

## **Creative Non-fiction**

*The Time Traveller's Guide to Elizabethan England*. By Ian Mortimer (Bodley Head, 2012; pp. x + 420. £20)

The final OUHS meeting of Trinity term 2012 had to compete with several audibly well-attended end of year parties. Faced with the resultant sparse audience, the guest speaker, Dr. Ian Mortimer, flourished a substantial script for his advertised talk – ‘Creative Non-fiction: where does history go from here?’ – before, with a gesture the late A J P Taylor might have envied, returning it to his pocket<sup>1</sup>. Instead, he said, he would take us on an unscripted canter through daily life in Elizabethan England: supposing we were to find ourselves transported to that period, what would be our first impressions? Where would we stay? What would we eat? What sort of work might we find? What punishments and pleasures might we endure or enjoy? What sicknesses might we suffer (and expect to die from at a disappointingly early age)?

These and other questions Dr Mortimer answered by means of an alphabetical filleting of the book under review – then newly published. Starting with ‘A is for Armada’ (‘the defining battle of the reign’ and ‘a talking point among all classes’, literate or not) he ad libbed through to ‘Y is for Your Heritage’, effectively a catch-all peroration since, he admitted, ‘Z for’ had eluded him. In that ‘heritage’ summing up he suggested the Elizabethan age marked a sensible change not only for the political and landed classes, but for common citizens; a sense of novelty, of England having somehow moved on, whether welcome or not, was an inevitable consequence of the century’s major political and social changes - dissolution of the monasteries, yoking of religious and political power and so on.

On the way, Mortimer handed out what old-fashioned schoolmasters might have termed ‘gobbets’ – (oral) paragraphs on topics ranging from ‘E for education’ – printing of the Bible and the foundation of grammar schools had an enormous influence on literacy,

<sup>1</sup> Readers can catch up with this talk, previously delivered to the Friends of the National Archives, at <http://www.ianmortimer.com>.

especially of women – to ‘U is for underwear.’ Coincidentally that last topic, often overlooked in standard texts, was highlighted around the same time in the BBC TV series ‘Harlots, Housewives and Heroines – women in 17<sup>th</sup> century history’, fronted by Dr. Lucy Worsley, Chief Curator of Historic Royal Palaces. But where Dr. Worsley demurely but firmly demonstrated that as late as the time of the English civil wars, knickers were unknown, Dr. Mortimer hedged his bets: ‘most women’, he suggested, ‘probably’ wore no drawers, but some contemporary sources boasted that the queen, at least, was known to be proud possessor of several imported silk pairs.

Ian Mortimer’s alphabetical gallop seemed a good enough wheeze for lecturers; it certainly aids note-taking. But it would be wrong to give the impression that his book represents no more than a random collection of unrelated ephemera. Rather, his talk should have whetted appetites for what is a serious, properly researched and wide-ranging look at daily life in 16<sup>th</sup> century England. To bring such a range of topics together and give the reader a rounded picture of everyday life is a trick which the author had previously pulled off in respect of medieval England.<sup>2</sup> Without undervaluing the effort required for *any* work of this kind, it is probably fair to say that the Elizabethan task would have been the easier of the two: most readers may already have some sort of feel for 16<sup>th</sup> century life and language, thanks partly to film and TV, although, as Mortimer demonstrates, that sort of knowledge may in some cases be wildly inaccurate.

More importantly, not least because of the spread of print, there is a greater range of contemporary material covering a range of social classes, on which the historian may draw. It includes the often colourful and revealing diaries and letters of foreign visitors to England; the Italian Alessandro Magno, for example, features large in Mortimer’s narrative; most such writers came free of pre-conceptions, although inevitably they tend to be heavily London-centric.

Very occasionally Mortimer may slip from factual scenario to debatable generalisation: thus the time-traveller, he writes, would find the ‘self-confidence’ of Elizabethan people

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<sup>2</sup> Mortimer, *Time Traveller’s Guide to Medieval England*, 2008, Bodley Head.

‘easily shaken’, and his earlier book maintained that ‘Medieval people love music . . . one of those aspects of life which united everyone, from the most powerful nobleman to the most miserable villein.’ But these are rare exceptions; for the most part the reader can be confident that what Dr. Mortimer writes is what you might well expect to see, hear, smell and taste around the homes, markets, streets, inns and theatres of Elizabethan England. In a work originally published in 1991, Keith Jenkins asserted, ‘we can never really know the past . . . the gap between past and history . . . is such that no amount of epistemological effort can bridge it.’<sup>3</sup> Well, maybe, but if you still fancy leaping that particular gap, Ian Mortimer would be a good choice of companion.

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<sup>3</sup> Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, 1991/2003, quoted Mortimer, *Medieval England*, p.311.