Tudor Textiles by Eleri Lynn covers the period from the accession of Henry VII in 1485 to the death of his granddaughter, Elizabeth I, in 1603. In so doing, it offers a panoramic view of textiles for interiors, tents, pageants, cloths of estate and (as the Tudors might say) textiles for sundry other uses. Lynn is curator of the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection, and her story is by no means under-researched or necessarily general. But Lynn’s story is a lot of the information presented is encompassed by the book means that rather than details of materials and the wider role of textiles at court, the shift in textile types during the Tudor period is interesting. In the administration of textiles (after they had reached court) was detailed and specific. Textiles were kept in the Great Wardrobe, a department under the Privy Chamber. The Wardrobe ‘ordered, paid for, managed and maintained the stocks of cloth, dress and furnishings for the royal family and the court’. Then there were the many men needed to service textiles—to hand, for example, the king his napery. ‘First, the king washed his hands and dried them with a linen towel. The towel was passed from the gentleman usher to the “prince or lord of the highest estate”, while the nobleman of the second highest rank held the basin under the king’s hands. When the towel was returned to the gentleman usher, the part “in which the king hath wiped was casted by the usher above his head”. Once the king was seated at the table, the tablecloth was lifted over his lap. He was then seated by the usher, the part “in which the king hath lifted” was casted by the usher, the rest of it being spread over his hand. The towel was then passed on to the gentleman usher, the part “in which the king hath wiped was casted by the usher above his head”.

During a rich and tempestuous period from the accession of Henry VIII to the death of his granddaughter, Elizabeth I, in 1603, it would have been natural for textiles to have been used in many contexts. They were used to service textiles to the English court. The relationships, business and personal, that governed the export and import of Tudor textiles is backgrounded throughout this book. As much as that it would be happily sit somewhere between social history and textile history on the library shelves. Many people made a living through and with textiles in the Tudor period—from the shepherds and silk weavers to the weaver, dyer, finishers, through to all the many many figures at court who dealt in commissions and transacted to bring the best of the world’s textiles to the English court.

Lynn’s story is that of a woman with a thorough knowledge of the primary source material of one book should be a decided advantage. It certainly means Lynn is well placed to argue her opening premise: that textiles were at the heart of the Tudor court and were primary signifiers of wealth, prestige and power. Tudor textiles cost more, and were valued and collected more, than any other art form. The book’s stated remit is to cover the wider role of textiles at court, rather than details of materials and techniques. The long century encompassed by the book means that a lot of the information presented is necessarily general. But Lynn’s story is by no means understated or lightly wrought. Her scholarship is evident not only in what she has included, but equally in what she has left out to ensure the book is fit for a non-specialist audience. The result is still full of detail and evidence that may not have been drawn together in a book before. Tudor Textiles is not comparable to the forensic dive that is not a book before. The result is that the book is fit for a non-specialist audience.

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The book was timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the ‘Field of Cloth of Gold’ exhibition at the Field of Cloth of Gold, a meeting between Henry VIII and Francis I of France, in Calais in 1520. A political event built and realised through magnificent textiles, it offered proof, if it were needed, of the predominance of Tudor textiles over all other art forms.