

Henry VII

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A new book on Henry VII is a major event. The last full-length study of the king and his reign, by S. B. Chrimes, was written in 1972, in a very different historiographical world. At that time, the explosion of interest in later-medieval history was still in its infancy, and the decades after 1485 were seen mainly through the lens of the 'Tudor Revolution in Government'. Since then, many things have happened to alter our understanding of Henry VII's life and times. The fifteenth century has become one of the most widely and minutely studied periods of medieval history, and ingrained assumptions concerning the precariousness of Plantagenet authority have been eroded; the Elton view of the early Tudors has been substantially battered and reshaped; and medievalists have broken through the ramparts of early modernity to comment critically on Henry VII's achievements. Meanwhile, if the first of the Tudors remains a rather unloved and unfashionable king, he is newly imprinted on the national consciousness as a doyen of the AS-level syllabus (virtually inescapable, whichever Board you go for). These trends have produced a great expansion of interest in Henry's reign, which began in earnest in the 1990s. So far, this has produced a heap of new information and many new perspectives, but no substantial new synthesis. Sean Cunningham, who has been studying the reign for a decade and a half, is ideally placed to draw things together in a work shaped by his own extensive researches. His eagerly-awaited book unquestionably moves things forward.

Cunningham's starting-point is the king's shadowy reputation, which is shadowy in two senses. On the one hand, it is enigmatic, and under-explored, since Henry VII is often seen through the impersonal medium of his administrative and fiscal measures. On the other, it is not entirely reputable, as Henry is also remembered as a hard-faced miser whose rule edged so close to tyranny that his death brought talk of Magna Carta and

the arrest of his leading ministers. Cunningham's aim is to look beyond the institutional record, both positive and negative, to the man himself. He seeks to understand and explain the king's authoritarian and centralising policies, and to place his controversial measures in the context of his personality and experiences. The book therefore moves swiftly to a four-chapter narrative of Henry's life and reign, before covering Henry's governance of the realm more thematically in a further seven chapters. A conclusion, including a sketch of today's research on the reign, completes the volume.

Cunningham's narrative begins with a deft account of Henry's early life up to Bosworth, which contains few surprises, but is distinctive in making him the Lancastrian dynastic champion from as early as the deaths of Henry VI and his son Edward in May 1471. While he sees Richard III's usurpation as decisive in creating new opportunities for Henry, Cunningham also notes the tensions which arose from his mixed base of support: the alliance between Henry and the network of disaffected Edwardians was a marriage of convenience, and may have been threatened by the addition of the staunchly Lancastrian earl of Oxford to the king's party in late 1484. These cracks in the Tudor entourage form a theme which runs throughout the ensuing narrative: Henry, the man whom no-one apart from his mother and his uncle really knew, was backed by an uneasy alliance of former Lancastrians and pre-1483 Yorkists. From the moment that the splendid victory at Bosworth won Henry the throne, this unstable group was complicated further by the addition of former Ricardians, both cool administrators like the Edwardian ministers who had remained in office after Richard's usurpation, and lords and gentlemen, whose associations with the last Yorkist king went back rather further. Small wonder, in Cunningham's view, that the king proved so vulnerable to Yorkist plotting in the years ahead.

The narrative of the reign is accomplished in three chapters, and these form one of the principal achievements of the book. For the first time, Henry's travails with pretenders, his dealings with foreign rulers, and the rhythms of domestic policy and governmental reform are treated at decent length, all together and in a chronological format. Cunningham's division of the reign into three sections works very well indeed. First there are the years of establishment, 1485-9, in which the king set up his regime, operating in a broadly traditional way, relying as far as possible on his most tried supporters, but offering quarter to anyone who would work with him. He responded dynamically to the major rising of 1487, and showed mercy to many participants (even to one of its central figures-Lambert Simnel). By 1489, he had forged links with the duke of Brittany and the Catholic Monarchs of Spain; he had a Yorkist wife and a legitimate son, and was able to mop up the Yorkshire rebellion of that April with no difficulty. The king's early years, then, were a success.

But the picture was about to change, and Cunningham's next chapter deals with the 1490s and the powerful impact of the Warbeck conspiracy on Henry's rule. This conspiracy is shown to have arisen from three main forces: the designs of John Taylor, a former servant of the duke of Clarence; the desire of a succession of foreign rulers to cause problems for Henry (beginning with the French, who were responding to the king's interventions on behalf of Brittany); and the alienation of former Yorkists, as Henry's better-trusted agents began to expand operations at their expense. In a compelling, if rather complex, narrative, Cunningham shows how very serious the threat from Warbeck was, reminding us that his identity was uncertain, and pointing out that only bad weather prevented a substantial landing in East Anglia in the summer of 1495. Not until the end of 1496 did Henry begin to get convincingly on top of the situation, and just a few months later he faced a massive rebellion in the South West while his main forces were poised on the Scottish border. Throughout the 1490s, it seems that the king had just enough solid support to face down those who betrayed him and to manage those who wavered; while his reliance on a narrowing circle may have been alienating to those outside, it appears to have given him the backing he needed. Simply by surviving, he emerged from the 1490s greatly strengthened, and it is telling that it was only in 1499, after Warbeck's capture, that the Spanish finally agreed to the long-planned marriage of Catherine to Prince Arthur; the future of Henry's regime seemed secure in a way that it never had before.

In fact, however, 1499 proved a false dawn, as the final narrative chapter shows. Between 1499 and 1504, Henry suffered another series of disasters which drove him into more desperate political and fiscal expedients, and left him looking even more vulnerable than before. By the spring of 1503, two of his three

sons and his wife were dead, he himself had begun to show signs of sickness, and the newly-rebellious earl of Suffolk had fled to safety at the court of the Emperor. The remaining years of the reign were tense indeed, as the king raised fantastic sums to buy off Maximilian, and the moral authority of his government dwindled. A stroke of luck brought Suffolk into his hands in 1506, but the earl's younger brothers, also Yorkist claimants, remained overseas, and the king's increasing illness meant that diplomacy was less well-managed and royal agents were less well-supervised. The situation in London was reaching boiling point by 1509, when Henry's death, and the succession of his young heir, at last brought relief. In a series of moves, about which Cunningham might have said a little more, Henry VIII and his advisers released the pressure that had built up over the previous decade while preserving the royal network and the other essential achievements of Henry VII's rule.

The remainder of the book, slightly more than half, looks at Henry's rule of the realm. A long chapter surveys the ideologies, practices, and frameworks of royal government. Succeeding chapters discuss a variety of issues and problems: the power-structures of the English localities; the royal networks focused on court and council; the security policies for which the king is so famous-bonds and recognisances, measures against retaining; relations with the church and the city of London; the rule of Wales and Ireland; economics, trade, and the armed forces. These chapters are packed with information, some of it new and most of it helpful. For this reviewer, the real highlights were the discussions of local politics in Kent, the North West and East Anglia, which are skilfully done and eminently persuasive: we know all too little about the rule of the localities under Henry VII, but it is a crucial area, and Cunningham's chapter, which rests on his own research, makes an excellent addition to what can be learned from the works of Christine Carpenter, Tony Pollard, Dominic Lockett, and others. Towards the end of the book, the logic of the treatment becomes rather mysterious-it is not quite clear why the church, trade, and London are the principal constituents of 'The King's Nation', or why 'Projecting Tudor Influence' plays host to the army, Wales, and Ireland-but, as a whole, the second half adds up to a pretty comprehensive picture of politics, government, and political society in the period of the reign.

If there is a central theme to this section, it is perhaps-as Margaret Condon proposed in a famous essay (1)-the crucial role of councils and councillors in Henry VII's regime. In Cunningham's convincing view, Henry's smallish group of trusted councillors provided him with a network of highly-skilled administrators, who could generate new policy and manage its implementation without intensive royal oversight. Their intimacy with a king who became more remote from the early 1490s made them key figures in the mediation of royal power, enabling them to enrich themselves and direct the affairs of all those who sought royal favour. Their combination of roles-not just go-betweens, policy wonks, and record-keepers, but judges and financial managers-gave them political mastery, and they quickly developed new and connected mechanisms for managing the wider realm: the rapid and flexible justice of council and chancery; the use of bonds to enforce compliance and good behaviour; a network of royal officers, known to the councillors and bound over to fulfil their roles efficiently, to rule the localities through licensed retinues and the authority derived from connection to the centre. The oppressive tendency of this structure bound its participants together until very late in the reign, when, Cunningham suggests, a group comprising Surrey, Fox, Lovell, and Warham began to distance themselves from the activities of Empson, Dudley, and the Council Learned in the Law. Henry had succeeded in creating a curiously effective and neatly-self-perpetuating power structure-not without costs, as the recurrent dissidence of those beneath and outside it demonstrated, but strong enough to prevail, and to provide the bedrock of the Tudor state.

As a work of synthesis, this book has many strengths-it is learned, moderate, and respectful of the work of other historians: this most controversial of kings is treated in a remarkably uncontroversial way. At the same time, however, it does feel slightly shapeless, and I wonder if the author's desire to avoid argument is part of the problem. Cunningham treads very carefully: the battle of Bosworth might have been here, or it might have been there; Perkin Warbeck might have been the man named in his confession, or he might have been someone else, or he might even have been Richard of York; Henry VII might have been trying to undermine the power of lords, or he might simply have been trying to manage it better; his misfortunes might have arisen from dynastic opposition, or from foreign interference, or from the results of his own policies;

retaining might have been a menace, or it might have been something the king needed to preserve; the king ruled with a group of like-minded councillors, but 'it was entirely Henry VII's personality that shaped and directed the course of the reign' (p. 285). Sometimes these debates do not matter, but, if so, we might reasonably expect to be told that. More often, the situation is genuinely complicated—on the one hand, this; on the other, that—and then a clear synthesis of conflicting positions would help us understand. To take the Warbeck example, what the reader really needs to know is that virtually none of his contemporaries could be sure that he was not Richard of York and that, consequently, Henry, his regime, and his opponents had to behave as if they were dealing with the son of the last fully effective and legitimate king of England: this is implicit in Cunningham's treatment, but it is not *explicit*. Equally, it would have been very helpful to academic historians to see a reasoned response to Christine Carpenter's memorable criticism of Henry VII, as a king ruling a still-medieval polity whose needs he largely failed to understand (2). One senses that Cunningham disagrees with this view, but it would have been nice to see him make a case against it. *Did* Henry misjudge the power-structures of his realm? If he did, why did he? What were the results of these misjudgements, and how much did they matter? Was the realm still 'medieval', in the intended sense of being dominated by networks of aristocratic lordship? Cunningham could answer all these questions, and there are indications of his views throughout the book, but, because questions like these are not posed, or dealt with systematically, there is a certain lack of clarity and conclusiveness in his treatment. Much of this, no doubt, is due to the demands of the series in which the book appears. The blurb for Routledge Historical Biographies promises 'engaging, readable and academically credible biographies', 'accessible accounts [which] will bring important historical figures to life'. This seems to have meant a strict limit on the footnotes, which is a real loss given Cunningham's extensive knowledge of the sources and the substantial amount of fresh material he presents. It also means an emphasis on the personal, in that the king's motivations and experiences have to be placed at the centre of the book; and it has probably meant less engagement with the historical and historiographical context of Henry's reign, because 'general readers' are not supposed to find these interesting.

There are two other criticisms I would make along these lines. The first concerns the background to Henry VII's reign. Although Cunningham provides a good account of pre-1485 political events, at least as they bore upon Henry Tudor, his handling of the broader context of the fifteenth century—the workings of the later-medieval polity, the dynamics of the civil wars, the European situation, even the patterns and events of Edward IV's reign—is sketchy and often challengeable. Cunningham talks rather too readily about 'a century [before 1485] of noble squabbling over the crown' (p.4), and the nobility in his account are generally rather a nuisance, squabbling over royal patronage and behaving in an overmighty fashion. While this negative impression is palliated by occasional reminders that 'noble power underpinned so much of royal power' (p. 165), and/or by noting that the nobility could pull together to try to restore order, there is little recognition that the pre-1485 political order could work perfectly well, and no sympathetic explanation of why it was structured as it was. This is a pity, as it was precisely this blind-spot among historians of the later-fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that prompted the medievalists' critique of Henry VII in the 1990s, and it does not tally well with the way that historians of the rest of the fifteenth century think about the polity (Cunningham's statement, on p. 121, that today's historians regard the works of Fortescue as a starting-point for the study of late-medieval political and constitutional ideas is seriously misleading—both historiographically, since most medievalists regard Fortescue as a problematic witness, and historically, as his works were far from neutral and written in the context of prolonged political crisis). In my view, Cunningham does not pay enough attention to why the political system broke down in the 1450s, or to how it developed in the 1460s and 70s. The latter is a surprising omission, given how frequently the reigns of Edward IV and Henry VII have been compared with each other, but it is also an important one, because the polity Henry inherited had been significantly reshaped by recurrent civil war and by the ways in which successive regimes had responded to it. Cunningham makes various references to how Henry VII built on Edward IV's achievements, and/or avoided some of his misjudgements, but he does not give any focused consideration to the changes in royal government and noble power that took place in the Yorkist period, and which help to explain not only the strengths and weaknesses of Henry's situation, but also the solutions he and his ministers adopted. It is not reasonable to call Henry's reign 'the important transition between the political disorder of the Wars of the Roses and the strident, confident Tudor monarchies that followed him'

(p. 285) without considering what that political disorder had been about, and what transitions had already taken place before Henry came to rule.

Explaining these disorders and transitions means engaging with underlying structures, and that would be my final criticism of this book: it concentrates more on personalities, conscious motivations, and events than the underlying patterns and frameworks that shape them. Once again, no doubt, this is a consequence of the biographical format, and-to be fair-Cunningham scarcely ignores patterns of cause and effect, and writes shrewdly about both such things as the causes and the consequences of Henry's narrowing circle of friends, or the dilemmas of governing the localities without recourse to unreliable local potentates. But it seems to me that many of these ideas could be taken further, and that insufficient attention has been given to structural factors. I would pick out three of these: the interpenetration of insular, 'British', and European political conflicts; the erosion of political confidence by recurrent political instability; the interaction of the whole political order-commons and urban elites as well as greater and lesser landowners-with the dynamics of civil war and the policies associated with 'new monarchy'.

As Cliff Davies has pointed out (3), the struggles that affected England in the later-fifteenth century were, in part, the product of a process of state-making in the overlapping polities of North-Western Europe. While parts of the political map had certainly solidified by 1485, other parts had not, and the position of Brittany, Ireland, Scotland and much of the area between Normandy and Holland was highly uncertain. The development of powerful state machineries made intervention at the highest level-through pensioned counsellors, dynastic challengers, diplomatic treaties, permanent ambassadors-more important than ever; yet the territorial power of regional princes, itself sometimes state-like, meant that it was not only kings who were part of this great game. This larger context must explain Henry VII's travails just as much as the local dynastic cleavage or the king's own policies and their results: Kildare and the other Anglo-Irish lords, the lieutenant of Calais and his establishment, Lincoln and the other de la Poles, Warwick, Bergavenny, and the heirs of Northumberland and Buckingham were part of a complex politics that transcended national boundaries, and their loyalties and calculations must have been forged against that wider canvas too. Cunningham is far from blind to the international context, perceptively casting the Simnel affair as 'the Irish invasion', for instance, and treating Henry's policies towards Wales, Ireland, and foreign powers at some length, but, in my view, he could have done more to explore the interplay of English, British, and European frameworks and the permeability of the boundaries between them: there is a fundamental explanation for the insecurity of the Henrician regime here, and it is not really acknowledged in this book.

Loyalties were challenged from another direction too: the eroding effects of several decades of political instability (Edward IV's achievement having been thwarted by his early death). Cunningham tends to assume that dynastic identities are strong and heartfelt. In his reading, Henry was essentially a Lancastrian and could only attract fragile loyalties from former Yorkists, especially former Ricardians; when Yorkist alternatives appeared-Lincoln/Simnel, Warbeck, Warwick, even Suffolk-these men readily returned to their natural allegiance. I think this is a stage too simple. Dynastic associations were certainly not meaningless, because they were woven into social networks and the memories of families, but they must have been heavily qualified-by habits of obedience to the crown (and structures of power and authority which generally made that obedience prudent), by the forging of new relationships, and by changing political circumstances. The blank slate which Henry VII presented to his new kingdom in 1485 was a tremendous asset, as (in a more limited way) it had been to the nineteen-year-old Edward IV in 1461; his mixed court, of old Lancastrians, former Edwardians, and pardoned Ricardians, was a normal and potentially effective power-base. If Henry came to face betrayals by a succession of former Yorkists, this was not because they thought someone else was the true king, but because they were more likely to be approached by plotters, because they feared Henry's mistrust, and/or because they thought his regime might collapse and had to balance the dangers of defying their former associates against the dangers of betraying their vulnerable master. Henry's subjects had lived through decades in which adaptability was essential, and it was this very quality-not deep-seated loyalties-which made them so tricky to manage in the 1480s and 90s. Only when the new dispensation had proved itself unshakeable, and a new generation had grown up under it, would stronger loyalties develop-and then they would tend to focus on the king, as had been the case before the civil wars.

A third general problem facing Henry's regime lay in the complex dialogue between government and political society in what was evidently an era of change for both. In the second half of the fifteenth century, the structures that had supported 'bastard feudal' lordship were breaking down: noble descents and aristocratic networks were many times disrupted; the crown became better able to attract and manage gentry allegiances; the judicial order was changing. These developments both arose from and stimulated royal policy, and the general effect of all this change was to increase disorder and uncertainty: not only because he was a usurper, but simply because he was king at this time, Henry VII was unable and unwilling to use the traditional means of local rule, and had therefore to pay the price of deploying and developing non-traditional ones. Meanwhile, the systems of taxation and representation hammered out between c.1215 and c.1370 were no longer easily workable. Once again, this was the complex result of royal action and changing circumstances; once again, it encouraged or forced the king into devices that destabilized the fiscal and political relationship with the mass of his subjects. Out of all this radical social and political change came the welling dissatisfaction which is apparent not only in the popular risings of 1489 and 1497, but also in the politics of upper-class rebellion and in the policy initiatives of the government and its critics. Henry VII should be neither praised nor blamed for his role in these processes: he was not the genius designer of a new order; nor was he a fool who failed to understand that he was ruling a still-medieval polity. Rather, the king and his ministers-for let's remember that this was a joint effort-were men living in a time of rapid and general discursive, ideological, institutional, and socio-political change, and this underlying dynamic should play an important part in explaining both their successes and their failures.

To conclude, then, I think that a more collected analysis of broader structures and dynamics might have increased the value of this book, but it would certainly be wrong to underplay its importance. Sean Cunningham has given us a superb narrative of Henry VII's reign; he has brought lots of fresh evidence to light; his book is full of thought-provoking insights and ideas; and he has particularly striking things to say about the localities, bonds and recognisances, and the politics of London. His *Henry VII* is a hefty achievement, and a goldmine for anyone interested in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Notes

1. M. M. Condon, 'Ruling Elites in the Reign of Henry VII' in *Patronage, Pedigree and Power*, ed. C. D. Ross (Gloucester, 1979), 109-42. [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. C. Carpenter, 'Henry VII and the English Polity', in *The Reign of Henry VII*, ed. B. Thompson (Stamford, 1995), 11-30. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. C. S. L. Davies, 'The Wars of the Roses in European Context', in *The Wars of the Roses*, ed. A. J. Pollard (Basingstoke, 1995), 162-85. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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