much going for it, and which can serve as a basis for further work. However, as a work of literature and as a narrative it fails. In fact a reader can do nothing but to skim, so tedious are the facts that are thrown at him, that to stop and absorb would mire him in endless labyrinthian digressions. Not surprisingly the mind wanders as one reads through, yet is the exercise totally pointless? Rowse is a dedicated historian and quite productive, which of course is not necessarily a good thing, and his enthusiasm should of course be acknowledged. Maybe something can after all be reaped from it. Besides Rowse is opinionated, and does not hide his prejudices, which of course adds some zest to his presentation.

We learn that during the Elizabethan age, England was much less populated and that forests were wide-spread teeming with wild-life giving a lot of rein to the hunting ambitions, not only of the gentry. London was the dominant city, in fact it may have been the largest city in Europe at the time, which does go a long way to explain the somewhat disproportionate importance, such a sparsely populated and peripheral country, played after all in European politics, dwarfed as it was by both France and Spain, and somewhat the junior partner to the Dutch lands across the sea, to which it owed its closest affinity, linguistically as well as politically and commercially. The English tongue was a raw one, which few people outside the British Isles bothered to learn.

Marginal as it might be, it nevertheless was fairly rich in the sense, that the standard of living of its poor, was above that of the continent. (If we now can trust our source and his interpretation of his sources. The fact is more of an opinion forwarded by eye-witnesses and as such not so much reliable as intriguing.) There were also a few other cities outside London of some importance. Norwich definitely, and then the fast-growing port of Bristol soon to overtake it. By modern standards those cities were small, less than twenty-thousand inhabitants, and hence they did present a rather rural impression, with streets tapering into country lanes, and the stroller soon losing his way among cow-dung. Life in the cities were not that healthy due to over-crowding in terms of sanitary infra-structures, and most people lived, as they would continue to live the world over for centuries, in the

country. Furthermore there were significant differences between different parts of England. The East tended to be more affluent than the West, just as the South was richer, more populous and more advanced than the North, which tended to be underdeveloped and backward, still under the spell of the Middle-Ages.

We learn a lot about the gentry, this of course being the less anonymous part of the population and one which has left traces in forms of letters and diaries, and whose lifestyles and adventures bear retelling. There were of course huge differences in income, somewhat ameliorated by the fact that the rich had obligations. Not only to provide for immediate families but also for large retinues, hoards of people being dependent upon the head of the family. The fact that there is a confusion of titles, Earls and Dukes, Lords and Counts as well as mere baronets and mere gentlemen, cries out for some explanation, but the author obviously assumes that the Native English reader is sufficiently familiar with all those titles, not to need any explicit instruction. It makes up a class society, in fact one close to that of a caste, with the important different that social mobility is easier than in a more traditional, rigidified one as in India. Both have their supporters on the ground that a socially stratified society makes everyone know their place, and that is a good thing. At least the author is of that persuasion, regretting that the traditional English class society came to a halt by the First World War, and since then life has not been what it should be. A dissolution of social mores being a very unfortunate thing.

But dissolution is exactly what the Elizabethan Age is about. It was brought about by Henry VIII taking command of the Church in England and starting to dismantling its worldly assets. The so called Reformation. This brought about a definite secularization of English Society, a process unfortunately reversed by Queen Mary, the elder half-sister of Elizabeth, but only temporarily. Some aspects of it were brutal, involving destruction of much valuable religious art. Religious art, the author points out, can have artistic qualities transcending its origin, and just because something is an expression of superstition does not mean that it should be condemned. But the Iconoclasts of the time, the horrible Puritans, according to the author, had no such sensibilities, and hence invite comparison with the Talibans of today, a comparison the author writing a quarter of a century too early could not make. Thus instead of churches being built, of which there were enough, stately mansions became the new way of manifesting wealth and power.

Yes at the top of society was the gentry, some of whom did actively partake in the Court, described by the author as a concentric sequence of circles, in whose common center was the Queen. Much of the Court and its procedures, had already been put in place by her father - Henry VIII, whose reputation in posterity has unfortunately been dominated by his many hapless marriages and dissolutions of the same, but who actually did so much more, and was a genuinely popular King¹. Elizabeth continued the traditions set in place by her father, but in gentler more feminine way, removing the masculine excesses that had played such a striking role before. The Queen acted as a Queen bee in a stack, except that she was a virgin. The reason for her decision can be discussed, but a very persuasive argument is that any marriage would have meant stepping down in favor of her consort, and as she was fond of power more than sexual dalliance (unlike her unfortunate Scottish relative - Mary) the decision was natural. However, around her she had a lot of young

¹ Rowse dismisses the works of Pollard et al, as that of narrow-minded academics.

ladies, as well as sexually aggressive young males, who preyed on nubile flesh, not always ending things with appropriate propriety. Hence there was a court teeming with gossip and intrigue, as any indulgent court is bound to do. Elizabeth did not stay put in London, but traveled all over the country, staying at different estates, bringing a large part of her court with her. It was called keeping in touch with the people.

Now what the Queen did on a grand scale, the gentry did on a somewhat smaller scale, each one responsible for a certain territory. This hierarchal structure, familiar to any one studying medieval feudalism, was at the heart of what made a country governable, by successive layers of delegation. As noted the gentry was very rich compared to great mass of people, who always tend to be rather anonymous in any historical survey, and a large part of their income was given away in charities. This fact very much impresses the author, who lauds the practice. One may ask, why he never asks himself how they did acquire that wealth in the first place. Our modern sensibilities are geared towards thinking in terms of exploitation. First you rob people of their rightful income, and then you generously return some of it as charity. The hypocrisy should be obvious. However, economics is not so simple, wealth can be generated above the effort of workers. I am thinking in terms of organization of larger projects, impossible to be undertaken on an individual basis. Anyway, exploitation or not, the idea of well-fare, only temporarily taken up by modern politics, was crucial to the feudal system. The lord had obligations, not just to his own abstract wealth, but also to those who were dependent on him.

There are separate chapters on Food and Sanitation as well as on Sex. The latter, in spite of the promise, delivers very little except some anecdotal evidence that extra-marital sex was in existence. Among the upper classes, because of plenty of opportunities, among the lower because of dire need. Only the middle classes are traditionally considered steadfast. The author perpetrates traditional opinions. Their correctness is certainly open to doubt. The chapter on Food and sanitation is more rewarding. Before the Industrial Revolution there were only a few means of conspicuous consumption. Building big manors, castles and palaces was one obvious way, and the most enduring. Being dressed in a lavish style was another. In the past you did judge people by the way they were dressed. Much less so nowadays. But giving huge dinner parties was probably the most common. Those meals were gargantuan, and one learns that people ate so much that they had to induce vomiting in order to be able to process more. This I remember from my school-days and I was very much scandalized. Rowse makes no such references, only remarking that most people only nibbled at the food, partaking of those courses that they fancied, as at a modern smorgasboard. And what was left was eagerly devoured by the poorer people, usually in different locations. We are talking about trickle-down. There was of course a lot of food for the rich, the countryside filled with game, much of it the exclusive preserve of the gentry. Poaching was a crime, and a very hard one to resist. (We all know that Shakespeare was caught.) As to sanitation, this was probably not a major problem for the poor out on the land, but for the rich living in crowded quarters as in the Court itself. And of course, maybe even more so for the townspeople living in cramped circumstances. The Water-closet, that particular English contribution to the comforts of the modern age, has a long pedigree and was of course technically feasible already during the Elizabethan times, and experimentally in use. But for it to work on a larger scale, it required an

infra-structure that only the industrial revolution was able to furnish many centuries later.

There is also a chapter on Parish and Sport, where most of the bulk of the text is devoted to the pastime of the upper classes. Noteworthy is that jousting is not mentioned. Could it be that it was already going out of fashion, a relic of the Medieval times. Hunting, however, was very much in vogue, especially falconry, whose sophisticated veneer as well as exotic provenance, must have appealed to those to whom exclusive fashion is irresistible. When it came to fighting, the Italian habit of fencing with rapiers was taken up already in Henry's court. It also led to the regrettable habit of duels, but the author claims that this practice never reached the extremes it enjoyed on the Continent. Tennis was already introduced, but strictly an upper class sport, unlike a kind of football or hurling, which tended to be a rather brutal affair, almost a battle, leaving casualties on the field. Sometimes people even broke their necks. It involved a ball, that was not only kicked, but also carried by hand. Then there was coq-fighting, bull-fighting and bear-baiting. Only the latter was a recent invention, bull-fighting having a long tradition all over Europe, not just in Spain and Southern France, where it is more in the nature of a relic.

People in the past were busy. They did not have many gadgets to worry about, instead they manufactured them. The year was divided by religious holidays, Christmas sometimes lasting from November to early February when the leisured classes were concerned. Many of the festivities had Pagan roots, but having been appropriated by a wise church they fitted seamlessly into the religious ones. Probably without this cycle of celebrations, life would indeed have been onerous.

Finally superstition was rampant, even among the educated. This is not to be wondered at, as the author points out, the tendency to believe in the supernatural is as strong now as then, only that a scientific and secular society sets limits to its influence. Even the scientists were caught in the same web, which should make us pause and truly appreciate the genius of the few men who transcended their age. But of course, even then we tend to look upon them as more modern as they really were, because it is the modernity of their ideas which have survived, not their personal prejudices. Newton is a case in point. As usual the author exemplifies at length and depth. This is fine when we are in no doubt as to what he exemplifies. The story of Dee and Kemp carries on for many a page, and shows how insatiable curiosity, technical mathematical skill (something astrologers needed, and which meant that in those days, the connotation of a mathematician was akin to a magician and astrologer), can cohabit in the same mind as that of an inveterate mystic. Now the researchers of those two men strike us as pure lunacy, and if not the machinations of charlatans, of which there has been a steady supply throughout history. Rowse assures us that they were neither. They sincerely believed in what they were doing, and there was no established science into which they could channel their mental energies.

Finally we have the case of witches. Witchcraft was rampant as well, and everybody believed, including the witches themselves, that witches could effect people, even cast fatal spells. But Rowse is adamant in holding, as opposed to other historians, that there was very little witch-hunting in England, as opposed to the Continent. Few witches were actually convicted, and even those who were convicted were often let free. In total maybe a thousand witches were hanged or burned at the stake, a number that may seem high, but spread over the years was modest compared to all the people who were executed due

to petty crimes such as stealing. Of course if a witch was convicted of having cast a spell leading to the death of the victim, she was on par with a murderer and should suffer the consequences. Nothing particularly cruel about that, the noteworthy thing was in the belief of the reality of a spell. But such beliefs were in perfect keeping with the tenor of the age, in which people also believed in fairies and ghosts and evil spirits to be exorcised by priests. In fact the belief in ghosts probably still carries on at the population at large. One may ridicule such illusions, on the other hand they do make for an emotionally rich environment, in which also everyday objects and events become imbued with a deeper meaning. Rationality certainly has impoverished the world of the common people. One is tempted to speculate, that a revival of such feelings would be necessary in order to achieve a so called sustainable society! Why? Because natural resources and its like could be endowed with spirits and thus become safe from exploitation for material benefits. But to return to witches after this digression. The witches believed it themselves, and if not, torture usually brought out the required confessions. Rowse sees modern parallels with the show-trials of Stalin, while later readers, may look at CIA practices such as enhanced interrogation. The lesson that torture does not necessarily extract truth is an old one, but one apparently badly learned and in need of repetition. Rowse brings up a hero Reginald Scott who already at the end of the 16th century spoke against witchhunts with compelling arguments. A book considered so pivotal that it was even translated into Dutch, English books at the time seldom thought worthy of such attention. Rowse is an unabashed patriot and cannot but sneer at the contemporary Frenchman Bodin and his far more primitive views on the subject.

Astrology was finally phased out, but Rowse notes that the arguments against it at the time was as crude and non-sensical as the arguments for. Calvin was against it because it interfered with the will of God. We were simply not meant to know the future in advance. It is tempting to see a sort of revival of astrology in the readiness the public, as well as much of the scientific establishment, to see the various fates of people already encoded in their individual DNA.

February 16, 2013 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se