

## THE TUDOR MONARCHY

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**Summary:** Dr Cooper expertly examines the place of the Tudors in British history, the “Tudor myth” and the evidence supplied by the State Papers, the “new monarchy” of Henry VIII, the language and symbolism of monarchy, royal supremacy and the issue of the succession.

The monarchs of the Tudor dynasty occupy a unique place within the national memory. Tudor history is perennially popular in schools and universities, and academic research flourishes in Britain and North America. Alongside the specialist monographs and scholarly journals flows a steady stream of popular biography, historical fiction, film and television. Henry VIII and Elizabeth I are among England’s most recognisable rulers, thanks to splendid portraits painted in their own lifetimes: the Tudors were gifted in the art of self-promotion. Many of their achievements – Hampton Court palace and the ‘Mary Rose’, the defeat of the Spanish Armada and the beginnings of English settlement in America – are admired to this day.

But the Tudors are also controversial, and the State Papers that tell their story are open to competing interpretations. King Henry VIII is remembered both as a liberator and a tyrant: if he freed his people from papal allegiance and authorised their English Bible, then he also destroyed their shrines and monasteries and put hundreds of dissenters to death. One of the best-known images of Elizabeth I is the Ditchley portrait of circa 1592 in which the Virgin Queen towers over England, omniscient and serene. And yet in her other kingdom of Ireland Elizabeth presided over a bloody ethnic conflict and a scramble for land that had dreadful consequences for many generations.

The idea that the Tudors represent a ‘turning-point’ in English and, arguably, British history is as old as the dynasty itself. Henry VII, heir to the house of Lancaster, hoped that his marriage to Elizabeth of York, daughter of Edward IV, would end the fighting over the crown that had afflicted England with sporadic intensity during the fifteenth century. The union of Lancaster and York was celebrated with a new royal trademark, the Tudor rose, soon displayed on secular and church architecture across the land.<sup>1</sup> The ‘Tudor myth’ of peace and security following the Wars of the Roses was nurtured by historians and artists, and defined the way the monarchy was depicted throughout the sixteenth century and long after Elizabeth’s death.<sup>2</sup>

### The evidence of the State Papers

The State Papers, however, reveal the reality beneath the image. All five Tudor monarchs faced major provincial rebellions, stirred up by a variety of economic, political and (from the 1530s onwards) religious grievances. Two of these uprisings, in 1554 and 1569, may have imagined the deposition of the sovereign. The 1580s witnessed two Catholic gentlemen, Francis Throckmorton and Anthony Babington, conspiring to place Mary Queen of Scots on the English throne, and assassination attempts against Elizabeth were widely rumoured. The fabric of English society, meanwhile, was in a state of flux. Grain prices and enclosure, both on the rise by the 1540s, provoked riots of the

hungry and dispossessed. Though many prospered from changing economic conditions, the problem of poverty was increasingly evident. In 1596 the Somerset JP Edward Hext wrote to Lord Burghley about the growing numbers of landless labourers, vagrants and demobilised soldiers who were roaming his shire: 'the Infynyte numbers of the idle wandrynge people and robbers of the land', he explained, 'are the chefest cause of the dearth'.<sup>3</sup> William Shakespeare's 'Tragedy of King Richard III', in which the victorious Henry Tudor apparently puts an end to civil strife, was written at a time of war, famine, and deep political uncertainty; audiences in the 1590s must have contrasted the 'Tudor myth' with their own daily experience.

### **A new monarchy?**

Henry Tudor founded a new ruling dynasty; was this also a new monarchy? The term 'new monarchy' was coined in 1893 by J. R. Green to describe what he saw as the despotic kingship of both Edward IV and Henry VII, the late Yorkist as well as the early Tudor regime. Green's theme was refined in 1910 by A. F. Pollard, who praised Tudor new monarchy for allying itself with the rising middle class and 'the coming force of nationality': in essence, for laying the foundations of a modern nation-state.<sup>4</sup> In 1953 Geoffrey Elton advanced a different sort of thesis that dominated debate for years to come. Instead of 'new monarchy', Elton saw a revolution in government in the 1530s that was connected with Henry VIII's Reformation, piloted by his chief minister Thomas Cromwell, and guided by the principle of 'bureaucratic organisation in place of the personal control of the king'. The result was the sovereignty of the king in parliament.<sup>5</sup> Elton's vision of Tudor bureaucratic government has been criticised as premature; other historians, notably David Starkey, have argued persuasively for putting the personality of the monarch back into personal monarchy.<sup>6</sup> What cannot be denied is the Tudor rhetoric of kingship, bold in its scope and aspirations. The imperial symbolism assumed by Henry VII was given dramatic new force by the Tudor reformations of religion, and was taken to the people by propaganda campaigns in print and pulpit.<sup>7</sup> In terms of the more intense relationship between crown and subject that was cultivated by the Tudors, the 1530s retain a strong claim for being a 'turning point' in English history.

### **Royal Supremacy**

Henry VIII's declaration of sovereignty over the church, and his extension of the treason laws to police what his subjects said about him, were alike unprecedented. The royal supremacy, however, was presented not as a new departure but a reassertion of an essential truth. English kings, it was claimed, had always possessed spiritual jurisdiction within their own realms, although their rights had been usurped by a thousand years of papal domination. This sacred quality of monarchy was reinforced through ritual. The customs of the royal Maundy and touching for the 'king's evil' (the disease of scrofula) were revived by Henry VII to link his dynasty to the mystical kingship of their forebears and, by implication, to the monarchy of Christ. Queen Mary participated in these rites with particular devotion to proclaim the Catholic faith restored in her reign. But Elizabeth called on similar methods to reinforce her own queenship, and indeed the ceremonial healing of the 'king's evil' continued into the early eighteenth century.<sup>8</sup> The flexible symbolism of the royal touch illustrates the point that there was no single 'theory' of monarchy in the sixteenth century: Tudor sacred kingship was an amalgam of old and new beliefs, rituals, and strategies of persuasion.

## ‘Medieval’ or ‘Modern’

The National Archives document class called the State Papers begins with Henry VIII’s accession in April 1509. The ordering of the records is logical, but it can reinforce an artificial distinction between Henry VII the ‘medieval’ and Henry VIII the ‘modern’ king. The effect is compounded by the loss of the king’s council registers for the early Tudor period, such that it is difficult to compare Elton’s revolution of the 1530s with the conciliar government of Henry VII or Cardinal Wolsey, although extracts in the British Library and the Huntington Library cast some light on the judicial business of the early Tudor council.<sup>9</sup>

The first two Tudor kings are usually contrasted in their royal styles: Henry VII watchful, avaricious, ever conscious of the danger of a rival claimant to the throne; Henry VIII easier in the company of his aristocracy, profligate in his spending, and secure in his inheritance – at least until the break from Rome created new fissures in state and society. Writing in James I’s reign, Francis Bacon described Henry VII as ‘a dark prince, and infinitely suspicious... full of thoughts and secret observations’.<sup>10</sup> His stringent financial policy, which exploited feudal prerogatives and demanded punitive bonds from the nobility, raised the power and status of the Tudor crown, albeit at a cost. Thomas More spoke for many when he proclaimed Henry VIII’s accession in a Latin epigram: ‘no longer does fear hiss whispered secrets in one’s ear’.<sup>11</sup> More’s message was that Henry VII’s kingship had gone seriously awry; a wise monarch co-operated with his magnates and political nation. Henry VIII took the lesson to heart, peopling his privy chamber with the young sons of the aristocracy, and enthusiastically entering the jousting lists where his father had only judged from the sidelines. The pageantry of the tiltyard placed Henry VIII at the ceremonial heart of his nobility, although a heavy fall from his horse in 1536 left him unconscious for two hours. The politics of intimacy and faction at Henry VIII’s Court are not easy to track through the State Papers, but they are an important counterpart to the bureaucratic and parliamentary revolution described by Geoffrey Elton.

The contrasts between Henry VII and Henry VIII should not obscure significant continuities in their political ideas. Historians seeking the origins of the nation-state have often cited the Act of Appeals of 1533, an assertion of England’s sovereignty inspired by Henry VIII’s *Kulturkampf* with the papacy: ‘this realm of England is an empire... governed by one supreme head and king having the dignity and royal estate of the imperial crown of the same’.<sup>12</sup> In its scale and implications, this was a new argument; its language, however, was not. In 1489 Henry VII had issued a new gold ‘sovereign’ coin depicting the king wearing an arched imperial crown, and he consciously revived interest in the ‘British’ empire of King Arthur. Henry VIII revised the text of his coronation oath, limiting it to the laws and customs of the realm ‘not prejudicial to his crowne or imperiall jurisdiction’. Sovereignty and empire were Tudor motifs years before the onset of the Reformation. With the break from Rome, however, they took on a powerful new significance.<sup>13</sup>

The papers of Thomas Cromwell, confiscated on his execution for treason in 1540, are one of the richest hunting-grounds among the Tudor State Papers. Cromwell’s position as principal secretary involved him in virtually every aspect of government, and he maintained a phenomenal network of correspondence with the magistrates and gentry who governed provincial England. These records are an invaluable resource to historians investigating one of the most

intriguing questions about the Reformation – how was it successfully enforced? Thus we see Cromwell monitoring seditious preaching in Newark in 1534, hearing about an abortive religious protest in Cornwall in 1537, and taking a personal interest in the relic of Christ's blood at Hailes Abbey in Gloucestershire in 1538. The State Papers also allow for a detailed reconstruction of the 1536 Pilgrimage of Grace, numerically by far the greatest of all the popular uprisings against the Tudors.

### **Reign of Edward VI**

Henry VIII's death in January 1547 left his son Edward king at nine years old. Portraits of Edward VI deliberately echoed those of his father, and Protestant propaganda imagined him as the Old Testament image-breaker Josiah. Court preachers took a high view of royal power and praised the king as Christ's lieutenant on earth, his actions answerable to God rather than his subjects.<sup>14</sup> Edward's regime thus expanded on the language of monarchy inherited from the previous reign. His operational kingship, however, was limited by his youth. Edward's extensive writings demonstrate his quickness to learn, his attention to business, and his thinking on religious and economic affairs; by summer 1552 and his first royal progress, the king was becoming independent of his tutors. But the policy decisions of his reign – the war in Scotland, commissions to remedy the effects of enclosure, the Book of Common Prayer in English – depended on those who administered the realm in his name, notably his uncle Edward Seymour as lord protector, John Dudley as lord president of the council, and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. The letters of the councillor and diplomat William Paget, an essential source for Edward's reign, are split between the State Papers and other archives.<sup>15</sup>

### **Female rule**

Edward's early death in July 1553 meant that the Tudor dominions would now be governed by women: Jane Grey, queen by a coup d'état, for nine disputed days; Mary, who deposed Jane in a coup of her own, for five years; and Elizabeth, for forty-four. English history offered only one precedent – Matilda's struggle for the throne in the twelfth century – and so other justifications of queenship had to be sought. Catholics such as the Suffolk gentleman Robert Wingfield saw the accession of 'sacred Mary, the most holy queen' in providential terms, an interpretation of events which Mary shared.<sup>16</sup> Her piety, learned from her mother Katherine of Aragon, enabled flattering comparisons to be made with the Virgin Mary. When Elizabeth acceded in November 1558, the Marian model was no longer appropriate. Hence the new queen became another Deborah, Judith or Hester: godly women of the Old Testament. Like her sister, Elizabeth had good reason to give thanks to God for her deliverance: from the peril of execution in Mary's reign, and for her recovery from smallpox in 1562, as her own prayers attest. The miraculous discovery of Catholic conspiracies against Elizabeth as her reign progressed was taken as further evidence of divine protection. This evolving Protestant cult, while endorsing the rule of Elizabeth, was also intended to petition the queen towards further religious reform.<sup>17</sup>

Mary and Elizabeth share a tomb in Westminster Abbey, where a Jacobean inscription describes them as 'partners both in throne and grave'. In fact they could hardly have been more different in their responses to the two critical problems facing the children of Henry VIII, namely religion and the succession. Mary's Catholicism was visceral, and she saw her accession as a God-given opportunity to heal England of the heresies that it had suffered since the 1530s. The burning of nearly three hundred Protestants, most of them artisans or labourers and many of them women, was in a

real sense Mary's policy, which she pursued despite the concerns of King Philip and some senior churchmen that it provoked more opposition than it silenced.<sup>18</sup> The prayers that she wrote attest that Elizabeth experienced her faith no less keenly. Protestants saw her as their deliverer, and Elizabeth played up to the image. The 1559 church settlement, which she took real risks to achieve, was reformed in both its liturgy and theology. The evidence of Elizabeth's chapel royal, with its sacred music and its controversial crucifix, is more ambiguous. But when foreign-trained Catholic seminary priests began to evangelise England and Wales from the 1570s, the response of the Elizabethan state was decisive: promoting recusancy from the Church of England would be punished as treason.

Mary's decision to marry Philip, although it fuelled Wyatt's rebellion, restored the Spanish alliance that had been the keystone of Tudor foreign policy until Edward VI's reign. Had the royal couple had children, the Catholicism of England would have been secured. By the same token, Elizabeth's failure to marry, despite her dalliance with a range of suitors, remains the greatest enigma of her reign. Burghley and Walsingham may have had little appetite for a Catholic match, but the alternative was an unresolved succession, a problem made all the worse by the queen's absolute refusal to name an heir. It was a situation inviting conspiracy, or invasion. Explanations for the queen's apparent dereliction of duty have ranged from the psychological and gynaecological to feminist arguments that she chose to remain single, thus avoiding subordination to a husband. The latter argument is deflated by John Aylmer's *An Harborowe for Faithful and True Subiectes* of 1559, which deployed the idea of the king's two bodies to explain how a queen regnant could be submissive as a wife, and still dominant as a magistrate.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps Elizabeth did hope to marry, whether the Earl of Leicester or Francis Duke of Anjou, and was prevented by the tortuous politics of religion and international alliances. The mass of correspondence in The National Archives, the British Library and other repositories is proof of years of effort to solve the chronic problem of the Tudor succession.

In the event, Elizabeth had to abandon the image of the eligible spinster and become the Virgin Queen. Meanwhile an alteration was taking place in contemporary thinking about monarchy, related to Elizabeth's gender but with consequences that outlasted her reign. Under cover of the 1584 'bond of association', a document which swore those who signed it to pursue 'to the uttermost extermination' anyone intending harm to the royal person, the queen's councillors were engaging in some radical thinking. When the bond was sealed in statute, it included a clause that would only come into effect in the event of Elizabeth's violent death. If there was no immediate hereditary succession, then government would continue by council, peers and lawyers: a republic within a monarchy.<sup>20</sup> The plan was conceived as a temporary response to a national emergency. But the fact that the death of the queen could be debated in open Parliament illustrates how broad the theorizing about monarchy had become, of necessity, by the later sixteenth century. The crown of England inherited by James VI in 1603 might still be described in the language of medieval sacred kingship, but its substance had become something new.

## Citation:

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## Notes:

### (Endnotes)

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- 5 G. R. Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government* (Cambridge, 1953), pp. 3-4.
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- 10 'Dark' in the sense of secretive. Francis Bacon, *The History of the Reign of King Henry VII*, ed. B. Vickers (Cambridge, 1998), p. 202.
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- 20 Act 27 Elizabeth 1, c. 1, *Statutes of the Realm* (London, 1810-28), Vol. IV, 704-5; P. Collinson, 'The Monarchical Republic of Elizabeth I', in J. Guy, ed., *The Tudor Monarchy* (London, 1997), pp. 110-34.