The Queens Conjurer: The Science and Magic of Dr. John Dee, Advisor to Queen Elizabeth I by Benjamin Woolley

A fascinating portrait of one of the most brilliant, complex, and colorful figures of the Renaissance. Although his accomplishments were substantial -- he became a trusted confidante to Queen Elizabeth I, inspired the formation of the British Empire, and plotted voyages to the New World--John Dees story has been largely lost to history. Beyond the political sphere his intellectual pursuits ranged from the scientific to the occult. His mathematics anticipated Isaac Newton by nearly a century, while his mapmaking and navigation were critical to exploration. He was also obsessed with alchemy, astrology, and mysticism. His library was one of the finest in Europe, a vast compendium of thousands of volumes. Yet, despite his powerful position and prodigious intellect, Dee died in poverty and obscurity, reviled and pitied as a madman. Benjamin Woolley tells the engrossing story of the rise and fall of this remarkable man, who wielded great influence during the pivotal era when the age of superstition collided with the new world of science and reason. Written with flair and vigor, based on numerous surviving diaries of the period, The Queens Conjurer is a highly readable account of an extraordinary life.

My Personal Review:
I have always found Dr. John Dee to be one of the most intriguing characters of Elizabethan times. Yet, there seemed to be so little information available about him, only bits and pieces and rumors - often spread by his enemies. Here is a most satisfying biography that not only gives you a complete look at the Doctor's life, but is also supplemented with a wealth of associated detail and historical background. This book turns Dee from a shadowy character to a real man, a great man. What comes across is the amazing breadth and depth of Dee's interests and scholarship. He was already famed for his remarkable intellect and ability
as a student at Cambridge. At a time when most scholars barely processed a reading knowledge of bad Latin, he mastered classical Greek to be able to read the forgotten works of Plato and Pythagoras. He was a personal friend and correspondent to the great men of the age such as Tycho Brahe and Mercator. Dee himself was famed as a great mathematician in Europe (at a time when simple trigonometry was almost unknown in England.) He was offered high positions at the great courts of Europe, but turned these offers down out of a deep seated desire to raise up his country of birth to be their eventual global equal (at this time England was a poor, backward, weak backwater.) Indeed, the first conception of a British Empire, founded upon a strong Royal Navy, was first expounded by Dee. John Dee was as close to modern scientist as existed in the 16th century. He independently came to the conclusion that bodies of unequal weight fall at the same rate- before Galileo. He was recognized as England's top expert on optics and lenses. He was recognized as one of the top experts on navigation and chart making of his day. He kept detailed astronomical observations that even Tycho Brahe admired. He based his astrological work upon the heliocentric "heresy" of Copernicus. He was an expert in geology and ores and leased his own tin mine. He also collected the biggest research library of the age in Mortlake, which was a gathering place of the greatest minds of England and the continent. In short- Dee was a competent expert in several areas of natural philosophy and applied technology. He believed in detailed observation and record keeping- in both natural, and supernatural, phenomena. The thing is, Dee believed his accomplishments in the more material and practical sciences to be among his lesser accomplishments. Like Newton after him, his real passion was with the deepest cosmic and spiritual secrets. This led to his fame as an astrologer, and an alchemist, and a cabalist. Dee's passion was to discover the ancient, true, original religion of mankind, the "prisci theology." That is why he could walk easily among both Protestants and Catholics- he ultimately considered both of their dogma's to be equally absurd. Dee had a much more open mind that the "scientists" of later centuries- he studied all unknown forces, natural or supernatural. This was why be studied and practiced natural magic (Agrippa's three books were always open upon his desk for quick reference.) He knew that hidden currents influenced the day-to-day world, and he documented his observations even if he couldn't explain them in terms of material cause and effect. This also led to his interest is scrying and the use of natural sensitives to communicate with spirits. It should be noted, that no one at this time doubted the existence of such spirits- it was as self evident as the existence of God. In fact, many powerful lords of the day employed seers and scryers, including the earls of Leicester, Pembroke, and Northumberland. All in all, you come away with a renewed respect for Dee. You realize that his only fault was to be born in a society of petty, ignorant, lesser men. It was they that libeled and slandered his image and painted him as a superstitious conjuror. Indeed, the only real mistake that the good Doctor made was to outlive his beloved queen and protector.