

HENRY VII. Sean Cunningham. 2006. Routledge Historical Biographies, London, £10.99 (pbk); £45.00 (hbk). ISBN 0-415-26621-1; 0-415-26628-3 (hbk).

The publication of a new scholarly biography of Henry VII (the first for nearly twenty-five years) is something of a landmark for students of the period. Sean Cunningham's biography, while not without its faults, is a major achievement and should now be recognised as the standard work on the first Tudor king. First, it should be made clear that this is a work of biography, principally about Henry himself and not about the development of the early Tudor polity or about the nature of the government of the realm. The king, therefore, takes centre stage. It is Henry who is portrayed as architect of his regime; similarly, the author suggests that the nature of the early Tudor polity can only be understood through an understanding of the character and aims of the king himself. The book begins with a four-chapter narrative of Henry's life. His formative years in exile are expertly covered, while Cunningham's account of the establishment of the regime, the king's relations with foreign powers, his tribulations with various pretenders to the throne, and the obscure politics of Henry's last decade provide the best narrative we have of the reign to date. A further seven chapters deal with aspects of the reign thematically, looking at the nature of early Tudor institutions of government, Henry's governance of the realm, the relationship between the government at Westminster and the localities, the church, and a very useful section of Henry's relations with London.

The picture of Henrician government that emerges is one very different to our familiar image of late-medieval England. Cunningham's Henry VII, I suspect, will be more recognisable to scholars of Tudor England (or even continental Europe) than those brought up in the McFarlane tradition of fifteenth-century England. Very early in his reign Henry, we are told, 'felt he had to rule through enforcement rather than consensus' (p. 42). This may seem a curious assertion, given what we know about the importance of aristocratic networks in the successful enforcement of royal justice, lordship and the waging of war. Nevertheless, Henry's suspicion and willingness to develop new methods of government to enforce his authority are recurrent features throughout the book, but the author seems reluctant to take this a stage further and engage with the extent to which Henry's reign transformed the underlying structures by which England was governed. Tudor government appears, by 1500, to have been dictatorial: it had by the 1500s, for instance, 'tipped the balance of Tudor judicial policy towards repression and tyranny' (p. 153). But if this was really the case something monumental had happened to alter fundamentally the nature of the English polity. This is a big issue and something for which the book does not provide a really satisfactory answer. Equally, some may question the extent of the king's ability to personally shape the nature of that polity. We are told that 'it was entirely Henry VII's personality that shaped and directed the course of the reign' (p. 285). To an extent, inasmuch as the king controlled increasing amounts of royal patronage, this is true, but recent work by John Watts and others has drawn attention to the importance of Henry's counsellors (especially lawyers and churchmen) in imparting a different flavour to the reign from its predominantly aristocratic predecessors. Cunningham is, of course, aware of this, but the argument is not sufficiently developed.

This said, there is much in this book to be savoured. Cunningham synthesises existing work by Carpenter, Luckett and others on Henry's relations with the localities and complements this with his own research on Lancashire and Kent. Similarly, he is able to draw on his considerable expertise in the archive to give a nuanced account of the role of obligations, recognisances and bonds in the government of the realm. The book hints at the tensions created in Henry's court and government in the latter years of the reign, as the king, wracked by illness, distanced himself from his servants. The origins of the struggle which came to the fore on the king's death with the execution of Empson and Dudley are traced, although I suspect much more can be made of the dynamics of political conflict late in the reign (conflict which occurred within the king's court and household circle, rather than, as before, between the king and his supporters on the one hand and supporters of the various Yorkist pretenders on the other).

The late Sir Geoffrey Elton steadfastly refused to write a biography of Thomas Cromwell, stating that the historian 'should not write biography – or at least should not suppose that in writing biography he is writing history' (G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History*, 2nd edn. Oxford 2002, p. 124). Cunningham's *Henry VII* is a brave attempt to combine the narrative style of biography with the analytical style of a history. That said, the book's shortcomings, highlighted above, arise principally from its biographical format. Not all of these are of the author's making: the lack of footnotes will infuriate many scholarly readers, while the at times clumsy inclusion of chapters on church, trade and the defence of the realm smacks of a publisher's *diktat*. Nevertheless, this book shows just how much are our understanding of the king and the reign has

come since Stanley Chrimes published his 'biography' (a book in which the king himself was strangely absent) in 1972. Henry remains one of the most elusive and controversial of English kings, but Cunningham has provided a new and most welcome synthesis, and one from which to conduct further research. As such it deserves to be read by everyone interested in the period.

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First published in *The Ricardian* Vol. 18 2008.

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