A History of Seventeenth-Century English Literature

Thomas N. Corns
A History of Seventeenth-Century English Literature
The books in this series renew and redefine a familiar form by recognizing that to write literary history involves more than placing texts in chronological sequence. Thus the emphasis within each volume falls both on plotting the significant literary developments of a given period, and on the wider cultural contexts within which they occurred. ‘Cultural history’ is construed in broad terms and authors address such issues as politics, society, the arts, ideologies, varieties of literary production and consumption, and dominant genres and modes. The effect of each volume is to give the reader a sense of possessing a crucial sector of literary terrain, of understanding the forces that give a period its distinctive cast and of seeing how writing of a given period impacts on, and is shaped by, its cultural circumstances.

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Published to date

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Robert Fulk

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Forthcoming

*Victorian Literature*  
James Eli Adams
To Pat, for even more patience
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This is a history of English literature in the seventeenth century. It covers writing in English in England and Wales. Writing in English in Scotland and Ireland, like new composition in Latin, figures only marginally, where it relates to or illuminates the principal subject. Literatures produced in the other languages of Britain and Ireland are not considered, because they are both beyond my remit and outside my competence.

Other decisions in the selection or omission of texts are less clear-cut. Those authors who currently are most read and studied receive most attention. I have added some non-canonical works to throw light on the mainstream, together with some which, in my view, have literary merit that has been overlooked. Writers who were once influential or were otherwise perceived as important in their own day are generally included, even though they have substantially fallen from the canon. Translation, particularly from the classical languages, was a significant component of the seventeenth-century experience of literature. Here my treatment is selective and perhaps somewhat arbitrary, though works which proved influential, like Sylvester’s rendition of Du Bartas, are included. Dryden’s late, glorious translations seemed too good and too important a component of his oeuvre to omit. Populist genres such as ballads or works of popular piety for the most part are drawn on only as part of the larger cultural context. Writers in other genres outside those that are typically considered literary appear intermittently. Francis Bacon and Thomas Sprat, who have often figured in critical histories of non-fictional prose, are engaged with in literary terms; Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, despite their higher status as thinkers, are not considered, except as influences on or analogues to other writers. Though both write with persuasive power, their
principal genius rests in their contribution to the tradition of western philosophy, and a proper appreciation of their work would have carried me beyond the concerns of literary history.

This study owes much to the kindness of others. Neville Davies, Paul Hammond, Neil Keeble, Robert Wilcher and David Womersley read and commented on large sections. Alastair Fowler read it in its entirety, and with extraordinary generosity met with me over two days to talk through matters of detail and some of the larger issues. More casual conversations with Gordon Campbell, David Loewenstein and Nigel Smith, particularly at the early stages, shaped the project more profoundly than they can have realized. The early modernists among my Bangor colleagues, Tony Claydon, Bruce Wood, Andrew Hiscock and Ceri Sullivan, have been a recurrent source of advice and assistance. The English department, by the sweat of its collective brow, made possible a semester of study leave at a critical point, and I am grateful, too, to Densil Morgan, who deputized for me as head of the School of Arts and Humanities over that period. Several people at Blackwell Publishing also deserve my thanks: Andrew McNeillie for encouraging me to take the commission on and Emma Bennett for encouraging me to finish it; and Karen Wilson and Sarah Dancy for seeing it through the final stages. The dedication acknowledges a more pervasive kind of debt.

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This chapter deals with the literary history of the concluding years of the Tudor era. In terms of the material circumstances of literary production and consumption, much that is described remained substantially unchanged from the 1590s, nor were there major discontinuities with literary life in the Jacobean decades. There were some highly significant shifts of emphasis, particularly in the structures of patronage, as the fall of Robert Devereux, second Earl of Essex, disrupted the complex web of protection and praise that had developed around his circle. The arrival of the Stuart court, with radically different cultural aspirations and a diverse and polycentric organization, would open new opportunities. Few of the writers who shaped the literary culture of the Elizabethan golden age lived into the new century. Sir Philip Sidney died in 1586, Edmund Spenser in 1599, Robert Greene in 1592, Christopher Marlowe in 1593, Thomas Kyd in 1594. The figures who dominate Jacobean literary culture, Francis Bacon (b. 1561), John Donne (b. ?1572), Ben Jonson (b. 1572), and William Shakespeare (b. 1564), were all writing, but only the last had achieved an eminence to match his Jacobean status. Sidney and Spenser, both available in print before 1600, offered a subtle and pervasive influence deep into the new century, and many earlier Elizabethan plays remained in the repertoire of London drama companies, but inevitably those deaths closed off some aspects of Elizabethan culture, despite the continuities, as surely as others with different aesthetic assumption and different strengths moved the tradition on. Yet late Elizabethan and Jacobean literary cultures shared much common ground.