

Reviews in History

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

Henry VIII's Bishops: Diplomats, Administrators, Scholars and Shepherds

Review Number:

399

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 April, 2004

Author:

Andrew Allan Chibi

ISBN:

227679768X

Date of Publication:

2003

Price:

£50.00

Pages:

356pp.

Publisher:

James Clarke and Co.

Place of Publication:

Cambridge

Reviewer:

Peter Marshall (b. 1964)

This study sets itself the task of restoring 'the tarnished reputation that Henry VIII's bishops have earned from contemporaries and historians alike'. (p. 7) From Francis Bacon, through David Hume, and into the twentieth century, historians have condemned the occupants of Henry's episcopal bench as mediocrities and time-servers. Yet for some years, a movement to rehabilitate them has been underway. In a (sadly unpublished) Oxford doctoral thesis of 1984 on 'The pastoral work of the English and Welsh bishops 1500-58', Stephen Thompson made a compelling case for the seriousness with which they took their responsibilities to their dioceses. More recently, Richard Rex has claimed that 'the English bench of bishops under Henry VIII was one of the most impressive groups of men ever to have held such office.'⁽¹⁾ Chibi draws heavily on Thompson's researches, and broadly endorses Rex's assessment (though, curiously, he makes no reference to another recent study, Kenneth Carleton's *Bishops and Reform in the English Church 1520-1559* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2001)). Nonetheless, this is the first book-length treatment of the Henrician episcopate, and one that attempts to view them in the round. It supplies both an exercise in historical prosopography, and an assessment of the significance of bishops, individually and collectively, for the religious and political history of the reign.

The first of these objectives produces the more valuable and convincing results. Chibi has tracked the careers

of all 69 diocesan bishops holding office in Henry VIII's reign. He identifies three overlapping waves of appointments. In the 1520s, scholars, jurists and humanists were nominated to English and Welsh bishoprics, underscoring Henry's credentials as a state-of-the-art renaissance prince. The demands of the Divorce and the religious experiments of the 1530s saw an unprecedented number of intellectuals and theologians appointed to the bench, while religious reaction and the return to martial policy in the 1540s produced promotions for effective administrators and diplomats. In comparison with other west European episcopates, Chibi suggests, "the Henricians stand head and shoulders above their contemporary colleagues".(p. 13) This chimes with the now widely-accepted revisionist contention that the institutions of the English Church were in remarkably (perhaps uniquely) good shape in the first decades of the sixteenth century.

It is interesting to discover that, on average, Henry's bishops had served 16 years between their first clerical appointment and elevation to a bishopric (no child bishops here). Seventeen had served as vicars of parish churches, though as Chibi concedes, not necessarily as resident pastors. They can scarcely be acquitted of that congenital vice of late medieval prelacy, pluralism – between them they held 139 rectories, though in general on their way to the top they seem to have relied more on prebends than on rectories for generating income. Henrician bishops were almost uniformly graduate, many possessed higher degrees, and fifteen of them had studied abroad, at Bologna, Ferrara, Louvain, Paris or Rome. In their status origins, they represented "a social microcosm of contemporary England".(p. 26) The episcopate of Henry's great rival, Francis I, was dominated by nobles, while the institution against which Martin Luther struggled was notoriously an *Adelkirche* (nobles' church) in its upper echelons. By contrast, the English nobility were conspicuous by their absence from Henry's bench (represented only by Edmund Audley of Rochester and James Stanley of Ely, both inherited from Henry VII). The yeomanry and minor gentry predominated – the "butcher's cur" Thomas Wolsey was representative rather than unique in his humble social origins. Bishops came from a diverse regional background, with little bias towards the economically and politically dominant south-east: northerners, large numbers of midlanders, even Welshmen made it onto the list.

Following Thompson, Chibi argues that episcopal non-residency did little or no damage to the spiritual life of English dioceses. He is also inclined to follow revisionist rehabilitation of Wolsey, arguing that "his dominance was in many ways a great benefit to the Henrician bench".(p. 64) It served to inhibit factionalism after the divisions that had opened up over Archbishop Warham's claims to enhanced probate jurisdiction, and by squeezing other bishops out of political influence, it redirected them to their pastoral responsibilities. Chibi notes the role that bishops played in the repression of (pre-Lutheran) heresy in England, though arguably he does not provide enough analysis of the extent of episcopal co-operation in the anti-Lollard drive of 1511-12. Their role as conscientious visitors of religious houses is also observed, though here the conclusion that "the soul of monasticism was dying out" (p. 85 and similar comments *passim*) seems to me to represent an over-reading of (notoriously problematic) disciplinary evidence. The essays in a recent collection present a very different picture.(2)

Henry VIII's Bishops tends to become a rather less original and sure-footed guide as it moves from the analysis of attainments and career patterns to the elucidation of events, though here it still has some interesting things to say. Chibi draws attention to a "generation gap" in reactions to the "King's Great Matter", with older bishops more likely to support Queen Catherine. Those appointed after 1527 (unsurprisingly) were whole-hearted supporters of the king. It is interesting to be reminded that as late as 1531 Henry was pressing for Stokesley and Casali to be made cardinals, suggestive of a desire for a re-run (with loaded dice) of a papal divorce trial in England. In the event, a number of bishops played important roles in the dissolution of the Aragon marriage, though there was to be little direct episcopal involvement in the king's later matrimonial trials. We are given a crisp run-through of episcopal contributions and reactions to Cranmer's metropolitanical visitation of 1534, to the royal visitation of 1535, to the creation of the Ten Articles of 1536, and to the *Bishops' Book* of 1537. (Here, p. 221, a reference to Cranmer's preoccupation with idolatry leading to "the combination of the first two commandments into one" needs to be unscrambled: the first commandment – in the Augustinian numbering – was separated into two.)

There is some welcome departure from the conventional reading of events in a section on the making of the Act of Six Articles in 1539, where Chibi makes the case that Stokesley (rather than Tunstal) should be seen

with Gardiner as 'the driving force behind the act in both the lords and in convocation'. (p. 225) From the wings, German commentators repeatedly painted the bishops of Winchester and London as chief sponsors of the act. This is plausible, but not definitive. The established view (put forward by Glyn Redworth) that it was Tunstal who had captured the king's ear at this crucial moment is dismissed on the grounds that 'Tunstal was not a theologian' (p. 225). But this seems a little pedantic: the fact that Gardiner was not by training a theologian did not prevent him from penning either the most important theological defence of the royal supremacy, or highly effective attacks on the eucharistic theology of the reformers. While recognising the fact of division among the bishops in the 1530s, Chibi is inclined to accentuate such consensus as existed. He insists that conservative bishops such as Stokesley, Longland and Veysey were enthusiastic, not pragmatic, supporters and preachers of royal supremacy, and he notes the conservative bishops' wholehearted support for the campaign against relics and pilgrimage in the late 1530s. (A somewhat confusing reference here to 'the relic known as 'Hale's Blood'' (p. 204) refers to the portion of Christ's Blood from the Cistercian house of Hailes, Gloucestershire). The support of conservative as well as radical bishops for the dissolution of the monasteries is plausibly related to the exasperating experience of having to deal with houses exempt from episcopal oversight.

In much of this, however, I felt that the book needed to attempt a clearer and crisper taxonomy of the religious positions of Henry's bishops, and of how the balance between evangelicals and conservatives (and the various sub-categories within each group) shifted over time. The religious allegiances of individual bishops are generally identified, but they are usually asserted rather than analysed, and the labelling sometimes reflects uncritical reliance on older secondary sources. I was unconvinced by the categorisation of Rowland Lee as a 'committed reformer' (p. 193). In 1534, Stephen Vaughan wrote to his patron, Thomas Cromwell, attacking the new bishop of Coventry and Lichfield as 'a papist, and idolator and a fleshy priest'. (3) While it would be absurd in an account of Henrician religious politics to give equal prominence to all the bishops, there is a somewhat idiosyncratic coverage in Chibi's text, in particular in the attention devoted to John Stokesley of London (116 index entries, as opposed to 81 for Cranmer, 74 for Gardiner, 53 for the longer-serving archbishop of York, Edward Lee).

The prominence of Stokesley (died 1539), points to what is a significant weakness of the book: namely, its unbalanced chronological coverage. While the politics of Henry's first three decades are treated in some detail, only ten pages are allocated to 'the final years of the reign' (that is, the 1540s). This is unfortunate, as recent research is underlining the extent to which this decade was in many ways a fulcrum of the English Reformation, and very far from being a flat landscape of religious 'reaction'. (4) Chibi's brief epitome (p. 239) that after 1543 religious conflict 'degenerated into more personal confrontations between Gardiner and Cranmer, and their supporters' hardly does justice to the issues at stake. Similarly, the contention (ibid.) that 'in any case, there was little or no wider impact to their bickering and both men survived into the reign of Queen Mary' will strike most scholars of the period as evasive, to say the least. This reviewer was disappointed that the book had so little to say about the episcopal appointments of the 1540s - Bulkely, Bush, Chambers, Day, Holbeach, King, Kitchen, Knight, Thirlby, Wakeman. These individuals are seen to merit little more than a couple of lines each, and are brusquely summed up (p. 235) as 'mostly conservative non-entities and men who would not cause trouble'. There is a missed opportunity here to probe and test such conventional assessments, and to add to the scholarship by providing a more rounded account of the stewardship of Henry VIII's church in its final phase.

Perhaps there is another missed opportunity as well. Arguably, the most important thing about Henry VIII's bishops was that they were *Henry VIII's* bishops. Yet the king himself is a distinctly shadowy presence throughout this book. We get little sense of bishops' individual relationships with Henry, the processes by which they came to his attention, or the position that episcopacy itself occupied in Henry VIII's decidedly quirky vision of the Church. In the conclusion (p. 259), Chibi states his opinion that Henry VIII found it irksome not only to determine 'intricate details', but also 'to keep an eye on the bigger picture': 'In the absence of the king's leadership, the bishops did the best they could'. This is highly questionable. Much recent research has stressed Henry's intense investment in the creation and defence of the royal supremacy, his personal involvement in the campaign against 'idolatry' and 'superstition', his animus against the

religious houses, his horror of sacramentarian heresy. This was a king who rated his own theological prowess, annotating in great and critical detail the *Bishops' Book* of 1537, and presiding over the trial of John Lambert in 1538. In contenting itself with such an off-stage role for Henry, this book threatens to give us Hamlet without the Prince.

Nonetheless, there is much here that historians of the Tudor church will find useful and interesting. Of particular value is the very full set of appendices, with tables adumbrating the social and regional origins of all the bishops, their education, office-holding and royal service. Pre-empting the New *DNB*, helpful summary biographies are provided for all Henry's bishops, from Aldrich to Wolsey.

Notes

1. Richard Rex, *Henry VIII and the English Reformation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 42.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. James G. Clark, ed., *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2002). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Philip Hughes, *The Reformation in England*, 3 vols (London: Hollis and Carter, 1950-54), i, 266n. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For example, Alec Ryrie's *The Gospel and Henry VIII: Evangelicals in the Early English Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).[Back to \(4\)](#)

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