



The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I

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In a Europe aflame with wars of religion and dynastic conflicts, Elizabeth I came to the throne of a realm encircled by menace. To the great Catholic powers of France and Spain, England was a heretic pariah state, a canker to be cut away for the health of the greater body of Christendom. Elizabeth's government, defending God's true Church of England and its leader, the queen, could stop at nothing to defend itself.

Headed by the brilliant, enigmatic, and widely feared Sir Francis Walsingham, the Elizabethan state deployed every dark art: spies, double agents, cryptography, and torture. Delving deeply into sixteenth-century archives, Stephen Alford offers a groundbreaking, chillingly vivid depiction of Elizabethan espionage, literally recovering it from the shadows. In his company we follow Her Majesty's agents through the streets of London and Rome, and into the dank cells of the Tower. We see the world as they saw it—ever unsure who could be trusted or when the fatal knock on their own door might come. *The Watchers* is a riveting exploration of loyalty, faith, betrayal, and deception with the highest possible stakes, in a world poised between the Middle Ages and modernity.

The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I Details

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From Reader Review The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I for online ebook

Ruth says

I really enjoyed this book. The subtitle is "a secret history of the reign of Elizabeth I", but I feel that doesn't actually explain just what an insightful, but accessible, book this one is.

It includes some really fascinating details on spies and spying in Elizabethan Europe, but it also describes the state of almost perpetual paranoia during a period of history which Hollywood likes to glamorize as the "golden age" of monarchy. It wasn't a golden age. Elizabeth maintained a dazzling but strict distance from the majority of her advisors and from the plebs which made her appear all the more awe-inspiring, and she was definitely an extremely intelligent, astute and ruthless individual, who aimed to find outcomes to the issues of the day which put her in the best possible position with little effort on her behalf which I can only admire, but for me the real heroes appear to be the astonishingly clever, worldly, and subtle "administrators". They worked to protect the aura of majesty around the Queen, and keep safe both her, and the hard-won religious freedom of an England surrounded by Catholics. The Great Armada was not the climax in English-Spanish military history I was taught at school, but simply one battle in a long cold war, which occasionally boiled over, and was only extinguished when James Stuart came to the throne, complete with his ready-made heirs, and finally resolved the agonies of the Tudor succession (well, for a generation or two, at least). This almost obsessive passion for maintaining the Protestant religious freedom of England was something which James II, the grandson of James Stuart (nor Charles I, to a lesser extent) never understood, but which Charles II understood to his bones.

I understand the religious history of the age (at least to a certain extent), but this book brought it alive for me. Think of a relatively minor, new religion (or cult) today, and imagine that a president or prime minister decides that for their own expediency this new religion is going to be what everyone in that country must follow. Now imagine after a bloody tussle of a few decades of back-and-forth, all the "non-believers" are essentially persecuted into exile. Some of them will decide to make their homes where they land, but others will do all they can to go home on their own terms (whilst maintaining loyalty to the government) and others will do all they can to destroy the government in the name of the "old" religion. Other countries see this an opportunity to invade and take the heretic country for themselves (it's not particularly wealthy, but its geographic location makes it important for trade, and it has been supporting insurgents/terrorists overseas for years), and they spend money and time and decades trying to do so. That is the picture of Elizabethan Europe you get from this book.

This book is also interesting for its descriptions of how espionage was actually physically carried out in the 16th century. It surprised me how much it resembled modern espionage. It relied upon having well-placed, non-descript individuals, either motivated by overwhelming loyalty or vast wads of money, or threatened into spying. They wrote their reports, encrypted them and shipped them to their handlers, who then pieced them together to try and form an accurate picture of threats, so they could devise counterpolicy. Essentially what happens now.

Great book. I could go on for ever about how much I got out of it.. 5 stars. It was amazing.

Libby says

Deadly danger and intrigue, love of money, monarch and God and a bizarre cast of players make up the

incredible melange that is *The Watchers*. The author takes us on an unforgettable "Grand Tour" of Elizabethan Period Europe. We visit Rome, Rouen, Paris, Madrid and Lisbon. We frequent London's taverns and lodging houses. We study in Douais, Rouen and Rome, and we hide in priest-holes in the English Midlands. Alford spins the tales of Sir Francis Walsingham's vaunted spy network in the days when to be a Catholic was to live under suspicion of treason. Walsingham and his right hand man Thomas Phelippes were masters of the art of "turning" a spy into their service. Phelippes was as well a mathematical prodigy, a genius level cypher cracker and a fair forger. Together they patiently gathered information, studied the patterns and protected the Queen from dangers imagined and very real.

The Watchers is densely packed with fascinating information. It is told from a slightly unusual point of view, as we are given sympathetic POV's of Catholic exiles, English courtiers and politicians and a motley crew of "intelligencers." Alford writes smoothly and jumps us nimbly through complex plots and counterplots. His erudition is impressive and his ability to share his knowledge with us is the stuff of great teachers.

Paul says

Elizabeth I reigned for a total of 45 years in England, and the stability she gave as head of state gave us the Golden Age of wealth and greater self-assurance as a nation. The final Tudor monarch saw a cultural advances too, this being the time of Shakespeare and military confidence on the high seas. However, the Europeans saw her very differently; as daughter of Anne Boylen, Henry VIII's second wife, she was considered a bastard and Protestant heretic by catholic Europe. Following her denouncement by the Pope various European rulers prepared plans to dispose her, replacing her with Mary. The event that most people are aware of is the almost invasion by The Spanish Armada, but throughout her reign she was protected by a team of loyal subjects.

These men were a motley bunch of ambassadors, codebreakers, and confidence-men and spies who used all sort of covert and overt methods to counter the catholic threat. Infiltrators were sent to the continent to ingratiate themselves with the church, uncovering conspiracies both real and imagined, identified and followed gentlemen who were plotting the overthrow of their Queen. The network tracked priests entering the country under cover, intercepted and deciphered almost all correspondence between suspects in England and their contacts in France, Spain and Italy and neutered the threat that hung over the crown.

Drawing on documents from archive and collections, Alford shines a light into this dark and shadowy time of history. The narrative details tense searches across the countryside looking for specific people who were perceived to be a threat to the crown. Traitors who were convicted, sometimes only on hearsay and confessions uttered under torture on the rack, were condemned in horrific ways to die. It is an interesting account of those involved in keeping their monarch safe from all the assassination attempts and plots, but at times was fairly complicated as he details all the people involved in these plots. Worth reading though for those that like their Tudor history.

Karen Brooks says

Sent this book by the publishers, I really looked forward to reading what's ostensibly a behind the scenes account of Queen Elizabeth I's reign but from the point of view of the "watchers": that is, reporters, listeners, spies – the men whose speciality was espionage. Elizabethan times, it turns out, are notorious for their

extensive use of spies and networks, all of which were established to protect England and ensure the queen's successful reign. As Alford writes in the introduction, while Elizabeth and her council worked hard to maintain "clever and persuasive projections of political stability, empire, self-confidence and national myth" there was, in fact, "a darker story... set against a Europe divided and oppressed by religious conflict, civil war and the ambitions of kings and princes."

Taking the crown after her half-sister "Bloody Mary" tried to purge the Protestant stain, and trying to stabilise an England divided by religious schism and rapidly changing succession, Elizabeth's job was not easy. Declaring England as Protestant, but claiming that Catholicism would be tolerated, Elizabeth nonetheless was acutely aware of how precarious her position as ruler and religious head of a reeling nation was. Plots to declare her rule invalid, assassination attempts, never mind trying to overthrow Elizabeth and place Mary Queen of Scots on the throne abounded. Then there was the job of trying to find Elizabeth a suitable husband, all of which meant that though the kingdom flourished in terms of exploration, the humanities and arts, there was also a seething underbelly that threatened to erupt and destroy everything at any time. The greatest threat was that of the Catholics who, discontent with Elizabeth's heretical leadership and perceiving it as ungodly, sought to rid themselves of Henry VIII's daughter and restore the "true religion". Working from within their homeland, their overseas networks were extensive, travelling across Europe and involving some of the most powerful people abroad as well.

The stage is thus set for espionage, betrayal, treason, propaganda, secrets, torture, faith, martyrdom and lies all of which Sir Francis Walsingham and his successors sought to control.

Carefully researched and very well-written, this book is an eye-opener that also makes the mind boggle. The lengths to which various individuals would go to inveigle themselves into (Catholic) families or communities in order to uncover plots and treasons were phenomenal. Conspirators were discovered frequently, many from noble families. The Throckmorton plot was one of the most famous and this is covered in detail throughout the book. Fascinating in its complexity and the degree of commitment and sacrifice believers were ready to make, uncovering it was to prove an even greater triumph.

The book goes on to explore the stories, derring-do, successes and failures of many spies and traitors, how far they were willing to go (disguise, denying their identities for long periods, sacrificing family and a "normal" life for little reward) and from these we also learn how disposed Walsingham and his men were to use torture to uncover secrets and plots and how brutal their interrogation methods were. Some of the spies, or intelligencers, were gentleman and even poets, others were criminals, but many were chameleons, able to shift, camouflage themselves and change with subtlety. There was William Parry, Thomas Phelippes, Gilbery Gifford, Charles Sledd, Sir Robert Cecil, Burghley, simply to name a few (forgive my memory) - names both known and unknown to history buffs. Perhaps, for those names less familiar, it's testimony to how well they performed their roles - they disappeared not simply into the woodwork, but became lost in the pages of history and time until Alford recovers them. Uncovering the plots and deeds of desperate men, these watchers brought many to trial and death and, in doing so, ensured Elizabeth's long reign.

Utilising surviving records, Alford has done an amazing job and recreated in detail a tumultuous but fascinating period. Almost akin to a Renaissance version of Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy, I found this book fascinating, challenging (to keep track of the different names and roles), but also a wonderful insight into what occurs behind the doors, under the tables and in the shadows and whispers of a colourful and deceptively confident queen's reign. Like an ice-berg, it was the seven-eighths we didn't see that ensured the topmost part remained afloat. Alford has given us access to that which we don't normally witness and exposed the intricacy and deadly seriousness of spying in Elizabethan times.

A great read for history buffs, writers, anyone who loves tales of espionage and appreciates solid research delivered in an entertaining and engaging manner.

4.5 stars

Nicholas Whyte says

<http://nwhyte.livejournal.com/2207951.html>[return][return]this is a study of how the leadership of the English government maintained an intelligence service to protect the realm, in particular the Cecils and Sir Francis Walsingham. I'll say up front that I had a couple of disappointments - there is very little about Ireland, and I'd hoped for at least a passing mention of John Bossy's Giordano Bruno theory and didn't get one. But I was very satisfied with the overall detailed picture of the Queen's advisors, determined to preserve her rule at all costs, much more ruthless than she would have been (as witness her dithering over the execution of Mary Queen of Scots) and also somewhat more anti-Catholic. [return][return]It's easy to overlook two very important facts about the historical situation: first, that nobody knew that Elizabeth would live to 1603, and the uncertainty about her succession, which she deliberately fostered to some extent, was profoundly destabilising to those who wanted to think ahead to the next reign; and second, that information just did not really flow between countries - there were no newspapers, statesmen did not give interviews, official communications between rulers and magnates had to be supplemented by intelligence gathered by agents in important centres abroad. One of the tools of statecraft therefore was to have a widespread network of contacts, who would demand regular payment in return for information; this still happens today, of course, but unlike today there was almost no OSINT to check the HUMINT against. Another important point is that most of the information was channeled to the principals directly, and never shown to anyone else except, if really necessary, the Queen.[return][return]Given these two factors, Alford makes it almost uncontroversial, though of course potentially very dangerous, that Walsingham essentially framed Mary Queen of Scots for execution through the Babington Plot; although Babington himself, who was only 24, was clearly a rather slender reed for the restoration of Catholicism, Mary was an ever present temptation for someone more competent while she lived. Walsingham and Cecil were ruthless, but they had seen the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, and indeed had perpetrated plenty of sectarian violence themselves; they knew perfectly well what awaited them in the event of a further change of official ideology. Elizabethan England, providing security at home for economic stability and some encouragement of culture, at the cost of repression of the surviving loyalists to the former regime and paranoia about their foreign allies, seems not so very different from Pinochet's Chile, or the less corrupt Eastern European countries under Communism.

Marty Monahan says

This showed how delicate the balance of power was to just maintain.

Ubiquitousbastard says

For some reason I randomly became obsessed with Elizabethan spycraft in the last week, so of course I had to read this. And, for the most part, this book had what I wanted. There is an insane level of detail here; many, many documents get referenced. I also liked how the author explained all of the broader concepts at work as well, for those of us who don't know off the top of our head the politics of Philip's Spanish court. Yes, there is an obvious bias, but it's so mundane that it didn't really affect my reading. (Alford may be in love with Phelippes, just saying).

But anyway. I think this book gave a very comprehensive overview of the state of espionage in Elizabethan England, as well as a pretty good idea of what the political climate was like. It would probably be a great source (that leads to MANY great sources), but I really did read it for fun. And, I do have to say that Alford makes his subject very accessible, so that reading it wasn't a chore and was actually enjoyable.

My only slight annoyance was how much he would focus on one particular person, and then completely forget them later on. If you're going to give me someone's life story, you have to finish it. Other than that, there is very little to complain about here.

Steven says

I so enjoy academics -- especially historians -- who can write about topics in a way that is both knowledgeable and accessible. Alford is one of those writers and this one of those books.

Alford shows how the time period of Elizabeth I's reign, saw the origins of both the modern state and international espionage. Indeed, they seem to have been born and grown up together. Beginning with a dramatic what-if episode that serves to highlight just how precarious England's situation was during the latter half of the 16th century, Alford goes on to reveal the characters that were involved in the shadowy intrigues of the day. Swirled around these men were issues of loyalty, trade and "true religion." The stakes were quite high -- and only a few seemed to be truly aware of just how perilous England's future was.

Interestingly, although much of this book discusses issues surrounding the personal safety of the queen and her ability to hold her crown, she exists on the outer edges of these books. The really interesting subjects of this book are the men who risked careers, life and limb to keep her alive and in charge. And those who sought to destroy her.

Shelley says

This is a gossipy romp through Elizabethan spying. The best part of the book is in the very beginning, when the author describes a scenario where Elizabeth is assassinated and what might have happened as a result. This is the terror the government lived with. The fear that her spymasters felt becomes palpable and, as a result, I had a very good sense of why they acted as they did.

The book needs editing. It's redundant in many places, repeating information about individuals, plots, and basic history. (I am fine if, say, information is repeated from one chapter to the next, but not from page to page or within the same chapter.) This is my main gripe with the book, because of all the sins for an author to commit, wasting my time is the absolute worst. Rereading the same tidbits over and over again makes me stabby.

It reads as if it's cobbled together from lectures. (This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but to a minister's daughter, who grew up with sermons delivered with the slightly dramatic cadence of a university lecture, it was as if my father were reading the book to me. I doubt that's going to be an issue for most readers, but it was definitely odd.)

In reality, I'd give this book 3.5 stars. I'd subtract one for the redundancies and one-half for the somewhat haphazard organization.

Mara says

I thought the history covered in this book was really fascinating, and it was nice to get a book set during

Elizabeth's reign that talks about what was going on behind the scenes and abroad instead of focusing solely on her and her own choices and actions.

What keeps me from giving the book a higher rating is that the prose is very choppy and repetitive, and included so much jumping around from one point in time to another and back again that I found it very hard to get engrossed in the narrative. I would still recommend it to Tudor history fans, though!

Pete daPixie says

I found this book to be a very interesting and well researched probe into the Elizabethan birth pains of our present MI5 and MI6. A fascinating history of Walsingham and Burghley's dark and secret intelligence networks, established in England and throughout Europe during the second half of the sixteenth century. Stephen Alford has brought out of the shadows many of the agents employed, through British and Bodleian Library documents, Cecil Papers, State manuscripts and printed sources.

'The Watchers-A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I' is a recommended read. A scholarly investigation into the many plots and threats faced by the Protestant government, standing alone and surrounded by a hostile Catholic world. Against all odds, the ship of state was steered for more than four decades through the storms of Spanish military might, religious propaganda and the many and various attacks, domestic and foreign, faced by the crown.

A good companion to Derek Wilson's biography of Walsingham. I was hoping that Christopher Marlowe's name would turn up in this book, having read Park Honan's biography of Marlowe, but he remains hidden. Still, there are enough agents and double agents revealed in 'The Watchers' to match anything concocted by Ian Fleming. The secret sign of Dr.John Dee was 007.

Anthony says

A fascinating look, into the machinations, it took, to keep Elizabeth I on her throne, and to keep her alive. It also gives question(s) as to why Mary Queen of Scots was so demonized by the English, but the bigger question, for me was, how come Elizabeth I never met with her so called "sister?" Was Mary Queen of Scots the legitimate heir to the throne from Edward VI? After all, Elizabeth had been legally declared a "Bastard," and that term was never legally dismissed. So many questions, so many books to still read regarding the Tudors.

Ed says

"The Watchers" gives us a very different view of Elizabethan England than we (or at least I) are used to. Instead of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Ben Jonson and the university wits there is the constant threat of invasion and the first stirrings of a centralized police state. Elizabeth is not the Gloriana of Spenser's "Faerie Queen" but a headstrong monarch who put her kingdom at risk by refusing to name a successor. While the arts flourished, voyages of discovery sent out and everyone went to the theater—except when they were closed by the plague—there were undercurrents of treachery, perfidy and treason. The queen might be assassinated, Phillip of Spain's armies might embark from the Low Countries and cross the narrow sea to land on English beaches and the horror of religious civil war could be imminent. Mary, Queen of Scots and cousin of Elizabeth would be freed from house arrest to rule as a Catholic monarch. None of this happened; Stephen

Alford does his best to show that it was due to the machinations of two men, William Cecil and Francis Walsingham, the queen's spymasters, directors of the watchers of the title and the employers of spies, turncoats and torturers. Alford knows the sources, has a firm sense of narrative and tells the story well.

Three actions had to occur for the plot to succeed. The queen had to die, preferably at the hand of a man claiming to be a loyal Englishman and devout Catholic (Elizabeth had already been condemned as a heretic, schismatic and bastard), Mary, her cousin, had to be proclaimed the new queen, soon to marry a Catholic monarch from the continent, either Phillip of Spain or the Duke of Guise of France, and the army of a Catholic country had to invade while Catholic nobles from the north of England and Scotland raised a rebellion. The plots were constant and Alford shows how Cecil and Walsingham's spies in France and Italy kept track of them while their operatives in the ports kept watch for seditious literature produced by the émigré community and for priests trying to sneak into the country.

Alford begins with a counterfactual account of a successful assassination plot against the queen in 1566 with the chaos and strife that would follow. It sets up his thesis, that all the spying, torturing and killing that took place to keep Elizabeth safe was both necessary and proper. He ends with the queen dying in her bed and James IV of Scotland, soon to be James I of England, ready to accept the crown. He was the son of her cousin Mary, Queen of Scots sent to the block by Elizabeth in 1567. The peaceful succession was quietly arranged during Elizabeth's last illness by Robert Cecil, son of William Cecil and the new spymaster of the realm.

Note on the kindle edition--it is necessary to use the Kindle Cloud app to actually see the illustrations. As is always the case the kindle device is too small to render drawings and images of 16th century text legibly.

Jenny says

The golden age of England, underneath, was a time when secrets were a form of currency just as precious as gold.

Stephen Alford's "The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I" was an excellent book about one of my all-time favorite eras of history the Tudor Reign. I've read several books about the Tudors, and this book showed that Elizabeth's rule was a precarious and fragile thing; the Protestant monarch had many enemies at home and abroad, at times her network of spies was all that stood between rule and ruin.

First, you have to like a book with such detailed references. A good sign of a non-fiction book's character (or lack thereof) will be revealed if a book has a strong backbone of source material. I also thought the layout of the beginning of the book was excellent, the author set up the characters like that of a playbill, giving a brief description of the parts each person played-out in this game of spies. This was beneficial, since there was a number of players to keep straight, and having a quick guide to turn back to was helpful.

Although I was aware of Elizabeth's most trusted advisor William Cecil's cunning, and his web of information that was far-reaching, I did not know to what extent and how wide the network of underground information-gathering reached. Alford showcased the inner-turmoil of the country, where Protestants were once again in favor and Catholics fled the country for fear of persecution or worse. Catholics that left the country, however, were not safe for the ever-watchful eyes of England's spies.

Alford's book gave in detail a number of entertaining and well-documented accounts of how England's spies went about procuring their information, and how these spies give evidence against men they had lived with, worked for, and befriended. The book also described the Throckmorton Plot to overthrow Elizabeth, and

place Catholic Mary Queen of Scots on the throne.

I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in Elizabethan or Tudor history, or those interested in reading about the lucrative business of information-gathering. Alford's "The Watchers: A Secret History of the Reign of Elizabeth I" was a well-written and thoroughly researched book that I found very entertaining and informative.

Carrie Slager says

(This review also appears on The Mad Reviewer.)

[Full disclosure: Bloomsbury sent me a free print copy in exchange for an honest review of this book.]

I don't read nearly as much nonfiction as I would like, so *The Watchers* was both a refreshing change from YA novels and a great book in its own right. For someone who knows a decent amount about the Tudors and Medieval England, I was shocked at how big of a role spying played back then. It wasn't just basic spying either: it was sophisticated and at times, incredibly complicated. Stephen Alford has documented the lives of some of the main players in the spy game, from the talented to the incompetent, the eccentric to the boring.

Although Alford's writing can get a bit choppy here and there as he jumps from spy to spy, he does tie things up well at the end of the chapters and at the very end of the book. Despite the head-hopping, the writing style itself was very engaging for a nonfiction writer and made *The Watchers* far more enjoyable. To illustrate his point that spying was very important in Tudor England, he had a very lengthy introduction imagining a scenario in which spies did not exist and Elizabeth I really had been assassinated. I would have liked for the introduction to be cut down slightly, but Alford certainly did make his point well.

One thing I really liked about *The Watchers* is that Alford isn't telling a completely one-sided story of the struggle of Protestants to protect their queen from evil Catholics. We get to see how the Protestant agents felt about their missions, but also get to see things from the point of view of Catholic exiles. It's rare to find such balanced nonfiction these days, but Alford managed it. The political triumphs of courtiers like Lord Burghley are balanced by accounts of the terrible torture captured Catholics faced. Alford does not depict a picture of a Golden Age as most books about Elizabethan England seem to and we get to see that the ugly side of the Golden Age was quite ugly at times. It's nice to find a more realistic portrayal of the times.

Overall, *The Watchers* is a great book for both newcomers to history and old hats at it. Personally, I'm looking forward to any future books Stephen Alford publishes.

I give this book 4.5/5 stars, rounded up to 5 stars for the purpose of Goodreads ratings.
