

Glyn Parry. *The Arch-Conjuror of England: John Dee*.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. xii + 336 pp. \$55. ISBN: 978-0-300-11719-6.

In spite of the numerous monographs and studies of the prolific Dee industry, the factual biography of the Elizabethan occult philosopher John Dee has relatively been neglected. After the pioneering work of Charlotte Fell Smith of 1909, only James Deacon's highly speculative monograph (1968) and Benjamin Wooley's

lightly documented *The Queen's Conjuror* (2001) tried to offer predominantly biographical accounts as opposed to the works concentrating on the science, magic, and intellectual contexts of the English Doctor. Now Glyn Parry's book fills the gap, presumably for a long time. His biography is built on unprecedented scrutiny of historical sources, not only of Dee's own writings but data buried in the National Archives, the State Papers, Renaissance correspondences, and in often obscure Elizabethan prints. Presently there is no one to know better the facts of Dee's life than Parry.

The book traces Dee's career from his formative years to his death with an almost day-to-day accuracy. Naturally, many of the events have been well-known and discussed by Dee scholars, while other periods, especially Dee's years in Central Europe, are less thoroughly treated by Parry himself. Nevertheless, in each chapter one finds observations that have either been overlooked, or can be considered entirely new discoveries. Some of these revelations include Dee's Catholic priesthood, with all its consequences; his service in connection with Elizabeth's coronation (contrary to general belief, he did not select the day of the ritual, just astrologically confirmed the Privy Council's decision); the personal interest or participation in occult practices by Elizabeth and her courtiers; various aspects of Dee's being an instigator of Elizabethan imperial policy by claiming her territorial rights both in the New World and Europe; the political intricacies behind the various editions of Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, in which Dee's image changed from issue to issue; and the details of Dee's 1578 travel to Germany to consult Leonhard Thurneysser about the queen's health by taking a flask of royal urine for inspection.

The accounts of the sojourns of Dee, Kelly, and company in Poland, Bohemia, and Germany are backed by a more modest arsenal of historical sources (here a look at publications by East and Central European historians might have come in handy); on the other hand, a meticulous reading of Dee's records of the Continental angelic conversations as well as his private diaries provide a more than usually detailed presentation even for those years. The exposure of Dee's last two decades again offers much new or overlooked detail about his struggles to reestablish himself in Britain; his desperate maneuvering amidst the antimagical counterrevolution led by Archbishop Whitgift against enthusiast Presbyterians as well as recusants; the difficult years in Manchester; and even the circumstances of his death.

"What are we to make of the extraordinary story of John Dee?" asks the author in his short conclusion. The summary suggests a paradigm that recalls Keith Thomas's thesis about "religion and the decline of magic": in Dee's early career magic seemed to most people an extension of life. To his contemporaries the occult sciences were perfectly explicable means to be used for power politics. By the end of his life, however, waves of Protestant attacks on magic discredited the occult philosophy and left the Doctor vulnerable to accusations of being an "Arch-Conjuror of England."

Leaving aside the problem of Protestant attitudes to magic, something that has been discussed extensively in connection with Keith Thomas's thesis, a few aspects of Parry's book make the reader uneasy. First is the rigid image of an unchanging

Dee, a gullible enthusiast whose only purpose is to secure patronage in the middle of political and religious whirlwinds and power games — and becoming invariably stranded by those whom he wanted to flatter. Such an image produces almost a caricature of its antihero, which together with that of his contemporaries produces a series of flat illustrations. A more serious flaw is the cumbersome, irritating method of citations. There is no bibliography and there are no full sentence quotations. The haphazardly placed notes (regrettably endnotes, making the deciphering even more difficult) usually refer without further explanations to several sources, leaving to the reader to sort them out. Since most point to archival manuscripts, one has no chance to doublecheck. Because of this unorthodox way of citation, intriguing pieces of information often look undocumented and appear as mere speculation.

The style of an author is a matter of personal taste so I reluctantly bring this up. Although often witty and entertaining, Parry's diction regularly falls into bombast that better fits *The Tudors* than a Yale monograph. One can enjoy many of his witticisms, but to compare John Thynne to "a Russian oligarch of his day" (13) I cannot help finding questionable in a scholarly context.

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