

Elizabethan non-fiction prose

Literature



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Richard Hooker (1554-1600):

Hooker's masterly work *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Policy* is the greatest of the non-fictional prose works of the Elizabethan age. It began appearing volume by volume in 1594 and continued till the author's death. It was the first book in England which used English for a serious philosophic discussion. Hooker was a Protestant who combined the piety of a saint with the simplicity of a child. His purpose in writing the book was to defend the Church of England and to support certain principles of Church government.

Hardin Craig in *A History of English Literature* edited by himself maintains : " As originally written the eight books were already on a very high level of theological and legal argument. The first book is Hooker's famous general treatise on law. The second argues that divine law or scripture is not the only law that ought to serve for our direction in things ecclesiastical. The effect of the third is to make of the Church an independent and self-directing social institution within the State. The fourth claims for the Church the right to adjust its position, free, on the one side, of Rome and, on the other, of Geneva.

The fifth book... deals with the established practices of the Church of England. The fragmentary sixth is largely on penitence... The seventh treats the power and position of bishops, and the eighth is a most significant treatise on the relation of the Church to the secular government. Hooker admits the right of the secular government to establish and control the Church, but declares that the powers of the Crown are derived from the consent of the governed as expressed in a parliament of the people. " Hooker modelled his style on Cicero.

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Though his diction is simple yet the syntax is highly Latinized, but not without much harmony and studied flow. The style is as much removed from vulgarity as from pedantry. Ruskin was later to seize upon this style and use it in his earlier works, particularly *Modern Painters*.

Bacon (1561-1626):

Exactly opposite to Hooker's Ciceronian style was Bacon's English prose style which has been called style coupe or anti-Ciceronian style. Much of what Bacon wrote appeared in the age of James I. However, the first edition of his *Essays* appeared in 1597. that is, within the age of Elizabeth.

Bacon borrowed the term and the conception of the essay from the French writer Montaigne whose *Essais* first appeared in 1580. In spite of the fact that Bacon took them lightly, his essays make pretty heavy reading. They are full of memorable aphorisms which have passed into everyday speech. The scope of his essays is vast, and they embrace all kinds of issues, but, mostly, those of practical life. By writing his essays Bacon became " the father of the English essay. " Even though his essays differ from the kind which was later established in England, he is a worthy predecessor of the line of essayists ranging from his own times up to ours.