Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

The Wars of the Roses

Review Number:
1218
Publish date:
Thursday, 1 March, 2012
Author:
Michael Hicks
ISBN:
9780300114232
Date of Publication:
2010
Price:
£28.00
Pages:
352pp.
Publisher:
Yale University Press
Place of Publication:
New Haven, CT
Reviewer:
John Watts

Michael Hicks?s new book on the Wars of the Roses seeks to offer a general explanation of the civil wars that dominated English political life in the second half of the 15th century. Declaring that ?many textbooks on Late Medieval England have been written by the best academic historians and survey what happened, and yet they still do not explain the Wars? (p. x), Hicks sets out to offer an account of why the Wars broke out, why they kept recurring, and why they came to an end. This requires him to re-tell the story, but within an analytical framework (more than one, in fact). The resulting book presents a series of perspectives that will already be familiar to readers of Professor Hicks?s numerous books and articles; it may not succeed in producing the overall explanation for the Wars that Hicks thinks is lacking in the existing literature, but it does present a series of propositions, it gives emphasis to themes which have often been underplayed, and it takes a distinctive view of the reign of Henry VI, which ? as one of the puffs on the dust-jacket notes ? ?challenge[s] current orthodoxy?. While it is simply untrue that the many existing treatments of the Wars have failed to explain them, this book contains a number of thought-provoking insights and some interesting bits of information.

Hicks?s account of the Wars, to take that first, is skewed towards a revisionist analysis of Henry VI?s reign, which occupies six of the nine or ten narrative chapters. Its argument is that Henry was a pretty normal king, unlucky in his circumstances ? economic crisis, inadequate financing, an unwinnable war in France ? but

pretty decently committed to ruling consultatively and doing justice. He was too forgiving to the Yorkists, but so were most of the lords, and neither he nor his ministers deserved the prolonged onslaught which began with Cade?s rebellion, but was then picked up by the bullying York and his various allies. The troubles to which the Yorkists claimed to be responding were the products of their own actions or of unmanageable external causes; the reforms they introduced, before and after 1461, did not effectively address these causes and England remained an unhappy country, at least until the 1470s. Hicks?s treatment of the Yorkist kings is pretty conventional and short (only about a quarter of the book is devoted to this central period of the Wars). Edward IV, ?indolent and self-indulgent? (p. 187), but also ?vigorous and capable? (p. 187), enjoyed appropriately mixed success; while he failed to reform the realm and thus remained vulnerable to assault, he somehow won through in the crisis of 1469?71 and restored control in his second reign; Warwick?s assault on Edward, whose origins lay in the Woodville marriage, was mainly selfish and ambitious, but there was plenty of popular support for the Earl and many found Henry VI a more legitimate claimant than his supplanter. Richard III?s usurpation was uncalled for (though Hicks complicates this reasonable claim by asserting that before Richard acted the Woodvilles had launched a kind of ?coup d?état?, denying the duke the protectorate which Edward IV had probably conferred on him and planning to govern through the young Edward V ? p. 217). By this time, the Wars had lost much of their public character (?This Third War became purely dynastic. An important theme was North versus South? ? p. 208), but many of the aristocracy were horrified by Richard?s actions and rose against him, ultimately successfully. Henry VII?s main problem was foreign-backed pretenders, and, while the obnoxious features of his rule provoked popular opposition, this was only rarely and fleetingly joined to the activities of magnates. At the same time, the king launched a vigorous propaganda campaign, restored the finances of the monarchy and benefited from improving economic, diplomatic and ideological conditions. The Wars were at an end, though Hicks seems to suggest that even up to 1525, ?all governments ? remained weak and susceptible to overthrow? (p. 233).

It?s hard not to feel that this account suffers a little from conflicting aims. On the one hand, Hicks wants to advance a thesis and to take issue with the copious literature on the Wars; on the other, he wants to present an up-to-date textbook narrative, drawing on the work of other scholars as well as his own extensive research. At times, the narrative is interrupted for argumentation or analysis (?The root problem was fivefold? ? p. 224), but in other places matters of lively debate among historians ? such as the background to Richard III?s usurpation ? are presented without reference to dissenting views. On the whole, Hicks absorbs points of view that he has come to agree with ? sometimes without acknowledgement ? and signals disagreement in the footnotes, not always with any argument to support his position. This can leave the scholarly reader feeling roughly treated, while the general reader ? to whom the publishers are apparently trying to appeal ? may find the format distracting. In fact, the earlier parts of the book are much more coherently argumentative than the later ones: Hicks?s case for Henry VI as a more or less normal king is developed with verve and fresh research ? most notably on the king?s judicial activity in the 1440s, early 1450s and even later 1450s; but there is less new thinking on the Yorkist period, and both the diction and the analysis become more uneven as the book moves into the reign of Henry VII and its aftermath.

Let us turn to Hicks?s attempt to ?make sense of it all? (p. xi). At its centre is a claim that the interaction of four factors underlay the Wars. These were: the weakness of the crown (essentially a financial weakness); the participation of the common people in politics; the intervention of foreign powers; and the sense on the part of the nobility that it was legitimate to try to overthrow the king. In fact, there are other problems behind these. One, given emphasis throughout, is the varied set of economic problems that set in around 1440 and lasted perhaps into the 1470s, which Hicks, following John Hatcher, but adding capitals and italics, calls the ?*Great Slump*?.(1) These problems ? a credit crisis, a drastic fall in overseas trade, and a collapse in agrarian revenues, rents, wages and prices ? are treated as major causes of the first two factors: the crown?s revenues from customs were directly affected, and ? since impoverishment affected taxpayers of all classes ? it faced a harder task in eliciting grants of direct taxation from Parliament; equally, it is argued that economic problems underlay much of the popular ferment of this period, helping to cause the revolt of 1450 and the reservoir of popular disaffection on which figures like Richard of York and Warwick the Kingmaker eagerly drew. Another problem, merging into but also influencing the willingness of the nobility to push the

boundaries of their obedience, was the dynastic division ? not, for Hicks, a real factor before 1460, but thereafter an easy and persistent means of challenging the authority of the ruling king. These four (or six) factors are the main causes of the Wars, and their departure from the scene, at various points during the period 1485?1525 (or later), explains the ending of the conflict. Rather confusingly, this interpretative model is then overlain with another one, borrowed from Laurence Stone, but already familiar to students of the Wars of the Roses, featuring ?preconditions?, ?precipitants? and ?triggers?. This latter framework is initially maintained with some doggedness and provides the theme for chapters five to eight (though not, curiously, for chapter four on ?Problems with the system?), but it fades away after that, ?precipitants? being limited to the Yorkist uprising of the autumn of 1459 and ?triggers? to York?s assertion of his claim to the throne, his death at Wakefield and the decision of the remaining Yorkists to crown his son in early March 1461. One might be forgiven for thinking that the Wars were well underway by this point, but Hicks?s re-working of the well-established notion that there were really three ?Wars of the Roses? contains some novel dates: the First War does not begin until four years after the 1455 battle of St Albans (and ends in 1461), the Second (as usual) is 1469-71 and the Third, most uncommonly, is 1483?1525 (though 1485?1525 is also the period of the ?Ending of the Wars?).

Set against existing explanations of the Wars of the Roses, Hicks?s account has some strengths, but also many weaknesses. Like many before him, he offers a mixture of more fundamental and more proximate causes, the latter including matters of mere contingency, but it seems to the present reviewer that he does not reconcile these as skilfully as some earlier historians. For K. B. McFarlane, writing in the 1960s, the Wars broke out because of the inability of Henry VI to manage an essentially stable system of relations between the king and the aristocracy; they persisted because the series of usurpers that followed were initially unable to guarantee landowners the security that they needed; whether York, Warwick and Gloucester were right to rebel against Henry VI, Edward IV and Henry VII, McFarlane regards as moot, given our evidence, but we can readily understand why they did so, and also why some followed them and others did not.(2) This is an explanation that effectively locates the role of individuals in a structural setting; it is accomplished in a masterly thirty pages; and, despite some limitations, it is still the best short explanation of the Wars. For Tony Pollard, whose very deft and even-handed textbook account has been re-issued twice, the Wars stem from underlying weaknesses in the political system: essentially a gap between the expectations and agency of subjects, on the one hand, and the capacity of the government to deliver what they wanted, on the other.(3) While this gap could and did widen for a series of reasons more local to the later 15th century (defeat in France, fiscal and economic problems, a dynastic cleavage, a notably incompetent ruler in the 1450s and notably shrewd ones after 1485), it was the underlying cause of the Wars, as it was also ? *mutatis mutandis* ? of the troubles of 1370?1410 and perhaps 1547?53; Henry VI, Warwick, Richard III, Henry VII all have parts to play, but there is a deeper logic to events. In a third major modern explanation of the Wars ? one acknowledged as such by Hicks on p. x, though dismissed as just saying what happened on p. 20 ? Christine Carpenter has argued that, while there was nothing wrong with the political system, its particular way of enlisting both public and private power, especially that of the aristocracy, explains why the personal inadequacy of Henry VI had such dramatic and lasting consequences.(4) In Carpenter?s account, the king had a fundamental role to play in balancing and merging the different elements in the constitution; if he did not make authoritative decisions and provide the right kind of leadership in the spheres of justice and defence, disorder and division were inevitable; if he was not the sole convincing claimant to royal authority, as Edward IV (until 1471), Edward V and Richard III were not, then he could not easily provide that leadership, though there was no need, in Carpenter?s view, for the unwise actions of Warwick, Gloucester and Henry VII, which played their own parts in prolonging the conflict.

So here are three prominent and clear overall explanations of the Wars of the Roses, and beside them lies a rich body of writing providing partial explanations of the Wars, whether thematic ? such as Richard Britnell?s treatment of the economy, Cliff Davies?s account of the European context, my own work on political ideas and principles, or (along with David Grummitt and others) on popular politics ? or specific to particular stages of the conflict, notably its origins under Henry VI and its re-emergence under Richard III.(5) Hicks very decently acknowledges his debt to this extensive body of work in his preface and that debt is clear in the four (or six) underlying causes of the Wars that he identifies. How well, then, does his new

explanation fare against earlier ones?

There are potential gains, it seems to me, in the prominence given to economic conditions, to the role of overseas intervention and to the role of popular politics in interpreting the Wars. Older accounts have often been too exclusively concerned with the dealings of England?s kings, lords and gentry, ignoring the interaction of these key groups with other elements in the polity, such as the commons, or with wider influences, such as continental powers and networks and the movements of the economy. While Pollard acknowledges these influences and Carpenter makes a case for why the politics of landowning should be considered pre-eminent, Hicks brings them forward and that seems absolutely the right thing to do. Like Ralph Griffiths and Richard Britnell before him, Hicks makes a compelling case for the sheer difficulty facing the government of Henry VI, in particular, as both agrarian and commercial incomes were hit hard in the late 1430s and 1440s; he also emphasises the role of economic problems in shaping the popular discontent of 1449?50 and 1469?70, discontent which played a fundamental role in enabling (perhaps even driving) the critical actions of York and Warwick, with their manifold consequences. While Hicks?s treatment of the international context is less developed and closer to the norm, he has some useful things to say about the interaction of English, French and Burgundian interests in the politics of the 1480s and 1490s, and provides a good account of the subsequent turning of Valois and Habsburg energies away from the affairs of England and towards a new front line in Italy. There is no question that the Wars need opening out in this kind of way ? and indeed, there are good grounds for wanting to see other groups and contexts brought into consideration: the role of England?s towns, for instance, still woefully under-explored; the politics of Ireland, which were so important in the 1480s and 1490s and arguably at other times as well; the influence of the various cultural changes of the era ? printing, neo-classicism, changes in education and literacy.

It is an unfortunate by-product of the broadening of the agenda, which Hicks rightly adopts and promotes, that one immediately wants to know more about the ?newer? factors in the story, and how they fit in with, and weigh up against, the more familiar politics of kings and landowners. Here the book is disappointing, and in two ways. First of all, there is not much detailed or systematic analysis of how an appreciation of the economic situation ? in all its diverse forms ? or the participation of the commons (a highly diverse group), or the diplomatic context (multi-faceted and complex) should be brought to bear on the political story. Perhaps this is another facet of the dual aims discussed above, but it is a regrettable one for academic readers. The late medieval economy is and was both incompletely understood and highly intricate: assessing its political impact is no easy task. Falling agricultural prices hit producers, but they benefited consumers: what did this mean for taxpayers? Wages stagnated too, of course, but was this more or less than prices? Any economic change is likely to produce winners as well as losers; its effects will therefore need to be calculated with some care, particularly in a polity where the total tax-take is estimated to have been never more than 3.5 per cent of national output.(6) It seems almost undeniable that there was a significant slump in trade in the 1440s, but how much are the customs data affected by the government?s readiness to grant licences to export outside the Staple, or by a general breakdown of fiscal administration? MPs were probably unwilling to make grants in the 1430s and 1440s, but was this because of economic conditions or because of a lack of confidence in an over-indebted and directionless regime? As far as we know, Henry VI?s government did not ask for more than it got: there is no evidence of the king attempting to raise large sums from Parliament to support a major expedition, and no sign of the kind of fiscal pressure that Edward III, Henry V, or even Edward IV and Henry VII laid on representatives. Why should taxpayers dig deep if the government was unwilling to force them to do so? And why should they support the defence of France or the seas if the king himself showed no interest in doing so? Why could Edward IV get grants of two tenths and 15ths in 1468 (or four in 1472?5) when Henry VI could not in any comparable period of his reign? After all, the ?*Great Slump*? was apparently still continuing. None of these questions is easy to answer, but if we are going to insist that the economy was a major influence on the politics of the period, we need to work out exactly how, and how much. The same kind of approach needs to be taken with the international context or with the participation of the commons in politics. The former seems to me a much more central factor in the politics of the 1460s than existing accounts allow, reaching more deeply into the fabric of English political life than is suggested by the familiar view of a disagreement between Warwick and Edward over foreign

policy. Meanwhile, as far as popular activism is concerned, Hicks represents it as a new phenomenon in 1450, oddly overlooking the impact of 1381 on the politics of Richard II?s reign or the interweaving of popular and aristocratic dissent under Henry IV. But again, while it is surely right to signal the intensity of these kinds of interactions in the 1450s and 1460s, there is a lot of thinking for us all to do on how they worked and what they meant. Hicks tends to present York and Warwick as rabble-rousers, but if there was a persistent undercurrent of popular dissatisfaction, would not great men like these have felt some responsibility to pay attention to it? As I and others have argued elsewhere, later medieval England was a highly representative polity, and the behaviour of its politicians was highly conditioned by the demands of those who could claim, and act, to represent the commune.(7) We can certainly point to examples of York and Warwick attempting to appropriate popular grievances and/or to stir them up, but we have to recognise that the views of the commons were an insistent pressure on the thoughts and actions of these men, as they were for others, positioned differently in the spheres of politics and government.

This leads on to a more general criticism of Hicks?s handling of his explanatory factors. They tend to be treated singly and/or adventitiously, rather than combined with one another and kept in play over time. We are encouraged to believe that the governments of Henry VI and Edward IV were weakened by their economic and fiscal circumstances, but the readiness of Richard of York or Warwick the Kingmaker to challenge these governments is treated as a further (and implicitly autonomous) weakness, rather than a response. In Hicks?s account York is substantially the cause of the many troubles of which he complains; he is animated by ambition and his protests against Henry VI?s ministers are calculated and spurious. Similarly, Warwick has no real justification for his risings in 1469 and 1470: he is just another over-mighty subject. But, while Hicks is at pains to restore Henry VI?s reputation, he does not deny that he and his ministers lost France and were seriously indebted, or even (in places ? eg. p. 136) that he was a distinctly lacklustre ruler. Does this state of affairs not supply a reason for York?s behaviour? And surely the same could be said of Warwick, particularly on the evidence that Hicks supplies ? he sees Edward as disappointing expectations, levying too much tax, conducting an over-ambitious and foolhardy foreign policy, failing to address mounting economic problems and presiding over a realm full of potential Lancastrians, some of whom were beginning to take subversive action by the end of the 1460s. Under these circumstances, isn?t it understandable that Warwick took the action he did? Like other historians of the period, Hicks identifies a tension between the duty of obedience to the king and the claims of the common weal; to this he perceptively adds a willingness on the part of Henry VI and Edward IV to pardon the misdemeanours of their greatest subjects. But are these not explanations for the behaviour of York, Warwick and Richard of Gloucester, which is otherwise condemned as stemming from over-mightiness? And if they were more brutal than their opponents, as Hicks insists, was this not because they took a more dangerous path by preferring action to passive obedience? It is a striking feature of Hicks?s analysis that he is generally willing to exonerate Henry VI by putting his weaknesses down to external causes, while all his opponents and successors are held personally responsible for what they did. In this way, a book which ostensibly sets out structural causes for the civil wars tends instead to emphasise the personal failings of a generation of politicians (rather than the failings of one unusual but uniquely positioned man ? Henry of Windsor ? as has more commonly been the case).

Reconciling the personal with the structural is, of course, one of the great challenges facing all historians; deciding what the ?structures? are ? what is cause and what symptom ? and establishing how these structures fit together is not easy either. These tasks are all the harder given the norms of 15th-century history, when so much public power was mediated through individuals, and when the source-base is so challenging ? as J. R. Lander evocatively put it, ?shreds and tatters and wisps of information? on political affairs, combined with ?unalluring ? miles of parchment? illustrating the activity of the royal administration.(8) Hicks?s factors are unexceptionable in themselves, but most of them are also products of the phenomenon they are supposed to be causing. One of the lessons of later medieval history is that those features of the later medieval English polity that contributed to its strength in periods of political harmony ? its ambitious legal system, its openness to communal representation, its reliance on consensual taxation, its ultimate dependence on a free-wheeling king and his free-form relationships with a few dozen important people ? deepened its difficulties when that harmony was lost. It is worth remembering that the Wars of the Roses were not the first prolonged

sequence of later medieval troubles, but the second, comparable to the series of disorders that unfurled in the 1370s and lasted in one way or another until the 1410s. Once serious divisions had broken out at the top of society, as they certainly had by the early 1450s, if not earlier, it was very difficult to reassemble a convincing and representative authority. The Wars of the Roses were both part of that process and a political response to it; they changed and ended, not because the original causes had gone away, but because the forces of potential resolution ? the tenurial dominance of the crown, the disruption of descents and aristocratic ties, the changing ideologies of power and so on ? eventually found a kind of equilibrium in a changed political order.

Notes

1. J. Hatcher, ?The great slump of the mid-15th century?, in *Progress and Problems in Medieval England* , ed. R. Britnell and J. Hatcher (Cambridge, 1996), 237?72.Back to (1)
2. K. B. McFarlane, ?The Wars of the Roses?, in idem, *England in the 15th Century* (London, 1981), 231?61.Back to (2)
3. A. J. Pollard, *The Wars of the Roses*, (2nd ed., Basingstoke, 2001).Back to (3)
4. C. Carpenter, *The Wars of the Roses: Politics and the Constitution in England, c.1437?1509* (Cambridge, 1997).Back to (4)
5. For the first three, see *The Wars of the Roses*, ed. A. J. Pollard, Problems in Focus ser. (Basingstoke, 1995). For the popular role in the Wars, see, *inter alia*, J. Watts, ?Polemic and politics in the 1450s?, in *The Politics of 15th-Century England: John Vale?s Book*, ed. M. L. Kekewich et al (Stroud, 1995), pp. 3?42; I. M. W. Harvey, ?I. M. W. Harvey, ?Was there popular politics in 15th-century England?? in The *McFarlane Legacy*, ed. R. Britnell and A. J. Pollard (Stroud, 1995), pp. 155?74; D. Grummitt, ?Deconstructing Cade?s rebellion: discourse and politics in the mid-15th century?, in *The 15th Century VI*, ed. L. Clark (Woodbridge, 2006), 107?22. For works which seek to explain why the wars broke out under Henry VI, see especially B. P. Wolffe, *Henry VI* (London, 1981) and J. Watts, *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship* (Cambridge, 1996)and for why they began again under Richard III, R. Horrox, *Richard III: a Study in Service* (Cambridge, 1989).Back to (5)
6. Figures by kind permission of Mark Ormrod, included in his forthcoming paper on ?Henry V and the English taxpayer?.Back to (6)
7. This is a central argument of *Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship* and, in a different way, of ?The pressure of the public on later medieval politics?, in *The 15th Century IV*, ed. L. Clark and C. Carpenter (Woodbridge, 2004). A work which goes even further in this direction is D. Rollison, *A Commonwealth of the People* (Cambridge, 2010).Back to (7)
8. J. R. Lander, *Conflict and Stability in 15th-Century England* (London, 1969), pp. 18, 13.Back to (8)

For those interested in further discussion of this topic, here's an interesting blog post by David Rundle which was prompted by this review - http://bonaelitterae.wordpress.com/2012/04/04/never-mind-the-book-read-the-review/ [2].

Source URL: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1218

Links:
[1] http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/8323
[2] http://bonaelitterae.wordpress.com/2012/04/04/never-mind-the-book-read-the-review/