

Book Review: Elizabethan Secret Agent by Timothy Ashby

A person in a position of great authority is volatile, stingy, unreliable, and unwilling to take personal responsibility for anything unpopular.

Scotland has not forgiven England for what it perceives to be crimes (and one crime in particular) against it. England has its own desperate reasons for wanting to keep Scotland under its control. Promises are made and broken. Allegiances shift in the wind. Espionage has become a way of life.

Disease is rife. A certificate of health is required before anyone can approach the seat of power.

We are in fact in the 16th century, but on many occasions while reading **Timothy Ashby's** excellent new biography of his ancestor, I found myself noting just how little has changed in over four hundred years. ***Elizabethan Secret Agent – The Untold Story of William Ashby 1536-1593*** tells a fascinating, exciting, and at times all too familiar tale of political conspiracies, double agents, personal rivalries and the perennial quest, by states and by individuals, for power and control. The action moves back and forth between London, Edinburgh, the Low Countries, France and Spain as we follow the life and career of this remarkable, but until now largely unknown, man.

William Ashby was born in 1536 to a middle class family in rural Leicestershire. Although his father was not rich his extended family had many valuable connections, and in the course of his life Ashby was to study at the College Royal in Paris (where he lived as a Marian exile in the reign of Mary Tudor), and later at Cambridge and Oxford, spend time at the Inns of Court, serve as a member of parliament and ultimately become a diplomat and 'gentleman (ie largely unpaid) intelligencer (or spy)' for the Elizabethan court. He was an adventurer who travelled widely at a time when journeys were fraught with danger and many countries almost permanently plague-stricken. He carried messages (often, for safety, only in his head – he had an exceptional memory) from one court to another, was sent to negotiate several deals to protect the English throne, and recruited many other agents to aid the cause. His story provides a brilliant insight into politics – and everyday life – at one of the most turbulent times in British history.

Ashby's patron and boss – and effectively his handler – was Francis Walsingham, sometime English ambassador to France, and from 1573 to his death, Elizabeth I's Principal Private Secretary and chief spymaster. *Elizabethan Secret Agent* falls broadly into two parts, the first concerning Walsingham and Ashby's activities in the Low Countries, the second their missions to Scotland. In each their primary purpose was to shore up the 'new religion', Protestantism, against the old Catholic church, and to prevent Spain and/or France from invading, restoring Catholicism, turning the countries into vassal states of the Holy Roman Empire, and most importantly, using Scotland in particular as a launching pad to invade England, remove Elizabeth, and replace her with a Catholic monarch of their choosing (and probably of their own royal families.)

In The Low Countries, William of Orange welcomed their assistance in the rebellion against Spanish rule, though

Elizabeth refused to offer much financial support and wanted a brokered peace. Despite several attempts at a resolution, the situation rumbled on, unsettled, for many years.

In Scotland things were even more difficult. King James VI was still a teenager; the last regent, Lord Morton, had kept the country on an even keel, but when James took over things swiftly deteriorated. The country, and James himself, were incandescent about the captivity and eventual murder of James's mother, Mary Queen of Scots. Walsingham described Scotland as;

The postern-gate to any mischief or peril that may befall to this realm

Protestantism may have caught on in what we now call the Central Belt, but the north still clung to its Catholic beliefs, and the borders were rife with feuding clans; frequent raids were made into England. In the north families were often more interested in arguing with one another than bothering about what was going on in Edinburgh. James himself was fickle, favoured his boyfriends (often against the advice of his government), with titles, gifts and high honours spent money like water and would rather go out hunting than pay attention to matters of state.

Scotland was poor, and what James wanted above all was financial assistance. He repeatedly requested this from Elizabeth; she repeatedly refused to supply it. Spain and France saw their chance; James was easily bought. Elizabeth was warned of the danger, but still would not pay. Walsingham and Ashby were stuck in the middle, trying to negotiate with their hands metaphorically tied behind their backs.

No-one wanted to be sent to Scotland; not only was the country seen as barbaric and expensive (Ashby's thoughts on the low standard and outrageous cost of accommodation in Edinburgh would ring many bells with festival goers today), but the

notoriously volatile and temperamental Queen was famous for failing to deliver on promises she had ordered her ministers to make, and for denying that she had ever issued such orders in the first place. An offer made in good faith could lead to the dismissal, and even to the death, of the man who made it. No one relished such a posting, and everyone feared the reception he might get on his return to London; Ashby was just one of the many who suffered the wrath of his capricious monarch.



English Ships and the Spanish Armada August 1588 (Image:Royal Museums Greenwich; considered in the public domain owing to age.)

As fears of the Spanish Armada grew, Ashby made one more desperate trip to Edinburgh to try to win James over. He was appalled by the king's slovenly dress and the filthy state of his audience chamber at Holyrood. When England managed to defeat the Spanish fleet, the offers Ashby had been told to

make to the unreliable James were repudiated not only by Elizabeth and Lord Burghley, but even by Walsingham himself.

In showing us how, despite this, his ancestor managed to keep his job in Scotland (indeed he kept asking to be recalled to London but was pressed to stay on) and navigate a successful diplomatic career in such perilous times, Tim Ashby brings us an exciting story with as many twists, turns and terrors as any modern day writer of spy novels could hope to invent. Ships explode, (so-called) witches burn, pirates take prisoners, blood feuds are fought on the steps of St Giles' Cathedral. After a gang fight on Edinburgh's Blackfriars Wynd, the Earl of Bothwell

'strake (William Stewart) in the back and out the belly, and killed him.'

There is humour too; Elizabeth's behaviour in particular often brings to mind Miranda Richardson's portrayal of her in *Blackadder*. Ashby reports that on one occasion the Queen herself gives the future Earl of Shrewsbury 'a great fillip' on the head for accidentally seeing her in her nightgown. When the 17 year old James sends a marriage proposal to Elizabeth, she is amused and replies that

There (is) no person in England with the necessary qualifications for this purpose.

Nor in Scotland, apparently.

The author does not spare us the details of disembowelments, decapitations and disease, nor sanitise his descriptions of the squalid conditions Ashby is forced to endure in Scotland and even near his own house at Clerkenwell;

Ashby kept his hand on the hilt of his rapier, and Hays carried a cudgel in addition to a dagger as they passed The Cock on the east side of Turnbull Street, eyed by masterless

men, cutpurses and bleary doxies hovering outside the inn.

There are also, however, some charming descriptions of Christmas back at the family home in Leicestershire, with visits to friends and neighbours, feasting, music and singing, dances and games to all hours. Not everyone was miserable, and Leicestershire's gentry had no time for Puritan austerity.

Tim Ashby's writing brings the story alive – this is no long list of dry dates and battles, but the story of a real life, lived both in the courts of Europe and the stinking closes of Edinburgh.

And through it all Ashby keeps his head (in every sense.), As his life comes to its end, he passes the baton to his nephew and heir Robert Naunton. When James accedes to the English throne, Naunton takes over Walsingham's role as one of the Crown's most powerful officials – and as its next spymaster.

Elizabethan Secret Agent concludes with a very useful Dramatis Personae, which is a great help in reminding the reader of who is who, especially when many people have two different names. There are also extensive Endnotes giving further information.



Tim Ashby (www.timashbybooks.com)

Tim Ashby is to be commended on this excellent tribute to his distant relative, which is also an illuminating account of life in Tudor and Stuart times.

Elizabethan Secret Agent: The Untold Story of William Ashby 1536-1593 by Timothy Ashby is published by Edinburgh's Scotland Street Press.