

BOOKS

So much for Good Queen Bess

The troubled end of Elizabeth I's reign saw riots, famine and the lowest wages since records began, finds *Jessie Childs*

ELIZABETH: THE FORGOTTEN YEARS

by John Guy

512PP, VIKING, £25, EBOOK £12.99



★★★★★

For those who worship at the codpiece of Henry VIII and the immaculate complexion of Gloriana, the Tudor dynasty must end with a bang – preferably Drake's cannon – not a whimper. But Tudolatry is not history, and John Guy is a historian, one of the very best we have in this country. Here he grapples with the latter two decades of the reign of Elizabeth I – a time of inglorious war, harvest failure, religious dissent, riot, rebellion, unemployment, high taxation and the lowest wages since records began. These are “the forgotten years” of the subtitle, which the jacket blurb brazenly dubs “unknown later years” (Guy more carefully describes them as “generally

neglected” years). The many works of scholarship that he builds upon – and fully acknowledges in his references – suggest otherwise, but he is tilting in the mainstream and, for the 1590s at least, he has a case.

Guy's broader point is that undue focus on the first half of Elizabeth's reign has perpetuated an impression (peace, prosperity, tolerance and a golden age) that a close study of the “war years” cannot sustain. He presents an England where vagrants are hanged “by order of martial law”, Africans are proposed for deportation and Roman Catholic priests are tortured with royal approbation. The gulf between rich and poor widened: loitering became a serious crime, while fat cats built country houses and practised tax evasion.

The book begins in 1584 with Elizabeth in her 50s and past the prospect of a useful marriage. She faced Catholic conspiracy at home and, with the assassination of the Protestant figurehead William of Orange in July, isolation in Europe. She felt duty-bound to help Protestants on the Continent and keep Spanish troops from Channel ports. Between 1585 and 1603, Elizabethans campaigned in the Netherlands, France, Ireland and



on the high seas. The Spanish Crown was “extremely offended by that woman”, but Elizabeth was no warrior queen. As well as having access to a cache of letters sold by Sotheby's in 2010, Guy has uncovered manuscripts in Brussels that show Elizabeth “abjectly”

suating for peace as late as June 20 1588. By then, “the first Gran Armada” (there would be more), had set sail.

Elizabeth strived to curb the aggressive and self-serving instincts of her commanders. “Eyes of youth have sharp sights,”

she warned the cocksure Earl of Essex, “but commonly not so deep as those of elder age.” But war was men's business. Leicester defied her in the Netherlands, Raleigh in the Atlantic, and Essex pretty much everywhere, though a clandestine dinner in 1597, at which he, Cecil

Heavy lies the crown: a 1937 print of *The Weary Sovereign*, painted a few years after Elizabeth I's death in 1603

and Raleigh plotted a more offensive strategy, backfired. “She saw straight through them,” Guy writes, and offered a lecture on finance.

The cost of war combined with grain shortage and rising prices to send the country into recession. Demobbed soldiers who had the temerity to petition Elizabeth for their wages were hanged. “The gallows are the pay they give us for going to the wars,” one shouted from the scaffold. It is telling that during the summer of 1595, a mob of apprentices was spurred to riot by the trumpet of a war veteran.

So much for “Good Queen Bess”, a trope Guy chiefly attributes to the “fawning glosses” of Robert Norton, the translator of William Camden's 17th-century *Annales*. Guy is in his element prising off the myths that are barnacled to the queen: nothing is known about what she wore at Tilbury; her heart did not melt, pace Lytton Strachey, in the presence of Essex; she did

‘Out of touch’ and a ‘snob’, Elizabeth was also intelligent and ruthless

not bankrupt the country or order the destruction of realistic portraits. Time and again sloppy thinking, rehearsed arguments, misdating, mistranslation and over-reliance on Victorian abstracts are subjected to the Guy taser. It is brilliant, vigorous history and, despite the odd kitsch metaphor (“Elizabeth's Armada of the soul”, “the El Dorado of her favour”), a triumph of storytelling and scholarship.

Guy explains the procedures of government and can trace every rivalry and kin network. He knows which of the 15,000 letters and warrants sent in Elizabeth's name were written or dictated by her (no more than 2,400) and the provenance, inasmuch as is possible, of her recorded speeches. His Elizabeth is not lovable as his Mary Queen of Scots was, or even likeable. Neither Gloriana nor grotesque, she is human. She is “spiteful”, “out of



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touch” and a “terrible snob”, but also intelligent, ruthless and an outstanding rhetorician. She liked gardens and mechanical instruments, not mornings or elephants (too costly). She swore by “God's death!” and fiddled with her sleeves. She suffered from insomnia, arthritis and migraines. She couldn't possibly live up to the exultations of her courtiers or hold the casual conferences that a king could enjoy.

An enduring image from this magisterial biography is of Elizabeth translating Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*. One

of the few people who might have provided comfort in person, and who almost lasted the course, was Elizabeth's gentlewoman, Kate Carey, Countess of Nottingham. She died in February 1603 and Elizabeth followed a month later, having not, Guy suspects, named James VI of Scotland as her successor. “Rejoice, rejoice, therefore, rejoice and sing,” his new subjects were enjoined, “for it hath pleas'd God to give us a King.” After a few decades of Stuart rule, Elizabeth's less-than-heroic years were easily forgiven, if not quite forgotten.

CORRECTION

A review of *A Passing Fury* by A T Williams (*Review* May 14) referred to “Polish death camps”. We have been asked to make clear that Nazi death camps were not “Polish”, but were based in German-occupied Poland. We are happy to do so.

Plutocrats in chest freezers

Don DeLillo's lyrical novel about cryonics forgoes his usual cynicism for hope, says *Duncan White*

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ZERO K

by Don DeLillo



288PP, PICADOR, £16.99, EBOOK £10.99

★★★★★

Don DeLillo has always been something more than a novelist. Such was the ambition and acuity of his novels of the Eighties and Nineties – *White Noise*, *Libra*, *Mao II*, *Underworld* – that he acquired the reputation of postmodern seer, his pen a dowsing rod for the

submerged terrors and desires of late capitalist America. Since the turn of the millennium his work has become more ascetic and abstract, but remains concerned with picking out the ominous noise beneath the complacent noise of contemporary culture.

So it is surprising to find that in *Zero K*, written in his 80th year, DeLillo has chosen a subject that became a convention of science fiction in the Twenties and Thirties: cryonic suspension. When Robert Ettinger read those speculative stories, he saw the future. In 1964, with *The Prospect of Immortality*, he made the case for the scientific validity of cryonics. Three years later the first person was cryogenically frozen.

The prospect of immortality was soon beset by tiresome reality. In California some of the freezers went on the blink and, as the money ran out for repairs, there followed gruesome results. Cryonics lost its credibility. Now the faith has been renewed by

the cheerful overreach of Silicon Valley. With substantial funding and new research projects cryonics is apparently back on the map. Let's disrupt death! This is what DeLillo is interested in: not the scientific credibility of this stuff but the technological messianism that fuels it.

The frozen corpses will be implanted with a knowledge of arthouse cinema

Zero K opens with Jeffrey Lockhart in the back of an armoured vehicle racing through the Central Asian salt flats, heading to a secret complex, most of which is submerged deep beneath the desert. This is the Convergence, a privately funded facility dedicated to the cryonic suspension of the wealthy dying. Its chief benefactor is Jeffrey's father Ross whose second

wife, Artis Martineau, is suffering from MS and is about to be placed in a pod and frozen. The Convergence, though, turns out to be more than just a big freezer. Those being preserved are to be given a new language on awakening, and scientists are experimenting with enhancing their vision. They will be implanted with the experience of having read big Russian novels and having watched the films of Ingmar Bergman. These corpses in their ice vats will pupate into the enlightened citizens of a perfect metropolis.

Jeffrey plays the role of sceptic amid the plutocratic cultists in thrall to their “faith-based technology”. He is, in true DeLillo fashion, deeply unsettled, and becomes more so when he discovers there is a special unit – Zero K – that caters for those who want to go into suspension “prematurely”. For the architects of the Convergence the End Times are near, and these pilgrims are not so much seeking the promised land as escaping history.

As Jeffrey wanders the site's Kafkaesque corridors, he encounters screens running footage displaying the ravages of climate change and asymmetric warfare. Ross Lockhart, we are told, made his fortune “analysing the profit impact of natural disasters”, a fortune that has built this very sanctuary from the chaos of the world.

That *Zero K* carries within a sense of redemptive possibility is a thought that seems remote when we are trapped with Jeffrey in his air-conditioned nightmare, yet it is there all the same. The novel concludes with a different kind of “climate event” to the floods and tornadoes projected on the Convergence screens: the rare alignment of the setting sun with the Manhattan street grid. Rendered in lyrical prose, it carries with it an old consolation: that beauty is by necessity transitory. It might just be that DeLillo the lacerating sceptic is going soft in his old age.

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