

# Scholar, courtier, magician: the lost library of John Dee (Royal College of Physicians, 18 January–29 July 2016)

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## Review: Scholar, courtier, magician: the lost library of John Dee (Royal College of Physicians, 18 January–29 July 2016)

‘What have the Victorians ever done for us?’, to paraphrase a well-known scene in *The Life of Brian*, is a legitimate question for modern British society. Apart from disease-conquering sewers, the railways, and electricity, we still owe much to the Victorian conviction that only the application of science in technology will bring progress, no matter the inequality that arises. Yet those very Victorian notions still limit our appreciation of history before the Enlightenment, because Victorian beliefs about the positive value of science inevitably denigrated what they dismissed as ‘superstition’, meaning magic and occult philosophy. This involved the social dismissal of alchemy, astrology, and contact with the spirit world, relegating them to a belief-system confused with the annual cycle of agricultural folk-rituals, and identified with the ‘lower orders’. Early nineteenth-century proto-anthropologists, busily recording those popular agrarian customs being erased by industrial capitalism, such as the late Victorian ‘scientific’ belief in ‘the people’s’ apparent opposition to ‘modern’ thought, created a vast social chasm between the intellectual elite and the emotive world of the deluded masses.

The results appear in the sea-change in Victorian historiography about Elizabeth I and her court. Until the mid-nineteenth century the Queen’s biographers happily acknowledged her fascination with alchemy, her implicit belief in astrology – which she shared with her leading courtiers – and even her occasional participation in spirit magic, because the surviving papers from her reign amply demonstrated them. By the late nineteenth century, however, cataloguers began to omit magical beliefs from their descriptions of those papers, artificially separating the leaders of court society from ‘magicians’ like John Dee. For example, the catalogue of Lord Burghley’s papers, published from 1883, carefully obscured evidence of Burghley’s obsessive belief in alchemy and his political anxieties about astrological influences. This helped to foster the twentieth-century belief that the Elizabethan elite, while dressed in exotic-looking clothes, thought just like modern politicians. While this has contributed to the publishing and multi-media success of the cottage industry now known as ‘The Tudors’, it has not created an informed understanding of their world. It has attracted interest to figures like Dee precisely because he is seen as a marginalised outlier, a sinister figure who fascinated a court he simultaneously horrified, as he does the modern audience.

By giving a prominent place to Henry Gillard Glindoni’s pre-1913 painting of *John Dee performing an experiment before Elizabeth I*, the recent exhibition of John Dee’s books at the Royal College of Physicians nails its colours firmly to this conventional Victorian mast. Glindoni’s circle of skulls, within which Dee originally stood, have been painted out, but the painting still distances Dee from his scandalised courtly audience. One would never guess that one of those glittering noblemen, Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford (and Burghley’s son-in-law), not only claimed to have conjured spirits himself, but to have had sex with them.

Figure 1



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*John Dee performing an experiment before Queen Elizabeth I.* Oil painting by Henry Gillard Glindoni

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Within these limits, the College displayed about fifty books selected from a hundred volumes donated by the descendants of Henry Pierrepont (the Marquis of Dorchester) after his death in 1680, the largest single collection from Dee's library of over three thousand books. They demonstrate Dee's wide reading in ancient history and languages, astronomy, cryptography and mathematics, as well as alchemical medicine and occult studies. Throughout the exhibition attention is drawn to Dee's voluminous marginalia, yet restricting the display to the College's collection obscures Dee's purpose in annotating his books: to organise information across books in dialogue with one another. His cross-references to books extant in other collections are more historically significant than the beauty of his marginalia. For example, much is made of Dee's stunning marginal drawing in Cicero's *Opera* (1539–40) of a ship in full sail, but it is not connected with his other drawing of such a ship, that steered by Elizabeth in the heavily-encoded title page of his *General and rare memorials pertayning to the Perfect Arte of navigation* (1577), now in the British Library. Sea power as the basis of the 'British Empire' fascinated Dee, but the title-page of *Memorials* reveals that he imagined Elizabeth's predestined imperial rule over all of Christian Europe. Significantly, *Memorials* proposed to achieve that empire by creating the philosophers' stone in an alchemical research institute supported from general taxation. Similarly, the exhibition's display of objects connected to his angelic séances, including a crystal ball and a 'scrying' mirror to discern angels, did not mention Dee's belief that the angels inspired and supported his alchemical endeavours and imperial advice to Elizabeth.

**Figure 2**



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Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*. John Dee provided a 'mathematical preface' for the first English edition

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Figure 3



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John Dee's doodle of a ship from vol 2 of Cicero's *Opera omnia*

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The exhibition displayed Dee's life thematically, as scholar, courtier, alchemist, doctor and magician. This partly obscured the fact that – to his contemporaries – for much of his life Dee was all of these things at once. His court career also explains some of the deceptions which Dee practised on his own time and posterity, but which were uncritically accepted in the display. The exhibition claimed that Dee was arrested in 1555 for drawing up Mary I's horoscope, and was placed under house arrest with Edmund Bonner, the Catholic Bishop of London. This false statement originated with Dee, and the circumstances of its creation underline the need to place Dee more fully in his contemporary context than the exhibition achieved. Dee was in fact ordained a Catholic priest in February 1554, with Bonner's assistance, and became Bonner's chaplain. The first accounts of the Protestant martyrs published under Elizabeth, especially John Foxe's so-called *Book of Martyrs* (1563) blamed 'beastly' Bonner for their sufferings. Dee's rivals for alchemical patronage at Court in the 1560s used this information to darken Dee's 'conjuring' reputation, forging further 'evidence' of his persecution of Protestants. Dee could only respond in 1577, when he temporarily gained political influence by writing *Memorials*, which supported the Earl of Leicester's campaign to make Elizabeth undertake her imperial destiny in Europe. Leicester forced Foxe to rewrite his book so that Dee became Bonner's household prisoner and a proto-Protestant martyr. This blend of magic, politics and religion typifies Dee's career, but even though the exhibition displayed Andreas Alexander's *Mathemalogium prime partis* (1504) with Dee's annotation that he read it in September 1555 in 'the house of my singular friend' Bonner, the contradiction between this evidence and the larger claims of the exhibition is passed over in silence.

The exhibition therefore was not the last word on Dee, nor could it be, given the breadth of his interests and the voluminous surviving evidence about them, both in the Royal College of Physicians and many other archives. Its success in drawing large crowds and much media interest is to be congratulated, but if we are to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the Tudor age, we need to accept that its strangeness from our time is part of its attraction. The idea that an exhibition needs to challenge the preconceptions of its audience rather than reinforce them may seem ambitious, but there are grounds for optimism about the ability of new historical scholarship to inform the public perception of 'The Tudors'. The tide may be turning once again towards a fuller appreciation of the centrality of magic, and Dee, in Elizabeth's court, when recent 'popular' studies drawing upon more informed Dee research, such as Tracy Borman's *The Private Lives of the Tudors: Uncovering the Secrets of*

*Britain's Greatest Dynasty* and Anna Whitelock's *Elizabeth's Bedfellows: An Intimate History of the Queen's Court* firmly reject the Victorian marginalisation of Dee's occult philosophy.

**Figure 4**



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Portrait of John Dee, holding scroll, 3/4 length

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