Henry VII: From diligent bureaucrat to paranoid blunderer?

For most of the twentieth century, interpretations of Henry VII's reign were disarmingly simple. Henry was viewed as a highly capable, ruthless politician who, in 1485, had few allies and many enemies but survived through his assiduous involvement in administration, particularly finances, utilising 'new men' and excluding the nobility from influence. The certainty of this interpretation was reassuring for A level students, even if they found the main topics less than exciting.

In the 1960s and 1970s the work of B.P. Wolffe on finances and S.B. Chrimes on administration filled out this picture rather than challenged it. Looking back, this was an example of a little research being a dangerous thing. When only a handful of aspects of a reign have been researched, those aspects can exert a disproportionate influence on interpretations.

Since then a group of intertwined influences have challenged much of this interpretation. These include research into many more aspects of Henry's reign and a re-assessment of periodization that places the reign firmly in the context of the late Middle Ages and is not hypnotized by the apparent significance of the date 1485. While the general trend of Tudor historiography was strongly administrative, focusing on a top-down analysis of government institutions, historians of the fifteenth century have extensively studied the political roles of kings and nobles and analysed the county communities, providing a gentry-up perspective.

One breakthrough came in the early 1990s with Steven Gunn's work on Henry's court and his relations with his nobles.(1) The picture of the diligent bureaucrat cracked as Henry was revealed as a king who made full use of the pomp of his court, hunted vigorously and watched jousts, enjoying the company of men who knew one end of a lance from the other, rather than just those whose skill was in the counting-house.

Looking at Henry's reign from the perspective of the fifteenth rather than the sixteenth century has led to a reassessment of his position in 1485. Firstly, nobles and gentry are now seen as reluctant participants in the sporadic wars given a false unity

by the label ‘The Wars of the Roses’. So why should nobles be keen to cause trouble for Henry VII when they had been markedly reluctant to take up arms against his predecessors? Secondly, detailed study reveals Bosworth to have been not the final titanic struggle between York and Lancaster but is better described as the Yorkist court and a Lancastrian remnant versus the supporters of Richard III. Henry was, in practice, the ‘unity candidate’ brought in by Edward IV’s Yorkist household to topple Richard. Henry’s situation in 1485 now looks potentially strong rather than fundamentally weak, so why did political threats rumble on until 1497 and haunt the anxious King until his death?

One element of the answer lies in historians’ re-interpretation of Henry from objective Machiavellian to a blunderer who never learned how to win the trust of his nobles and gentry. Dominic Luckett’s analysis of Henry’s handling of the south-western county communities reveals a king unable to trust anyone who hadn’t rebelled against Richard III in 1483 and then joined him in Brittany. (2) Henry concentrated his rewards on his ‘trusties’ and failed to spread offices and grants amongst the rest, the majority. The ability of the Cornish rebels of 1497 to march right across southern England (Henry and his army were on the Scottish border) is comprehensible when it’s realised that Henry had done little to win the hearts and minds of the southern gentry. However, even this is a generalization for Henry’s handling of different counties varied in its success. This variety provides a warning against constructing new certainties.

One more attack on the cold, calculating Henrician stereotype is provided by Ian Arthurson’s study of Perkin Warbeck, particularly the impact of astrology on decision-making in 1499. (3) Here Henry, ‘addicted to hearing prognostications’ from the court astrologer, William Parron, orders the executions of Warwick and Warbeck in a panic, buttressed by Parron’s predictions that such actions were in the country’s interests. While we must view astrology in the context of fifteenth century rather than modern thinking this is a clear warning not to see Henry VII as a modern mind in Tudor clothing.

So where are we now? We have, perhaps, a king with much more multi-faceted interests, more comprehensibly human, but less capable in government, making

significant errors and never really understanding the art of governing his nobles and gentry but hanging onto his crown despite these errors. But has the pendulum of re-interpretation swung too far?

Notes

1. Gunn, S. The Courtiers of Henry VII, English Historical Review, 1993.

2. Luckett, D. 'Patronage, Violence and Revolt in the Reign of Henry VII' in Archer, R.E. (1995) in Crown,Government and People in the Fifteenth Century, Alan Sutton.

3. Arthurson, I. (1994) The Perkin Warbeck Conspiracy , Alan Sutton

Further Reading

Carpenter, C. (1997) The Wars of the Roses, CUP – the best short modern analysis.

Thomson, B. (1995) The Reign of Henry VII, Paul Watkins – a collection of articles providing detailed reconsiderations by Carpenter and others but also specific studies on a host of aspects of Henry's reign – architecture, music, pageantry, iconography, religion etc.

www.vam.ac.uk provides information on the Torrigiano bust plus photographs from multiple angles. Search through the Access to Images section.