

Who was Henry VII? The 500th anniversary of the death of the first Tudor King (1509-2009)

Review Number: 865

Publish date: Monday, 1 March, 2010

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ISBN: 09503471

Date of Publication: 2009

Publisher: Wiley-Blackwell

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Pauline Croft

This issue contains 11 articles by leading scholars of the reign, together with the guest editor's introduction (in addition to his two articles), and an impressively extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources including unpublished theses. Horowitz emphasises the importance of Henry VII in English history and sums up the theme of this special issue: that the king

would contribute to transforming the monarchy, the government and the realm into a solvent, stable country to be reckoned with abroad and admired by its citizenry at home.

This throws down a challenge to the handful of historians who have recently attempted to minimise Henry's impact, depicting him as little more than a run-of-the-mill medieval monarch. Steven Gunn, author of the outstanding study of Henry VII in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (1) (which newcomers to the reign could read with profit, before plunging into these detailed articles), discusses the king in the wider context of European history, particularly by comparison with the achievements of his great contemporaries Louis XI of France and Ferdinand of Aragon. Only a century after his death, both Francis Bacon and Walter Raleigh took Henry as a model of prudent kingship, and Bacon considered him at least the equal of Louis and Ferdinand. Bacon also thought there were lessons still to be learned; his praise of Henry's 'felicity of full coffers' (p. 381) tacitly rebuked the unhappily empty coffers of James I. Gunn surveys more recent historians such as J. R. Green in 1874, Wilhelm Busch in 1895, and A. F. Pollard in 1907, who saw Henry as the creator of a 'New Monarchy', and with it the emergence of the modern nation-state. Stubbs agreed with this view of 'the critical, transitional age' from medieval to early modern, but disagreed over the importance placed on Henry himself. Instead he dismissively thought that things would have been much the same 'whatever sort of king was on the throne of England' (p. 384). Elton by contrast was convinced that England remained substantially medieval until the 1530s, when Thomas Cromwell transformed the style of kingship and the administrative effectiveness of the regime of Henry VIII. Gunn notes that the European Science Foundation has produced seven volumes on the origins of the modern state from the 13th to the 18th century, with 60 references to Louis XIV, but only two to Henry VII, whose achievement remains hard to assimilate to European models. The English king remains stubbornly distinctive; comparisons with continental monarchs can teach us much, but at the same time they 'continue to strain our powers of explanation' (p. 392).

Other contributors provide a range of additional insights and viewpoints. For David Grummitt, the years between 1485 and 1509 were remarkable because they saw the formation of a new political culture, transitioning from medieval to early modern modes of governance, Tudor rather than Plantagenet. Even though Henry's machinery of rule owed much to his Yorkist predecessors, the nature and role of the royal household were crucially re-defined, not least because it became a centre of political intrigue. Its leading officers frequently fell foul of Henry himself, revealing deep-rooted tensions within the inner circle: in short, the household was 'dysfunctional' (p. 401). Grummitt also points to an influential essay by Paul Strohm which argues that late 15th-century England experienced its own 'pre-Machiavellian moment' (p. 394), when the rules governing political behaviour changed fundamentally. Intense loyalty to the person of the king took precedence over more abstract notions of Crown and commonwealth, and overrode other ties of service and loyalty. Grummitt cites a notable range of literary responses to this new political morality, from John Skelton and Stephen Hawes among others, which together provide evidence of the emergence of an informed if still small-scale body of public opinion.

Mark Horowitz contributes a detailed discussion showing how bonds concerning the law and its maintenance affected all stations in life, with ordinary Englishmen and women constantly entering into legal obligations. The king's notorious bonds and recognisances followed this existing national pattern, and perhaps seemed less striking to his contemporaries than they have appeared subsequently to historians. However, 'diligence was the key' (p. 439). Henry's bond policy 'literally "bound" a large number of English men and women of high and low birth to the centre through the administration of law, the enforcement of peace, and the collection of revenue and debts due on financial arrangements, offices and responsibilities' (pp. 452–3). He deliberately extended the longstanding practices of the duchy of Lancaster, which became the royal model, using bonds for revenue, for the maintenance of law and order, and the adjudication of debts owed to the Crown. The king even used bonds as a preventative measure if he sensed rebellion was in the offing, as in 1501. Although Empson and Dudley were his most active agents, Henry personally directed the intensification of bond administration, consolidation and prosecution, using the chancery as the central processing point. Here we have an illuminating, contextualised description of this distinctive aspect of Henrician kingship.

Sean Cunningham continues the emphasis on bonds by showing how quickly Henry adopted them as tools of enforcement after his accession in 1485, to confront the remaining opposition to his victory at Bosworth. Thereafter he extended the policy, 'effectively attempting to make the financial and political price of rebellion greater than any member of the ruling elite could afford' (p. 473). The bonds worked, because prominent families were willing to pay a heavy price to maintain their status and influence. Cunningham alerts us to the problems created by the archival re-arrangements of the 19th century which have disguised the coherence of the records of council business. Nevertheless, he concludes that the elevation of bonds as a key component of Henry's style of governance after 1500, which has been noted by earlier historians of the reign, was only possible because, from the outset in 1485, bonds had played a primary role in the containment of conspiracy and rebellion. From the beginning, 'expert management of a system of suspended penalties' (p. 480) was central to the security of the new Tudor dynasty.

Paul Cavill expands the discussion, away from bonds, by pointing to the enforcement of penal statutes as a significant feature of the 1490s. This was an increasingly controversial dimension of Henry's kingship and at the core of his growing reputation for avarice; but Cavill argues that it was not, as often depicted, a new development after 1500. The parliament of October 1495 passed 27 statutes, more than any other parliament of the reign, and a general pardon of past offences balanced the strict enforcement of future legislation. However, Cavill agrees with Horowitz and Cunningham in suggesting a more nuanced picture than the usual straightforward one of increasing royal greed. Instead, 'the later years of Henry's reign witnessed a quickening in the tempo of enforcement rather than a new development' (p. 488). In general, he balanced the use of penal statutes for profit with their enforcement for the good of the commonweal. To Henry's subjects this would probably have seemed a rather generous assessment of the situation, but here the arguments are clearly made.

An essay by Margaret McGlynn suggests that Henry's administration was one 'in which the habits, outlooks and assumptions of both monarchy and bureaucracy were blended' (p. 547). She scrutinises two documents produced by Chamber auditors soon after 1509, concerning the practices of Sir Robert Southwell, a prominent financial manager for both Henry VII and Henry VIII. The texts reveal massive continuities of personnel within the offices and institutions that men like Southwell were charged with operating for the new Tudor monarchy. She thereby supports the argument put forward elsewhere by John Watts, on the significance of the substantial number of Yorkist officials still employed after 1485. However, McGlynn balances the 'continuity' argument by emphasising that Henry's accession brought dynamic political change, even though it was often juxtaposed with institutional conservatism. On the death of Henry VII, England was far more intensively governed than in 1485, but once again, the demands of the common law and the traditional processes of financial administration continued to shape the ongoing processes of change and adaptation. Although Henry VIII made much of his new stance of distancing himself from his father's more exploitative practices, this was 'more theatrical than practical': Southwell and many other Tudor bureaucrats remained in their offices since the new king was shrewd enough not to jettison a very effective financial structure. As McGlynn caustically notes, 'Henry VIII needed all the money that his father's machinery could give him, and more' (pp. 556–7).

James Lee contributes an innovative study of York, Bristol and Exeter, where the focus elsewhere in this volume on central government gives way to a broader assessment of the importance of Henry VII's involvement with urban policy and urban political culture. He was sensitive to the ambitions of urban elites and particularly concerned with the appointment of urban officials. York had supported Richard III, so the greater part of the city's leading residents thought it prudent to go out of their way to welcome the new king in 1486, meeting him a full five miles outside the city walls. Also in 1486, Bristol carefully staged an impressive formal entry followed by no fewer than five pageants. The most distinctive feature of Henry's rule was that he consistently endorsed and promoted a form of oligarchic government, presumably in the interests of greater stability. He appears also to have been conscious of York's strategically important position near the Scottish border. By the end of the reign, York's officials were entirely self-selected since the king had removed the commonalty's right to nominate two candidates for the mayoralty. Similarly, by the royal charter of 1499, Bristol was granted a considerable level of political and judicial devolution, consolidating power in the hands of a small elite, mostly of merchants. This was probably a reciprocal response to the Crown's use of the city's substantial merchant marine during the crises occasioned by Perkin Warbeck's challenge to Henry's throne. Exeter's charter of July 1509, granted by Henry VIII, similarly seems to reflect an earlier royal preference for oligarchy shown by Henry VII.

All these examples support the views of Robert Tittler, whose work on early modern urban history has been so influential. He saw urban governance in the 16th century as steadily narrowing, to express only the views of a minority which came to exercise hegemony over the rest. Such a policy on the part of the Tudor monarchy began with Henry VII, but it seems to have attracted significant opposition only in London, although that may in part be due to the exceptional richness of the capital's archives compared to those of provincial towns. Penny Tucker shows how the tendency of Henry VII and his ministers to exercise arbitrary

authority, undermined the more balanced urban polity – ‘a form of aristocracy ... moderated by what contemporaries called democracy’ (p. 515), which medieval Londoners had earlier enjoyed. On the king’s death this generated a forceful reaction, at the highest city levels, which can be seen in the strongly critical writings of Thomas More and others. However, her title, ‘Henry VII’s style of kingship and the emergence of constitutional monarchy’ begs a number of questions. She concludes that the hostile ‘London’ commentaries on Henry’s kingship clearly draw on a more general literature on the subject of tyranny, ‘and so gave fuel to the wider debate about bridling kings’. It may well have been so, but such a key development would need much fuller description than it is given here, where only a handful of authors such as Fortescue and St German are mentioned. Does that ‘wider debate’ include parliamentary debate, and if so, at what period? The discussion of events in the capital city is scholarly and convincing, but the broader argument about a linkage with ‘the emergence of constitutional monarchy’ (p. 525) would need greater substantiation, not least by making clear what definition of ‘constitutional monarchy’ is being used, and when exactly the author thinks that it emerged.

John Currin’s meticulous explorations of Henry VII’s diplomacy have already re-written the older accounts, by revealing the complexities of the king’s foreign policy, always intent on securing his newly-established dynasty against challengers. Here he breaks fresh ground in his discussion of England’s reaction to the invasion of Italy by Charles VIII in 1494, which unleashed a half-century of hostilities between France and the Habsburgs. Currin convincingly argues that Henry was far more European-minded than most Tudor historians have allowed, not least because of his upbringing spent away from his native land. Moreover, the 15th century saw growing cultural, economic and political contacts between England and the Italian states, so much so that by 1500, Italian merchants, physicians, scholars, artisans and musicians comprised the second-largest alien community in England. The king personally invested large sums of money in the wool trade to Pisa. By joining the Holy League of Venice in 1496, Henry demonstrated his perceptive understanding of Italian affairs, which were certainly of concern to many English merchants. However, his central aim in that year was to conduct a punitive war against James IV of Scotland, who had supported the pretender Perkin Warbeck. In response, Henry worked successfully to re-create the Holy League, founded in 1495, as a purely political alliance, dropping all military obligations but signalling England’s refusal to support further French incursions into Naples. Here, the significance of dynastic marriages as a crucial tool of diplomacy emerges very clearly. Ferdinand and Isabella wanted to marry their daughter Juana to the Archduke Philip, and their youngest daughter Catalina (Catherine) to Henry’s heir, Prince Arthur. They had no intention of concluding a marriage alliance with Scotland, despite the embassy sent to them for that purpose by James IV. Meanwhile Charles VIII proposed a counter-alliance whereby the Dauphin would marry Princess Margaret Tudor and Prince Arthur would wed the daughter of the Duc de Bourbon. These alternative possibilities remind us of the range of foreign policy possibilities open to Henry, and the wisdom of his choices. Currin sees the king as successfully inaugurating the ‘politics of balance’ (p. 546), the strategy pursued by the Tudors and their successors well into the 18th century, to keep any one European power from dominating the entire continent, while keeping England out of wars that were of little significance for her own security.

The last essay, again by Horowitz, entitled ‘Henry Tudor’s treasure’ sets out to examine the evidence for the views almost unanimously put forward by contemporaries, and accepted by many later historians, that the king amassed an immense fortune. To well-placed observers, it seemed that Henry deliberately limited his spending and ensured, as the Spanish ambassador remarked in 1499, that ‘if gold coin once enters his strong boxes, it never comes out again’ (p. 560). However, the financial documentation is both inadequate – particularly with the loss of the Chamber books for 1495–1502 – and very complex. Here, in line with the emphases in other articles in this collection, the focus is on Henry’s bond policy of prosecuting and collecting upon written obligations and recognisances for all aspects of finance, law and order. After a detailed discussion of various sources of income, Horowitz concludes that all the evidence indicates that Henry VII did indeed amass a ‘prodigious’ (p. 577) fortune which he left to his son, who largely wasted the money, waging war on France immediately after his accession, while enjoying a lavish lifestyle. The reckless expenditure of Henry VIII in his early years certainly supports the rather oblique arguments for his

father's bequest to him of very large sums of money. This retrospective evidence poses a provocative question. If we accept Horowitz's argument that Henry VII had indeed succeeded in becoming a self-sustaining and unencumbered ruler, as advocated by Sir John Fortescue, he could have set England on the road to absolutist government. Perhaps that is what the old king wanted to do. By contrast, his heir was not focussed on maintaining royal solvency and financial independence, but rather on cutting a grand figure on the European stage. Even when Henry VIII had a second chance of achieving self-sufficiency, with the dissolution of the monasteries, he did not take it, instead alienating most of the lands he acquired. Horowitz argues for the long-term significance of all this; Henry VIII had 'squandered a rare opportunity for the English monarchy to become independent of parliamentary financial support' (p. 562). That was to have immense consequences in the 17th century.

The contributors to this special edition of *Historical Research*, and the guest editor, must be congratulated in producing such a wide-ranging, stimulating and scholarly volume in commemoration of the death of Henry VII. Yet they are very tentative in drawing what seem to be the broader conclusions of their cumulative researches. Surely here was a king who never felt that he could rely on the loyalty of his subjects. His closed, introverted personality saw the security of his line as dependent on massive financial and legal reinforcement, employing often dubious methods, and not on cultivating the support of the English people. Instead he appears to have preferred an atmosphere of tension and even fear. There is no discussion here of the increasingly precarious succession, with the death of his third son Edmund in 1500, that of his heir Prince Arthur in 1502, and of his wife Elizabeth of York in 1503. If the king had died soon after, his heir Prince Henry would have been a child of twelve. Would a minority have stress-tested the new dynasty to destruction? In posing the tantalising question 'Who was Henry VII?' as their title, the editor and contributors might have attempted more evaluation of the man himself. Nevertheless they deserve warm thanks for what they have achieved: updating and expanding our understanding of the policies of the first Tudor monarch, showcasing recent unpublished research, and making it far more widely available to a general historical readership. Professor Miles Taylor, Director of the IHR and Editor of the journal, must likewise be thanked for imaginatively commissioning these essays to form a single-theme issue. Let us hope for similar volumes in the future.

Notes

1. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* < <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/12954> [2]> [accessed 12 October 2009]. [Back to \(1\)](#)

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