

Winter King: The Dawn of Tudor England

Review Number: 1301

Publish date: Thursday, 16 August, 2012

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ISBN: 9781846142024

Date of Publication: 2011

Price: £20.00

Pages: 480pp.

Publisher: Allen Lane

Publisher url:

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: David Grummitt

Recently, Sir Keith Thomas, after chairing the judging panel for the annual Wolfson History Prize, signalled his misgivings over the tendency for young historians to eschew conventional academic publishing (the scholarly monograph) and instead to ‘hire an agent, cut out the footnotes, jazz it all up a bit and try to produce a historical bestseller from what would have otherwise been a perfectly good academic work’.⁽¹⁾ One wonders if Thomas Penn’s hefty account of the last years of the reign of Henry VII had passed across his desk recently. Penn may or not have hired an agent in the course of writing and publishing this book, and he cannot be accused of cutting out the footnotes, but he has certainly ‘jazzed up’ his language and his aim in *The Winter King* must surely to have been to produce something for the Bestselling Non Fiction list rather than a traditional piece of scholarship.

All that makes *Winter King* a very difficult book to review fairly, particularly in a forum such as this. Penn’s book re-examines the reign of Henry VII, one of the most misunderstood of English kings. The reign sits uncomfortably on the borders between the Middle Ages and modernity, and the standard biography remains Stanley Chrimes’s 1972 account, a book in which the king himself remains elusive. While much is made of administrative developments, Chrimes very much left the politics out of his work. However, even before Christine Carpenter appealed for a new political history of the first Tudor⁽²⁾, scholars were adding more flesh to bones of Chrimes’s picture of a rather dull, if competent, medieval king. Penn draws on much of this research and concentrates on the last decade of the reign, beginning with the marriage between Henry’s heir, Arthur, and Catherine of Aragon, before moving to the untimely death of both Arthur and Queen Elizabeth within a year of each other in 1502/3, and the increasingly repressive and rapacious policies that characterised the king’s rule in the last decade of the reign. *Winter King* has been greeted with much acclaim in the broadsheet press both for its literary flair and its scholarship. Blair Worden has even suggested that its success (and that of Anne Wroe’s 2003 biography of Perkin Warbeck) should prompt ‘sober reflection’ on the part of professional, academic historians of the reign of Henry VII (this reviewer presumably included).⁽³⁾ Personally I do not share Professor Worden’s concerns. Penn’s portrait of Henry is entirely in line with that presented by recent scholarship and the main thrust of his argument (that the king presided over a proto-Machiavellian polity, dominated by fear and suspicion, and one in which good government was too often subjugated to the demands of his own greed and paranoia) is one familiar to anyone who has read the various essays collected together in the special 2009 edition of *Historical Research*, edited by Mark Horowitz and

subtitled 'Who was Henry VII?' (4) The account of Henry's relationship with various members of his household and the fact that the household was a focus of plots, intrigue and faction was the main argument of my own contribution to the collection and this (along with the suggestion that this pre-figured the new political world of Machiavelli) is, in many ways, the dominant motif of Penn's book. (5) Other historians of the reign of Henry VII will too be glad to see their own research informing Penn's narrative. Richard Hoyle's careful reconstruction from the records of the King's Bench and Star Chamber of the dispute between Henry Percy, fifth earl of Northumberland, and Thomas Savage, archbishop of York, is paraphrased across four pages of *Winter King* (pp. 135–8). (6) Similarly, Mark Horowitz's detailed account of the trials and tribulations of the London haberdasher, Thomas Sunnyff, at the hands of Henry's financial agents is recounted in great detail. (7) Historians, and many students, of the early Tudor period will find many of Penn's vignettes familiar: the so-called Flamank Conversation (a report of a potentially treasonable conversation that took place in Calais among officers of the garrison there in September 1504) has been analysed in exhaustive detail by Carpenter, Dominic Lockett and others. (8) Anyone who has read the existing work on the topic will struggle to identify the novelty in Penn's account. I don't want to suggest that the author has done anything other than be scrupulous in acknowledging his considerable debt to others – the scholarly apparatus of endnotes is in good order and the relevant scholarship is always noted – but *Winter King* is a work of synthesis not a piece of original research. Where the book is original is perhaps in its treatment of the regime's connection to Italy, reflecting, I suspect, the author's own doctoral research. (9) Penn is excellent on the links between early Tudor England and the peninsula in terms of trade, diplomacy, cultural exchange and the relationship with the papacy. Despite this the overall assessment of Henry's reign is problematic. The king, it is argued, was the only person who knew how his government actually worked, indeed 'the various threads ... all came together' in his hands (p. 169). Yet, as the two chapters previous to this claim make clear, Henry delegated increasing amounts of government business to his councillors and servants in the last decade and, as was common knowledge to well-informed contemporaries, periodic bouts of illness prevented him from playing his full role in the government from at least 1503. Henry VII was no 'Universal Spider' (as his near contemporary Duke Charles the Bold of Burgundy described his rival, Louis XI, king of France) and academic historians of the first Tudor will want to know how Penn's view squares with the more nuanced view of the king's role in government put forward by John Watts, Steven Gunn and others.

Does this matter in a book like this? On one level Penn is to be applauded. He has challenged the commonly held notion of Henry VII as a rather dull, workmanlike king who was rightly hostile to his ambitious and unruly nobility (the strength and tenacity of this view is evident in undergraduate essays up and down the country) and he has presented the latest research in a relatively readable and accessible way. He is undoubtedly skilled as a writer of historical narrative. He effectively juggles several narrative threads and puts across well the sense of developing crisis and emergency that gripped the first decade of the 16th century. Yet *Winter King* leaves a slightly odd taste in my mouth. Perhaps it's the language (compromised by Penn's efforts to 'jazz up' his prose to cater for the popular history market): when Perkin Warbeck, the pretender who had claimed to be Richard, duke of York, the younger of the Princes in the Tower, was executed at Tyburn in 1499, we are told, 'the ladder was whipped away and he jerked downwards, his body convulsing violently, then twitching, then limp' (p. 39). A powerful picture indeed but one in no way supported by the contemporary evidence and in fact the note to that sentence refers to Gatrell's study of the cultural significance of public execution in eighteenth-century England. (10) Similarly, can we really be sure that the young nobles of the royal court exchanged 'cool glances' with the ladies of Queen Catherine of Aragon's household when the two met in London in November 1501 (p. 57), or that Catherine and her future mother-in-law, Queen Elizabeth, 'immediately clicked' (p. 62)? To what extent is the author's description of Sir Reynold Bray, Henry's leading councillor in the 1490s until his premature death in 1503, grounded in historical reality? Is it not a little fanciful and misleading to claim that Bray's father, Richard, a surgeon, was 'a bone-setter and blood-letter' and Bray himself as a youngster 'thickset and shaggy-haired' (p. 148). Penn presents as historical fact things that are the product of his own, albeit well-informed and empathetic, imagination and the reader is not always left with a clear distinction between the two. Anachronisms and colloquisms abound: James IV's invasion of northern England in 1497 'hit the buffers' (p. 31), while, as

their king lay dying, Empson and Dudley ‘failed to watch their backs’ (p. 344); Edward Belknap, surveyor of the king’s prerogative and one of the king’s most important financial agents, is described as a ‘mini-me’ in a reference to the Austin Powers series of spoof spy movies (p. 324); while the king’s younger daughter, Princess Mary, apparently ‘possessed the qualities of a Lolita’ (p. 295). I could go on, but these examples make an important point: *Winter King* is neither solid, academic writing nor an exemplar of accessible, popular history. General readers will find it difficult to keep up with the story as new and complex characters are introduced. Equally, there is little in the way of context, either in what made Henry’s style of rule so distinct or what there was in Henry’s background that made him so unlikely a candidate for successful kingship. Penn is neither Hilary Mantel nor Simon Schama and thus I think this book sits uneasily on the boundaries of two distinct genres. I can only hope that young scholars contemplating their first book will read *Winter King* and reflect on Sir Keith Thomas’s warning.

Notes

1. *The Independent*, 9 May 2012 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/history/young-historians-are-damaging-academia-in-their-bid-for-stardom-7723284.html> [2]> [accessed 16 July 2012]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Most fully articulated in her *The Wars of the Roses: Politics and the Constitution in England, c.1437–1509* (Cambridge, 1997), ch. 11. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *The Guardian*, 25 November 2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/nov/25/winter-king-thomas-penn-review> [3]> [accessed 16 July 2012]. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. *Historical Research*, 82, no. 217 (August 2009). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. David Grummitt, ‘Household, Politics and Political Morality in the Reign of Henry VII’, *Historical Research* 82 (2009), 393-411. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. R. W. Hoyle. ‘The Earl, the Archbishop and the Council: the Affray at Fulford, May 1504’, in *Rulers and Ruled in Late Medieval England*, ed. Rowena E. Archer and Simon Walker (London, 1995), 239-56. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. M. R. Horowitz, ‘“Agree With the King”: Henry VII, Edmund Dudley and the Strange Case of Thomas Sunniff’, *Historical Research*, 79 (2006), 325-66. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. D. A. Lockett, ‘Crown Patronage and Political Morality in Early Tudor England: the case of Giles, Lord Daubeney’, *English Historical Review* 110 (1995), 589-93; Christine Carpenter, ‘Henry VII and the English Polity’, in *The Reign of Henry VII*, ed. Benjamin Thompson (Stamford, 1995), pp. 11–30. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. T. D. Penn, ‘Literary service at the court of Henry VII’ (University of Cambridge, PhD thesis, 2001). [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770–1868* (Oxford, 1996). [Back to \(10\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/nov/25/winter-king-thomas-penn-review> [3]

Observer

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/16/winter-king-thomas-penn-review> [4]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/8781894/Winter-King-by-Thomas-Penn-review.html> [5]

Financial Times

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/13dff88a-e922-11e0-9817-00144feab49a.html> [6]

Literary Review

<http://www.exacteditions.com/exact/browse/327/342/9559/3/8/0/> [7]

Economist

<http://www.economist.com/node/21530068> [8]

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- [1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/28939>
- [2] <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/history/young-historians-are-damaging-academia-in-their-bid-for-stardom-7723284.html>
- [3] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/nov/25/winter-king-thomas-penn-review>
- [4] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/oct/16/winter-king-thomas-penn-review>
- [5] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/8781894/Winter-King-by-Thomas-Penn-review.html>
- [6] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/13dff88a-e922-11e0-9817-00144feab49a.html#axzz23iLaJJCQ>
- [7] <http://www.exacteditions.com/exact/browse/327/342/9559/3/8/0/>
- [8] <http://www.economist.com/node/21530068>