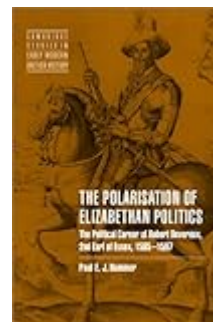


Paul E. J. Hammer. *The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics. The Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, 1585-1597.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. xviii + 446 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-43485-0.



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Published on H-Albion (September, 2000)

Historians scrutinizing the long 1590s – England, 1588-1603 – have tended to do so with a dyspeptic eye. They see outbreaks of plague, poor harvests (with the year 1597 producing the highest cost for a “market basket” of consumables recorded in the seven centuries for which such data has been compiled), an ongoing war with Spain now spilling over from the Low Countries into France and Ireland and, perhaps most conspicuously, a struggle for the succession to the throne and to the power base that had been built up by Lord Burghley, the Queen Elizabeth’s principal minister. Political infighting at the royal court reached new levels of viciousness as competing factions struggled for control. At the center of all this stood the Queen’s young favorite, the Earl of Essex, whose efforts to seize power led ultimately to his revolt and condemnation. The trial of Essex and his confederates, their demeanor as they were led to execution, the final triumph of their enemies – these are the scenes that have come to dominate the historical imagination.

Paul Hammer believes this view of the decade is wrong. He does not gainsay the famine or disease or pressure of war, but insists the politics of the 1590s have been consistently misconstrued. In the first place, historians cursed with the gift of hindsight have read the events of Essex’s fall back into the earlier years of the decade. In an effort to counter this, Hammer has chosen

to end his study in 1597, omitting the years of decline and fall. In addition, however, Hammer claims that previous generations of historians have used a limited group of printed sources and have largely ignored the part of the historical record that lies unread in the manuscript depositories.[1] To remedy this, he has spent years working through an astonishing assortment of archives, local and national, private and public, with the result that this very learned study of a dozen years of Elizabethan history runs to over four hundred pages, with some openings resembling the sort of Victorian monograph in which a few lines of text struggled to keep their place above a sea of notes. To put the material in order, he has adopted a hybrid form, in which the first part takes us chronologically from Essex’s birth to his achieving a place on the Elizabethan Privy Council (1593), while the second (and very much longer) part takes the form of a series of thematic chapters.

The point of all this is to force readers to see Essex as something much more serious than a “playboy of the western world.” We learn that Essex early took to soldiering as a career, accompanying his stepfather, the Earl of Leicester, to the Netherlands and serving there with heroism. As the war with Spain spread, and the Queen finally was brought to realize that English interests would be served by helping Henri IV, the Protestant heir to the

French throne, it was Essex who led the army sent to Rouen. Though the campaign was not successful, it did serve to establish Essex as England's leading military figure, a position he held for the remainder of his life; it also served as a demonstration of his overpowering desire to persuade – or, if need be, force – the Queen to do what he determined to be right. Seating Essex at the council board may well have been intended to keep him in check; in any event, the move was a complete success, for the Earl turned out to be an extremely hardworking and capable councillor. He added weight to his opinions on foreign affairs when, with the capable assistance of Anthony Bacon, he established a network of informants on the continent; Francis Bacon, together with a group of men recruited from the universities, many of whom ultimately achieved high office, provided assistance in domestic matters, and acted as a private secretariat. At the same time, Essex continued his efforts to dominate England's military establishment, in particular working to attract the captains who recruited and led the fighting forces. Such activity was not undertaken merely in a spirit of self-aggrandizement. As Paul Hammer makes clear, there was always an ideological element behind Essex's actions. The Earl had adopted the militant Protestants' view that the English should help their coreligionists wherever possible, and should take the war to Spain rather than waiting to be attacked. That fitted with the creed of humanist (and feudal) virtue in which Essex had been brought up. To serve the Queen well meant to adopt the role of the Christian knight, along the lines made famous by his friend, Sir Philip Sidney, who had died in the attempt, leaving Essex his best sword and, as it turned out, his widow as well.

All this is carefully and learnedly explored by Professor Hammer, but of course it is only part of the picture. Essex's followers, military and civilian, had to be rewarded, and the Earl's personal means were, for one of his rank, very slender indeed. Offices and grants had to come from the Queen. Inevitably, however, there were competitors for the royal largesse. Sir Walter Raleigh vied with Essex for the role of royal favorite. The Queen's principal adviser, Lord Burghley, tried to keep grants of offices largely in his control, and his son, Sir Robert Cecil, became even more monopolistic in his aims. A following grew around Essex, as one had already grown around Burghley and, as the pressures of the 1590s grew, so did the competition for power and influence. Still, Professor Hammer assures us, this struggle had not yet reached the point of factional warfare, though by the winter of 1597-98 it was coming perilously close. It is here that Hammer

wishes to alter the terms through which modern scholars have understood the events of the decade. A following, he tells us, consisted of some great man and those who had attached themselves to him; a faction, on the other hand, was "a body of men who felt themselves personally bound to one particular great man *and* who also saw themselves as necessarily opposed to other men who had a similar bond to a different leader" (p. 351). The second, negative, part of that definition only became applicable during that critical winter, when Sir Robert Cecil finally achieved his goal of becoming Secretary, and Essex felt his position beginning to slip away.

Such a definition of "faction" makes a useful distinction, but it seems to me that it does not, in the end, help us very much in explaining the events of these years. What we see in England during much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is the operation of a classic patronage system, one dependent on the exchange of favors. A leader built up his following by giving them gifts: land, rank, money, offices, even the small kindness of getting a serving officer royal permission to come home for a time on furlough. Most of these favors were in the hands of the Queen, and most were in very short supply. Thus, any office that went to someone else's follower was lost to one's own; at every moment, the great men had to ask themselves whether the peace and quiet gained by not fighting were worth more than keeping their own friends happy. The natural tendency of any following was to turn into a faction; in other words, each great man tried to achieve a monopoly of whatever favors were available. In this competition, the Queen acted as a kind of regulator, doling out her gifts alternately, trying to assure that her own role in the system remained dominant. Exigent courtiers made it difficult, and Professor Hammer documents in great detail the sort of emotional and political blackmail Essex used to try to get his way, and prevent competitors from getting theirs. It is perfectly true that the Cecils did not, at first, respond in kind, but that was mainly because they had more favors in their gift and did not feel the need to do so. When the Cecils adopted Essex's exigent tactics, the Queen began to lose control. Phrased another way, we might say that, in the mid-1590s, there was only one faction, that of the Earl of Essex, and so of course there could be no factional struggle.

Naturally enough, the Earl of Essex, convinced that the Cecils had a near-monopoly of offices that had to be broken, would not have seen matters in quite that way. Why he, more than most of his contemporaries, saw things in so absolute a fashion needs further analysis. Essex was not the only Elizabethan aristocrat brought up in

an atmosphere of humanist piety mixed with feudal duty. Others besides Essex struggled to convince the Queen that salvation, political and religious, lay in the direction they were pointing. In the end, most of them came to accept the lesson that "it was sufficient for the plant to grow where his Sovereigns hand had planted it." [2] Essex did not, for reasons that need explaining, not least because it is clear from Professor Hammer's book that it was Essex, much more than either of the Cecils, who was responsible for the rupture in Elizabethan politics.

Because scholars have used the word "faction" loosely for so long, Professor Hammer's redefinition does, it seems to me, perform a useful function by forcing readers to rethink the issue for themselves. His insistence on ending the book in 1597 serves much the same purpose, as well as making us crave a second and concluding volume. Still, at the end of this large, immensely learned study, do we in fact see the politics of the 1590s in a radically new and different way? In my judgment at least, that would seem to be overstating the case. The labors of past generations *did* set forth in print many of the most important sources: the papers of Francis and Anthony Bacon, of the Sidneys, of the Cecils, and of some of the minor players as well have been used with sufficient perspicacity for the old sketch to hold. Nevertheless, in this

book the focus of the picture has been sharpened immeasurably, and those attempting the subject again will ignore Professor Hammer's reading of these events at their peril.

Notes

[1]. He might have added that most of the recent writing on the period is still dominated by two classic articles: J. E. Neale, "The Elizabethan Political Scene," in his *Essays in Elizabethan History* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1958), pp. 59-84, and Joel Hurstfield, "The Succession Struggle in late Elizabethan England," in his *Freedom, Corruption and Government in Elizabethan England* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1973), pp. 104-34.

[2]. *Sir Fulke Greville's Life of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. Nowell Smith (Oxford, 1907), 149. Greville was part of Essex's following, and this book, though written more than a decade after the events it describes, is one of the best accounts of the Earl and his ideas. Though the book is somewhat problematic, I remain puzzled that Hammer makes so little use of it.

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Citation: F. J. Levy. Review of Hammer, Paul E. J., *The Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics. The Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, 1585-1597*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. September, 2000.

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