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Though there has been a recent surge of interest from Hollywood regarding the life, times and events of the reign of England's first Elizabeth, from the excellent whimsical romance of "Shakespeare in Love" to the abominable and inaccurate "Elizabeth I", scholarly attentions paid to Elizabeth and her reign have been scant in most recent years. Indeed, the early years of the Elizabethan era have seen perhaps the least new scholarly activity as the new millennium approaches: the standard work on the formative years of the reign remains Wallace MacCaffrey's *The Shaping of the Elizabethan Regime*, published in 1967, and the standard biography of her Chief Minister, William Cecil, remains Conyers Read's 1955 work, *Mr. Secretary Cecil and Queen Elizabeth*, a work which also reinforced the traditional views of a Council rent by faction and Elizabeth as 'Gloriana', playing the factions off one another like a master violinist or puppeteer to gain "harmonious cooperation" within her realm, first proposed in this century by J.E. Neale's 1934 work, *Queen Elizabeth*.¹ Even the standard revisionist views of Elizabeth and of her role in governance, Neville Williams' *Elizabeth the First: Queen of England*, and Christopher Haigh's *Elizabeth I*, were published in 1968 and 1988, respectively.² Stephen Alford's work, *The Early Elizabethan Polity* is an important addition to the bodies of work concerned with the early years of Elizabeth's reign and regarding its main subject, William Cecil.

Alford presents a prosopographic and institutional study of Cecil, with a focus on his actions and relations at court and in council, particularly as regards the formation of Scottish

¹ Wallace MacCaffrey, *The Shaping of the Elizabethan Regime*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968); Conyers Read, *Mr. Secretary Cecil and Queen Elizabeth* (New York: Knopf, 1955); J. E. Neale, *Queen Elizabeth I*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1952). Another important work regarding Elizabethan government is A.G.R. Smith *The Government of Elizabethan England* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 1967).

² Neville Williams, *Elizabeth the First: Queen of England* (New York: Dutton & Co., 1968); Christopher Haigh, *Elizabeth I*, (London: Longman, 1988).

policies, policies regarding the succession, the marriage of Mary, Queen of Scots to Lord Damley, and the settlement of 1568. In this work, Alford seeks to move his analysis beyond a study of faction in the Council, and begins to address more comprehensive questions which, executed properly, would bring a more complete portrait of Elizabethan governance than has heretofore been offered: Who made policy? What part did the Privy Council play in collating debate and deciding policy? And, how did this system work in political practice?³ He also considers reactions in the face of Norfolk's plot and the Northern rebellion, each of which are analyzed more in terms of their causes, rather than the responses offered to them. He determines, compellingly, that the "political creed" of Cecil and the early Elizabethan Privy Council consisted of three parts: "first, that England was a 'mixed polity'; second, that the 'prerogative of the ruler' was limited by the advice of the Council; and third, that the 'assent of the whole realm' in parliament was needed to effect significant political or religious change"⁴ Contrary to Williams' pessimistic view of an over-complacent council and terrified Queen acting without real concert or efficiency that left her, after fourteen years "at odds with her Council, both Houses of Parliament and Convocation, with the religious unity she had striven for lying "in tatters," Alford argues that the Council was "an effective political body" by "even the middle part of the decade [of the 1560's]"⁵ Further, in contrast to MacCaffrey, A.G.R. Smith, Haigh and most of the historiography since the eras of Read and Neale, all of whom saw faction as having "rent the Council," Alford asserts that 'faction' in the Council merely reflected "strategic disagreements

³ Stephen Alford, *The Early Elizabethan Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 6.

⁴ Alford, *Early Elizabethan Polity*, p. 3. This is in contrast to Haigh's assertion that "Privy Councillors saw royal objection not as a final refusal but as a problem to be circumvented," due to Elizabeth's use of "vacillation" as an overriding political strategy. Haigh, *Elizabeth I*, p. 72.

⁵ Alford, *Early Elizabethan Polity*, p. 208. This contrasts Williams, *Elizabeth the First*, p. 178.

rather than ideological [ones],” and that the workings of the Council were “fairly smooth” throughout the decade, noting that “disagreement, after all, was not faction.”⁶

Alford also makes insightful points regarding the anachronism of such labels as ‘domestic’ and ‘foreign’ when applied to the consideration of issues and creation of policy in the early modern period, that the politicians and councilors saw no real distinction between the two, but saw policies regarding issues seemingly as disparate as interrelated in the governance of the realm.⁷ He also makes a compelling argument about the role which providential philosophy played in the conceptions of Cecil, arguing against the traditional portrait of Cecil as *politique*, noting that his subject’s writings often showed his linking of the spiritual health of the realm with the physical health and political security of the commonwealth, as well as the effectiveness of its governance.⁸ He also points out, using Cecil’s writings on the subject, that the Elizabethan Council did not “plant” debates in Parliament, but did act in concert with senior MPs, the Speaker of the House of Commons and the Lords, to help shape and manage debate, and pressure the Queen, successfully, more often than not.⁹ His successful use of a form of prosopographic method, concentrated on an individual, insures that a deeper portrait of the Cecil of the 1560’s emerges, one fully within the politics and polity of his era, acting consciously as an early modern model of Cicero’s *vir civilis*: governor, councillor and secretary, a model well-known to Cecil and his contemporaries.¹⁰

While this book offers many compelling arguments and does an admirable job in melding intellectual and political history using an innovative method, while helping to shift the field of

⁶ Alford, *Early Elizabethan Polity*, p. 30, 213.

⁷ Alford, *Early Elizabethan Polity*, p. 217.

⁸ Alford, *Early Elizabethan Polity*, p. 26-28.

⁹ Alford, *Early Elizabethan Polity*, p. 215.

¹⁰ Alford, *Early Elizabethan Polity*, p. 20-24.

Elizabethan political history away from an obsession with inter-Councillor factional strife, particularly between Cecil and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, to one which is concerned with the creation and promulgation of policy, it does have its shortcomings. First, the book is somewhat mistitled. Billed as a study of “the early Elizabethan polity,” a more apt title for the work would be “William Cecil and the Early Elizabethan Polity,” the political nation aside from Cecil gets rather short shrift in this work. Certainly, one can not deny the importance of William Cecil to a study of this nature, however, it is also a mistake to assume a study of Cecil’s attitudes, motivations, philosophies and actions is a study of these things as applied to the polity as a whole.

Secondly, Alford gives a great amount of analytical discussion to Cecil’s 1563 proposal which would have given the “prerogative power of the crown” to the Privy Council if anything had happened to Elizabeth, in fact, publishing the ultimately rejected proposal in toto as appendix 2 (of 6). While the author does a fine job in illustrating how such a proposal, and the reactions to it, demonstrated the importance of the on-going succession crisis of the 1560’s, his focus on that decade leads to a certain lack of context vital to a full understanding of such a proposal, and the man who advanced it. Alford mentions that Cecil played a role on the Council at the end of Henry VIII’s reign and during that of Edward VI, however, his discussion of Cecil’s role in the machinations of the late 1540’s is glossed over with great brevity and with no real depth.¹¹ Alford offers no analysis of Cecil’s possible role in the changing of Henry’s will to allow Somerset to take control of the Council after the ascension of the minor Edward VI, and offers no comment on the likely connection between Cecil’s proposal of 1563, offered during a succession

¹¹ The author’s briefly mentions the events of the 1540s twice, on neither occasion does Alford offer any discussion of Cecil’s role as Northumberland’s protégé and the subsequent influence that relationship would have on policies

crisis, and the events which Cecil lived through in Edward's reign. These events saw the succession of a Counciliar government under a Protector of the Realm during a royal minority first fall into the personal rule of one man, the Duke of Somerset, then saw a counciliar *coup d'etat* affected by the Duke of Northumberland which led to arrests and executions of Northumberland's enemies, including Somerset, and finally, saw Northumberland himself attempt to alter the succession at Edward's death by placing his daughter-in-law Jane Grey on the throne for her famous nine days, all of which promoted factionalism and rivalry and was to the detriment of 'good governance'. The fact that Cecil not only lived through these events, but was a prominent political actor in them, beginning his counciliar career as Northumberland's protégé, and eventually being excluded from the Marian Council in large part due to perceptions about that relationship, lends a deeper level of understanding for his need to not only promulgate such a proposal as that which he tried to advance in 1563, but also to his desire to find a permanent and stable remedy to the on-going succession crisis of the 1560's, a focus of much of Alford's analysis. Without an examination of this necessary background, Alford's intellectual history, on this point at least, lacks necessary context.

Finally, while the book does a good job in discussing Cecil and events in London, answering the questions 'who made policy?' and 'what part did the Privy Council play?' with a large degree of success, the book is less successful in answering the third of its questions, 'how did it work in political practice?', at least how it all worked outside London and the Court. One certainly gets a sense of how policy was conceived and how policy was promulgated, and the roles of William Cecil in both processes, however, one gains less insight in how policies were implemented and enforced. A full political picture should include all of these factors.

advanced by Cecil after 1558, or, indeed, his notable exclusion from the Marian Council. Alford, *Early Elizabethan*

Despite these problems, this book is an important addition to both Cecilian and Elizabethan era scholarship. The text is followed by six appendices, all containing primary documents which help to inform the reader regarding points of the author's analysis, and it contains an exceedingly useful bibliography and list of sources on Cecil, which will serve as a good place to begin for those interested in the subjects of the book and for future further scholarship on Cecil and early Elizabethan government. While more time than many of us would like might have to be spent "reeducating" students who only know the 'history' proffered by Hollywood movies on Elizabeth, Stephen Alford's book should take its rightful place as one of the standards by which such an education is undertaken.

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