

Shaping the Nation. England 1360–1461

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Author:

Gerald Harriss

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Nigel Saul

For medievalists, the long-awaited appearance of Gerald Harriss's volume in the New Oxford History of England constitutes a major publishing event. In this superb study a leading academic historian, K. B. McFarlane's successor at Magdalen, offers an authoritative summing-up of a period which saw medieval England transformed. Harriss's *magnum opus*, a 700-page tome, is at once eloquent, magisterial and thought-provoking. It is a work of awesome scholarship. It will be turned to as an essential work of reference for decades to come.

Shaping the Nation covers a period which was divided in the old Oxford History of England between two volumes, McKisack's on the fourteenth century and Jacob's on fifteenth. The New Oxford History of England, in the conception of the late John Roberts, effects a conscious break with the old chronological structures. Where, for the most part, the earlier volumes mapped directly onto the centuries, the new ones cut across them. For the late middle ages the old periodisation had something to be said for it. If only by coincidence, key turning points, such as the outbreak of the Scottish wars or the deposition of Richard II, came just as one century gave way to another. The dates on which John Roberts has settled for the new series, however, have a certain logic to them too. Gerald Harriss's book opens with the Treaty of Brétigny, which brought to a close the first phase of the Hundred Years War, and finishes with the deposition of Henry VI and the accession of the Yorkist dynasty. Arguably, a better concluding point would have been the battle of Bosworth in 1485, which saw the restoration of a measure of political stability. To have asked the author to cover the whole of the Wars of the Roses, however, would have been to make a long book even longer. Certainly there appears nothing unnatural in the dates chosen for Dr Harriss; on the contrary, his interpretative scheme gives the period an intellectual coherence of its own.

Like the other contributors to the New Oxford History, Gerald Harriss has written a book significantly different from those it replaces. Most obviously, the structure of the volume is more strongly thematic. The old Oxford Histories were essentially narrative-driven. Thematic chapters periodically interrupted the narrative to explore aspects of social and cultural history; it was the narrative, however, which provided both the backbone and the structure. The arrangement and structure are otherwise here. Gerald Harriss's book divides very clearly into two parts – the first part strongly thematic, analysing the economy, religious movements, and the working of political life, and the second, 'Men and Events', providing the narrative of high politics: the earlier part considerably exceeding the latter in length. The effect is to produce a crossways-by-lengthways structure. The balance which Harriss has chosen to strike shows his keen appreciation of the interest now taken by historians in analysing social and political structures. At the same time, Harriss reveals his alertness to the modern agenda more generally in his readiness to engage with issues of contemporary debate. A striking number of his paragraphs, particularly in Part I, begin with rhetorical questions. By the use of this device he offers the reader a commentary on almost every issue on which an opinion is likely to be sought. Harriss shows himself well aware of the expectation that the Oxford History should offer an authoritative summing-up of the state of play in the field.

It is worth comparing Harriss's volume not only with the ones it replaces but also with his own earlier work on the period. Over the years, a broad consistency has informed Harriss's interpretations of the later middle ages. Harriss has long seen the period as a deeply significant one in the emergence of the English state. By the fourteenth century, he has argued, a political community had emerged in which the crown, the symbol of national identity, and the council, advising the king, and parliament, the voice of the national community, all worked together for the common good. The main factor instrumental in promoting this development was the realm's involvement in war. Under the impact of near-continuous warfare in Scotland and France from the 1290s and the consequent imposition of national taxation, the political relationships were forged which underpinned the English state until their dissolution in Charles I's reign. Harriss first articulated this view at length in *King, Parliament and Public Finance in Medieval England to 1369* (Oxford, 1975) and he has repeated it in many later works. In the present study, however, it is a view which is subjected to a measure of qualification. In place of the strongly consensual emphasis in Harriss's earlier work, there now appears a recognition of tension and division. In Harriss's current view, the opposition between the two principal theories of political authority made for debate, tension and instability. With one conception holding that kings derived their authority from God, and were thus not answerable to their subjects, and the other seeing them exercising authority in trust from the people, there was bound to be disagreement about how kings exercised their rule and how far they could be held to account. In practice in England, as the lawyer Sir John Fortescue recognised, a mixed monarchy had emerged. Nonetheless, the tensions between the two positions were never erased, and, as Harriss argues, in some reigns, notably Richard II's, they gave rise to violent dispute. A recognition of the potential for tension and division is also evident in Harriss's discussion of the character of gentry politics. In 1981, when he introduced an edition of McFarlane's papers, he viewed the magnate affinity as a stabilising influence and 'a powerful regulator of social behaviour'.⁽¹⁾ Twenty years later, however, he is not so sure. Influenced by the late Simon Walker's work on John of Gaunt's affinity, he allows for the potentially disruptive effects of magnate lordship and for the tensions apt to develop between those within retinues and those without.⁽²⁾ Highly doubtful that magnate affinities included all the politically significant in local society, he sees local faction as arising in many cases from the resentments of the excluded against the well-connected. At one point Harriss goes further, arguing for a tension between the public and the private aspects of the gentry's authority as a local magistracy. In a period when, as he points out, there was no salaried local bureaucracy, it was inevitable that the crown should harness the private jurisdictional power of the county elites. Yet the unfortunate by-product of this system was the hijacking of public power by private interest. Recognition of this point is implicit in Harriss's eloquent introduction to McFarlane's papers. In *Shaping the Nation*, however, the point is more explicit. The emphasis, so strong in Harriss's earlier work, on the medieval emergence of the public aspect of the English state is now more qualified. Private is seen to co-exist at all levels with public.

A major strength of Harriss's work has always been his ability to judge royal government in the light of the

expectations that contemporaries had of it. The same strength is evident again in this book. Harriss shows himself as well versed in the literature of political punditry – the ‘mirrors for princes’ literature and associated moralistic writings – as in the records of the chancery, household and exchequer. He uses these writings to brilliant effect to lay bare the body of ideas and assumptions which governed the working of contemporary political life. Throughout the book he lays emphasis on the responsibilities resting on a king, the channel for God’s rule and the head which gives strength and direction to the body politic. Yet, alongside this, he highlights the obligation which lay on the nobility, as major stakeholders in the kingdom, to advise the king dispassionately in the common good. Harriss’s political narrative in the second half of the book never loses sight of this conceptual framework. For this reason, his interpretations of political history transcend the narrow ‘politics of faction’ approach to focus on rival ideas of how the common good might be attained. It is an approach which invests what might otherwise appear the somewhat sterile and pointless debates of the late middle ages with a meaning beyond the contingent and the personal.

Lest it appear that Harriss’s book is concerned almost exclusively with politics, it should be stressed that this is a study of quite exceptional range and depth. Virtually every aspect of England’s late medieval experience is subjected to review. A long opening section discusses the court, the nobility and gentry, the culture of the upper classes, war and the role of chivalry, and the character and consequences of ‘bastard feudalism’. The next section, headed ‘Work and worship’, offers a wide-ranging discussion of population change, urban decline, agrarian society, overseas trade, the institutional church and popular piety. The quality and sophistication of these chapters attest Harriss’s mastery of a range of subjects extending far beyond those on which he has written hitherto. Harriss, moreover, interprets his brief to write about English history with commendable liberality. Complementing the central discussion of England are equally effective discussions of Wales, Scotland and Ireland. It would be difficult to improve on his review of developments in fifteenth-century Wales, when the retreat of English influence paved the way for the emergence of a powerful native squirearchy. No less valuable is his analysis of Normandy under the English occupation (drawing here on Christopher Allmand’s work), an episode normally bypassed in accounts of English history.

The only area, indeed, which can be said to suffer a measure of neglect is art history, in particular the history of manuscript art. The history of the elite culture of the court is given as much coverage as it is reasonable to expect in a general history of this sort. Thus Harriss offers some illuminating observations on the work of Chaucer and Gower in the context of the culture of Richard II’s courtly entourage. He also offers some excellent, if all too brief, remarks on architecture and the rise of the Perpendicular style. To the history of painting, however, he accords virtually no consideration at all. His account of the Wilton Diptych interprets this iconic image solely in the context of Richard II’s ideas of kingship. He attempts no accompanying discussion of the artistic background to the work, nor of what, if anything, its legacy might have been. The discussion stands in a vacuum. The possible influence of the Italianate-looking Bohun manuscripts of the 1360s is not considered, while the fifteenth century’s supreme works, the Sherborne Missal, the Beaufort/Beauchamp Hours and the Bedford Hours, are not mentioned at all. This omission points to a larger oversight on Harriss’s part. He unfortunately expresses no view on whether or not English culture was in decline in the late middle ages. A long art-historical tradition maintains that culturally England became something of a backwater after 1400. The late fourteenth-century flowering of the arts associated with Richard II’s court petered out under his austere Lancastrian successors. Chaucer and Gower found no successors of comparable stature among the hack poetasters of the fifteenth century, while manuscript illumination went into decline until the reception of Netherlandish influence in Edward IV’s reign. English art, in other words, became insular, cut adrift from the European mainstream. Harriss touches on the general question of English isolationism in his conclusion. He ventures to suggest that England’s expulsion from France in the 1450s encouraged the development of a more inward-looking mentality. He does not, however, review this hypothesis in the light of debates about alleged English cultural decline. Very possibly, his book was too close to completion by the time of the Victoria and Albert Museum’s major exhibition ‘Gothic: Art for England, 1400–1547’, which suggested an alternative reading of the evidence.⁽³⁾ The lavish display in this exhibition might be interpreted as lending support to the notion that English art was not so much inferior to continental art of the period as simply different; English patrons of the day looked for different aesthetic qualities from their counterparts across the Channel. It would have been good to have had Harriss’s

reflections on the issues raised by the exhibition. Certainly, whatever view is taken of the cultural achievement of the period is bound to affect our view of its achievement as a whole.

More generally, how does Harriss see the achievement of the century from Brétigny to the Wars of the Roses? For the most part, Harriss's judgement is positive. While recognising that aspects of the period are off-putting – the grisly background of plague and disease and, after 1399, growing political instability – he nonetheless takes a generally optimistic view of developments. He believes that the changes in agrarian organisation in the wake of the demographic collapse, by promoting the rise of the yeomanry or lesser squirearchy, made for a more broadly based and self-conscious proprietorial class. He also believes that the widening of the political elite to embrace the gentry, merchants and professionals, men with a range of wealth and experience, contributed in the long term to political stability. Despite the problem of dynastic conflict, he believes, society still responded well to structures of self-regulation. Even in the towns, where tensions sometimes erupted into dissent, it was possible for the elites to contain and respond to the aspirations of the lower orders.

Might Harriss's view, however, perhaps be considered a little too rosy? Nowhere in the conclusion does he touch on an issue which surfaces periodically in the book, the growing bankruptcy of the crown. At roughly the time that Henry VI's reign drew to a close, the crown's debts and arrears amounted to a whopping £372,000. In a typical year the ordinary revenues of the crown totalled a mere £5,000, although a grant of the moveables levy could raise this sum by £20,000 per annum or so. In the closing phase of the French war only Cardinal Beaufort's hardly disinterested generosity prevented the crown from collapsing into total insolvency. The origins of the crown's problems lay in the over-ambitious war to win the French crown on which Henry V had embarked in 1417. Territorial conquest, a much bolder strategy than the chevauchée campaigning of the fourteenth century, involved demands on the state far greater than it could support. Not only were the English armies over-extended in the field, the financial resources available to support them were woefully inadequate. Had Henry V and his successors been able to tap substantial new sources of income, such as the booming cloth trade, the position might well have been different. However, the crown never so much as embarked on the attempt. Over the years, royal income first stagnated and then fell. War on the massive scale which Henry V conceived with the conquest of Normandy was in the long run unsustainable. The consequences for the crown's finances were disastrous. More than that, the underlying stability of English political life was subverted. The strategy of waging external war in partnership with the nobility had been the principal means by which kings had achieved internal harmony and stability. War had the beneficial effect of uniting the king and nobility in an endeavour which appealed to them both. Are we entitled to conclude, then, that the goal of internal stability could only have been achieved at the cost of bankrupting the crown? This is an issue which may be said to invite consideration in any general history of late medieval England; yet it is not considered here. When Dr Harriss has given us so much else in this wonderful book, however, it may simply be churlish (and certainly greedy) to beg for more.

Notes

1. K. B. McFarlane, *England in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. G. L. Harriss (1981), p. xv.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. S. Walker, *The Lancastrian Affinity 1361–1399* (Oxford, 1990).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. *Gothic: Art for England 1400–1547*, ed. R. Marks and P. Williamson (London, 2003).[Back to \(3\)](#)

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