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Tudors

The History of England Volume II

Written by Peter Ackroyd

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Peter Ackroyd

THE HISTORY OF ENGLAND

Volume II

TUDORS

PAN BOOKS

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1

Hallelujah

The land was flowing with milk and honey. On 21 April 1509 the old king, having grown ever more harsh and rapacious, died in his palace at Richmond on the south bank of the Thames. The fact was kept secret for two days, so that the realm would not tremble. Yet the new Henry had already been proclaimed king.

On 9 May the body of Henry VII was taken in a black chariot from Richmond Palace to St Paul's Cathedral; the funeral car was attended by 1,400 formal mourners and 700 torch-bearers. But few, if any, grieved; the courtiers and household servants were already awaiting the son and heir. When the body, having been taken to the abbey of Westminster, after the funeral service was over, was lowered into its vault the heralds announced 'le noble roy, Henri le Septième, est mort'. Then at once they cried out with one voice, '*Vive le noble roy, Henri le Huitième*'. His title was undisputed, the first such easy succession in a century. The new king was in his seventeenth year.

Midsummer Day, 24 June, was chosen as the day of coronation. The sun in its splendour would herald the rising of another sun. It was just four days before his eighteenth birthday. The ceremony of the coronation was considered to be the eighth sacrament of the Church, in which Henry was anointed with chrism or holy oil as a token of sacred kingship. His robes were stiff with jewels, diamonds and rubies and emeralds and pearls, so that a glow or light hovered about him. He now radiated the power and the glory. He may have acted and dressed under advice, but he soon came to understand the theatre of magnificence.

Henry had taken the precaution, thirteen days before the coronation, of marrying his intended bride so that a king would be accompanied by a queen; it was thereby to be understood that he was an adult rather than a minor. Katherine of Aragon was the child of Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon, in whose reign Spain was united. She had come from that country in order to marry Prince Arthur, Henry's older brother, but events conspired against her. Arthur died less than six months after their wedding, of consumption or the sweating sickness, and Katherine was left at the English court in the unenviable position of a widow whose usefulness had gone. It was said that the king himself, Henry VII, might wish to marry her. But this was unthinkable. Instead she was betrothed to Prince Henry, and was consigned to some years of relative penury and privation at the hands of a difficult father-in-law who was in any case pursuing a better match for his son and heir. Yet, after seven years of waiting, her moment of apotheosis had come. On the day before the coronation she was taken in a litter from the Tower of London to Westminster, passing through streets draped in rich tapestry and cloth of gold. A contemporary woodcut depicts Henry and Katherine being crowned at the same time, surrounded by rank upon rank of bishops and senior clergy.

Henry's early years had been spent in the shadow of an anxious and over-protective father, intent before anything else on securing the dynasty. The young prince never spoke in public, except in reply to questions from the king. He could leave the palace at Greenwich or at Eltham only under careful supervision, and then venture into the palace's park through a private door. Much care was bestowed on his early education, so that he acquired the reputation of being the most learned of princes. Throughout his life he considered himself to be a great debater in matters of theology, fully steeped in the scholarship of Thomas Aquinas. He took an early delight in music, and composed Masses as well as songs and motets; he sang, and played both lute and keyboard. He had his own company of musicians who followed him wherever he walked, and by the time of his death he owned seventy-two flutes. He was the harmonious prince. Thomas More, in a poem celebrating the coronation, described him as the glory of the era. Surely he would inaugurate a new golden age in which all men of goodwill would flourish?

Henry was himself a golden youth, robust and good-looking. He was a little over 6 feet in height and, literally, towered over most of his subjects. It was written that 'when he moves the ground shakes under him'. He excelled in wrestling and archery, hawking and jousting. Nine months after the coronation, he organized a tournament in which the feats of chivalry could be celebrated. He rode out in disguise, but his identity was soon discovered. He had read Malory as well as Aquinas, and knew well enough that a good king was a brave and aggressive king. You had to strike down your opponent with a lance or sword. You must not hesitate or draw back. It was a question of honour. The joust offered a taste of warfare, also, and the new king surrounded himself with young lords who enjoyed a good fight. The noblemen of England were eager to stiffen the sinews and summon up the blood.

When he was not master of the joust, he was leader of the hunt. He spoke of his hunting expeditions for days afterwards, and he would eventually own a stable of 200 horses. Hunting was, and still is, the sport of kings. It was a form of war against an enemy, a battleground upon which speed and accuracy were essential. Henry would call out 'Holla! Holla! So boy! There boy!' When the stag was down, he would slit its throat and cut open its belly before thrusting his hands into its entrails; he would then daub his companions with its blood.

Older and more sedate men were also by his side. These were the royal councillors, the majority of whom had served under the previous king. The archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham, remained as chancellor. The bishop of Winchester, Richard Foxe, continued to serve as lord privy seal. The other senior bishops – of Durham, of Rochester and of Norwich – were also in place. The young king had to be advised and guided if the kingdom were to continue on its settled course. Whether he would accept that advice, and follow that guidance, was another matter.

The surviving members of the House of York were restored to favour, after they had endured the indifference and even hostility of the previous king. Henry VII had identified himself as the Lancastrian claimant to the throne. Even though he had married Elizabeth of York after his coronation, he was suspicious and resentful of the rival royal family. The essential unity of the realm was now being proclaimed after the dynastic struggles of the previous century.

The older councillors now took the opportunity of destroying some of the 'new men' whom Henry VII had promoted. His two most trusted advisers, or confidential clerks, were arrested and imprisoned. Sir Richard Empson and Sir Edmund Dudley had been associated with the previous king's financial exactions, but they were in general resented and distrusted by the bishops and older nobility. They were charged with the unlikely crime of 'constructive treason' against the young king, and were duly executed. It is not at all clear that Henry played any part in what was essentially judicial murder, but his formal approval was still necessary. He would employ the same methods, for removing his enemies, in another period of his reign.

Henry was in any case of uncertain temper. He had the disposition of a king. He could be generous and magnanimous, but he was also self-willed and capricious. The Spanish ambassador had intimated to his master that 'speaking frankly, the prince is not considered to be a genial person'. The French ambassador, at a later date, revealed that he could not enter the king's presence without fear of personal violence.

An early outbreak of royal temper is suggestive. In the summer of 1509 a letter arrived from the French king, Louis XII, in reply to one purportedly sent by Henry in which the new king had requested peace and friendship. But Henry had not written it. It had been sent by the king's council in his name. The youthful monarch then grew furious. 'Who wrote this letter?' he demanded. 'I ask peace of the king of France, who dare not look me in the face, still less make war on me!' His pride had been touched. He looked upon France as an ancient enemy. Only Calais remained of the dominion that the English kings had once enjoyed across the Channel. Henry was eager to claim back his ancient rights and, from the time of his coronation, he looked upon France as a prize to be taken. War was not only a pleasure; it was a dynastic duty.

Yet the pleasures of peace were still to be tasted. He had inherited a tranquil kingdom, as well as the store of treasure that his father had amassed. Henry VII bequeathed to him something in excess of £1,250,000, which may plausibly be translated to a contemporary fortune of approximately £380,000,000. It would soon all be dissipated, if not exactly squandered. It was rumoured that the young king was spending too much time on sports and entertainments, and was as a result neglecting the business of the realm. This need not be taken at face value. As the letter to the French king demonstrated, the learned bishops preferred their master to stay away from their serious deliberations.

There were in any case more immediate concerns. Katherine of Aragon had at the end of January 1510 gone into painful labour. The result was a girl, stillborn. Yet Katherine remained evidently pregnant with another child, and the preparations for a royal birth were continued. They were unnecessary. The swelling of her belly subsided, caused by infection rather than fruitfulness. It was announced that the queen had suffered a miscarriage, but it was rumoured that she was perhaps infertile. No greater doom could be delivered upon an English queen. She disproved the rumours when she gave birth to a son on the first day of 1511, but the infant died two months later. Katherine may have been deemed to be unlucky, but the king would eventually suspect something much worse than misfortune.

Henry had already strayed from the marriage bed. While Katherine was enduring the strains of her phantom pregnancy in the early months of 1510, he took comfort from the attentions of Anne Stafford. She was one of the queen's ladies-in-waiting, and was already married. She was also a sister of the duke of Buckingham, and this great lord was sensitive of his family's honour. Anne Stafford was sent to a nunnery, and Buckingham removed himself from court after an angry confrontation with the king. Katherine of Aragon was apprised of the affair and, naturally enough, took Buckingham's part. She had been shamed by her husband's infidelity with one of her own servants. The household was already full of deception and division. Other royal liaisons may have gone unrecorded. Mistress Amadas, the wife of the court goldsmith, later announced the fact that the king had come secretly to her in a Thames Street house owned by one of his principal courtiers.

Yet all sins of lust could be absolved. In the early days of 1511 Henry went on pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in Norfolk. It was reported that he trod, barefoot and in secret, along the pilgrims' road in order to pray for the life of his struggling infant boy. In the summer of the same year he made a pilgrimage to the shrine of Master John Schorne at North Marston in Buckinghamshire. Master Schorne was the rector of that village who had acquired a reputation for saintliness and whose shrine became a centre of miraculous healing. He was said to have conjured the devil into a boot.

In all matters of faith, therefore, Henry was a loyal son of the Church. In that respect, at least, he resembled the overwhelming majority of his subjects. The Venetian ambassador reported that 'they all attend Mass every day and say many paternosters in public – the women carrying long rosaries in their hands'. At the beginning of Henry's reign the Catholic Church in England was flourishing. It had recovered its vigour and purpose. In the south-west, for example, there was a rapid increase in church building and reconstruction. More attention was paid to the standards of preaching. Where before the congregation knelt on rush-covered floors, benches were now being set up in front of the pulpits.

It was the Church of ancient custom and of traditional ceremony. On Good Friday, for example, the 'creeping to the cross' took place. The crucifix was veiled and held up behind the high altar by two priests while the responses to the versicles were chanted; it was then uncovered and placed on the third step in front of the altar, to which the clergy now would crawl on their hands and knees before kissing it. Hymns were sung as the crucifix was then carried down to the congregation, who would genuflect before it and kiss it. The crucifix was then wreathed in linen and placed in a 'sepulchre' until it re-emerged in triumph on the morning of Easter Sunday. This was an age of carols and of holy days, of relics and pilgrimages and miracles.

The old faith was established upon communal ritual as much as theology. The defining moment of devotion was the miracle of transubstantiation at the Mass, when the bread and wine were transformed into the body and blood of Christ. The religious life was nourished by the sacraments, which were in turn administered by a duly ordained body of priests who owed their primary allegiance to the pope. The faithful were obliged to attend Mass on Sundays and holy days, to fast on appointed days, to make confession and receive communion at least once a year. The most powerful of all beliefs was that in purgatory, whereby the living made intercession for the souls of the dead to bring a quicker end to their suffering; the old Church itself represented the communion of the living and the dead.

The saints were powerful intercessors, too, and were venerated as guardians and benefactors. St Barbara protected her votaries against thunder and lightning, and St Gertrude kept away the mice and the rats; St Dorothy protected herbs, while St Apolline healed the toothache; St Nicholas saved the faithful from drowning, while St Anthony guarded the swine. The supreme intercessor was the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, whose image was to be found everywhere surrounded by candles and incense.

The churches were therefore filled with images and lights. Those of London, for example, were treasure-chests of silver candlesticks and censers, silver crucifixes and chalices and patens. The high altar and the rood screen, separating the priest from the congregation, were miracles of art and workmanship. Images of Jesus and of the Holy Virgin, of patron saints and local saints, adorned every available space. They wore coronets and necklaces of precious stones; rings were set upon their fingers and they were clothed in garments of gold. Some churches even exhibited the horns of unicorns or the eggs of ostriches in order to elicit admiration.

The human representatives of the Church were perhaps more frail. Yet the condition of the clergy was sound, as far as the laws of human nature allowed. Incompetent and foolish priests could be found, of course, but there was no general debasement or corruption of the clerical office. More men and women were now in religious orders than at any time in the previous century, and after the invention of printing came a great flood of devotional literature. In the years between 1490 and 1530, some twenty-eight editions of the *Hours of the Blessed Virgin* were issued. The religious guilds, set up to collect money for charity and to pray for the souls of the dead, had never been so popular; they were the institutional aspect of the religious community.

There were eager reformers, of course, who wished for a revival of the Christian spirit buried beneath the golden carapace of ritual and traditional devotion. It is in fact a measure of the health of the Church at the beginning of the sixteenth century that such fervent voices were heard everywhere. In the winter of 1511 John Colet stepped into the pulpit, at his own cathedral church of St Paul's in London, and preached of religious reform to the senior clergy of the realm. He repeated his theme to a convocation of clergy in the chapter-house of Canterbury. 'Never', he said, 'did the state of the Church more need your endeavours.' It was time for 'the reformation of ecclesiastical affairs'. The word had been spoken, but the deed was unthinkable. What Colet meant by 'reformation' was a rise in the quality and therefore the renown of the priesthood.

He despised some of the more primitive superstitions of the Catholic people, such as the veneration of relics and the use of prayer as a magical charm, but he had no doubt on the principles of faith and the tenets of theology. On these matters the Church was resolute. In May 1511 six men and four women, from Tenterden in Kent, were denounced as heretics for claiming among other things that the sacrament of the altar was not the body of Christ but merely material bread. They were forced to abjure their doctrines, and were condemned to wear the badge of a faggot in flames for the rest of their lives. Two men were burned, however, for the crime of being 'relapsed' heretics; they had repented, but then had taken up their old opinions once more. The Latin secretary to Henry, an Italian cleric known as Ammonius, wrote with some exaggeration that 'I do not wonder that the price of faggots has gone up, for many heretics furnish a daily holocaust, and yet more spring up to take their place'.

The career of Ammonius himself is testimony to the fact that the Church was still the avenue for royal preferment. This was a truth of which Thomas Wolsey was the supreme embodiment. Wolsey arrived at court through the agency of Bishop Foxe, the lord privy seal, and seems almost at once to have impressed the young king with his stamina and mastery of detail. By the spring of 1511 he was issuing letters and bills directly under the king's command, thus effectively circumventing the usual elaborate procedures. He was still only dean of Lincoln, but he was already advising Henry in affairs international and ecclesiastical.

He had the gift of affability as well as of industry, and was infinitely resourceful; he did what the king wanted, and did it quickly. The king's opinions were his own. Wolsey was, according to his gentleman usher, George Cavendish, 'most earnest and readiest in all the council to advance the king's only will and pleasure, having no respect to the case'. He was thirty-eight years old, and a generation younger than the old bishops of the council. Here was a man whom the young king could take into his confidence, and upon whom he could rely. Wolsey rose at four in the morning, and could work for twelve hours at a stretch without intermission. Cavendish relates that 'my lord never rose once to piss, nor yet to eat any meat'. When he had finished his labours he heard Mass and then ate a light supper before retiring.

Wolsey therefore became the instrument of the king's will, and no more forcefully than in the prosecution of Henry's ambitions against France. In November 1511 Henry joined a Holy League with the pope and with his father-in-law, Ferdinand of Spain, so that they might with papal approval attack France. Henry longed for war, and of course an excuse for combat could always be found. In this instance the incursion of French troops into Italian territories was cited as the reason for hostilities. In the following month a Christmas pageant was devised for the king at the house of the black friars in Ludgate, in which were displayed an artificial lion and an antelope. Four knight challengers rode out against men in the apparel of 'woodwoos', or wild men of the forest. It was a spectacle in praise of battle. A few months later it was decreed by parliament that all male children were obliged to practise the skills of archery.

Contrary advice was being given to the king at this juncture. The bishops and statesmen of the royal council advised peace against the hazard and cost of war with the French. Many of the reformist clergy were temperamentally opposed to warfare, and regretted that a golden prince of peace should so soon become a ravening lion of war. Colet declared from the pulpit of St Paul's that 'an unjust peace is better than the justest war'. Erasmus, the Dutch humanist then resident at Cambridge, wrote that 'it is the people who build cities, while the madness of princes destroys them'.

Yet the old nobility, and the young lords about the king, pressed for combat and glory in an alliance with Spain against the old enemy. Katherine of Aragon, who had assumed the role of Spanish ambassador to the English court of her husband, was also in favour of war against France. In this she was fulfilling the desire of her father. It was an unequal balance of forces, especially when it was tilted by Henry's desire for martial honour. He desired above all else to be a 'valiant knight' in the Arthurian tradition. That was the destiny of a true king. What did it matter if this were, in England, the beginning of a run of bad harvests when bread was dear and life more precarious? The will of the king was absolute. Had he not been proclaimed king of France at the time of his coronation? He wished to recover his birthright.

In April 1512 war was declared against France; a fleet of eighteen warships was prepared to take 15,000 men to Spain, from where they were to invade the enemy. In the early summer the English forces landed in Spain. No tents, or provisions, had been prepared for them. They lay in fields and under hedges, without protection from the torrential rain. The season was oppressive and pestilential, a menace augmented by the hot wine of Spain. The men wanted beer, but there was none to be found.

It also soon became apparent that they had been duped by Ferdinand, who had no intention of invading France, but merely wanted his border to be guarded by the English troops while he waged an independent war against the kingdom of Navarre. His words were fair, one English commander wrote back to the king, but his deeds were slack. Dysentery caused many casualties and, as a result of disease and poor rations, rumours and threats of mutiny began to multiply. In October 1512 the English sailed back home. 'Englishmen have so long abstained from war,' the daughter of the emperor Maximilian said, 'they lack experience from disuse.' The young king had been dishonoured as well as betrayed. Henry was furious at the hypocrisy and duplicity of his father-in-law, and seems in part to have blamed Katherine for the fiasco. A report soon emerged in Rome that he wished to 'repudiate' his wife, largely because she had proved incapable of bearing him a living heir, and to marry elsewhere.

Yet he refused to accept the humiliation in Spain, and at once began planning for a military expedition under his own leadership. He would lead a giant campaign, and emulate Henry V in the scale of his victories. Henry summoned his nobles, and their armed retainers, as their feudal master. The days of Agincourt were revived. He soon restored Thomas Howard to his father's title of duke of Norfolk and created Charles Brandon, his partner in the jousts, duke of Suffolk; the two warlords were thereby afforded sufficient dignity. If he were to imitate the exploits of the medieval king, however, he would need men and materials. Wolsey in effect became the minister of war. It was he who organized the fleet, and made provisions for 25,000 men to sail to France under the banner of the king. Henry now found him indispensable. He was made dean of York, another stage in his irrepressible rise.

The main body of the army set sail in the spring of 1513, followed a few weeks later by the king. He landed in Calais with a bodyguard of 300 men and a retinue of 115 priests and singers of the chapel. His great and ornate bed was transported along the route eastward, and was set up each night within a pavilion made from cloth of gold. The king had eleven tents, connected one with another; one was for his cook, and one for his kitchen. He was escorted, wherever he walked or rode, by fourteen young boys in coats of gold. The bells on his horse were made of gold. The most elaborate of the royal tents was decorated with golden ducats and golden florins. He was intent on displaying his magnificence as well as his valour. Henry had allied himself with the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, whose nominal empire comprised most of central Europe, but he also wished to claim imperial sovereignty for himself. He had already caused to be fashioned a 'rich crown of gold set with full many rich precious stones' that became known as the Imperial Crown; it would in time signify his dominion over the whole of Britain, but also over the Church within his domain.

The fighting in France itself was to a large extent inconsequential. In the summer of 1513 the English forces laid siege to the small town of Thérouanne in the county of Flanders; a body of French cavalry came upon them, exchanged fire, and then retreated. They rode away so hard that the encounter became known as the battle of the Spurs. Henry himself had remained in the rear, and had taken no part in the action. It was not a very glorious victory, but it was still a victory. When Thérouanne itself eventually submitted, the king's choristers sang the Te Deum.

The English infantry and cavalry moved on to besiege Tournai, a much bigger prize that Edward III had failed to capture in the summer of 1340. It fell within a week of the English arrival. Henry established a garrison in Tournai and strengthened its citadel; he also demanded that Thomas Wolsey be appointed as bishop of the city. Three weeks of tournaments, dances and revels marked the victory in which the courts of Maximilian and Henry freely mingled. The king then sailed back to England in triumph.

Yet the cost of the brief wars was enormous, comprising most of the treasure that Henry VII had bequeathed to his son. Wolsey persuaded parliament to grant a subsidy, in effect a tax upon every adult male, but this proved of course unpopular and difficult to collect. It became clear enough that England could not afford to wage war on equal terms with the larger powers of Europe. The French king had three times as many subjects, and also triple the resources; the Spanish king possessed six times as many subjects, and five times the revenue. Henry's ambition and appetite for glory outstripped his strength.

The true palm of victory, in 1513, was in any case to be found elsewhere. The Scots were restive, and ready once more to confirm their old alliance with the French. It was feared that James IV was prepared to invade England while its king was absent on other duties. And so it proved. Katherine herself played a role in the preparations for battle. She wrote to her husband that she was 'horribly busy with making standards, banners and badges', and she herself led an army north. Yet the victory came before she arrived. James IV led his soldiers over the border but, under the command of the elderly earl of Surrey, the English forces withstood and defeated them. James himself was left dead upon the field, and John Skelton wrote that 'at Flodden hills our bows and bills slew all the flower of their honour'; 10,000 Scots were killed.

The torn surcoat of the Scottish king, stained with blood, was sent to Henry at Tournai. Katherine wrote to her husband with news of the victory, and declared that the battle of Flodden Field 'has been to your grace and all your realm the greatest honour that could be, more than if you should win the crown of France'. Henry was truly the master of his kingdom.