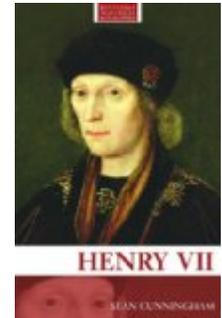


Sean Cunningham. *Henry VII.* London: Routledge, 2006. 317 pp. \$90.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-415-26620-8.



Reviewed by David Grummitt

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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 recognized 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 and not about the development of the early Tudor polity or the nature of the government of the realm. The king, therefore, takes center stage. It is Henry who is portrayed as architect of his regime; similarly, the nature of the early Tudor polity can only be understood through an understanding of the character and aims of the king.

The book begins with a four-chapter narrative of Henry's life. Cunningham expertly covers his formative years in exile, and his 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. The following seven chapters deal with aspects of the reign themat-

ically, 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 on Henry's relations with London.

Henry was, as Steven Gunn has recently reminded us, a liminal monarch, caught on the cusp of the Middle Ages and early modern period.[1] This has affected Henrician historiography, and this book is no exception. Cunningham approaches the king from his perspective as a medievalist, but the picture of Henrician government that emerges is one very different from the familiar image of late medieval England. Cunningham's *Henry VII*, I suspect, will be more recognizable to scholars of Tudor England (or even continental Europe) than those brought up in the K. B. McFarlane tradition of fifteenth-century England. Very early in his reign, Henry, Cunningham indicates, "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 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, 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 personal ability to shape the nature of the polity. Cunningham states 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 counselors (especially lawyers and churchmen) in imparting a different flavor to the reign from its predominantly aristocratic predecessors.[2] Cunningham is, of course, aware of this, but his argument is perhaps insufficiently developed.

This said, there is much in this book to be savored. Cunningham synthesizes existing work by Christine Carpenter, Dominic Lockett, and others on Henry's relations with the localities and complements this with his own research on Lancashire and Kent.[3] Similarly, he is able to draw on his considerable expertise in the archive to give a nuanced account of the role of obligations, recognizance, 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. Cunningham traces the origins of this struggle, which came to

the fore on the king's death with the execution of Sir Richard Empson and Edmund Dudley, although I suspect much more can be made of the dynamics of political conflict late in the reign (conflict that 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).

Like its subject, Cunningham's book also demonstrates a certain liminality, caught on the boundaries between biography and history. The late Sir Geoffrey R. 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." [4] Cunningham's *Henry VII* is a brave attempt to combine the narrative style of biography with the analytical style of history, although the book's weak points discussed above arise principally from its biographical format. Not all of its shortcomings are of the author's making: the lack of footnotes will infuriate many scholarly readers, while at times clumsy inclusion of chapters on church, trade, and the defense of the realm smacks of a publisher's *diktat*. This book shows just how much 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.[5] Henry remains one of the most elusive and controversial of English kings, but Cunningham has provided a new and most welcome synthesis, one from which to conduct further research. As such, it deserves to be read by everyone interested in the period.

NOTES

[1] Steven Gunn, "Henry VII in Context: Problems and Possibilities," *History* 92 (2007): 302.

[2] John Watts, "'A New Ffundacion of is Crowne': Monarchy in the Age of Henry VII," in *The Reign of Henry VII*, ed. Benjamin Thompson (Stamford: Paul Watkins, 1995), 31-53.

[3] D. A. Lockett, "Crown Patronage and Political Morality in Early Tudor England: the Case of Giles, Lord Daubeney," *English Historical Research* 110 (1995): 578-95; Christine Carpenter, *Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401-1499* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[4] Geoffrey R. Elton, *The Practice of History*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 124.

[5] Stanley B. Chrimes, *Henry VII* (London: Methuen, 1972).

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