

A TUDOR CHRISTMAS AND A STUART NEW YEAR

Queen Elizabeth's godson, the writer and courtier Sir John Harington (1560-1612), arrived at Whitehall in time for the Christmas celebrations of 1602/3. The twelve-day celebrations were expected to be dull, but the new Comptroller, Sir Edward Wotton, who was responsible for the day-to-day running of the palace, had tried to inject fresh life into them. Dressed entirely in white, he had organized dances, bear-baiting and gambling. Courtiers were playing for the highest stakes. As Harington reflected, Elizabeth was sixty-nine: she could not live forever. The country was on the eve of change, and Harington found the prospect as exciting as it was terrifying. For all Sir Edward's best efforts, this would not be a carefree season, but a time of jockeying for position in preparation for the regime to come, and overshadowed by the declining health of the Queen

I am the historian Leanda de Lisle, uncovering the Tudors and Stuarts behind the myths

Harington was called for an audience with the Queen soon after his arrival, and escorted along a dark passage to the Privy Chamber. Elizabeth sat on a raised platform with the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, beside her. His plain clerical garb contrasted starkly with her bejewelled gowns and spangled wigs. People believed that Elizabeth used her glittering costumes to dazzle people so they, 'would not so easily discern the marks of age..'. But if so, she no longer considered them enough.

In February 1601 Elizabeth's last great favourite, the Earl of Essex, had led a palace revolt. The childless Queen had always refused to name an heir, believing that to do so would make her expendable. Essex hoped to force her to name James VI of Scots and to overthrow her corrupt Secretary of State, Sir Robert Cecil. The revolt had failed, Essex had been executed and his noble followers, the young Earls of Southampton and Rutland, remained in the Tower. But the episode had left Elizabeth depressed and fearful. Anxious that any intimation of mortality would attract speculation on her successor she filled out her cheeks with fine cloths and wore make up down to her breast, 'in some places near half an inch thick.' There were some things, however, that she could not hide.

Elizabeth's throat was so sore, and her state of mind so troubled, that she could barely speak during Harington's audience. When she did, it was of Essex, at which she wept and struck her breast. 'She held in her hand a golden cup, which she often put to her lips; but in soothe' Harington told his wife, 'her heart seemed too full to lack [need] more filling.' He saw the Queen again later that night and the following day, only to discover she was not eating and had grown forgetful: he believed she had months to live. No one dared to openly voice the seriousness of her condition, but he did find, 'some less mindful of what they are soon to lose, than of what they may perchance hereafter get'.

A new monarch would need to acquire widespread support to secure their position against rivals. That meant an opening up of the royal purse: there would be gifts of land and office and title. Harington was too discreet to name names but he told his wife he had attended a dinner with the Archbishop and that many of Elizabeth's own clerics appeared to be, 'well anointed with the oil of gladness'. The spectacle of Elizabeth's misery amidst this feasting saddened Harington, but he too was full of hopes for the future - not all of them selfish.

Harington was a Protestant, but like many at court he had Catholic friends and relations. He hated their persecution by Elizabeth's government and was aware that although King James - the great-grandson of Henry VIII's sister, Margaret - was a Protestant his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, was regarded as akin a Catholic martyr. Harington believed James could

heal the bitter divisions in England and suggested that he introduce toleration of religion in a Tract arguing James's right of succession.

As Harington predicted Elizabeth's health deteriorated that winter and she died in March, the last of the Tudors. Cecil immediately proclaimed James King in London. The nation held its breath for several days. But there were no uprisings in favour of other candidates for the crown, only celebrations. James promised to be all things to all men: courtiers hoped for wealth denied them by the parsimonious Elizabeth, Puritans for reform of the English Church and many Catholics, thinking their sufferings were now over, showed themselves anxious to prove their loyalty.

On April 5th James began his journey from Edinburgh to London. He was to be crowned at Westminster Abbey in July, along with his wife Anna. But the celebrations at the time of his accession were now well and truly over. London's bells tolled for thousands dying from plague, and there were courtiers and priests in the Tower on charges of treason. The optimism of the early days had dissipated and Harington was amongst the disappointed – but he was back at court for the first Christmas celebrations of James's reign. This time they were at Hampton Court, with its forest of turrets and gilded weathervanes.

The Earl of Essex, who had rebelled against Elizabeth, was now referred to as James's 'martyr', and the Earls of Southampton and Rutland were free men. But their old enemy, Cecil, remained Secretary of State. He was busy promoting the King's unpopular plan for union between his kingdoms. And everywhere, it seemed, there were Scots, enriched by English wealth and, rumour had it, seeking the confiscated lands of the courtiers found guilty of treason against the new King.

Amongst the condemned was Elizabeth's Captain of the Guard, Sir Walter Raleigh. He had lost his post to a Scot, Sir Thomas Erskine, in May and was convicted of subsequently trying to overthrow James in favour of his English born cousin, Arbella Stuart. Harington's Catholic cousin, Sir Griffin Markham, was another convicted traitor, condemned for a separate plot to force James to introduce toleration of religion.

Catholic hopes had shattered as James had journeyed south, ordering general pardons for prisoners, from which Papists were excluded, along with murderers. Markham's co-conspirators had included two priests who had been amongst James's most vociferous supporters before his accession. The priests were hung, drawn and quartered in early December. Markham's life was spared, at the cost of exile and the promise to act as a spy on his co-religionists. Harington's hopes of royal favour had come to centre on being granted his cousin's attainted property. But although he now mourned the Queen he had lost, all around him her memory was treated with contempt.

Harington learnt, to his disgust, that Anna had ordered Elizabeth's best costumes be taken from the Tower to be cut up and re-arranged as costumes for her forthcoming masque, *The Vision of the Twelve Goddesses*. Anna herself was to perform as Pallas Athene, in a dress cut to the knee. Some thirty plays were also planned. William's Shakespeare's company performed several, including *A Midsummer's Night Dream* and Ben Jonson's *Sejennus, His Fall*. There was a new hedonism abroad. Even the court Ladies now played drunken games, and the young heir, Prince Henry found himself being thrown around like a tennis ball by dancing courtiers after his mother's masque.

James was chiefly occupied with entertaining visiting ambassadors, but he found time to see Harington, who had had the sense to befriend his Scots favourites. After a formal audience in the Presence Chamber, Harington was escorted to a small room furnished with a table covered in James's paper, ink and pens. James came in shortly afterwards.

At thirty-even, James was a man of restless energy, of good height and build, but with weak legs. He usually leaned on a courtier as he walked. James was in a jovial mood, and said that he had heard a great deal about Harington's learning. He showed off his own, quoting, 'Aristotle, and such like writers' and asked Harington, 'Whether a King should not be the best clerk in his own country; and if this land did not entertain good opinion of his learning and wisdom?' Harington reassured James everyone in England admired him. But James had other concerns. Smoking was very fashionable and James told Harington that he believed tobacco, ' would, by its use, infuse ill qualities on the brain.. and (he) wished it forbidden'. He was already planning a treatise, 'A Counter-Blast to Tobacco' and may have been writing it at the table in the room in which they stood.

A further cause for alarm, in James's eyes, was the slack attitude to witchcraft. James asked Harington, gravely, if he knew why it was that the devil so often worked in old women? Harington couldn't resist 'a scurvy jest' and replied that 'we were taught hereof in scripture where it is told, that the devil walketh in dry places'. James enjoyed the joke, but he was in deadly earnest about the danger from witches and saw to it that witchcraft was made a capital offence in England that spring.

The conversation now led to James's favourite subject: religion. Toleration for Catholics was a dead letter and the topic of the moment was the Conference on the English Church, shortly to be held at Hampton Court palace. James intended to thrash out a middle ground between those wished to keep the Church as it was and the more radical reforms of Puritans, who had believed James sympathised with their cause. Harington intended to witness the Conference and James closed the audience praying that Harington do him justice in his reports.

Elizabeth's godson, '..made courtesy here at, and withdrew down the passage, and out at the gate, amidst the many varlets and lordly servants who stood around'. Christmas was over and the new age had dawned, but there would be no more seasons at court in which James's popularity would outshine that of the dead Queen.

You can learn more about the death of Elizabeth I in my biography of the dynasty Tudor, The Family Story and in my book about the year 1603, AFTER ELIZABETH. You are also welcome to contact me via my website, facebook or twitter