Tudor England

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Tudor England took its beginning at the battle at Bosworth in 1485 where the upstart Henry upset Richard III and his army, killing the former and dispersing the latter. In retrospect this was the end of the Civil War known to posterity as the War of the Roses, - the whites of York and the reds of Lancaster, with the latter getting the upper hand. But at the time this was not clear, it took Henry VII a few years to fight off further challenges to his throne, which would, had they been successful merely prolonged the internal strife.

The Civil War had lasted for some thirty years and consisted in a series of intermittent battles and depositions of kings and repositions, the exact progress of which it is hard to remember. The noteworthy thing was that it involved limited forces and only engaged the upper power hungry crest of English Society. Supposedly it did little affect the lives of common men and its economy, and as such is noteworthy as far as Civil Wars go. The English Monarchy is not based on election but on heritage, the latter means that it is based on objective rules. The rules are of course set down by men, but as long as there is a common consensus to respect them, they almost acquire the character of a natural law. If maintained by a tradition that spans centuries, this tradition by itself adds considerable weight in the minds of men. Only a few times in the history of England, was the throne seized, and the ascent of Henry VII is of course the most successful exception to the tradition. Of course, Henry himself also rested his case on dynastic connections, but the male line of his ancestors consisted of obscure Welshmen and only on the maternal line could he claim a tenuous connection to John of Gaunt. the lynchpin of royal ancestry of the late Medieval ages.

Whatever the shortcomings of his pedigree, he had what it took to stay in power, and tautologically this is what eventually counts. The England he inherited was very different from the England of today, as the author is at pains to convey to the reader. First it was a country of a very small population, maybe two or three millions at most. Furthermore most of the country was wilderness, which unlike today when seen as precious, was considered as a waste. In a see of forest, mostly indigenous oak, there were islands of cultivations, the occasional overgrown village known as a town, and then of course London itself off the estuary of the Thames, the predominant commercial center, then as well as now. The Fourteenth century has seen the onslaught of the Black Death, the first strike of a period of pandemic pestilence, which would last for a few centuries, with periodic onslaughts, which would carry off the lions share of the victims, with far-reaching demographic consequences[1]. The drastic reduction in the population meant that much agrarian land had to be abandoned, as well as many villages and even smaller towns. The shortage of labor meant by the standard laws of supply and demand, that its value

[1] The author adheres to the standard theory, only recently challenged, that the pest was carried by a species of rats, whose eventual eradication by a rival sub-species, spelled the end of the scourge.

increased, and thus the standard of living of the survivors increased likewise.

Otherwise society was stratified. Most people scraped by at a subsistence level producing no surplus and thus really not playing any role in the economy at large. There were also a fairly substantial part of so called freeholders, peasants owning their own lots, like in Scandinavia, and often employing laborers. The lots and the subsequent wealth varied some of the freeholders being rather wealthy keeping manors and thus financially melting in with the titled nobility, of which some of course had vast holdings. The towns were the locations for artisans and merchants, although there was no real division between town and country, as many town dwellers were also engaged in agricultural work, London being the main exception, sucking the surplus agricultural produce from a large hinterland, as well as surplus population, unable to regenerate itself except by immigration.

Economically the agricultural surplus produced was essentially exclusively that of wool and cloth from sheep farming, whose interests conflicted with farming, especially as to the thorny question of enclosures, which would haunt British politics for centuries to come. At the time there were more sheep than people in England[2]. Of course it is always more advantageous to refine natural produce than to export it in raw form, and industries to weave cloth appeared all over England, not only in the towns, but even more so in the countryside. Before the industrial revolution those were fed by manual labor and energy. Most of the cloth was exported to Antwerp under monopolistic arrangements, and that trade was of crucial importance to the early Tudors. In addition to the exportation of wool and cloth, there were that of metals, predominantly tin (Cornwall) and lead, and hides from wild animals[3].

Henry VII did not engage in any military adventures, he was content with the less glorious task of putting finances in order and embark on some strategic diplomatic ventures, such as cementing the alliance with Spain by marrying the youngest daughter of the royal couple Ferdinand and Isabella t his own crown prince Arthur[4]. After hard bargaining a deal was struck, the princess transported to England (never to return) and married the young, sickly Prince of Wales, who however died shortly after the marriage. This led to renegotiations to marry the young widow to the prince next in line - the future Henry VIII, which was concluded after the death of Henry VII in 1509, when the 18-year old king took his sister-in-law as his bride and queen.

Henry VII bequested to his son a house well set in order. Never before had the Royal treasure been more plentifully supplied. Henry VIII more than anyone else stands for the Tudor regime, and even if not the most beloved of British monarchs, by far the most generally recognized by his portraits, of which there were plenty. In his youth he struck

[2] There are more sheep now in modern England than it was in Tudor times, on the other hand there are even more people, so the ration has been changed to the advantage of the latter. Still I recall driving through England in 1970, and my father remarking that one may get the impression that sheep farming is mainly what English economic life is all about.

[3] In spite of the fact that a large part of the island was pristine, partly because of a shortage of population, partly because of the need for hunting grounds of the leisured classes, indigenous animals such as the wolf and the bear were rare and finally exterminated in the 16th century

[4] The name chosen to further advance the legitimacy of the new dynasty by connecting it to a distant past.

quite a figure. Tall, well-built, in fact athletic in prowess as well as temperamentally, with a fair skin, reddish beard and hair, and blue eyes, he stood out among European royalty. His reign can conveniently be divided into three parts.

During the first married to the Spanish Princess was that of youth. He engaged himself in plenty of sports, jousting being the most important by its obvious martial nature, and then progressing to real wars across the channel in more or less friendly competition with his rival the French king Francis I, where he won some spurs. Otherwise the most decisive battle happening during his reign was the one at Flodden were the Scottish Nation came to grief its King dying along with the flower of its nobility and never properly to recover. The only blight on his happiness was the inability of his queen to produce a male heir, on which the dynasty depended. As to the affairs of the state, those were left to Wolsey, one in the long row of people often of humble backgrounds but remarkable competence, who make themselves indispensable and thus acquire a lot of power at the discretion of their superior, to whom they alone are responsible. Bismarck likened the relationship to the rider of a horse. The horse has superior physical power, but the rider by dint of his wit, is able to bend it to his will.

The second, and the decisive part of his reign was the breakup with Rome. Having fallen in love with Anne Boleyn, who, unlike her elder sister, skillfully led him on, he sought an annulment of his marriage on flimsy grounds[5]. The whole was of course political, while there was in principle no limit to the extent the Pope could go to satisfy the demands of a sovereign, the very political situation of the time made the concessions of the Pope, who was in a very precarious position, impossible to extract, in spite of lengthy pleading and the ultimately ineffectual efforts of Wolsey, who found himself in a very difficult position, his own interest clashing with that of his sovereign. In the end the king decided to cut the Gordian knot by proclaiming himself to be the head of the Church on England. This of course had ramifications well beyond the simple expedience of getting rid of a tiresome wife to pursue unimpeded amorous impulses, the riches of the church beckoned as they had to princely courts all over Northern Europe. The clergy was not very popular, its wealth resented, its manifold abuses provoking indignation, and thus in a skilled and determined cooperation with the Parliament the necessary legislature was drawn up. Wolsey was disposed of, his honors stripped, his goods confiscated, but the old man died before he was to mert his ultimate fate, namely that of execution. Instead another commoner - Thomas Cromwell, had made himself indispensable, able to not only to gauge the wishes of the King but to form and twist them to his own purposes. The union with Ann Boleyn did not produce a male heir either, and when his ardent sexual fever had subsided by its cravings being satisfied, he soon tired of a demanding woman and sought a meeker companion. Cromwell engineered the downfall and eventual execution of Boleyn making room for the next family at the Royal banquet. Now the bliss with Jane Seymour was brief as she died shortly after having presented her husband with the ultimate gift - a male heir.

The break with Rome would of course have momentous consequences on British history

[5] The ostensible issue was whether the teenage marriage between his wife and former sister-in-law with his sickly brother had actually been consummated. There is no need to consider the pros and cons for such a hypothesis, suffices to say that Catherine hotly denied it.

for the next century and a half, and is easily seen as the most important event during his reign. As in the case with most of those breaks with Catholicism it had nothing to do with religion at all. Henry VIII, as far as he was a religious individual at all, was perfectly happy with the Catholic rituals and had no desire to change them. The real reformist zeal would arise elsewhere taking advantage of the paths already blazed. In fact eventually the Church of England, known as the Anglican, would be the one most resembling the Catholic breed in its service and format.

The third part of the reign of Henry VIII was one of decline, at least as to the state of the King[6]. He managed three more marriages, one of which to a much younger woman, who as a consequence found herself on the scaffold. He died in 1547 in his 56th year. The protestant movement he had set in motion was further advanced by the people around the minor Edward VI who died in his teens (just like his uncle). He was followed by Henry's eldest daughter Mary, known as the bloody, because of her ruthless determination to reverse the reformation. Many a men was burned at the stake, yet if considering the actual tolls in life, they must be deemed rather modest and selective. She married the King of Spain, making for an uneasy union between England and that still very powerful country. She was sickly, produced no issue, and died. Incidentally, during her brief reign the last British foothold on the continent - Calais, was lost to the French.

The final ascension on the Tudor throne was that of Elizabeth, and by far the most successful. Justly or unjustly, the period is seen as a golden age, which saw the rise of English power. Elizabeth returned to the country to the Protestant fold, hardly surprising as she was of the Boleyn family, which had identified itself strongly with the Protestant cause, but the real reason may have been more *realpolitisch* than sentimental. Unlike her half-sister she did not marry and thus kept power in her own hands. Like the typical successful head of state, she put the interest of the state above that of her own pleasure. An obvious option in retrospect, far harder in real time. The most important event was weathering the onslaught of the Spanish Armada. The British navy initiated by her father had come into its own and put out a competent fleet, but basically the Armada self-destructed, and the storm that ultimately set on it, did hardly improve matters. The Spanish threat had dissipated itself and Spain would never recover its former status and become a second rate power in the centuries to follow.

Britain being an island, its fate was linked to the sea and a reliable seapower, and the Elizabethan age saw its true beginnings, not in the least in the matter of oversees exploration, a venture as much of piracy as anything else, Sir Francis Drake being the typical example of the daring buccaneer. Elizabeth left no issue, and the crown was bestowed on the son of Mary Stuart, the distant relative, whose uneasy confinement in England, after having been ousted from the Scottish throne, ended reluctantly in her execution on trumped up charges of betrayal[7].

Life in a country proceeds to a large part independently of those in charge, this goes particularly as to its economic development. The story of Tudor England, although

[6] The King greatly extended his girth and became plagued with all kinds of disgusting ailments such as ulcerating sores.

[7] The former Queen argued with some conviction, that she could hardly be accused of treason as she was not a subject of the Queen.

enlivened by the antics of its monarchs is after all a steady undramatic one, which may produce increased well-being but hardly any good stories. Thus the predisposition of historians to focus on the personal element not the history of the long duration. This book is an attempt to do the latter, but irresistibly it is drawn into the former, so what starts out promisingly ends up as yet another long chronicle of events hard to make sense of.

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