

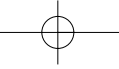
INTRODUCTION

I

AL. ROWSE was a complex and contradictory character. He was a hugely successful historian and writer, but he constantly complained that his talents were unappreciated. He was a friend of poets and novelists and politicians and socialites, he was a guest at the great houses of the nobility, but he thought of himself as a neglected outsider. He sailed through scholarships and examinations, a plum post fell into his lap, he lived in congenial comfort and made a fortune from his books—but whined that he had always had to struggle against adversity and never had any luck. He was a Labour Party activist and parliamentary candidate, who soon came to despise ‘the idiot people’¹ and to prefer the country-house set. He was a Marxist internationalist who turned Tory nationalist, and an English patriot who insisted he was Cornish and not English at all.

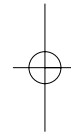
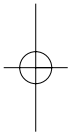
Rowse was bitter and vindictive, nurturing hatreds and maintaining grievances for decades, but he could be generous, loyal, and sensitive to the needs and misfortunes of others. He was a homosexual misogynist, who would turn his back on female guests at his college, but some of his closest confidantes were women. He sneered at American gaucheness and derided American scholarship—but he admired American energy and ambition, and loved American hospitality and adulation. From the start he was insufferably arrogant: as a little boy he shouted to his family, ‘Everyone’s a fool in this house but me!’—and he kept saying it to the end of his life, with irrepressible self-congratulation. Almost every other intelligence was disparaged, but Rowse was a self-proclaimed ‘genius’.² He talked and wrote as if he were the only man with common sense, the only man who understood the way things really are—and one of the few historians who could do the job properly. But his private diaries show he was self-knowing and self-critical, recognising, if not quite regretting, his flaws.

There were lots of different Rowses. To his family he was Les; to his friends Leslie; to his intimates ‘A. L.’; to his colleagues Rowse;



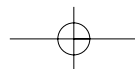
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to his enemies ‘bloody Rowse’ (and, often, ‘bloody, bloody Rowse’). I met him just once, in 1970: ‘Haigh? Haigh?’ he queried when we were introduced—‘Ah, yes, I’ve just reviewed your book. I thought it was wonderful. Of course, I didn’t say so, lest they should think you were my boyfriend’. The review, when it came, was straightforward and descriptive, and predictably condescending to a novice historian. Rowse himself was certainly (if rather briefly) a significant academic historian: he wrote one groundbreaking book, *Tudor Cornwall* (1941); one major work of reinterpretation and synthesis, *The England of Elizabeth* (1950) (this present volume); and he almost invented a new subject, in *The Expansion of Elizabethan England* (1955), also now reprinted by Palgrave Macmillan. In search of fame and fortune, he turned himself into a prodigious populariser, one of the first and most successful of the coffee-table historians. He wrote lots of poetry, mainly about Cornwall and himself, and much of it appeared in print—though never to as much acclaim as he thought it deserved. He published four volumes of autobiography, the first a minor masterpiece (*A Cornish Childhood*, 1942), and books about politics, sex, diplomacy, and his cat. He wrote literary biographies, and edited Shakespeare plays and the sonnets. He claimed to have found the hidden keys to understanding Shakespeare the man, and made a cantankerous fool of himself over it. The scholars finally lost patience, but the fans kept on buying.



II

Alfred Leslie Rowse was born in 1903, to a poor family living outside St Austell in Cornwall. While a boy, he looked enviously at the old manor house at Trenarron, and wished he could live there³: he moved there in 1953, and died at the house in 1997. As a child he was fiercely precocious and clever. At eighteen he won the only university scholarship his county offered, and an open scholarship to read English at Christ Church, Oxford—but he was persuaded to change to History. In 1925 he took a high First in the Oxford Final Honour School (he crowed about it for the rest of his life), and won a prize fellowship at All Souls College. His research fellowship meant he could do much as he wished—except in the periodic



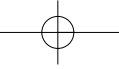
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anguish of an undiagnosed duodenal ulcer. He went to learn German in Germany, and didn't like it. He did a bit of college tutoring in Oxford and some lecturing at the LSE, but was bored by teaching. And, on the advice of the civil war historian Sir Charles Firth, he got on with serious work in Cornwall on the Reformation. It took him ten years to complete the research and to write *Tudor Cornwall*,⁴ and the book made his reputation as a historian.

Rowse later came to see *Tudor Cornwall* as the essential preparation for *The England of Elizabeth*.⁵ In *Tudor Cornwall* he did for one county what he was later to do for all England: it was 'a portrait of Tudor society as you see it in all its elaboration and richness and individual detail reflected in the small mirror of Cornwall'.⁶ Half of the book was devoted to the structure and institutions of Cornish society: the land, trade and industry, social structure, government, the Church—the themes he was to tackle in *The England of Elizabeth*, dealt with in the same order. The rest of *Tudor Cornwall* deals with the impact of the Reformation—the initial focus of his research. Rowse, as we shall see, thought all religion was nonsense, and medieval Catholicism corrupt and superstitious. But here he evoked traditional religion with sensitivity, recognised the sufferings caused in its loss, and portrayed the Catholics of Elizabethan Cornwall in sympathetic detail.

The theme of the book is how a distinct but lethargic Cornwall was absorbed into England, and became the energetic front line of a Protestant nation's struggle against Catholic Spain. It was emphatically not a piece of antiquarian local history: 'My aim, then, is to integrate local and national history, to make a bridge from one to the other'. Rowse thought it was time 'for a synthesis of local and national history', to use local materials to enrich understanding of English history and reveal its complexity. 'It is in this direction, I feel, that great progress may be made next in our historical studies: perhaps more than in any other field'.⁷ Perhaps he was right: A. G. Dickens had followed his example and was working on Tudor Yorkshire, and from the 1950s onwards we have seen county studies of every part of sixteenth century England.⁸

Tudor Cornwall was subtitled 'Portrait of a Society'. Some years later, the vice-chancellor of Oxford asked Rowse, 'Why not give us a portrait of the Elizabethan Age?' Rowse says he would not have



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dared to attempt such a 'synoptic view' without this challenge, and G. M. Trevelyan (who had admired *Tudor Cornwall*) encouraged him to get on with it.⁹ So he did as he was told, and planned a work on a grand scale: first there were to be two volumes under the general title of 'The Elizabethan Age' (vice-chancellors have their uses), then this expanded to three, and ultimately there were four.¹⁰ The series had, Rowse insisted, a logical plan—and, pretty much, he kept to it.¹¹ First he would deal with the structure of Elizabethan society; then he would tackle its expansion—its trade, colonisations, and warfare; then he would examine daily life at all levels of society—with food, drink, sex and sport; and finally he would look at its cultural achievement—architecture, music, painting, and science. It was a mammoth undertaking, and it lasted more than twenty years.

III

The first volume, *The England of Elizabeth*, appeared in 1950, and the reviews were enthusiastic. J. E. Neale (one of the few historians Rowse admired) said: 'This is a very fine book', a 'stimulating, delightful, outstanding book', and 'a unique achievement'. Neale, himself famed for his literary style, described the prose as 'lucid and limpid and always charged with vitality'—'Clio has been restored as a muse', he declared. Gladys Scott Thompson was less ecstatic, but firm: 'Let it be said at once that this . . . is a *tour de force*'.¹² In *The Times*, Trevelyan was more ponderous but also praising: it was 'a work of learning, filled with a vast assortment of facts illustrating the author's theses, and yet extremely readable, owing to his style and the vivacity of his thought'. 'Mr Rowse establishes his place in the ranks of great living historians', said *The Listener*.

When there was criticism of the book, it was usually of Rowse's very obvious personal antipathies and his passionate abuse of what he disliked—though Scott Thompson recognised that this was the vice of one of his virtues: 'This book is history written from a personal standpoint, with brilliance, imagination and passion. Passion which can be used to recreate an epoch, as Mr Rowse has done superbly in his opening chapters, can also get out of control'.¹³ Nowadays few of us suppose anyone could write history other than 'from a personal standpoint'—though most would agree that there

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are degrees of personal involvement, and that some attempt at detachment is a professional duty. But *The England of Elizabeth* is an astonishingly personal piece of historical writing, with the author's own prejudices prominent throughout and the man himself thinly disguised. The immodest Rowse rather liked William Camden, who 'had no false modesty, such as our age affects, about his qualifications'. The Rowse who thought he had always struggled against the odds understood Elizabeth: she expected nothing for nothing; for everything in this world one had to pay a price; whatever one achieved was won by effort and will: she had lived all her life in a hard school'.¹⁴

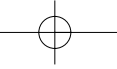
Sometimes, when writing about others, Rowse seems to be describing himself. Walter Raleigh had complained he had been slandered:

But we know that Raleigh was a very touchy person, quick to resent any fancied slights: due to something in his make-up and background, the restricted circumstances of his early years, the passionate ambition, the long-enforced wait for an opportunity for his superb gifts, his resentment at the refusal of others to recognise what they had not got, and then his taking it out of them when he got the chance. Not wise, but so very understandable in him.

Here, surely, was Rowse: touchy, resentful, ambitious, vengeful; poor background, waiting for recognition—and not wise. More surprisingly, there is a lot of Rowse in his portrayal of the exiled Jesuit Robert Parsons—a brilliant Oxford don, 'a Westcountryman of low origins', 'a man with a complex':

A sense of social inferiority, consciousness of great abilities, resentment at opposition, especially from people he must have considered his inferiors, frustration imposed upon a temperament naturally aggressive and designing, made for command though not naturally and easily like those, often far less able, who are born to it: all these must have stored up the desire to be revenged upon the country that had disconsidered him and upon which he had turned his back.

In this little sketch are many of the themes of Rowse's own diaries, and of *A Cornishman at Oxford*—where Parsons's rejected England is Rowse's rejected Christ Church. Christ Church was his

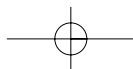


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own college, but its failure to elect him to a tutorship in 1926 produced a lifetime of resentment and petty revenges: ‘of course, they chose quite the wrong man to humiliate’.¹⁵

Rowse did not hide himself, and he certainly did not hide his prejudices—his dismissal of religion, his contempt for the ordinary, his English patriotism, and his conviction that much of what he valued was under threat or already lost. He made his religious position clear at the beginning of a chapter on ‘The Church’: he was ‘a dissenter from all the sects’. Religious disputes were ‘endless fooleries’—‘Flesh and blood can hardly now stand the reading of them’. ‘Alas that people should take their absurd beliefs so seriously!’ he boomed—‘why it is that humans should be such fools as to believe what they do beats me’, he wrote later.¹⁶ If there had to be religion, let it be the Church of England, cool and moderate, refusing to take things too seriously. But ‘On both extremes there were fools (or knaves) arguing for their own idea of liberty, Catholic or Puritan—each wishing of course, to impose it on the other. Nothing more boring in history than men’s identification of universal good with their own interests’. Catholicism was priest-ridden mumbo-jumbo or potential treason, and at least Protestantism was progress towards rationality.¹⁷

But Puritanism, well no thank you, not at any price—‘I have not depicted it at its worst, for the good reason that I like it so little’. Rowse had some kind words for Richard Greenham, but William Perkins was a ‘horrid barbarian’—‘fortunately he died young’. Rowse thought Richard Hooker had got ‘the horrid Puritans’ right: ‘He well understood how little real humility there was among the Puritans, any more than among their descendants in modern Nonconformity’.¹⁸ Rowse never quite forgot that he had been an Anglican choirboy in Nonconformist Cornwall—another grudge that wouldn’t die. He hated Puritanism, but he saw that it had been a historical force and had a sneaking admiration for its vigour. Perhaps those such as Puritans—‘intransigent, self-opinionated, and fearless’—are necessary to get things done. ‘The more one studies these people in their time, the more one is impressed by their unyielding spirit: they were irrepressible, they would not give in, they were absolutely determined to have their way in the end’¹⁹—just like Rowse.



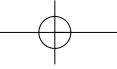
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It was in his contempt for conventional ideas and simple people that Rowse was at his most offensive. There were ‘the idiot people’: idiot because they were impressed by an image of the Crucifixion; idiot because they were afraid that Dutch immigrants would take their work; idiot because they hoped to be cured of scrofula, the King’s Evil. History is the story ‘of man’s, or rather of most men’s, ineffable stupidity, irrationality and foolery’, he tells us. This is more than hard-nosed cynicism, and there is no generous recognition of human frailty: humans should not be frail, they should be like Rowse, they should share his views and value the higher things. ‘Among many human idiots there is a loathing for things of beauty they cannot comprehend’.²⁰

Rowse identified himself strongly with England, its people and its institutions. He dated his preface ‘Empire Day, 1950’, and later described England as ‘the country whose history was the inspiration of my work’. In the book, England is always ‘here’, the English always ‘we’, their ways ‘ours’: ‘we were, in the Elizabethan Age, a small people’. ‘We’ were not as other nations: ‘we’ had law and liberty and order. Partly this was because of some natural geographical advantages, and partly through ‘the good sense of the English’. The Church of England was ‘gentler and kindlier’ than Rome or Geneva—‘like the English people themselves’. There was an English tradition ‘of cooperation between government and subject’, which became crucial to ‘the difference between this country and Europe’. An effective monarchy protected the weak against the mighty: ‘It was what marked us off from abroad’. But strong monarchy did not lead to absolutism: ‘It was fashionable abroad; but it did not go down here.’ Rowse offered some explanation for what he saw as England’s distinct course, but at bottom he thought that the English were just different. ‘No wonder “lesser breeds without the law”—we may disclaim any racial significance in the phrase—have no conception of what has been the heart of the English people’s experience’.²¹ Those foreigners just can’t understand.

IV

But the England that Rowse so admired had decayed: his wished-for England was in the distant past, it was ‘the England of Elizabeth’. He was, he later admitted, ‘an addict of the cult of



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romantic decay’—the glossy golden age had gone, and civilised ways were in decline. Rowse just didn’t like change. ‘All my work, all my writing, has been a protest against the ineluctable onward march of time towards one’s extinction, an attempt to erect a barrier, something to hold on to in that ever-rolling flood’. In 1971 he confessed ‘I find myself in more sympathy’ with the spirit of the Elizabethan age ‘than that of today’—and that had been true for more than twenty years. It was an unmistakable theme in *The England of Elizabeth*, with its frequent comparisons between Elizabethan glamour and dull modernity: ‘What must it have been like to be alive then, sentient and intelligent?—alas, the mirage the historian pursues!’²² What Rowse saw in the Elizabethan age was energy and opportunity: what he saw in his own age was restriction and stultification. The passion we have noted was as much a passion *against* his own time as it was a passion *for* Elizabeth’s.

The new curses were state control and egalitarianism. Then government was a bit ramshackle—better than ‘the throttling efficiency of our own time’. Then there was tax evasion and smuggling—‘Can one blame them?’ Then there was inefficiency—‘but there was no red tape’. Then the individual was left to ‘get on with what is his proper business—to live life as fully as possible, to develop his potentialities voluntarily and cooperatively along with others: the proper end of society’. Then things could get done: ‘the hierarchical nature of that society was no bar, but a stimulus, to creative achievement’, and social disparities were ‘so much better than greater equality with lowering standards’. Then there was ‘the accumulation of capital’, now ‘its erosion in a low grade consumption’. The modern obsession with equality had undermined excellence; everything was on ‘one dead level, a shared and equalised mediocrity, offering no excitements, no inducements, no interest even—dreary tenements in place of Elizabethan palaces, the ability of all to go to the cinema instead of an elect society that made the music and drama of that age’.²³ England had become a gutless and dreary society.

Rowse had been formed by the politics of the 1920s and especially the 1930s, the decade of appeasement: he called himself ‘a man of the thirties’. He regarded the years from 1924 to 1940 as

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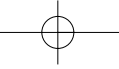
a period of shameful betrayal and failure, with weak foreign secretaries and, in Baldwin, a complacent, cheating prime minister.

They were past-masters at internal political manoeuvring—while the prime interests of the safety of the state, and all the people whose lives depended on it, went by default. They can never be forgiven for it—certainly not by the historian who thinks in terms of the England of Elizabeth and William Cecil, of Oliver Cromwell and William III and Marlborough, of Chatham and the younger Pitt, of Gladstone and Edward Grey and Winston Churchill, whom *they* kept out as long as they could. Unworthy, unworthy, unworthy. . . . People would not wake up till 1940, though given plenty of warning and danger-signals. By then it was too late, too late for this country, to hold the position in the world to which it was accustomed, lost by its governing class, followed by a bemused and lazy people.

Little wonder that he turned to ‘the England of Elizabeth and William Cecil’—the England that had stood against Spain and Catholicism, as his Britain had, for too long, failed to stand against Germany and Nazism—to the building of that national greatness which had ended with ‘the well-nigh irretrievable ruin of 1939’.²⁴ No wonder he looked back to a golden age—and dedicated his book ‘to the glorious memory of Elizabeth Queen of England’.

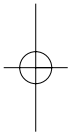
In Rowse’s golden age, anything was possible, because everything was just right. There was a brief, perfect Elizabethan moment when conditions were propitious and all was well. After the disruptions of the Reformation ‘a new equilibrium was struck’ and ‘a working harmony established’—‘the Elizabethan equilibrium in society’. There was a creative balance between the essential forces of order and energy: royal authority and a hierarchical social structure kept energies within bounds without suffocating them; ‘abounding energies’ prevented social paralysis and brought progress and achievement. ‘For a divine moment the tension was held: national unity imposed by the danger from abroad and the struggle; the personality of a celebrated Queen’. And while everything was temporarily in balance, the English grew up and became a modern nation: ‘new forces were released’, ‘society was progressing’, ‘the world was becoming more modern’.²⁵

It was a magic moment, an exciting, explosive instant. Rowse saw it as a burst into national maturity: ‘Perhaps it was in that

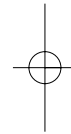


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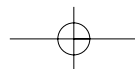
electric, charged moment that our people suddenly reached maturity and became aware of themselves as a people'. 'The Elizabethan Age was so much the most intense and electric experience of a young people suddenly coming to maturity, with new worlds opening out before them, not only across the seas but in the mind'. The English now reached 'intellectual maturity', with Bacon's *Essays* and Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*: Tudor scholarship 'attained its majority' with Camden's *Britannia*. In religion 'the people grew out of their medieval nonage', and displayed 'the determination of a country reaching maturity to have all its affairs under its own control'. In all spheres of life, things came together and went forward in a flash. Sometimes Rowse narrowed the moment to two decades: 'It is incredible what intensity of experience was crowded into those two decades at the end of Elizabeth's reign'; 'The discoveries, the experiences of a century were for the English crowded into those last decades of Elizabeth's reign'. Sometimes the key juncture was just ten years: 'It was in the 1580s—those wonderful years that saw so many things burst into a flame of activity'—'it was then that our people passed, in a decade, to maturity and awakening'.²⁶ What a glorious, golden time!



V



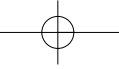
However, like all golden ages, Rowse's had not really existed. 'The England of Elizabeth' he projected was a myth: it was the England of Rowse. He created the England of his dreams, the England he would love to have lived in—'What must it have been like to be alive then!' It was an England that had all the qualities he thought his own England had lacked—leadership, bravery, energy, achievement. So his Elizabeth had to be a firm and effective ruler, always in charge, always thinking of her people—which is certainly not my view of that queen. If she delayed, it was because precipitate action was unwise; if her policy was defensive, it was because aggressiveness was dangerous. And William Cecil—a penetrating intelligence, a shrewd tactical eye, cool nerve, audacity combined with prudence and unsleeping watchfulness—so unlike the sleepy Baldwin. But some contemporaries thought the younger Cecil a rash interventionist, and many thought old Burghley a conservative who neglected defence (a Baldwin after all?).²⁷



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'The England of Elizabeth' was Rowse's version of mid-twentieth century Britain, turned upside-down—a horror story transformed to a fairy-tale. When he saw, or thought he saw, institutional irresolution, decline, contraction, and poverty, he made a fantasy England of 'confidence, reform, expansion, prosperity'. Never mind the constant fear of Catholic plotters and Spanish invasion; the total failure to reform the governmental machine; the disasters which befell attempts at colonisation; and the sufferings of the 1590s—when the poor were worse off than at any time since the 1340s.²⁸ When he saw, or thought he saw, an exhausted and aged post-war Britain, going nowhere but down the drain, he framed an imaginary England of vigour and youth. Elizabeth's England was 'tough, vigorous, pulsating with energy', bursting out from the constraints of old-fashioned values. The 1570 papal bull of deposition against Elizabeth 'was the last, ineffective gesture of the medieval world against the scandalous and unprecedented young nation which more than any other symbolised the new'. This was meaningless metaphor: the reality was a timorous nation, beset by enemies, afraid of its own shadow, divided in religion, and difficult to govern effectively.²⁹

Rowse invested 'the England of Elizabeth' with the qualities he most admired. He valued zest, the taking of chances, and the seizing of moments—and found them in his make-believe England. There 'the society generates constantly increasing energies, from which its astonishing achievement flowed. The Elizabethans had luck with them—they were on the up grade; but they made the most of it'. Most of them made nothing of it, of course, and stayed where they were. Rowse admired determination and a refusal to give in, which almost made the detested Puritans bearable—but most contemporaries had disliked their obtuseness and 'singularity', and had wanted them to conform. He also admired ambition, competitiveness, and success against the odds—and there they had been in his lost England: 'difference excited emulation, diversity gave colour and character, achievement received recognition, ambition was admired, genius and greatness of spirit adored'.³⁰ So why was Raleigh so angry? Why was Drake dropped from service? Why was Philip Sidney slapped down for challenging an earl? Why were there so few promotions to the peerage? Why did Francis Bacon have to wait for James I to give him a job?



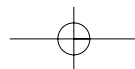
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As we have seen, Rowse despised religion, and blamed ‘the idiot people’ for taking it seriously—so he tried to take religion out of this most religious of ages. *His* Elizabethan England cannot be an England of religious fervour and zealotry, it has to be a sceptical and secular age. So the enthusiasts are pushed to the margins, and cast as fanatics—the Catholics and Puritans, the ‘fools (or knaves)’ who wanted to coerce others into taking religion, their religion, seriously. The rest, at least the best of the rest, were level-headed Anglicans, because that was sensible, undemanding, and English—indeed, hardly a proper religion at all, but a set of convenient social practices set to music.

Rowse’s Elizabeth was ‘essentially secular’: Mary Tudor had called upon God for aid, but ‘Elizabeth relied on her self alone, and on her own cool brain’ (Rowse presumably hadn’t read Elizabeth’s own prayers). The sensible people did not care much about dogma, and ‘like all the truly intelligent and humane in her time, [Elizabeth] was a *politique*’. It was the secular-minded, the *politiques*, who set the religious (not very religious) tone: ‘the emphasis of the leading spirits of the age *was* secular, and it was they who made it the “Elizabethan Age”, not the humdrum and commonplace, the ignorant and stupid, or even the conventionally intelligent who think what it is usual to think in all times and places’.³¹ This is a neat rhetorical trick: ‘the leading spirits’ (he names Elizabeth, Bacon, Marlowe, and Shakespeare: he may be right about Marlowe) were secular, and the rest were ‘ignorant and stupid’, ‘conventionally intelligent’, hardly Elizabethans at all. Rowse makes the age secular by excluding most of those who were there! Rowse saw what he wanted to see: he saw what he wanted England to be.

VI

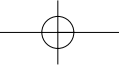
If ‘the England of Elizabeth’ was a wonderland, is *The England of Elizabeth* still worth reading? Emphatically yes! yes! It was and it is a marvellous book: the reviewers were not wrong, and it retains much of its value. Alongside the mythical ‘England of Elizabeth’ there is a real England of Elizabeth. A myth can be based on reality, and it is only by slants and emphases that Rowse has imposed his dream, not in the essential description and detail. We can, if we



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wish, skip over the old-world patriotism, the sometimes-offensive biases, the loaded comments, the depressing vision of decay and decline, and the gloss applied to our ancestors and their world—and still be left with the best all-round depiction of Elizabethan society that we have or are likely to get. Better still, we can enjoy Rowse's book twice over—as a skilfully constructed, engagingly written, wide-ranging and scholarly account of a past; and again as an intriguing example of how history was written fifty years ago, by a quirky craftsman with a powerful mind and powerful prejudices. That *The England of Elizabeth* was so Rowseian, so very 1950, makes it all the more interesting—all the more worthy of attention.

Inevitably, and splendidly, it is a book of its time. It faces what were then current historiographical problems, and builds on the work that was then fashionable. The chapter on industry and trade was much influenced by J. U. Nef's suggestion that there was a proto-industrial revolution between 1540 and 1640—and by E. J. Hamilton's argument that the sixteenth-century inflation was caused by the import of bullion from Spanish America. Neither view would be taken very seriously nowadays—which is not to say, history being history, that they may not come back into fashion in revised form.³² The chapter on social classes was indebted to R. H. Tawney's work on 'the rise of the gentry'—which was then just about to spark one of the fiercest debates ever in the English-speaking historical profession. Rowse accepted that the growing significance of the gentry led to a shift in political power, a challenge to monarchy and a rebalancing of the constitution—but we now have a very different approach to the origins of the Civil War.³³ In the chapter on law, Rowse was misled by Maitland's account of the reception of Roman law in England, an approach that had already been seriously questioned—and he relied on Holdsworth's multi-volume *History of English Law*, which was notoriously weak on the Tudor period.³⁴ On politics and government, he followed J. E. Neale on the power of parliament and the importance of factional conflict—interpretations which were not to be challenged until the 1980s.³⁵ On Puritanism his guide was M. M. Knappen, who helped Rowse see Puritans as cranky extremists: only later were we persuaded that elements of Puritan religion

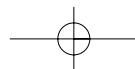
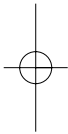


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(retitled ‘godly religion’) were part of mainstream Protestantism, and that Puritans were not dangerous madmen at all.³⁶

What is more striking about the book, however, is where it did not follow the crowd. Rowse always thought for himself, or gave his own twist to the ideas of others. Although he accepted ‘the rise of the gentry’, he rejected the concomitant ‘crisis of the aristocracy’: with a health-giving dose of common sense, he pointed out that in every generation there had always been more and less successful noble families—that the foolish or unfortunate lost money, but the sensible managers gained.³⁷ Though Rowse had obviously taken account of Tawney’s arguments on the impact of enclosures and the impoverishment of the lesser peasantry, he reworked the theme of damaging social crisis into productive social progress. He discovered the later-fashionable phenomenon of ‘social differentiation’: under the pressure of inflation, smaller farmers lost their tenancies and became wage-labourers, while those with more land profited from rising food-prices and took over the abandoned holdings at higher rents. There were similar shifts among townsmen and the clergy: the rich got richer, the poor got poorer, and there was a bigger gap in the middle. Where Tawney and others had bewailed the mistreatment of copyhold tenants as a consequence of the commercialisation of agriculture, the hard-headed and unsentimental Rowse saw it as a step towards efficiency and prosperity.³⁸

Some topics look very different in the work of more recent historians—if it didn’t, we might as well give up doing history and leave it all to Rowse. It now seems odd to read of 1559 as a restoration rather than a revolution. Rowse thought that the Reformation had already been effective (largely because he saw it in political rather than religious terms), so that Mary’s reign was an inconvenient disruption and Elizabeth’s a happy return to normality. Now we see the Reformation as a longer and contested process, with much support for traditional religion and little demand for change. Mary’s reign was the restoration, Elizabeth’s the revolution.³⁹ Rowse’s version of the making of the 1559 settlement has been pretty much abandoned: there was no Protestant majority in the Commons pressing the government on, nor was the outcome what Elizabeth wanted⁴⁰—but, after forty years of thinking that Puritanism was the only Protestantism that mattered, scholars have

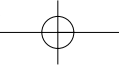


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come round to Rowse's view that the Church of England worked and the majority conformed contentedly.⁴¹ We are not now inclined to think, with Rowse and Neale, of a rebellious Commons that Queen and Privy Council struggled to control—rather of a Commons used by the Council's agents to pressurise the monarch.⁴²

But much of what Rowse had to say was then fresh and different. Sometimes he was path-breaking—or at least path-pointing. He saw the importance of the issue of population size, and the fact of population increase: he underestimated the rate of increase in Elizabeth's reign, but identified parish registers as the sources most likely to yield solid results (he did not invent family-reconstitution, but nor did he have an army of researchers working for him).⁴³ Rowse did not discover social history, nor was he alone in using local materials to tackle national questions—but he was one of those who moved away from the narrative of high politics and helped to refocus English historical studies for the later twentieth century. Much of Rowse's material came from the localities—from the work of local antiquarians and the publications of local record societies. He repeated what he had written in the preface to *Tudor Cornwall*—that he had sought to marry national and local history, and believed that this 'has more to offer us than many more sought and over-cultivated fields'. And he showed what could be done. He was an admirer of G. M. Trevelyan—'master of my craft'—but *The England of Elizabeth* was a huge advance on Trevelyan's *English Social History* (1944): in its range of sources, in its conceptual sophistication, in its intellectual precision and mastery of detail, and in the interest and significance of what it had to say.

Rowse had a talent for bringing the past to life, for making his readers feel they could be there. He employed a remarkable series of maps of the estates of All Souls College, drawn late in Elizabeth's reign, to show what villages were like and how agriculture was changing. He used Thomas Tusser's *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry* to give a sense of the realities of farming life. He mined contemporary descriptions by William Lambarde, Richard Carew, George Owen and others, to construct vignettes of particular counties—Kent, Cornwall, Pembrokeshire, Staffordshire. He takes us through Norden's maps, Camden's *Britannia*, and Drayton's *Polyolbion*, in remarkable evocations of the countryside



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and attitudes towards it. And he has John Stow as our guide around Elizabethan London—fields, streets, churches, houses, and company halls. We know it all so well now, half a century on: with Rowse in 1950 it was new and sparkling. Sadly, for Rowse as a serious historian it was downhill after that.

VII

Since Rowse wrote it, *The England of Elizabeth* has had only one serious rival—David Palliser's *The Age of Elizabeth* (1983, and later editions). Palliser too had first written a local study (of Tudor York), and had been a pupil of W. G. Hoskins—who had advised Rowse. Palliser acknowledges 'inspiration' from Rowse, and calls *The England of Elizabeth* 'brilliant'. In some respects the two books are very similar: Palliser roughly follows Rowse's structure, and shares his economic rationalism, his reaction against Tawney's socialist sentimentality, and his optimistic view of economic and social change. But Palliser is much less selective in his coverage, and much more technical in his approach—with lots of statistics, 22 tables, 5 charts, and 13 maps. There is a lot in Palliser that Rowse could not have written, because the work had not been done—on plague and poverty, families and literacy: there is much more on the cloth industry, on demographic issues, and on the causes and impact of inflation. In 1983 Palliser had a bibliography of 450 works, almost half of them published in the previous decade. A lot had happened since 1950. On balance, I think, Rowse's is the better book. Palliser wrote a very, very good textbook: Rowse created a work of art.

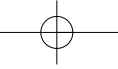
Why has *The England of Elizabeth* not been surpassed? Only David Palliser has really tried to do the same thing, and he nearly brought it off. Keith Wrightson, Joyce Youings and Jim Sharpe have written social histories, but of longer periods. There have been big, important books on each topic Rowse discussed: Joan Thirsk on agriculture; Peter Clark (and a whole new school of urban historians) on towns; Ian Archer and Steve Rappaport on London; Peter Laslett, and Wrigley and Schofield on population and social structure; Lawrence Stone on the nobility; Felicity Heal and Clive Holmes on the gentry; Penry Williams and Wallace

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MacCaffrey on government; Hassell Smith, Alison Wall, and Steve Hindle on local administration; J. H. Baker, Christopher Brookes, and W.R. Jones on the law; Patrick Collinson, David Cressy, and Judith Maltby on the Church of England and conformity; John Bossy and Tom McCoog on Catholics; Patrick Collinson and Peter Lake on Puritans; Joan Simon on schooling; James McConica and C. M. Dent on Oxford; Harry Porter on Cambridge; Wilf Prest on the inns of court—and so on, and on.⁴⁴ Perhaps there's now just too much stuff to handle: perhaps it was easier for Rowse.

But that is unfair—after all, he had to do much of the work himself, not build on what had been done by others. The real explanations may lie in changing historiographical preoccupations, and broader social and cultural trends. Since 1950 the historical agenda for early modernists has expanded massively. Subjects that Rowse hardly dreamed of (and some that would have given him nightmares) took attention away from more traditional topics—to new fashions for gender history, women and the family, *mentalites*, reading and writing, representations, crime, witchcraft, hygiene, and man's relationship to nature. These areas seemed so much more exciting and cutting edge: that was where reputations might be made. And as the scope of social history broadened, so it became more difficult to put things together into a single version—and, to take some account of just some of the new developments, Rowse himself found he had to expand his projected two volumes to four. It became harder to write an interpretative survey for another reason: the historical profession was riven by two long and bitter controversies, first 'the storm over the gentry', and later the 'revisionism' struggles about parliament, religion, and the length of the causes of the Civil War.⁴⁵ In terms of both agenda and controversies, energy was elsewhere and synthesis was difficult—so no-one really tried to do what Rowse had done.

Those two historical controversies—over the gentry and revisionism—were significantly different. Although the 'storm over the gentry' in the 1940s and 1950s began as a highly technical argument in the *Economic History Review*, it soon burst into the public prints—especially in *Encounter*, then the magazine of choice for the English intelligentsia, and also in *The Listener* and *The Times Literary Supplement*. Some of the participants, notably

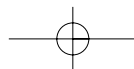
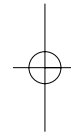
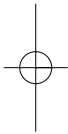


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Tawney himself and Hugh Trevor Roper, were significant public figures, and much fun was had by all. Historians were news. But the ‘revisionism’ controversy of the 1980s was a private affair: academic historians got steamed up, but nobody else cared. Historians were not news. The contrast is not explained by the nature of the controversies (the second was much less technical, much easier to understand, than the first), but by changes in the place of history and historians in British cultural life. Academic historians are less inclined to see it as their duty of explain the past to a broad public—and the public is less inclined to listen if they try.

Since Rowse wrote *The England of Elizabeth*—and since Tawney and Stone and Trevor Roper and Hexter argued about the gentry—the gap between academic and popular history has widened significantly. History syllabuses at schools and universities are now highly specialised, and public knowledge of the past seems minimal. Rowse began *The England of Elizabeth* with a brief comparison between the crises of 1588 and 1940. He suggested that in 1940 the English turned for inspiration to the reign of Elizabeth—to an actress reading Elizabeth’s ‘golden speech’ of 1601, to the plays of Shakespeare, and to the example of an age of heroism and achievement. That suggests a more historically-conscious public than would be true today, and perhaps a more historically-aware market: certainly *The England of Elizabeth* was a best-seller in 1950, and was reprinted twice in 1951. But with the discrediting of the monarchy, the collapse of religion, the decline of traditional values, and the decay of traditional communities, history now seems a long way away—another planet, inhabited by aliens in fancy dress. Of course, history still sells, on television and in the bookshops—but it is a different sort of history. Television history focuses on kings and queens and battles (the old high-political agenda that Rowse helped to change), and the books that sell best are television tie-ins or blockbuster biographies. Just occasionally an academic history strikes a public chord—Eamon Duffy’s *Stripping of the Altars*, Linda Colley’s *Britons*, Paul Kennedy’s *Rise and Fall of Great Powers*—but usually because of some contemporary relevance.

When faced with a choice between academic reputation and the rewards of commercial success, Rowse went for the money: in the 1960s he turned to sex, Shakespeare, literary biography, and



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picture-books. When scholars sneered at what he was doing, he derided ‘intellectuals’ and mocked them—they couldn’t understand the real world, they couldn’t write, and they couldn’t make money. For the public, he set himself up as ‘the historian’, the Olympian figure who understood the past and whose judgements had to be accepted—but among academic historians he became a joke. Rowse gave up trying to be both serious and successful: he churned out the words, and went to the bank. For historians, and for the reading public, this was a great pity. Rowse could write proper history and sell it—as he did triumphantly in *The England of Elizabeth*. Here he gave a vivid, accessible, and compelling portrait of an age—and he spiced it up with his own intriguing slants and twists. Rowse explained and entertained at the same time, because he had something he wanted to tell his readers. He had a vision of what Elizabeth’s age meant, why it mattered, and what it had to say to modern Britain. He knew the past mattered, and should matter to everyone. So when the divide between academic and popular history was expanding, Rowse might have been part of the solution: instead he became part of the problem. But *The England of Elizabeth* remains to show what he could do—and what we could do, if only we had the courage to try.

CHRISTOPHER HAIGH
OXFORD

Notes

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3. Rowse, *A Cornishman at Oxford*, p. 13.
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5. Rowse, *A Man of the Thirties*, p. 32; *The England of Elizabeth*, p. 9.
6. Rowse, *Tudor Cornwall*, p. 9.

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7. Ibid., p. 10.
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12. J. E. Neale review, *History*, vol. 37 (1952) pp. 58-9; G. Scott Thomson review, *English Historical Review*, vol. 66 (1951) pp. 589-92.
13. Ibid., p. 592.
14. *The England of Elizabeth*, pp. 57, 270.
15. Ibid., pp.349, 462-3; Rowse, *A Cornishman at Oxford*, p. 311.
16. *The England of Elizabeth*, pp. 386-7, 417; Rowse, *A Cornishman at Oxford*, p. 275. As Neale pointed out in his review, it was the historian's job *not* to be beaten: 'surely it is wiser to appreciate and explain sympathetically major interests of an age', Neale review, p. 58.
17. *The England of Elizabeth*, pp. 384-5, 390-1, 39.
18. Ibid., pp. 479, 417, 486, 520.
19. Ibid., pp. 302, 180; Rowse, *A Cornish Childhood*, pp. 67-8, 134-5, 142-4, 220; *A Man of the Thirties*, 93-4.
20. *The England of Elizabeth*, pp. 39, 145, 265, 387, 416.
21. Ibid., pp. xi, 533, 113, 388, 309-11, 361, 382; Rowse, *A Cornishman at Oxford*, p. 203. See also A. L. Rowse, *The Spirit of English History* (London, 1943), especially pp. 137-8.
22. Rowse, *A Cornishman at Oxford*, pp. 210, 227; Rowse, *The Elizabethan Renaissance: Life*, p. 10; *The England of Elizabeth*, p. 112.
23. Ibid., pp. 330, 340, 261, 532, 428, viii, 110.
24. Rowse, *A Cornishman at Oxford*, pp. 201, 203, 237, 300.
25. *The England of Elizabeth*, pp. 29, 386, 532, 29, 182, 398.
26. Ibid., pp. 10, 21, 483, 32, 424, 436, 112, 40, 533, 112.
27. Ibid., pp. 112, 270-3, 278; Christopher Haigh, *Elizabeth I* (2nd edn, 1999).

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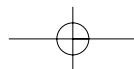
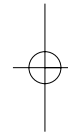
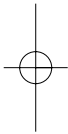
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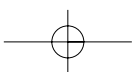
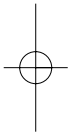
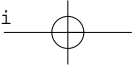
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PREFACE TO THE ORIGINAL EDITION

For many years now I have been working in the field of Tudor, particularly Elizabethan, studies. But I should never have dared to attempt a synoptic view of the whole Elizabethan Age if it had not been for a word from Sir Richard Livingstone, then Vice-Chancellor at Oxford, who said to me one day going down Magpie Lane: "Why not give us a portrait of the Elizabethan Age?" Why not, indeed? It was, of course, in our age of specialisation—when it becomes increasingly difficult to see anything steadily and see it whole—to assault the impossible. I have often felt, under the strain of composing this book—now over some years—that I had undertaken an impossible task. All I can say is that, so far, the book has gone exactly as I intended it should go; so that, whatever its defects and shortcomings, the responsibility is mine.

This volume is concerned essentially with the structure of Elizabethan society; not with social life as an end in itself, nor with the achievements of the age in action and the life of the mind. Here I am concerned to expose and portray the small society—tough, vigorous, pulsating with energy—that accomplished those extraordinary achievements and made the age the most remarkable in our history. Everything is related to this central purpose: when I am dealing, for instance, with government or economic matters, with Parliament or the Church, I am not treating them as disparate subjects, ends in themselves; but from the end of the society, as expressions of it, part and parcel—or rather bone and sinew—of its life. In every aspect and with every subject, I am engaged in extracting the juices of the social. Only so is it possible to write the book and give it a coherent form.

The book, then, has a logical plan. It begins with a Prologue designed to reveal, for those who have eyes to see, how much of the Elizabethan Age is alive all round us and within us, beneath the skin, the scars, the scoriations of the present. With that always in mind, one goes back to found the society, firmly and securely, on the land and its cultivation. Then one passes to the new developments characteristic of the age, in industry, commerce, finance: the



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accumulation of capital then—as against its erosion in a low-grade consumption now—the increasing prosperity that has left us such evidences in works of art and architecture from palaces to cottages, in the virtual rebuilding of English villages from Cornwall to North-umberland, the new wealth that encouraged so much enterprise, expansion, achievement. One must then indicate something of the part played by London and the towns in what was an overwhelmingly agrarian community—more like modern France in that respect than our top-heavy, ill-balanced industrial England. That done, one can describe the social classes, from the bottom upwards. Now that we have the society in being, there follows logically its government, which we trace, naturally, from the top downwards; and that also gives us a converse curve, a contrasted rhythm within those two chapters. After government, the administration of the society naturally comes, following a similar rhythm, from the centre outwards to the localities. Law, treated again not as an end in itself but as an expression of the society, comes as the ligament binding it together as a whole. We next have to tackle the Church, not as a system of belief, but as a social institution—indeed as the whole of society regarded from one aspect, inextricably entwined with secular life at every level, indis severable from it. Yet it was in this very time, as the result of the Reformation, that the unity and homogeneity of medieval society was broken; a measure of progress, it produced opposition on the right and on the left: which is dealt with in the chapter on the Catholics and the Puritans. After religion, there follows the education of the society: again not the content and matter of education, but its place in the community, its social affiliations.

Within the work there are various dominant themes corresponding to the rhythms observable in the society. There is the impact of the Reformation, at first destructive, deleterious, darkening; there are the black years of the middle of the century, from the fifteen-thirties to Elizabeth's accession—years of dislocation, economic maladjustment, of social malaise and financial crisis. Then, the experience absorbed, the lands of the Church swallowed, the society generates constantly increasing energies, from which its astonishing achievement flowed. The Elizabethans had luck with them—they were on the up grade; but they made the most of it.

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Another leading theme is the rise of the gentry: of which the consequences may be observed in many fields, in Parliament and local administration, on the land and in the society of every county, in the pressure on the monarchy and the Church, the support for the Puritans, the growing ascendancy of the Common Law, in the universities and schools, everywhere. It is fascinating to observe the same rhythms at work, rising and falling, palpitating and alive, in so many different sectors: in agriculture, in industry and commerce, in politics and administration, in education and religion. These themes serve to knit the work together and give it unity, instead of being a series of separate studies of different subjects. I have taken a tip from the art of musical composition: often a theme is merely announced, in order to be developed later, sometimes with variations.

It has been a help to have had a previous experience of attempting a portrait of a (small) society with my *Tudor Cornwall*. That book was built up, like a mosaic, out of innumerable details largely from original material. Impossible to follow the same method here: it would take forty *Tudor Cornwalls* to cover the whole country. (But how fascinating it should be to have a *Tudor Yorkshire*, or *Norfolk*, or *Kent*, or *Wales*!) The method of this book must be synthetic, its detail illustrative. The problem therefore has been to keep a balance. I have tried to make the picture representative; not to be seduced by my West Country leanings; to do justice to North as well as South, to the Midlands as well as to the West. Still, I could wish that the East had come out a little more strongly, though I have not neglected it.

There has been a similar problem of proportion as to subject, and of texture in treatment, all the way through. One has to keep the balance in mind at every point: often I have had to restrain myself on subjects that interest me more, to do justice to those that interest me less. I hope it will not be too easily discernible which was which. Naturally one accumulates far greater material on some subjects than on others. But I have not chosen to neglect those that are well known for others that have the mere virtue of obscurity: that would be to get the proportions wrong.

I have drawn largely upon local and regional material for my picture. There are immense riches in local archives and in the



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published records and journals of antiquarian societies all over England—tribute to our domestic tranquillity, the absence of revolutions; the amount of work done by generations of local scholars and antiquarians in this country is astonishing and beyond all praise. I love their work and them for their devotion. I believe that the marriage of local with national history—and further, beyond the bounds of nations—has more to offer us than many more sought and over-cultivated fields.

My aim has been to reduce references to a minimum. Those acquainted with the subject will know how to interpret them; those who are not will not need them. I dislike books that make a parade of apparatus and then proceed to show that their authors do not know how to write a book. I regret that I have not simplified my references even a little more.

It has been a great pleasure to accumulate so many obligations in the course of my researches; the composition of such a book has been a revelation in friendship, I have been helped so generously by so many friends. But they must not be taken as necessarily agreeing with any expressions of opinion within: my crotchets, or perhaps my convictions, are my own.

There are two scholars, masters in this field, whose work in general has been a great stimulus and from whom I have constantly profited: Professor J. E. Neale and Dr. J. A. Williamson. All my generation has been influenced by the work of Professor R. H. Tawney; and I owe much to it, though I have emerged with rather a different emphasis. Dr. G. M. Trevelyan, master of my craft, has shown a constant interest in the progress of the book and encouraged me in a way that I deeply appreciate. Dr. W. G. Hoskins of Leicester, of whose work I am a great admirer, has been most generous in placing at my disposal the product of his own researches, both published and unpublished. Professor A. G. Dickens of Hull has kindly helped me over Yorkshire; Sir Edmund Craster and Mr. L. H. Butler with suggestions on Northumberland and Worcestershire respectively. I can never sufficiently acknowledge what I owe to my friend, Professor Jack Simmons, who has ferreted out all sorts of material from the resources of his scholarship and his wonderful topographical knowledge; or what I owe to the conversation of my friend, Lord David Cecil, who has such an intimate

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bond with the Elizabethan Age and so many original and reflective ideas on it, which has been a great stimulus.

I am most grateful to the Dowager Duchess of Devonshire for her hospitality at Hardwick and for her kindness in arranging for me to see the Hardwick papers; to the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch for their kindness at Boughton and showing me the Montagu MSS. there; to my friend, Mr. Wyndham Ketton-Cremer, from whose friendly house at Felbrigg I have worked agreeably at Norfolk; to Mr. Norman Scarfe, who introduced me to Suffolk, and to Miss Lilian Redstone for help with her father's transcripts in the Borough Library at Ipswich; to Mr. K. B. McFarlane, from whose medieval—and other—conversation I constantly profit. I am indebted to my former research students, Mr. W. J. Rowe of Liverpool University, Mr. F. E. Leese of the Bodleian Library and Mr. L. L. S. Lowe, for placing material at my disposal; to the officials of the Bodleian Library, the London Library and the Public Record Office for their help and consideration, and, not least, to Mr. A. E. Whitaker and Mr. G. A. Webb, assistant librarians of the Codrington Library, for their unwearied attentiveness and courteous assistance over years. Professor Jack Simmons and Mrs. John Holdsworth (L. V. Hodgkin) have added to their many kindnesses by reading my proofs for me. It has been a great honour to have the proofs of my book passed by the same hand as corrected that classic of historical writing, *Italy and her Invaders*. I am much indebted to my publishers for their patience and help, and for the particular interest and encouragement of the Rt. Hon. Harold Macmillan and Mr. Daniel Macmillan in the progress of the book.

A. L. ROWSE

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