

## Henry VII's New Men and the Making of Tudor England

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**Reviewer:** Christine Carpenter

As Professor Gunn observes in his foreword, this book has been a long time coming: first mooted in fact in 1985 (a very suitable date). This has had two significant consequences which I shall discuss sequentially.

First, the time-lapse has meant that Professor Gunn has produced a book of breathtaking scholarship and thoroughness. The list of sources consulted, many of them unpublished, should shame even the most hardened and assiduous of source-conscious historians. In his bibliography, I counted no less than 60 National Archives classes, 13 in the British Library and 56 public and private local collections, not to mention further libraries at home and a few abroad. The footnotes show the thoroughness of his work and his refusal to make statements or generalisations which are not securely founded. As is the way with historical research, further material will doubtless turn up and further sidelights on the lives and careers of Henry VII's new men will doubtless be revealed but, as a study of these men as a group, this work will never have to be repeated. Moreover, at no point is the author overwhelmed by his vast material: everything is clear, organised and to the point. One simply takes one's hat off.

The most well-known of the new men are Reynold Bray (arguably the 'founding' new man, being the first of his type to loom so large across Henry VII's government, as well as the nurturer of the careers of some of the others) and the notorious Richard Empson and Edmund Dudley. All three feature but it is eight others who constitute the core of the book, chosen both for their importance and as exemplars of different types of career and role. They comprise: Thomas Lovell, Henry Wyatt, Robert Southwell, Andrew Windsor, John Hussey, Edward Poynings, Thomas Brandon and Henry Marney. Others feature on the fringes of the work, brought in when their histories offer further illumination. Between them, the central figures of the study cover all the areas of service to the king, including some fields less immediately associated with the new men. One thinks of them as lawyers, men of business and, in many cases, councillors, but Poynings and Brandon could be loosely classed as courtiers, and Poynings came from a minor noble family that had been disgraced in the Wars of the Roses. Several spanned the spheres of law and business on the one hand and what might be considered areas more identified with the nobly born, war and diplomacy, on the other and most of them fought for the king at some point, against rebels or foreign enemies or both. It is one of the many virtues of the work that we appreciate how much more diverse their careers and service were than is

commonly supposed.

The core chapters of the work are thematic, divided into three sections: 'Service', 'Power', and 'Wealth'. The most familiar material is in the first three chapters of 'Service', on 'Council, court and parliament', 'The pursuit of justice' (in the conciliar courts and in the localities) and 'The king's revenues'. Less familiar to many will be the last in the section, 'Borderlands, war, and diplomacy', which is where we discover how much several of these men contributed in these fields. But, whether familiar or not, the sheer amount of detail in this section enormously extends our knowledge and understanding of what the new men did for Henry and the nature of the enterprise to which they gave so much. These are subject-areas on which Gunn has already written authoritatively in his *Early Tudor Government* but here we learn not just more about government but a lot more about the men who made it happen. The second section, 'Power', examines how the new men built the power which they used for themselves and for the king. Much of this came through the king's own grants of office, in town and country, as recounted in the chapter on 'Towns and stewardships'. Stewardships on the now very extensive crown lands were particularly important for strengthening the lordship over men which was so critical for political power in the localities, for, as Gunn points out, even the greatest of the new men could not rival the lordship derived by the great nobles from their own lands. The next chapter, 'Followers', explores further this question of local power through local manpower but in a wider dimension. This and the chapter on 'Families and friends' comprise the most comprehensive account yet of the networks of power and patronage that gave these men influence: in the localities over justice and administration, which could be used to their own and the king's benefit; and at the centre, which could make them important channels to the king even for nobles and great churchmen. We also learn of their friendships with each other, including the significant fact that, by the time of their fall, Empson and Dudley had become a close but isolated duo: very much the most suitable fall guys. In between these two chapters, there is, first, one on 'Church and churchmen', on their record as clerical patrons and relations with the universities and religious orders. This is followed by 'Law and power', a very significant area, given the background of so many of these men, which examines their use (and abuse) of the law-courts for their own ends. If the section as a whole shows that the new men's use, and indeed abuse, of their power in general was mostly in ways that benefited the king as well as themselves, the 'abuse' part of this chapter reveals how they exploited the law for their own legal and financial benefit, to the point where even Henry VII and after him Wolsey sometimes needed to rein them in.

The third section, 'Wealth', focuses on their personal resources: how acquired and how spent, assessed by means of a predictably impressive mining of many and varied sources. 'The profits of power' looks at the raw figures and then at how these sums were acquired, through office, gifts and pensions (including some very handsome ones from foreign rulers), royal favour, marriage (as ever, the best route to wealth) and wardships. Though they all prospered, Bray and Lovell most of all, it was still the case that 'a leading peer or bishop was worth several of the new men put together' (p. 203). As Gunn notes, it was less how much they accumulated than the speed at which they did so that was considered remarkable. The next chapter examines their dealings in the land market, their purchasing patterns and how they exploited their position, through such methods as going for lands with weak titles (and therefore cheaper), getting people into debt and using their access to the king. 'Landlordship' explores how they exploited their estates: as Gunn admits, they acted similarly to other active landlords but this is a notable addition to the work on gentry estate management and farming in this period. Finally 'Expenditure and status' looks at their building, consumption and funerals and commemoration. This also is a useful addition to existing work and the discovery of how much black they wore is a novel piece of information to take to one's next viewing of Holbein portraits from Henry VIII's entourage.

The amount of new material and new insights in these three sections, some of it on important subject areas beyond the new men themselves, makes them a hugely significant addition to the literature on early Tudor England. But perhaps the most innovative section in general terms is the one which follows, which takes us into Henry VIII's reign. Quite a lot of the examples in the earlier sections are drawn from this reign, though mostly only into the early 1520s, but here we explicitly follow the progress of the new men into the very different world of Henry VII's son. This is a narrative that Professor Gunn, the most authoritative present-

day historian of the early Tudors, is well-equipped to write. We see how much continuity there was in the service and importance of the new men, the execution of Empson and Dudley notwithstanding, often via Wolsey and then, for those who survived biologically and politically, when the Wolsey political and governmental inheritance fell to Thomas Cromwell. We follow the fortunes, good and bad, of the next generation of these families, some of whom also went into Tudor service, and the fate of the surviving new men in the political and religious upheavals of the 1530s, when the greatest victim among them was Hussey, ennobled by Henry VIII but then executed by him after the Pilgrimage of Grace. This continuation of the story makes possible the final chapter, in which Gunn assesses the significance of the new men and their contribution to 'The making of Tudor England'. Despite the existence of 'new men' in England all the way back to Henry I and the precedents under the Yorkists, not least that some of these men had links to Edward IV and his household, he concludes that these new men were different in kind and achievement. He notes that they generally came from lower origins and rose higher than their predecessors; their versatility; and their role in the reconstruction of the central bureaucracy on new terms. In assessing their importance, while well aware that the Tudor state was built not on new men alone, he concludes that, both at the centre and in the two-way links between the centre and the shires, they had a key role in the creation of the Tudor state and in giving Henry VIII the strength to do (get away with perhaps) what he did. That he has shown how these men became enmeshed in every aspect of English political and governmental life powerfully reinforces his case.

The second notable consequence of the delayed publication of this work is that since 1985 perceptions of Henry VII and his rule have changed so much. Back then, the old interpretation was barely challenged. This was still the king who spurned and broke the nobility, those alleged suborners of the late medieval crown and cause of the Wars of the Roses; who immeasurably strengthened the monarchy, taking it into a 'post-feudal' modern world; who stored up quantities of money to create and cement his power; who leaned on the 'middle-class' new men, those repudiators of outdated aristocratic values; who (being 'modern') was himself antagonistic to courtly values and warfare. Even if the volume on Henry VII by Chrimes in the defining Eyre/Methuen (now Yale) English Monarchs series, published in 1972, was by a medievalist and was more critical of Henry than the norm, especially of the last years, it was in keeping with the standard version in essentially having no politics after the early rebellions – a reflection of how the reign had been studied – and, despite the muted criticism, still saluting Henry as the indispensable foundation-layer for the greatness of Tudor England.

The single most significant development since 1985 (though already underway then) is that Henry has been claimed by late medievalists as a late medieval king. This is partly because Tudor historians find it much easier to work on the better-sourced history of the following reigns but also because the late medieval revolution, inspired by K. B. McFarlane, has made clear how much light could be shed on the reign by McFarlane's insight that the nobility were not the enemies of good government and were indeed often the crown's major allies at home and abroad. And it has turned out not to be a particularly favourable light. Local studies, equally inspired by McFarlane, have revealed how much local disorder there was and how much of it was caused by Henry's failure to trust his nobility and his too lax treatment of some of his own men. At the centre, a political history has finally emerged, to join the already existing school-of-McFarlane history for the rest of the century, which shows that there was a court and court politics, and it could be ruthless and destructive even of new men. Without the rosy hue of the old version, we can see that Henry's foreign policy towards the end of his reign, as indeed Chrimes acknowledged, was in danger of leaving England isolated, and his famed store of money was, as any medievalist could see, still insufficient to fund a war without taxation. Taxation, however, having caused a major rebellion in 1497, was something Henry wished to avoid, and that deprived him of the diplomatic weapon of the threat of war. Doubtless he was by temperament less keen on war than his son but he really had no choice in avoiding it. Other work has revealed how vulnerable he was, up to and including the 1497 rebellion, which Ian Arthurson showed to be far more than a localised lower-class occurrence, and after the death of Prince Arthur in 1502. After this, a re-run of the events of 1483 could have happened had Henry not had the good fortune to survive until his second son was old enough to take power for himself.

Nearly all this revisionist work has been by medievalists. However, Professor Gunn, that rare thing, a historian of early modern England who knows about late medieval England, has been in the forefront of this re-evaluation. He has not been afraid to reveal the less savoury aspects of the rule of Henry and his close servants but he has also made notable contributions which show that Henry did have a court and court politics and that the ancient nobility remained important to him in ruling the provinces. All these themes are there, explicitly or implicitly, in this book and at no point does Gunn seek to paint the king and his new men as the sainted creators of modern England or to minimise the importance of great nobles and great ecclesiasts. There is however a difference of interpretative slant, perhaps even a temperamental difference, between Gunn's view of Henry and a late medievalist's (certainly this reviewer's) and it goes to the heart of how one views Henry VII.

It was Professor Gunn who summed it up very shrewdly in his book on early Tudor government. He pointed out that in 1953 McFarlane gave his Ford Lectures on 'The Nobility of Later Medieval England' and Geoffrey Elton published *The Tudor Revolution in Government* and thus in that year each of these distinguished historians set the tone for his own period. One focused on politics and the inter-relationship of king and nobles, the other on governmental institutions. One was in effect the view from below and the provinces, the other was very much, if not the 'king-centred' history which McFarlane saw as the main reason why the late medieval period was misunderstood, certainly bureaucrat-centred and top-down. While fully aware of the McFarlane/late medieval approach to Henry's reign and willing to recognise the excesses of Henry and his new men, in the last analysis, Gunn writes as a Tudor historian. Much of this difference is best summed up on pp. 5–6: the fact of '[r]epeated crises and a slide towards tyranny' are acknowledged but these are immediately set against the need for 'recovery from civil war' and '[g]ood governance' and that this might entail (among other things) '[m]ore controversial or painful change', including 'perhaps a re-balancing of the local power of great noblemen and that of lesser men more beholden to the king'. And yet, as Gunn would not dispute, most of this rebalancing had already occurred under Edward IV, through a combination of unlooked-for structural consequences of the decades of political unrest and crisis and Edward's ability to exploit this change: in his case by developing a powerful royal affinity and a cadre of nobles bound to the crown. By these means the localities became firmly tied to the centre. If his schema fell apart in 1483, that was from a combination of unforeseen circumstances which could easily have been repeated in and after 1502 and it is evident that Henry was terrified that this would be the case. One has to ask how much of the 'rebalancing' by Henry and his men was necessary, how much of it came about

because of Henry's own ignorance of England, and how much the more repressive and abusive parts of his rule actually created the sense of crisis towards the end of the reign.

One of the most interesting chapters in the book, very much in keeping with recent trends in late medieval English political history, is the first after the introduction, which looks at the new men's beliefs and ideals, mostly, though not exclusively, through the lens of Dudley's *Tree of Commonwealth* and Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucrece*. These works commend numbers of worthy ideals, for both rulers and their servants, and Gunn is ready to admit the many occasions when the new men fell short. Sometimes, as, for example, in their appointments to the benefices they controlled, they are seen to be no worse than anybody else, possibly sometimes better. One does feel, however, that they too often get a free pass. They did undoubtedly abuse their very considerable power and it is not as if there was not contemporary criticism of their speculation and greed, not least from Thomas More. As the Spanish ambassador, Pedro de Ayala, put it, king and ministers 'had a wonderful dexterity in getting other people's money' (p. 201). When it came to exploiting the judicial system, for personal gain or on behalf of the king, this was a serious matter because it struck at the heart of the political ideology of the age and brought the king himself into disrepute. The casual statement 'Towards the end of Henry's reign, as justice took a more fiscal turn' (pp. 55–6) rather downplays how serious a political effect that could have. The executions of Empson and Dudley and the commission of enquiry into the misdeeds of officers were certainly window-dressing but they were essential window-dressing, to save the new regime from the consequences of the old. At various points in the work, Gunn cites instances of exploitation by the new men of their power, especially their local power over the judicial system, which are really no different from practices for which the late medieval nobility are routinely condemned by advocates of the Henry VII type of 'strong' monarchy. Arguably, what the new men did was worse for their victims, for two reasons: their power at the centre gave them greater capacity to influence the legal system, which, with the development of the conciliar courts, had become much more susceptible to such pressure, and having the king as the foundation of their power made them much harder to withstand. Nobles who caused too much local revulsion tended to lose the locality to a rival or to find themselves subject to royal intervention. As you would expect, the new men's manipulation of the law was also technically more accomplished and therefore perhaps had a higher win ratio.

Is it the case that the way Henry and his new men ruled England (with its by-product of the licence the new men were given to behave badly) was essential for the foundation of the Tudor monarchy? As the comments above indicate, since the polity had already been re-centred on the monarchy, the answer is probably not, and Henry VII's rule may have put his dynasty in grave danger. On the other hand, without this fiercely centrist and at times ruthless 24 years of rule, and the continuity of much of the policy and many of the men into the first period of the next reign (albeit with a more crowd-pleasing performance from the monarch), it can certainly be argued that Henry VIII would not have got away with his later major misjudgements and often appalling behaviour. A late medieval king who behaved like him would probably have been removed. And that meant that the Break from Rome could be effected without civil war, and religious resistance and rebellions could be stamped out, while Henry cheerfully killed off most of the remaining claimants to his throne, however distant. Thanks to the work of Henry VII and his men and the tireless subsequent efforts of Wolsey, Cromwell and others, much of it based on the Henry VII legacy, there was a foundation on which the 'new' new men of Elizabeth's reign could build. And, between the death of Henry VIII and Elizabeth's accession, the fact that the new men had helped Henry VII reinforce the swing of power from the provinces to the centre made it easier for the monarchy to ride out the so-called mid-Tudor crisis. In many ways, it depends on one's historiographically conditioned perspective: a late medievalist will be more likely to value the role of the nobility in helping the king to rule the shires and to see things, including nasty dealings by the crown and its servants, from the point of view of landed society in the provinces. A historian of Tudor England is more likely to see the failings of the provincial model, looking outwards from the centre, and to overlook the disadvantages of the centrist model. Was it a good thing that Henry VII and his new men helped make the world safe for Henry VIII? Many might say not but, with religion becoming the really explosive and potentially nuclear issue during the century, and England avoiding the excesses that afflicted large parts of continental Europe, perhaps, taking the longer durée, even a late medievalist who believes that

the new men were by and large an unnecessary evil at the time, should admit that they were ultimately crucial in the building and survival of the Tudor state. They did however represent a very peculiar phase in English history. The new men who were the foundation of the Elizabethan polity – Cecil, Paulet, Wriothesley, Russell and so on – were mostly ennobled and, as Gunn observes, they became great landowners. Even though the nobility did play a part in Henry VII's rule, in almost no period of English history before the modern era has the central government been so dependent in the localities on men of so relatively little landed substance, whose power was so dependent on their service to the government. Under Henry I, the progenitor of 'new men', the great nobles remained the real power in the land, while the two exceptional periods, which reinforce the oddness of this period, are the decade under John that led up to Magna Carta and the Commonwealth.

These are all matters for debate. What is not in dispute is that this is a wonderful book, which was well worth the lengthy wait.

The author thanks the reviewer for this generous, detailed and stimulating review and does not wish to comment further.

**Other reviews:**

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