Encomium Henrici

A brief examination of the reign of King Henry IX

(b. 1519; r. 1547- 1588)

Et si fata deum, si mens non laeva fuisset,...

Trojaque nunc staret; Priamique arx alta, maneres.

Virgil *Aeneid* II

It is hard to imagine what the English Renaissance would have been like without Henry IX. He inherited the crown at the greatest crisis in England and in Europe, and kept England Catholic in spite of powerful pressure within England to bring that country into the Reformed orbit. By the end of his reign England was irrevocably loyal to Rome and well set on a course of world expansion as a maritime and colonial power. At the beginning of the reign, however, neither the final outcome of the Reformation movement in England nor England's status among the nations of Europe could be called certain. How much of the development of the mid-sixteenth century was due to social and political forces irrespective of personality and how much to the character and policy of that king whose reign future generations of Englishmen all over the world have remembered as the dawn of English glory and the beginning of the first great flowering of English letters?

Perhaps the most important question concerns the fate of the Reformation in England, for religious loyalties were of great importance in the politics of Europe through the eighteenth century. Why did England not "go Protestant" as did the Scandinavian countries, Holland, and so many parts of Germany? In England, as in, for instance, Denmark, kings had cast an avaricious eye at the Church's wealth in a quest for a new basis of their power. The English clergy, long accustomed to serving more as royal officials than as agents of the Church Universal, would not have much resisted a state-led reform like Gustavus Vasa's in Sweden. Most critical of all was the role of the Southeast and London, closely tied to the Netherlands, like the Netherlands a bourgeois. mercantile society. It was here that Lollardy maintained itself through the fifteenth century; it was here that Calvinism found its greatest growth in the sixteenth; it is here that the English Refomed Church remains strogest to this day. With London and its wealth already rising to pre-eminence in the Tudor era, why was not the whole of England drawn into the Calvinist camp?

It is perhaps inevitable that Protestantism (in the Zwinglian form of Tyndale and Frith, later added to the European network centered in Geneva) was able to gain strength in Kent, East Anglia, and particularly in London during the reign of Henry VIII. While Henry and many of his ministers, particularly Sir Thomas More, tried to root out heresy in those counties, the king's continual distraction in foreign adventures for which he was dependent on the support of London and the Southeast made any sustained effort difficult. But after the fall from power of Wiltshire, Cromwell, and other courtiers under Protestant influence on whom the Reformers had placed their hopes of gaining the king's allegiance, open rebellion was as inevitable as doomed to failure. The rebels with whom Henry IX had to deal at the beginning of his reign probably desired no sedition; but the conspiracy against the Earl of Wiltshire in 1542 had deprived them of any thought-out program or direction.

That the Duke of Norfolk was the leader of the conspirators who brought about the conviction for heresy and treason of Wiltshire, Sir Thomas Cromwell, and others of the circle of "new men" who were gaining favor with the king is well known. But the roles of such men as Bishop Tunstal, then Lord Chancellor, or Sir William Roper, who was to succeed to that office in the next reign, have been somewhat in doubt. In doubt, too, is the actual involvement of Cromwell and Wiltshire in heresy: they seem to have been men primarily secular in mind. This important palace *coup* may not, indeed, have been so much a clash of Catholic and

Protestant parties as an episode in the stuggle between the older families arid the "new men." [1] At any rate the Protestants had put their money on the "new men" to further their cause at court; 1542 saw the loss of able men who could have led a Protestant rising to victory. As it was, the rising, without even an Oldcastle to lead it, was lost before it began.

If the Reformers could have captured the crown, their cause would probably have prevailed quickly. Royal power was waxing throughout the Tudor period, and would have increased more with wealth confiscated, as in Denmark, from the Church. The English bishops were royal appointees with a tradition of royal service; it was not until the later part of Henry IX's reign that the English Counter-Reformation, led by Cardinals Pole and Roper, made the English church into an independent force in the tradition of Thomas Becket. The king the Reformers had to contend with, however, was more of a "Defender of the Faith" than even his father, formed by the piety of his Spanish mother Katherine and the humanist training of Thomas More and his school.

It was probably not in consideration of the future of the English Church, but in the impatience of policy at the great Utopian's inadaptability to the cunning turns of international politics that Henry VIII allowed Sir Thomas More to lay down the chancellorship after a very brief tenure of office and to devote himself to the education of the Prince of Wales. Henry already had a reputation of a scholarly mind, and had been know to associate with the More circle at court. The years before Sir Thomas' death in 1540 left a great mark on the future king, who in the early years of his reign had More's son-in-law for his Chancellor, and who patronized the most significant figure of the English Counter-Reformation, Thomas Cardinal Roper, Thomas More's grandson, founder of the Society of St. Thomas and principal mover behind the Authorised English Bible.

On the occasion of Cardinal Roper's canonisation in the nineteenth century, his distinguished successor as Archbishop of Canterbury, Cardinal Newman, remarked, "He was that careful gardener to whose judicious pruning the English Church owes her health even to this day." Even as a young man at Oxford, Roper had begun to gather around himself the future Society of St. Thomas of Canterbury, but it was royal patronage and that of the learned Archbishop Pole that raised him to positions of influence and obtained from Pius IV recognition of his new order of clerks regular and permission to work on his translation of the Bible from the original languages. Thus perhaps Henry deserves some of the praise that has gone to the great Roper.

Yet Roper's work, brilliant though it seems even today, has something in it of historical necessity. The constant unrest of the 1550s that followed the risings of 1547-48 could not be allowed to continue; nor could severe repression be used against the heretics, especially in London, without angering or crippling the merchant class so essential to England's prosperity, yet so thoroughly infiltrated with Protestantism. Only the work that Roper and his Society were ready to do could resolve the problem.[2] The English Bible, too, in an authorised version to compete with that of Tyndale, which had circulated underground some 50 years, was an idea whose time had long since come. It had, in fact, been urged by Roper's grandfather, old Sir Thomas More, in his dialogue against Tyndale in 1528. Roper assembled the greatest scholars and poets of his age and created not only a weapon against the heretics, but a literary masterpiece that has continued the influence of the More school of English prose to this very day.

We must now turn from the domestic affairs of the Reformation to foriegn policy, a field in which Henry IX excelled. Yet even here, many of his seemingly farsighted policies may be seen as the result of contemporary political considerations. His father, by twisting and turning in Continental politics, had played unwilling godfather to Dutch Protestantism; his son saw this danger and avoided such adventures in favor of the development of trade, naval power, and colonisation in America. Moderation in foreign involvements was

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[1] Of course, history being what it is, the "new men" did come to power in the end, though without the threat of heresy. And it must be noted that not only were Wiltshire and Cromwell "new men"; so were Roper and others or the Catholic party.

[2] Roper's order was without doubt more successful than the Jesuits could have been, given the xenophobia typical of this part of England and their non-English flavor. The Jesuits carried out the same work in Poland, Hungary. Bohemia, and elsewhere, only coming to England in the seventeenth century.

needed to balance the crown's commitment to Catholicism with the Protestant (and anti-Spanish, once the Nethlerlands began to assert their independence) tendencies of London. Though Protestantism declined after 1560, it did not disappear, as the many colonists who settled New England under the schemes of seventeenth-century monarchs demonstrate. Policy, therefore, as much as Utopian principle, kept the king from what seems to have been his natural inclination to support the Guise party in the French Wars of Religion.

Scottish affairs, too, would probably have run a similar course regardless of the personality of the king. The union of all Britain was perhaps inevitable without the Tudor dynastic marriage that brought about the union of the two crowns under Henry's successor. England's influence over Scottish ecclesiastical affairs was evident in the intervention against the Protestant rising of 1548, and later as the St. Thomas priests began to carry out their programs of reform in Scotland as well as England.

Though the element of inevitability in so much of this period is great, if Henry IX had been a different man and failed to read so well the mood of his subjects, foreign affairs might have been his downfall. Certainly any continued intervention in the Continent in the style of his father would have left open the way to Parliamentary power and the greater influence of Protestantism. War was the king's Achilles heel, because he could obtain the subsidies necessary for war only through Parliament. The strength of Henry's policy lay in avoiding war, and rather using the resources of his subjects for maritime expansion. On the other hand, to have allowed Scotland to go Protestant would have placed the English church in great jeopardy. Thus Henry's policy of developing Britain as a single naval power, strong through trade and loyalty to the Crown, was the only way that she could have survived, strong and Catholic.

The reign of Henry IX was a great period of crisis when England— rather we should say Britain—came into her modern character as a member in the community of Catholic nations. By his moderation in politics and firm support of the "Counter-Reformation" he headed off what could easily have been a Reformation on the Dutch or Scandinavian model, leaving the Church instead healthy, orthodox, and free from state domination. By avoiding continental wars, he set England on the course that would make her a great power in her true element—the sea. We in British America, whether we count ourselves the heirs of Protestant New England or Catholic Virginia, may rightly honor the memory of this great monarch.

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