

Book Review: The New Elizabethan Age. Culture, Society and National Identity after World War II edited by Irene Morra and Rob Gossedge

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In The New Elizabethan Age: Culture, Society and National Identity after World War II, editors Irene Morra and Rob Gossedge bring together contributors to explore the emergence of a cultural 'new Elizabethanism' following the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II at the start of the 1950s, which drew upon the historical example of the Elizabethans to express and channel a sense of dynamic modernity without relinquishing reverence for the past. While finding the central thesis of a 'new Elizabethanism' somewhat overdetermined across the essays, this is a stimulating and valuable collection that positions 1950s Britain as a nation in vigorous dialogue with itself over both its history and its future, writes Peter Webster.

***The New Elizabethan Age. Culture, Society and National Identity after World War II*. Irene Morra and Rob Gossedge (eds). I.B. Tauris. 2016.**

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The Britain of the late 1940s and 1950s has often languished in the historiographical shadow of its neighbours in time: the World Wars that preceded it and the sixties that followed. The popular perception of the early 1950s in particular is now of greyness and stasis, of a desperately slow recovery from the effects of the war and a return to social conformity, an in-between time without energy or direction. Only in 1963 did sex begin (it would seem), and the nation became young, swinging, forging ahead in the white heat of technological revolution.

Recent scholarship has begun to rescue this period from such caricature. *The New Elizabethan Age: Culture, Society and National Identity after World War II*, edited by Irene Morra and Rob Gossedge, both of Cardiff University, goes further again in cracking open the time to reveal fresh insights. Far from being culturally uniform and static, the nation that emerges is in vigorous dialogue with itself over both its past and its future. Here are chapters on Shakespeare, opera, ballet, musical theatre and film; others engage with national identities in the constituent nations of the UK; still more with British technological invention and with the persistence and usefulness of Arthurian, Byzantine and medieval themes. They are for the most part clearly written and suggestive, although some seem only to be connected with the theme in the most tenuous sense, notably the two pieces by the playwright Edward Bond, which although interesting, add little to the volume as a whole and should perhaps have been omitted.

The collection stands as a highly stimulating exploration of culture, society and national identity, as the subtitle suggests. This reviewer was left with more reservations about the overall theme of the 'New Elizabethan Age'. As the introduction clearly shows, there was a moment associated with the coronation of Elizabeth II in which media and other commentators sought to bring the figure of the first Elizabeth into symbolic play. The 'New Elizabethans' were to be in continuity with their past, but also youthful, inventive, exploratory – a spirit most clearly to be seen in



the arts. This was no 'false start' to the sixties, but rather an enduring cast of mind that deserves close attention. The instruments of this particular discourse were the media (and the BBC in particular) and the arts, as fostered by the newly founded Arts Council. The particular attention paid to the means by which this discourse was articulated is important and welcome.

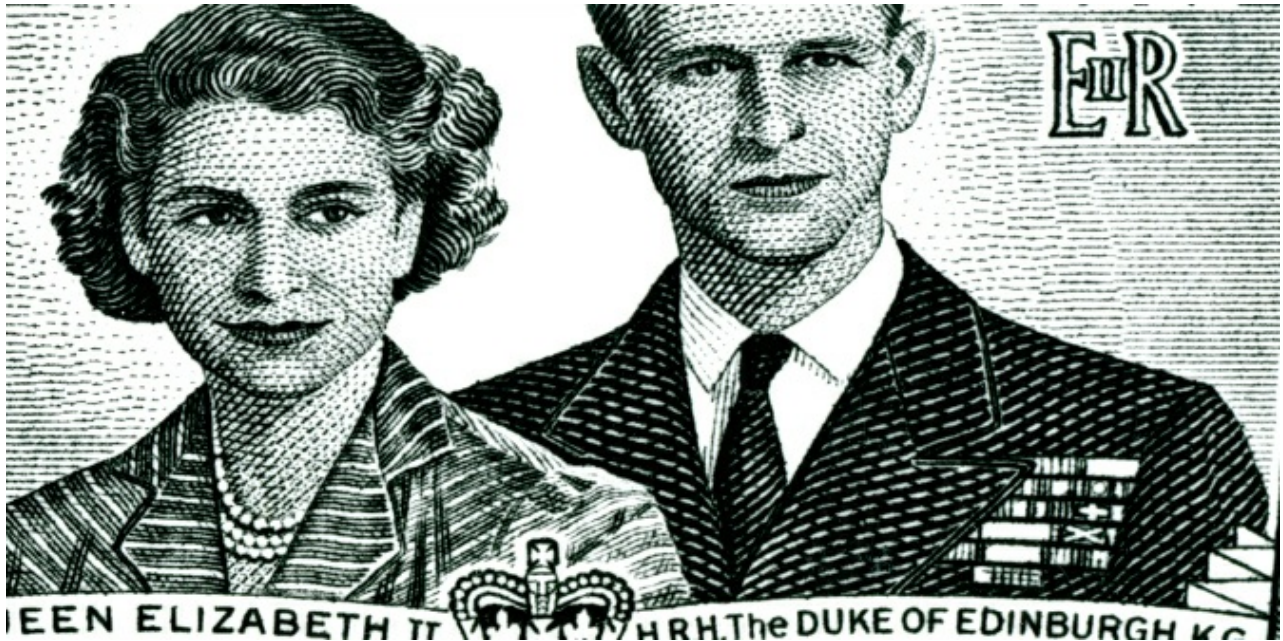


Image Credit: Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, 1953 ([Archives New Zealand, CC BY 2.0](#))

That there was a 'New Elizabethan' discourse is therefore hard to dispute, but there is a marked centrifugal tendency among the essays not wholly overcome by the introduction. Too many of the authors seem to acknowledge the notion of the 'New Elizabethan' in introductory paragraphs only for it to recede to vanishing point in the body of the chapter. Not everything that occurred in the early 1950s may usefully be dubbed 'New Elizabethan' without emptying the concept of its meaning. Readers most interested in this particular aspect would be best served by the introduction and Chapter One from Morra, which explore and define the New Elizabethan discourse. Also key are Paul Stevens on the historian A.L. Rowse and Powell and Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale*, Helen Phillips on literature for children and Stephen Banfield on the ambiguous music of the 'New Elizabethan soundtrack'. Amongst the others, it becomes clear that British people in the 1950s looked all over for resources to fund their thinking and actions, including to Tudor revivals that were in fact much older, such as in music, and to several periods of the past that were not Elizabethan. For every example that might fit the template, there are counterexamples, dissensions and dissonances.

One other striking omission is the visual arts, in which the symbolic play of past and present may be observed in other contexts, and which were similarly the object of both state and private patronage and the forces of a growing market. Of course, the editors may only include work which is available to publish, but there is yet a space open for studies of artistic representations of both the new queen and of the Tudor past in this particular period.

The New Elizabethan Age as a whole is highly suggestive and valuable, and shows well the moment in which answers to pressing questions of national identity were sought. Several of its chapters throw light on aspects of British culture seldom if ever illuminated before, and will be read with profit by cultural historians and scholars of the arts alike. However, it may be that in order to realise the full value of this collection the reader needs first to set aside the search for an essential New Elizabethanism. Read without this particular frame, the collection vividly presents a Britain seeking a means to reconcile a reverence for elements of its history, while also imagining a future in fundamentally changed circumstances after World War II. Losing both an empire and any last vestiges of world

leadership and adjusting to a new social settlement in the welfare state: for some, the figure of the new Queen and her earlier namesake did indeed symbolise something important; for others, notably outside England, the new Queen provided little symbolic heft. Ultimately, the interest lies in the fact of the search for such meaning, rather than in any single finding.

Peter Webster is an historian of contemporary British religion, with particular interests in church and state and the religious arts. He is also interested in the digital turn in contemporary history, and in particular the archived web as a new class of source. He is to be found blogging at peterwebster.wordpress.com or on Twitter [@pj_webster](https://twitter.com/pj_webster). [Read more by Peter Webster](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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