



HENRY VIII - THE GOOD KING

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When we look back at the reign of Henry VIII, the common view is that he was power-besotted man, who was fond of young girls and great revelry, and had an enormous appetite that saw him grow from a handsome, athletic youth to a bloated old man, who could barely walk.

This extreme view certainly makes for good press copy, but is rather distant from the truth of the man and his reign. It is this image that Carolly Erickson, in her biography, *Great Harry*, successfully explodes, and instead gives us a version of Henry that is often overlooked – that of a sober, forthright and indeed forceful man, who was not only a loyal Catholic, but a good king, who was much beloved by his subjects.

Nevertheless, there was a transition as well, which no doubt has given rise to the image of Henry VIII as an ogre, who was happily divorcing or beheading six wives. And this transition was part and parcel of the turbulent times during which Henry reigned, for it saw the establishment of the Protestant faith in England, the Dissolution of the Monasteries, and a path of independence from Rome for England.

The approach that Erickson takes is one of insight into the character of Henry, rather than any attempt on her part to either extol or destroy the "legend of Henry."

In fact, Erickson examines the great intellectual and physical vivacity of the young Henry, as he became a king at the age of eighteen, and his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, and then his slow decline into middle age and rather decrepit old age.

Thus, the contours of her book can also be seen as her examination of a great king, who declines into an ogre, desperately seeking an heir to his throne, while controlling those around him with fear.

The underlying question that Erickson seems to be asking is how does a gifted, talented young man become a vengeful executioner? There is, of course, no one answer to this question, as Erickson shows.

Indeed, the contours of Henry's life show this transformation, as Erickson reminds us again and again. Henry was a man of "majestic childishness,... absurd mixture of naïveté and cunning, boldness and poltroonery, vindictive cruelty and wayward almost irresistible charm."

Therefore, the actions of such a complex person need to be examined not only carefully, but also sensitively, since Henry struggled not only with internal problems, but also external ones, especially with France and Spain.

But he also saw himself as above other rulers, a mythic knight of old: "Henry appeared to incarnate all the ardent vitality of Christian knighthood, the dauntless zeal that for the right could outbrave all dangers."

But at home, he needed to assure his subjects of the rightful claim of the Tudors for the English. The

problem lay with his father, Henry VII, whose grab for the crown came only as result of a precarious win at the Battle of Bosworth, in which King Richard III was defeated. In fact, other than the victory, Henry VII had no right to the English throne at all.

The only way Henry VIII could expound the myth of the Tudors was to produce a male heir, who would not only secure the Tudor line, but also demonstrate that God was firmly on the side of the Tudors, whom He continually favored.

As well, a generation earlier, the War of the Roses had left England devastated, and Henry VIII did not want the plague of dynastic instability to run rampant in the nation.

Thus, Erickson astutely explains his relentless quest for an heir, within the context of Henry's political reality, since this was an age in which children (especially royal ones) were seen as being gifts from God. What would it say about Henry and the Tudors, if God withheld this gift?

Erickson demonstrates that this quest became all consuming for Henry, and because of it, Henry undertook monumental decisions that would change England forever.

The problem, as he saw it, lay with his wife, Catherine of Aragon, who had not produced an heir. Henry sought for an explanation. He found one, in that Catherine was the widow of his older brother, Arthur, who had died while Henry was young, thus bringing Henry to the throne.

In his own eyes, marrying Catherine was incest, and he asked the Pope, Clement VII, to dissolve their marriage based upon this fact, which became known as the King's Great Matter.

The Pope refused, and Henry sought other measures. Henry found resolved the Great Matter, by accepting Protestantism, and bringing about the English Reformation, and all the ensuing legal and political changes, such as the Oath of Succession, the Act of Appeals, the Act of Supremacy, the Supplication against the Ordinaries, and the Ten Articles.

Thus, Henry steered the course of England away from the rule of Rome towards a greater role, which would be realized by his daughter Elizabeth, and afterwards.

The man that Erickson presents to us is also one of great and boundless energy: " Along with his tough, untiring physique Henry had a superabundance of nervous energy which urged him on from one diversion to another and which put a keen edge on his every movement."

Erickson excels in this sort of description, which not only captures the true character of Henry, but also the very vitality of the man, for we see him full of life, someone reveling in the powers of his own body and mind.

It is this character of Henry that captured the hearts of his subjects, for they saw in him a king who was

not only energetic, but more importantly as a man of action – and action was the most defining characteristic of the Renaissance, and Henry embodied the spirit of his age perfectly.

Thus it was that Cardinal Wolsey referred to him as the “prince of royal courage” who would rather lose half his kingdom than abandon his undertakings/” It was this tenacity that marked the entire length of Henry’s reign.

Thus, the portrait that emerges from Erickson’s book is one of a man, who is both a shrewd reader and manipulator of men, and a rather moving man, who is seeking to do everything in his power to leave a great legacy behind.

In effect, Erickson takes the legend of Henry VIII, and places it side-by-side with his reality, which he documents minutely.

The result is a complete portrait of Henry VIII, as he really was, a man at once worldly and political, boyish and shrewd, playful and vindictive, loving and cruel. It is within these polarities that Erickson’s portrait of VIII greatly excels.

The [photo](#) shows, "The New Learning, Erasmus and Thomas More Visit the Children of King Henry VII at Greenwich, 1499 " by Frank Cadogan Cowper, painted ca. 1910.

