

Henry VIII

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The legitimacy of the Tudor line was shaky. And legitimacy in questions of rulers are very important in a society which recognizes an authority that goes beyond mere power. Legality transcends physical might as long as there is a general consensus that it should. Ultimately of course might decides what is legal. But on the other hand any exercise of power cannot rest on physical power alone, there has to be some general recognition and acceptance. This tension between legal convention and physical might goes a long way in explaining royal politics in Europe.

The Tudors arose as the result of the War of the Roses. A civil war to a large extent caused by a confusion of who was to rule. The House of Lancaster won on the battle field and Henry VII took the reins. He married a woman out of the House of York thus trying in classical ways to cement facts on the grounds by concession and compromise. But his dynastic ambitions went even further and he looked around deciding that the daughter Catherine of Ferdinand and Isabelle would be a good match for his eldest son and crown prince Arthur (so named in order to connect to the legendary King Arthur). Catherine herself had English blood in her veins, and was blond and blue-eyed. A marriage was arranged, not without extensive haggling on both sides, Henry VII as well as his counterpart Ferdinand were tough bargainers. Catherine was moved to England with an extensive entourage, never ever to return to her home country. Shortly thereafter she married Arthur, who a few months later succumbed. And the stage was set for the young Henry.

Henry VIII was born in 1491 and was a mere 18 when he succeeded to the throne on the death of his father in 1509. An exceptionally tall and handsome young man, who was not only an outstanding sportsman reveling in all kinds of physical activity, especially that of jousting; but also mentally quite adept and with a thorough classical education, speaking a number of languages fluently. As Pollard writes, he had everything going for him when he ascended to the throne. His reign, according to the author can conveniently be split in two parts.

The first was his apprentice as a king, when he relegated much of the actual ruling (as opposed to reining) to his trusted advisor Wolsey, later to be appointed Cardinal and Archbishop of Canterbury. It was Wolsey who conceived of the general strategy especially in foreign policy, an indefatigable worker, acting behind the scenes, when the King was more intent upon amusing himself, be it in hunting or playing, or occasionally waging war across the channel against the French, with some lucky breaks. It started all out with his fateful marriage to his brothers widow, the close connection to which required a dispensation from the Pope. And it ended with the frustration in securing a legal divorce from Catherine.

The second started with the downfall of Wolsey, who was arrested for treason, but died naturally before final measures could be taken, and lasted until his death. As noted

the turning point was the divorce. Pollard downplays the usual take, that Henry had got tired of his queen and for the first time in his life really fallen in love, the object of his desire being Anne Boleyn, who unlike her sister, further inflamed his passion by refusing to grant him any favors until he committed himself to marriage and making her a queen. Instead the author interprets the breach with the Pope as a natural move in power politics. He points out that the issue of the divorce was simply the spark that ignited all the combustible material that was lying around. The Author sees the second stage as natural and would have come about anyway sooner or later. Wolsey owed his power to the Church, and when the Church was appropriated he fell. But fallen he would have done no matter what. The King was egotistical, in fact, according to Pollard, egotism was the crucial defining element of his character. The King could brook no rival and had to be the best and foremost in all walks. So when his physical prowess waned. what was more natural than that he would direct all his energies to rule?

To make further sense of that we need to overview the political situation of the 1520's. Ferdinand and Isabella were dead and out of the picture, instead they had been succeeded by the grandson of Ferdinand -Charles V, who in addition to his Spanish dominions had acquired Habsburg lands in the Netherlands as well as in Austria, and was politically the strongest power in Europe. His aunt Catherine very much hoped for his support in her struggle against her husband and his plans to depose her. But her nephew was not sentimental and would never allow family considerations to get in the way of power-politics. Then there was France and Francis I and Henry of course, those being the only three players that counted. The Pope had counted before, but his secular power was in decline and his spiritual was being successfully challenged by the Reformation. Between Francis and Charles there was the contention of Italy, were both had ambitions. Thus both were eager to enlist the support of the English King, or at least his neutrality. Between France and England there was of course traditional animosity, as England once possessed large portions of France before they were expelled (with the exception of Calais which was still in English hands during the reign of Henry but which were abandoned by his daughter Mary). And indeed, as we have noted, early on in his reign he had invaded France and scored some spectacular victories, but none which translated into any permanent gain. As Pollard remarks. The armies at the time were too weak to effect any serious conquests. And then there was trade. The English were very dependent upon the Flemish textile trade and no interference with that was accepted. In this regard the interests of Henry and Charles coincided. Now the Pope, whom Henry in vain had tried to induce to give him a formal dispensation dragged his legs. Not that he had any moral qualms about giving such a dispensation, would he had had a free hand he would gladly given a dispensation to Henry to marry his sister; but to give such a dispensation was politically dangerous, as Charles had power in Italy, and in fact had humiliated the Pope by sacking Rome.

The struggle to divorce had occupied Henry for many years, and in the end he had to admit failure and to take matters into his own hands. He simply did, what many German Princes already had done, he repudiated the Pope and appropriated the riches of the Church, just as Gustavus Vasa had done in Sweden a few years before. Not because of any religious conviction, but simply out of expediency. As to religious matter, as far as Henry took them seriously and to some extent he seems to have done so, as he wrote a

religious tract, he was a rather old-fashioned Catholic. Pollard characterizes him as devout but fundamentally irreligious, and that for such people rites and celebrations are indeed very important. Indeed among Protestants, as Luther and his companion - Melanchton, he was not held in high esteem.

Catherine had never succeeded in giving Henry a male heir, and although there was no formal law against female ascendancy, last time it had happened in England, a civil war had ensued. Catherine had given birth to a few sons, but they had either been stillborn or died shortly after birth. In addition to that she had had many miscarriages. Yet she had managed one issue - Mary. Anne Boleyn took over as a queen and she and her family had as a consequence acquired a lot of power and influence. It is believed that she was an ardent Protestant and instrumental in the changes that were to follow, although the Anglican Church does not differ that much from the Catholic, testifying to the fact that although Catholicism in the centuries to follow was considered a pervasive evil and Popism a word of abuse, the Reformation in England did not go very deep. As Pollard notes, in an aside which would be typical of a 19th century historian, but not a more modern one, that the English hate change, and can only be persuaded to change once they have been convinced that the change is really a return to something old and better. Furthermore the author also claims that the English are not bonded to abstract ideas, and the English Reformation was focused not on new theological ideas but on practical matters, such as the abolition of clerical fees.

While the marriage with Catherine had dragged on for over twenty years, subsequent marriages of the King would be rather brief and sometimes even brutal affairs, which has more than anything else assured him a survival in popular posterity. Anne Boleyn gave birth to a daughter whom was set to supplant Mary, who was put aside. Soon thereafter the King must have tired of her, maybe she was too much of a pain, and had her beheaded on trumped up charges. Jane Seymour to follow was a rather meek and mousy looking woman, but she did give him a male heir, and expired upon the effort. Catherine Howard a young lusty woman was next in turn. By that time the King had lost his good looks and former physical vigor and become grossly fat and foul, tortured by various chronic ailments like never healing ulcers. The King was cuckolded by her and promptly sent to the scaffold. In fact he made a thorough case of it, he managed to pass an Act of Attainment in parliament, according to which it was considered treason for any woman to marry the King, had her previous life been unchaste. The next attempt was once again a go at a dynastic marriage. He had sent proposals and feelers all around European courts, but ladies were a bit reluctant. As one of them put it, if I had had two heads I would have been happy to spare one for the King. His close advisor Cromwell had secured a German Princess for him - Anne of Cleves, and much praised her looks and accomplishments. She turned out to be a disaster and a few months later, after he had ascertained that it would be politically safe to do so, he had the marriage annulled. The final woman - Catherine Parr, was already twice widowed when she married him, and would be so for a third time when he passed away in 1547.

As already noted the second part of Henrys reign was the most interesting, and one in which the full force of his personality came to the fore. In fact had he died in 1529 his reign would have gone down unnoticed in history save as an interlude, on the other hand in the

not at twenty years left to him, he effected many acts of supreme importance to history, according to the author. Pollard also notes that in spite of his impulsiveness and strong feelings and opinions, occasionally to erupt into violent passions, he nevertheless had the important ability to maintain self-control. Thus he was more able to read the minds of his ministers than they were able to read his. An advantage that should not be taken lightly. The downfall of many a dictator is the inability to listen, to only follow their own counsel and to surround themselves with assenters. Not so Henry, Pollard argues, he loved to meet argument with argument and did not think worse of an advisor, would he differ from himself. As to the Parliament he played that instrument to perfection. Why should he have broken it, Pollard asks, that would have been as pointless as for Ulysses to break the bow he alone could bend. The fact was that there was a not inconsiderable confluence of interest between Henry and his Parliament, and ultimately according to the author with the English people themselves, without which Henry would not have been so effective. It certainly was not a confluence stemming out of mere servility, as has sometimes been suggested, Parliament did indeed at times reject some of Henry's proposals. But it was through Parliament Henry dismantled the power of the Church and where he obviously found a lot of sympathy for his ambitions. The Church had become impotent partly because of its corruption and partly because of the rise of a trading class, with little patience for theology and a passion for money and getting rich. In particular monastic life was anathema to them. And as in the Protestant countries it was the monasteries that suffered the most, being essentially wiped out, while churches were if not kept intact, at least not toppled. The Reformation in England was however a piecemeal process that lasted for many years. Each step in a sense taken gingerly and when no forcible reaction from the outside world came about, he was emboldened to take the next. But what was the effect of enriching the country in this way? After all at the start of his reign, his father Henry VII had left him a wealthy chest, which he had dissipated during his first part of his reign on ill-advised adventures. Pollard notes that Henry did not appropriate all the wealth himself but spent much of the spoils on the nobles and the gentry. Had he instead spent it on education, maybe true democracy would have come to England sooner, he speculates. On the other hand had the Crown kept most of the wealth, the Stuarts to follow might have made themselves independent of Parliament. Such contrafactual speculation is a rather idle and dangerous thing.

Pollard does on the balance claim the King to have been a good King, In fact, he writes, his failings were as much a source of his strength as his virtues. And he never took the moral high ground, and that is essential to anyone who wants to rule effectively and engage the sympathy of his subjects. And one should never forget that the welfare of the State reigned supreme. Although torture was illegal in Britain, when the security of the State was of concern, it was used freely. Recent parallels cannot be lost on the modern reader. A man is executed for treason, not because what he has done is immoral, just because what he can do is dangerous. Politics can be thought of as a natural force, neither good nor evil, just amoral. With such arguments Pollard justifies Henry's action against the Church and claims that the transition was less bloody than similar conflicts turned out in other countries.

To Pollard Henry is the Prince of Machiavelli in action, taking his stand on efficiency

rather than principle. The spiritual welfare of England was at most a minor consideration. He was an egotist, but did he have a conscience at all? did he fear God? According to the author *For all the strange and violent things he did , he obtained the sanctions of his conscience, but his imperious egotism made conscience his humble slave, and blinded to his own sins, a judgement so keen to detect and chastise the failings of others.* But as the author notes if Conscience reigns supreme all government is *pis aller* and only in anarchy can the Millennium be found. On the other hand if Conscience is deposed man sinks too low to make any government an issue at all.

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