The Renaissance was a time of unprecedented change for Europe as education, the arts, politics, and many aspects of European culture changed and the term “Renaissance Man” was often applied to writers, politicians, poets, artists, and philosophers of the day. However the Renaissance saw the decline of a societal staple; magic. Science took off during the Renaissance eventually replacing magic, but for a time the lines between the two practices were blurred as many scientists practiced magic as well. One of these men was Dr. John Dee, the court astrologer to Queen Elizabeth I of England. Dee was an occultist in an age when magic was becoming taboo and his pursuits of astrology and enochian, or angelic magic damaged his reputation in the eyes of many historians. However John Dee was also a “Renaissance Man” as he was a scientist, scholar, writer, inventor, and explorer, and his unique mind was a near perfect example of the societal changes that were taking place during the Renaissance in England.

As the man who coined the term “The British Empire,” it is not surprising to find out that John Dee was extremely proud of, and influenced by his heritage. Dee was born on July 13th, 1527 in Mortlake village near London, England.\footnote{Richard Deacon, \textit{John Dee} (London: Frederick Muller, Ltd., 1986), 13.} His father was Rowland Dee, a gentleman server who managed the royal kitchen and was King Henry VIII’s chief carver. Dee’s Welsh descent bloodline could be traced back to a royal line of chieftains,
one of whom was connected to the House of Tudor. His father was extremely proud of their Welsh heritage, and having any connection to Welsh royalty and the King of England would be enough to inspire a nationalistic pride in Dee. It was also during this time period that the idea of nation-states was developing in northern Europe, and England which had been a hodgepodge of Anglo-Saxon, Norman, Welsh, and Celtic nationalities had finally begun merging into what we would recognize as England today. In fact it was in 1535 when Wales would officially become part of England with the Laws of Wales Act. Dee’s Welsh heritage would also come into play with mysticism as he knew of the Welsh Druids who had developed an understanding of astronomy ages ago leading Dee to seek out knowledge that had been lost during the Medieval Age.

Dee received a religious upbringing and when he was ten years old he began attending the Chantry School at Chelmsford in Essex, a grammar school where he would have learned Latin and religious rituals, and in 1542 he would start attending St. John’s College in Cambridge. There he would develop a rigid study ethic in grammar, logic, rhetoric, mathematics, astronomy, geography, music, and Greek. In 1546 he would be appointed Under-Reader of Greek at Trinity College, and he would be made a Fellow at Trinity and receive an M.A. from there.

Dee’s interest in mathematics and navigation would cause him to travel Europe in pursuit of knowledge, and in 1547 he left England for the Low Countries. He would attend the University of Louvain where he came to know Gerardus Mercator, the originator of the Mercator globes. He would go on to teach logic, arithmetic, and the use
of globes, becoming a renowned academic and lecturer. His fame spread throughout Europe and soon nobles from various courts began attending his lectures. He would leave Louvain in 1550 to lecture at Paris and lecture halls were overflowing with students every time he appeared. He would acquire the title of Doctor, but it was an honorific title noting his learned status.⁶

Of course all of this comes down to the one determining factor that shapes the lives of all historical figures of note: timing. Dee was born just a few years before Henry VIII passed the Act of Supremacy in 1534. The dissolution of the monasteries would begin shortly thereafter, but not soon enough to prevent Dee from attending the Chantry School in Chelmford. It also influenced his academics in St. John’s as Cambridge was heavily Protestant, and as such received many professorships in the Humanities from King Henry.⁷

Another factor during all of this was that Europe was in the middle of the Renaissance and education, as seen by Dee’s studies was rapidly evolving. Ancient Pagan texts had been discovered leading to the development of Humanism, and the ideas of Plato, and Aristotle spread throughout Europe. In fact this is why Dee and many others sought to learn Greek, so they could partake in the un-translated texts of ancient scholars. The first Professor of Greek at St. John’s was Erasmus himself⁸, a noted scholar who sought to harmonize the teachings of the New Testament and the teachings of Pagans.

Universities had grown with the studies in the Humanities, and John Dee was in the middle of it all since the Northern Humanists movement didn’t come to bear until the end of the 15th century. Education had become more available to the populace, as had books

⁶ Deacon, John Dee, 23.
⁷ Deacon, John Dee, 16.
⁸ Deacon, John Dee, 16.
since the printing press had been developed less than a century before Dee’s birth, and already hundreds of millions of books had been published, spreading knowledge and ideas. While Dee’s study-ethic may have been extraordinary, the opportunities afforded him due to changes in education and printing were becoming more and more commonplace to the people of Europe.

John Dee’s main fields of expertise were in astronomy and astrology two practices that had grown in popularity and were accepted in royal courts all throughout Europe. Both been reintroduced to Europeans through the Italian Renaissance and found their way to England as King Henry VIII himself studied and enjoyed astronomy and was known to use his astronomer’s findings to make predictions of events, or in simpler terms, he also dabbled in astrology. The two fields had always been linked by most people since the ancient world, and usually only those who studied them knew the difference. John Dee studied both having taken an interest in them while at St. John’s. He would become a purveyor of astronomy in England when he returned to England in 1551 bringing with him an astronomer’s staff, astronomer’s ring, and two Mercator globes.

None of these objects had been seen in England before and with their arrival Dee helped launch a mathematical instruments-making industry, and he would use his mathematical and astronomical skills to help explorers chart their path. Dee would go on to write several books on astronomical instruments, mechanics, optics, and ideas that were ahead of his time such as giant “burning glasses” that could be used as weapons to harness the

10 Deacon, John Dee, 19.
11 Peter Brimacombe, All the Queen’s Men (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000.), 143.
12 Deacon, John Dee, 28.
Sun’s power and destroy enemy armies.\textsuperscript{13} Under the patronage of the Duchess of Northumberland he would write a treatise on the tides, and the heavenly bodies.\textsuperscript{14} His work in astrology was equally prolific as he would begin casting horoscopes and predicting events.

Dee’s life would take a turbulent turn in 1553 when Mary Tudor became Queen of England and Northumberland was executed. Dee was without a patron and horrified at the prospect of Mary becoming Queen as she made known her intentions to ally England with Spain and return Catholicism to power. Dee’s aforementioned English patriotism made the thought of being tied to Spain repugnant, and he knew Mary’s return to Catholicism would be a bloody one. Yet he put on a happy face for the new Queen and obliged her when she asked for a horoscope for her and her betrothed, Philip of Spain.\textsuperscript{15}

During Mary’s reign Dee stayed out of politics and began secretly corresponding with Mary’s half sister Elizabeth who was being held in semi-captivity in Woodstock. He wrote to her about astrology, clairvoyance, and learning shorthand so her messages couldn’t be deciphered. She was intrigued with Dee and quickly developed an interest in astronomy.\textsuperscript{16} Dee would make a horoscope for Elizabeth, even predicting that she would never marry, and as their correspondences continued he showed her Mary’s horoscope (possibly at Elizabeth’s request)\textsuperscript{17}. It was because of this that Dee would be arrested in 1555 and tried for attempting to assassinate Mary through poison or black magic. Dee would be acquitted by the Star Chamber, but he was not set free. Instead he was put into

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{13} Deacon, \textit{John Dee}, 37.
\textsuperscript{14} Deacon, \textit{John Dee}, 27.
\textsuperscript{15} Deacon, \textit{John Dee}, 30.
\textsuperscript{16} Deacon, \textit{John Dee}, 31.
\textsuperscript{17} Deacon, \textit{John Dee}, 32.
\end{flushleft}
the custody of Bishop Bonner of London only to be released later that year when the Bishop was convinced he was not a heretic.

This wasn’t the first time Dee had been accused of being a sorcerer. When he was helping produce a play at Trinity College he developed a mechanical beetle that simulated flight so realistically that he was accused of being a sorcerer. It was the first of what would be many times. Dee’s exploits in astrology and magic would constantly see him labeled a practitioner of black magic, because even in the age of the Renaissance society was extremely superstitious, and science, mathematics, and magic were only separated by degrees. Most philosophers of the time (Ficino, Agrippa, and Fludd to name a few) believed in some sort of magic. Astronomers doubled as astrologers. Chemistry and alchemy were also intertwined, and medicine saw the use of all of these schools of thought and more. But Dee’s pursuit of magical arts, Mary’s persecution of non-Catholics, and the onset of the witchhunt craze made Dee a target for a fearful populace that would ransack his home in Mortlake years later while he was on the continent.

After being released by the Bishop, Dee continued to serve Queen Mary undeterred and would propose and complete a number of academic endeavors. Dee’s Renaissance spirit of discovery came to the forefront as Dee proposed the Library Royal, a State National Library, but his plan was rejected due to financial concerns, so Dee had to settle for building up his own personal library which held about 4000 manuscripts and books. During the next few years Dee continued to write on scientific

---

18 Deacon, *John Dee*, 17.
20 Deacon, *John Dee*, 186.
21 Deacon, *John Dee*, 35.
matters, mechanics and optics, became an advocate for the Copernican system, and demonstrated that comets were actually beyond the moon.\textsuperscript{23} Dee’s scientific work also contained theories on the speed of light, the fourth dimension, and the study of dreams. This combined with his other pursuits was symbolic of the Renaissance scientist, who unlike the scientists of today didn’t limit themselves to specific fields.

Mary’s death in 1558 paved the way for Elizabeth to become Queen and Dee chose her coronation date of January 15\textsuperscript{th} 1559. He was one of three men that held the nickname of her “Eyes”; Sir Christopher Hatton and Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, both of who were intimate acquaintances of the Queen were the others. When he wrote her a letter he signed with a special symbol (Figure 1). Dee chose the giant seven because he viewed it as a holy number.\textsuperscript{24}

![Figure 1: John Dee's special signature when writing to Queen Elizabeth](image)

Elizabeth would hold many audiences with Dee over the years, even visiting him at his home in Mortlake, as described by Dee in his own diaries.\textsuperscript{25} Her “noble Intelligencer”\textsuperscript{26} as she referred to Dee was just that. During his trips to the continent Dee began developing his own intelligence network. With the Renaissance came the idea of nations and with nations came ambassadors, diplomats, and spies and Dee partook in

\textsuperscript{23} Deacon, John Dee, 36-37.
\textsuperscript{24} Deacon, John Dee, 3.
\textsuperscript{26} Deacon, John Dee, 4.
these new duties. He gathered evidence against the Spanish ambassador in the 1584 Thockmorton plot. It was through Dee’s intelligence network and his “angelic conversations” that England became aware of the Spanish plot to burn down the Forest of Dean. And it was Dee’s adaptation of Trithemius’ *Stenographia* that helped Sir Francis Walsingham, Elizabeth’s Spymaster, employ ciphers and decoding methods against England’s enemies. Dee also had many ideas to help grow England into an imperial power: he advocated the creation of a large royal navy that would police the world. He also wanted a new breed of soldier that would serve on board the ships of this Navy, or as we would know them today, Marines. He also drew up plans to colonize the New World between Florida and Cape Breton with Catholic Englishmen so that they might not suffer under the Protestant laws of Elizabeth. When Pope Gregory XIII decided to reform the calendar in 1581 by shaving ten days off, it was to Dee that England turned. While he decided that it would be more prudent to remove eleven days from the calendar, the idea was rejected. In fact none of these ideas were put into action but each one shows Dee’s plans for England’s imperialism and his devotion to its people.

In 1581 Dee started down a road that he is best known for, and the one that damaged his name the most; the “angelic conversations.” Dee searched for a scryer who would help him commune with the angels, and in 1582 he began working with Edward Kelley. Every account of Kelley labels him a con-man who dabbled in alchemy, black magic, and sought to use Dee’s talents to further his own fame. But somehow he charmed Dee in the beginning and they set about compiling the *Quinti Libri Mysteriorum*,

---

28 A book about magic and cryptography.
31 Deacon, *John Dee*, 125.
*The Five Books of Mystery* in which Dee converses with angels through Kelley. It was through conversations like this that Dee found about the burning of the Forest of Dean, predicted the beheading of Mary, Queen of Scotts four years before her death, and the creation of the Spanish Armada two years before Walsingham’s agents discovered it. As useful as this was though, Kelley would drag Dee all over Europe in search of riches they would never find. By the summer of 1587, Dee and Kelley had parted ways.\(^{32}\) Dee would return to England in 1589 to live a quiet life. After his wife died from the plague in 1605, Dee left Manchester to return to Mortlake to live out his days quietly, passing away in December of 1608.\(^{33}\)

This bizarre episode has baffled historians and the whole six years that Dee worked with Kelly was a great blemish on his reputation. It’s because of Kelley that Dee was seen as a fraud and con-man by many. Kelley’s reputation as a necromancer was transferred on to Dee, and as a noted astrologist it was transferred onto that practice as well and is why some astrologers today suggest that Dee did more harm to the practice than good.\(^{34}\)

Dr. John Dee was, by fate, always a step ahead of society’s changes and as such the quintessential “Renaissance Man”. He was born at the perfect time to get an education before the Anglican Reformation could dissolve the monasteries. The English Renaissance was a few steps behind the rest of Europe, but timed just right so as to be peaking while Dee was attending College. A new world of ideas had reached the shores of England and Dee partook of them and wanted more. He left England but England never left him. He was an imperialist and a patriot of the first order. He served Queen

\(^{32}\) Deacon, *John Dee*, 201-214.


Elizabeth in any manner that he was asked and his scientific contributions in astronomy, optics, and navigation can be denied by no one. His occult studies even proved beneficial to England on several occasions, but caused him to fall out of favor with historians who can’t take such things seriously. But in looking at John Dee with unprejudiced eyes, one has to admit that he was England’s Renaissance Man.

Bibliography


