

# HENRY VIII



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# HENRY VIII

## AN ESSAY IN REVISION

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## HENRY VIII

WHAT shall we think of Henry VIII? However that question has been or may be answered, one reply is apparently impossible. Not even the most resolute believer in deterministic interpretations of history seems able to escape the spell of that magnificent figure; I know of no book on the age which does not allow the king a place somewhere at least near the centre of the stage. It is therefore self-evident that what one thinks of Henry VIII is an entirely fundamental part of what one thinks of sixteenth-century England; no one can arrive at a sensible view of that period without making for himself a convincingly real picture of the king. At first glance, this might seem no difficult task. No king of England is more familiar to his countrymen; indeed, he is the only one whose portrait the vast majority would recognize on sight. They know one fact about quite a few other sovereigns. Charles I lost his head, Charles II had Nell Gwyn, George III went mad. Of Henry VIII they know two things: he made the Reformation, and he had six wives. Even if only the second fact is beyond dispute, there is something oddly adequate about this body of knowledge. Henry's fame rests on a striking personality, expressing itself in his technicolored private life, and on the almost perfect success of his sovereign policy. The king stamped himself on his age and country with all the vehemence of the true ruler; today he appears as the very embodiment of personal monarchy. Any study of Henry VIII is indeed a study in the nature of personal monarchy, but that concept is not precise. It means different things in different hands, and some error has arisen from the supposition that if Henry VIII was a true personal monarch, he must in consequence have

been the maker and deviser of all that happened in his day.

In periods of patchy evidence, it is always difficult to ascribe responsibility and assess originality, so that one tends to use the name of the nominal ruler as a symbol for the multitude of men who go to make up the government of a country over a number of years. When the nominal ruler is so fiercely evident, leaves so profound and prolonged an impression, and looks so much a king *par excellence*, it seems clearly sensible to suppose that the symbol stands for the reality. Froude came to the study of the reign with every ingrained prejudice against that bloodstained monster, Henry VIII; he left it with an ardent admiration for the king.<sup>1</sup> A. F. Pollard, sound Victorian liberal though he was, gave the king not only the respect of the historian but also the worship of the devotee.<sup>2</sup> 'The most remarkable man who ever sat on the English throne'; 'it was the king, and the king alone, who kept England on the course he had mapped out'; such phrases take some justifying. Of course, they are supposed to arise from a dispassionate study of the evidence, but they go beyond the mere analysis of the king's doings to an almost bemused delight in what he is thought to have done. In this they perhaps represent only the feelings of the stalwart Protestant; but it is more to the point that this approval of the Reformation should have become so firmly attached to a monarch whom Pollard, at least, believed never to have wavered from doctrinal orthodoxy.

Anyone who wants to take an independent look at Henry VIII is bound to come up against Pollard whose splendidly executed portrait (not a Holbein, but neither a Sargent—perhaps a Winterhalter?) has held the field for nearly sixty years. Indeed, except for one or two

<sup>1</sup> J. A. Froude, *History of England*, vol. i, Preface.

<sup>2</sup> Especially in *Henry VIII* (annotated edition, 1905) and *Factors in Modern History* (1907); but even a mature work like *Wolsey* (1929) still embodies a strikingly favourable view of Henry.

popular but negligible books,<sup>1</sup> no further biography has even appeared since 1901.<sup>2</sup> What may perhaps be called a Catholic revival in historical writing, together with the experiences of the last generation, have here and there produced attacks on this figure inherited from a pleasanter age. It has become customary to trace the easy parallels between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries, with their ideological wars, state trials, subversive movements and all the rest; and even if that endeavour has on occasion led to some striking historical misjudgments, it has produced a drop in Henry's stock.<sup>3</sup> At least we are no longer quite so likely to accept Henry's egomania with indulgence merely because it somehow helped to advance the cause of Protestant England; recognizing his mixture of brutal will and cunning skill for what it was, we shall not so readily submerge the nastiness of the man in approval of the achievement. When Pollard roundly asserted that Henry was never capable of 'a lust for superfluous butchery',<sup>4</sup> we must wonder where for him superfluity had its beginning. Even the romantic view of the king, playing up his film-star and football-hero qualities in precisely the way that appealed to his own subjects, is constrained to take note of what is then called his 'darker' or 'satanic' side.<sup>5</sup> All these minor adjustments,

<sup>1</sup> Especially F. Hackett, *Henry VIII* (1929). The author described himself as a 'psycho-historian'.

<sup>2</sup> There are a few brief studies of which the best, beginning to see Henry VIII in a less Pollardian light, is that of Christopher Morris in *The Tudors* (1955). Prof. Bindoff's view in *Tudor England* (1950), esp. p. 96, tentatively modifies Pollard's but remains essentially based on it.

<sup>3</sup> When some years ago Mr. A. J. P. Taylor likened Tito's quarrel with Moscow to Henry VIII's break with Rome, it was uncertain which was the more striking – the immediate appositeness or the ultimate nullity of the comparison.

<sup>4</sup> *Henry VIII*, p. 346. Of course, Pollard recognized Henry VIII's egotism (e.g. *Factors*, pp. 83ff.), but he was throughout concerned to show that it did not matter.

<sup>5</sup> For a prime recent example of the romantic view see L. Baldwin Smith, *A Tudor Tragedy* (1961), pp. 125ff.

all these revulsions of taste, do not, however, take away from the granite core of Pollard's Henry VIII, the king who 'surrounded by faint hearts and fearful minds . . . neither faltered nor failed', the pilot who weathered the storm. Inevitably, if one is to arrive at a reasoned view of Henry VIII's place in history, one must first consider Pollard's view and assess its validity.

In Pollard's eyes, Henry VIII was essentially a simple man, despite his secret counsels and careful ways. A king at eighteen, a young athlete but also an intellectual, he was content to enjoy life in a variety of ways and left business to others. From 1514 to 1529 he allowed Wolsey to govern, though he never entirely abdicated his place to the cardinal. He matured slowly, but by 1529, when Wolsey failed in the matter of the Divorce, he was ready to take over. (In passing, it may be noted that a Tudor who did not 'mature' till he was 38 arouses one's scepticism). From then onwards, he remained his own prime minister, and the remainder of the reign witnessed a series of successful actions elevating both his monarchy and the nation's independence and power to new heights. For Pollard the reign therefore fell into two parts: the years during which Henry 'had been kept in leading strings by Wolsey's and other clerical influences', on the one hand; on the other, the later years during which he first consolidated his personal supremacy in England and then extended it over the rest of the British Isles.<sup>1</sup>

For this notion of a quite straightforward course of development, determined and guided by the growth of one particular personality, Pollard offered no evidence except a story so slanted as to support the interpretation. He never argued his case; he assumed it. Yet any critical consideration of it at once discovers a number of manifest difficulties. Even if one is to accept without question his account of the Wolsey era, can one really see a perfect unity in the years 1529-47? Pollard seems to maintain

<sup>1</sup> *Henry VIII*, pp. 363f.

not only that the pointless French war of 1542-4 was wise policy, but also that Henry's attack on Scottish independence in 1545-6 was sensible and constructive, though in the face of Henry's manifest failure to rivet English rule on Scotland even he was compelled to suggest some tentative criticisms.<sup>1</sup> Of the policy in general, however, he approves, arguing that in this last war Henry was not pursuing the 'Wolsey policy' of mere glory and aggrandisement but had in mind the menace of a personal union between France and Scotland. We look in vain beyond the assertion for the proof, and we cannot forget that the whole threat of a Franco-Scottish union neither did nor could begin to show until after Solway Moss, the death of James V, and the growingly palpable danger of an English conquest of Scotland.

In fact, without at this stage committing oneself to any explanation, one cannot but be immediately struck by the marked differences in purpose and success that marked the 1530's and 1540's, by the contrast between the highly successful internal policy in the first decade and the fumblingly unsuccessful external policy of the second. Moreover, the latter even threatened much of the internal achievement of the former: it aggravated, if it did not call forth, the great economic crisis. The truth about that period of inflation and distress was only partially known when Pollard wrote, though it must be said that even what he could have known ought to have influenced his account a good deal more than it did. In his book on Henry VIII he does not mention debase-ment and has nothing to say on inflation. Thus, even if one were to agree that the years from Wolsey's fall to the dissolution of the Reformation Parliament saw a continuous policy inspired by one man (and I have shown elsewhere why I should stress the changes brought about by Thomas Cromwell's arrival in power in 1531-2),<sup>2</sup> it

<sup>1</sup> *Henry VIII*, pp. 409f.

<sup>2</sup> See my 'King or Minister? The Man behind the English Reformation', *History*, 1954, pp. 216ff.

is quite impossible to overlook a drastic change for the worse in 1541-2 when the king resumed the policy of continental alliances and military enterprises.<sup>1</sup> Either Henry VIII was not the unfailing political genius of Pollard's imagining, or the policy of the second half of his reign was not so exclusively dominated by one man. Or, for that matter, both these points may be true.

A few particular pieces of Pollard's picture may be subjected to closer analysis, in order to show the slender grounds on which some apparently well-founded parts of it rest. It is essential to his view that Henry should be seen as 'innocent', idealist and trusting in his early years—a lamb going to slaughter among the wolves of the international scene, and a Prince Charming at home. Then we are shown the lamb learning its lesson and Prince Charming gradually losing his bloom; we are back with a Henry VIII slowly maturing—in cask, as it were. Of course, there is some truth in this; all men grow older and intelligent men learn from experience. No one doubts that advancing years and increasing ill-health left their mark on Henry VIII. Unquestionably, his physical grossness, suspicious arrogance and political dexterity all grew more marked as self-indulgence and the effects of adulation worked on one of the most purely egotistic temperaments known to history. What is less clear is whether Henry was really so innocent in his youth—so very different in essentials (allowing for differences in degree) from what later years showed him to be. It was in 1516, when twenty-five years old, that he expressed his view of his kingship as 'having no superior on earth'; as far as his belief in his own exalted position went, greater age and experience could not enlarge an assurance already complete. Pollard glides easily over the

<sup>1</sup> Pollard maintained (*Henry VIII*, pp. 149f.) that after 1529 Henry avoided a spirited foreign policy. This is true down to the early forties, and certainly Wolsey was largely responsible for the concentration on foreign policy which marked the years 1515-28. But to see in the wars after 1541 nothing but a sensible policy for the consolidation of 'Great Britain' is surely to misread the situation.

executions of Empson and Dudley, arraigned on manifestly false charges of treason and sacrificed to the demands of popularity. It may well be that the idea came from Henry's ministers; but the whole episode carries all the stigmata of political motive, sickening self-righteousness and drastic success which mark later occasions in the reign when others whose services had become inconvenient (Anne Boleyn, Cromwell, the Howards) found themselves in the same unhappy position. It is really very difficult to believe that even the adolescent Henry VIII was not fully conversant with the use of managed state trials.

More dubious still is Pollard's notion that the trusting idealist was horribly deceived and exploited by his wicked allies in the war of 1512-14. He tells the story exclusively from the calendar of *Letters and Papers of the Reign of Henry VIII*,<sup>1</sup> and although that collection includes some material from continental archives, a less insular body of evidence would surely cast a different light. This is the more certain because Pollard's version does not really hold together. Henry, we are told, entered the war purely because of his zeal for the Church. He was then time and again deceived by Ferdinand the Catholic and the Emperor Maximilian, though for long he refused to credit their duplicity and remained eager only to help the pope. It thus comes as something of a surprise to find the story end with the lamb's unheralded triumph over the wolves: 'Maximilian and Ferdinand were left out in the cold'. The upshot of all those manœuvres was England's marriage alliance with the common enemy, France, a manifest victory for Henry. That Ferdinand and Maximilian behaved badly and tortuously is unquestionably true; but the fact that only Henry got positive advantages (including money and territory) does make one wonder about his innocence and idealism. It would surely be a simpler and more probable view which saw his political abilities and understanding as highly

<sup>1</sup> *Henry VIII*, pp. 56ff.

developed even at this stage and took a less patriotically trusting line over his frequent protestations of noble intentions and gentlemanly instincts. In brief, Pollard's view fails to convince me because it essentially assumes a unity in the reign created by the dominance of the king's person and action, and then explains the obvious differences of its parts (reduced beyond the facts) by postulating unacceptably profound differences between the king's youth and manhood and age. Henry changed as all men change, but (like most men) he did so within clearly defined limits of character, intellect and purpose which are discernible from the first. In consequence, the changing character of the reign—the contrasts both in what was done and how it was done—cannot be explained by looking only at him.

There are also indications that the picture painted by Pollard, and very generally accepted, of a man sovereignly in control of all that went on, cannot be altogether true. Take the case of his ministers. Certainly, both Wolsey and Cromwell fell only because the king abandoned them: he made them, he maintained them, he alone could destroy them. Yet he regretted their loss soon after and recognized that he had been inveigled into a false step. He kept the possibility of recalling Wolsey in mind—to such good effect that Norfolk and the Council found it necessary to get evidence of the cardinal's continued political activity and be rid of him that way. In Cromwell's case, Henry frankly admitted the truth when he complained that his other councillors had, 'upon light pretexts, by false accusations . . . made him put to death the most faithful servant he ever had'.<sup>1</sup> This was exactly what had happened;<sup>2</sup> and it underlines the relative ease with which this powerful and personal monarch could be manipulated by those who knew how to play on his prejudices, fears and suspicions. Historians for ever quote

<sup>1</sup> *Letters and Papers . . . of Henry VIII*, xvi. 590.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. my 'Thomas Cromwell's Decline and Fall', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, x. 150ff.

Sir Thomas More's remark to Cromwell that if the lion but knew his own strength it were hard for anyone to hold him; but they do not seem to realize that this sufficiently penetrating (if also sufficiently obvious) insight both underestimated the lion's self-knowledge from the start and proves nothing about his readiness to be tricked by others into the use of his strength. Why, even in the most personal matter of all, Henry was easily enough caught in webs spun by the manipulators. A man who marries six wives is not a man who perfectly controls his own fate; and twice at least he married in obedience to other people's management. The Howards yoked him to his second Catherine as surely as Cromwell, more openly, forced his second Anne upon him.

All this is not intended in the least to deny Henry's very real abilities, but only to suggest that we surely cannot accept an argument unsupported by evidence which ascribes to him alone the mastery of events, the making of policy, and the detailed and specific government of the country. Personal monarchy does not necessarily require any of this. It is enough if the monarch observes the two essentials of such a form of kingship, as Henry VIII unquestionably did: he always and fully represented its symbolic side, and he always remained the last and ultimately decisive factor in government. The first point must be seen in its proper importance. Used as we are to a monarchy for long described, rather patronizingly, as a symbolic figurehead, we may easily overlook the vital necessity and great political strength in the sixteenth century of a king who was visibly king and head of the nation. Although it is not true, as has sometimes been alleged, that the Tudor age could not make a distinction between the crown and its holder, it remains true that ordinarily it preferred not to have to make the distinction. However much we may talk of an age of nationalism and similar abstractions, the fact that allegiance was given to an embodied head, to the person

of the king in the most literal way, is very plain. This semi-divine king, both distant and near—for privacy was a thing barely known to kings—not only stood for the nation and the commonwealth, symbolizing something else, but himself demanded and received a personal and direct devotion which during the stresses of the Reformation came at times very near idolatry. In its most restricted sense, personal monarchy perhaps reached its apogee in Henry VIII. At this task of personal projection he was better than his father, who had been a better and abler king; more successful even than his daughter, who died with court and country emerging from the spell she had cast. No matter what he did, Henry VIII never experienced any weakening in the personal magnetism which worked upon all sorts and conditions of men. From the day that he ascended the throne, so full of the Renaissance virtues that for once the panegyrists could mean what they said, to the day thirty-eight years later when the swollen wreck of a fine body at last released the indomitable spirit, the king stood in the world's eye as the true figure of all that kingship meant. Body and mind equipped him better for this than either Charles V or Francis I, both politically more powerful in fact. No person was ever more monarchical, no monarchy more personal in this sense, than Henry VIII's.

Nor, of course, was it all show. He ruled as well as reigned; no man ever dominated Henry VIII, and few could keep even a guiding hand on him for long. During Wolsey's ascendancy he seemed at times to retire from the political scene. But even though he allowed the cardinal to run things (till Wolsey himself came to believe in the implications of that dangerous cognomen, *alter rex*), he asserted himself at times, and always with contemptuous ease. As early as 1516, when he was still in the main preoccupied with his intellectual, athletic and amatory amusements, he taught Wolsey a lesson by compelling him to seek pardon on his knees in the clergys' quarrel with the laity which arose out of Richard

Hunne's case. Attempts to investigate and improve the machinery of government were undertaken in 1518-19 and 1526, in response to the king's demands for greater efficiency and influence; the fact that nothing came of them reflects on both king and minister, but it does not permit us to overlook Henry's very evident activity in government even at this stage. The correspondence of those years provides plenty of evidence of his constant concern with affairs: he had, for instance, his own view on the government of Ireland.<sup>1</sup> He let Wolsey govern and often gave him a free hand; but he never ceased to insert himself at intervals into the process by which policy came to be both devised and executed.

If Wolsey was arrogant, he yet showed a proper deference to the king; while he deceived himself into thinking that the reality of power lay with him, he yet accorded Henry some of the show. Cromwell, who never reached Wolsey's position in the world, or his income, and who took little stock in the trappings of glory, went much further in submission. Self-reliant and sturdy towards all others, he adopted towards Henry a fulsome-ness of tone, a depth of courtier-like phraseology, for which historians (who often, in their own way and without Cromwell's compelling reasons, are quite as much awed by the king) have never forgiven him. The difference did not entirely lie in the ministers; unquestionably the Divorce and the political complications which ensued changed Henry's habits. Immediately after Wolsey's fall he had no single minister to govern for him, and he therefore necessarily devoted more of his time and thought to affairs than before. Not vastly more: there was no change, however gradual, from playboy to statesman, for he had never really been the first and was never really to be the second. But he certainly demonstrated his personal control more deliberately. He began to see foreign ambassadors more often himself, even though the meetings in

<sup>1</sup> Cf. D. B. Quinn, 'Henry VIII and Ireland, 1509-34', *Irish Historical Studies*, xii (1961), 318ff.

which the real negotiations were carried on continued to take place with his ministers. He never attended Council meetings, a reasonable practice also followed by Elizabeth; but he now saw to it that Council discussions were not the sham of Wolsey's day and that he was given advice, not information on action taken. He read state papers and occasionally corrected them. To the superficial eye he was very much in charge, an appearance corroborated by Cromwell's careful language and willingness to let all things appear to have come from him. Cromwell was always using 'his highness' pleasure' in his letters and instructions; it was always 'the king so wills it' or 'his grace commandeth me to say', though there is plenty of evidence (including some of the charges levelled against him in his attainder) that these phrases did not necessarily mean that Henry had even heard of the case in question. Anyone who has ever received a letter on some minor point from some underling in a ministry, beginning 'I am instructed by Her Majesty's Secretary of State', will perhaps be able to put a more intelligent than literal interpretation on such words.

Still, it all goes to show what no one then doubted, as no one need doubt it now: no matter what was decided, the last word remained with the king. Cromwell's fall, more dramatically sudden than Wolsey's, underlined this, and Henry thereafter thought himself well able to govern without any chief minister. It is sometimes argued that his experience with Wolsey and Cromwell taught him the unwisdom of concentrating so much power in one hand, and I am far from denying the pathological suspiciousness which grew upon him with increasing age, ill health, and success. But I find it impossible to believe that he ever thought himself even remotely unable to do as he pleased with any of his servants. Not fear of overmighty subjects, but the absence of any obvious successor to Cromwell, the existence of two religious factions and misplaced confidence in his own powers led Henry VIII to do without a single leading minister after 1540. Those

were also the only years in his reign when government policy was directly disastrous to the country.

In one kind of business Henry seems always to have been the decisive factor from beginning to end – in the business, that is, of political trials and the persecution of important individuals. It is possible that the duke of Buckingham suffered because Wolsey tricked the king into suspicion, and Cromwell may have worked off a personal animus against the Poles. But even these cases are dubious, and in such other instances as Empson and Dudley, More and Fisher, Anne Boleyn and the earl of Surrey, not to mention Wolsey and Cromwell themselves, the real blood-guilt lies with the king. Time and again, real viciousness palpably enters these cases only with his personal participation. Faction strife and personal ambition brought their grim battles, but it was the king's hand that held the axe. Everybody accepted the fact and the supposed necessity of these 'prepared' trials with their edifying scaffold-scenes, but only the king gives the impression of believing in them, sincere horror of the alleged deed mingling in him with an unrelenting thirst for revenge. Cromwell treated More with compassion and respect until he had had a word from on high. In 1536, when Cromwell tried to protect the freshly cowed Carthusians against the royal desire to expel them from their house, he earned a severe reprimand: in Henry's view, their late submission could not wipe out the guilt of their long resistance. Nor did Cromwell's attempts in 1537 to secure some sort of relief for the relatives of those 'who have suffered' (those hanged for taking part in the northern rising) ever result in action from the king.<sup>1</sup> The Countess of Salisbury lived while Cromwell lived, though under sentence of death; it was Henry who, by carrying out this sentence, had the old lady callously disposed of in 1541. The clearing of the Tower in that year, which to Pollard is evidence of a deteriorating character,<sup>2</sup> is

<sup>1</sup> *Letters and Papers*, xi. 501, xii. I. 1315.

<sup>2</sup> *Henry VIII*, pp. 402f.

after all matched by a similar step during the early and allegedly glorious years when in 1513 the earl of Suffolk went to the scaffold to secure the home front during the forthcoming war. In a sense, Henry VIII's most horrifying victims were not the often and justly lamented righteous men of the 1530's, but rather the first and last men he attacked: Empson and Dudley in 1509, the Howards in 1546. Those victims were unattractive and did not fall for religion's sake, which has obscured the fact that they were unusually innocent of the charges preferred. More and Fisher did stand in the way of a revolution and were politically dangerous, and Fisher, at any rate, had by any definition dallied with treason; Empson and Dudley were killed to gain popularity and Surrey to satisfy tyrannic suspicion. For these killings, as for the rest, Henry VIII must himself take responsibility, not only because his ultimate power could so easily have stopped them, but because in fact he instigated and drove on the process. This evil readiness to commit political or dynastic murder arose directly from his militant self-righteousness; it was alien both to Wolsey's flamboyant hypocrisy and Cromwell's sardonic realism.

However, if so much active personal monarchy can be traced in the reign—if Henry was 'a real king' both to the eye and in action—why should one deny his full control of policy and affairs? In what respect is it reasonable to suppose that Pollard's straightforward assumption of Henry's directing hand overestimated his influence and impact? There are two lines of argument which strongly urge one to conclude that, unlike Henry VII or even Elizabeth, Henry VIII was not master or maker of his own fate or that of his country. In the first place, by ignoring the steady hard work of government and relying on ministers to attend to business, he gravely limited the effectiveness of that ultimate control of his. He did not exercise it in either a vacuum or a situation of his own creation, but in circumstances in which his choice had in

great part been predetermined by the action of others. Secondly, an analysis of the reign into its significant periods indicates that Henry relied on others not only for the day-to-day conduct of affairs but also for any general or specific ideas in approaching action. He was an opportunist, an inspired opportunist, making the most of other men's help in a given situation, rather than a creative statesman. This might not have limited his personal influence at most ordinary times, but in a reign which witnessed much fundamental policy-making—even revolution—Henry's disability in this respect matters. After all, we are concerned not with a generalized problem of personal monarchy, but with the question, for instance, whether it was really the king himself who devised the policy of the Reformation.

Henry was not an active administrator. From first to last he seems to have found attention to the details of business a bit of a bore. In his younger days his secretaries had to catch him as they could, between his amusements; in particular, there were many complaints that hunting (a sport, one of them said, which the king was turning into a martyrdom) interfered with the despatch of papers. He hated writing letters and never paid the slightest attention to financial affairs. This last, an understandable enough foible, was to cost him dear towards the end of his reign. It is true that he commonly saw state papers, or at least summaries prepared for him, and that diplomatic instructions required his personal signature: once again one must not exaggerate his relative indolence and reluctance into ineffectualness. It is well known that in his last years, when he was often ill, many documents requiring his signature were instead stamped with a facsimile; but it does not appear to be so well known that the first extant example of a stamped letter occurs in 1512,<sup>1</sup> or that throughout the 1530's many important documents, especially warrants for

<sup>1</sup> *Letters and Papers*, i. 1217: an order concerning the mustering of tenants, certainly not a piece of mere administrative routine.

payments were so authenticated.<sup>1</sup> That in fact it mattered little whether he ever saw such orders is well illustrated by the regularity with which Cromwell authorised and made payments before obtaining the royal warrants.<sup>2</sup> Even in foreign affairs, where the king assuredly kept a closer watch, he relied for information on abstracts and for his own letters on drafts prepared by his ministers. Very few such drafts bear corrections in his own hand, a fact which reflects on an anecdote recorded in Elizabeth's reign. It is reported that when Sir William Petre, on being appointed principal secretary (1544), showed his dismay at the way in which Henry 'crossed and blotted out many things in a writing which he had made', he was told not to take it to heart: 'for it is I,' said the king, 'who made Cromwell, Wriothesley and Paget good secretaries, and so must I do to thee'.<sup>3</sup> The story may well be true; by 1544 Henry may well have persuaded himself that things had happened thus. In fact, there is no sign in the many drafts which Cromwell and Wriothesley prepared for him that he had anything to teach them. The true position was perhaps better described in an aside of Sir Francis Bryan's when on embassy to France: 'In the king's letters,' he told Cromwell, 'you touched the quick.' Henry's agents knew who wrote his letters.<sup>4</sup>

Nor is there, in general, any notable difference in these working habits at different times. Both as a young and as an old king, Henry concerned himself with dispatches, accepted drafts, demanded changes. The evidence is too bulky to be detailed here and too patchy for any statistical assessment. If one may go by impressions, one must say that Henry probably saw more letters and papers during Cromwell's ascendancy, but exercised a more evident initiative in government during Wolsey's. While he pressed the cardinal several times to undertake re-

<sup>1</sup> G. R. Elton, *The Tudor Revolution in Government* (1953), p. 281.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155f.

<sup>3</sup> G. R. Elton, *The Tudor Constitution* (1960), pp. 126f.

<sup>4</sup> *Letters and Papers*, ix. 969.

forms of the administration,<sup>1</sup> he never played any part in the many such reforms carried out by the lord privy seal.<sup>2</sup> He never interfered with Cromwell's financial arrangements as he did with Wolsey's when in 1518 he insisted on supervising the payment of certain ambassadors' charges;<sup>3</sup> it is instructive to compare his intervention in the election at Wilton Nunnery in 1528 with his total ignorance of the abbatial election at Rievaulx in 1533.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, he never told anyone to treat Cromwell's letters as though they came from himself, as in 1517 he told Ghinucci to treat Wolsey's.<sup>5</sup> Though throughout his reign Henry kept an eye on some details and dealt with some business, he never did enough of this either before or after 1529 to save himself from having to follow the lead given by his ministers. There was, of course, no reason why he should. He delegated power in the confidence that he could rely on his advisers and agents; he knew he could always discard the policy with the minister if he wished to do so. His attitude to business shows that he was wise enough to realize that there are other things in life. But the evidence is strong that while a minister held power it was he and not the king who controlled and devised policy.

Of course, the objection to this argument from the papers is that the king need not have left any visible evidence of his personal activity in the record. What was to prevent him instructing his ministers to draw up documents of a given tenor or even dictating them, so that what appeared as the work of a servant was really the king's own? This objection, which—since we have no knowledge of conversations held—can never be

<sup>1</sup> E.g. *Letters and Papers*, iii. 165, 305, 357.

<sup>2</sup> For this cf. the general argument of my *Tudor Revolution in Government*.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters and Papers*, ii. 4512.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. D. Knowles, 'The Matter of Wilton', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, xxi. 92ff.; G. R. Elton, 'The Quondam of Rievaulx', *Star Chamber Stories* (1950), pp. 147 ff.

<sup>5</sup> *Letters and Papers*, ii. 2871.

altogether controverted, is yet seriously weakened by several facts. On the one occasion (in 1521) when we are explicitly told that the king dictated a dispatch, the matter is treated as entirely out of the ordinary, requiring detailed description.<sup>1</sup> In the 1530's it is pretty clear that Henry did not dictate his letters which were usually written away from court, commonly in Cromwell's private office. Under Wolsey, when diplomatic negotiations were often carried on without the king being aware of any details, the point is even plainer. There is also plenty of evidence that such matters as he did study had as a rule got very near to their final stage before he had a chance of affecting them. And lastly, the argument that the absence of Henry's handwriting from the papers proves little would be stronger if the king had not on occasion taken the trouble to correct what was put before him. Significantly, his hand occurs most frequently on papers with a theological or ecclesiastical import. These aroused his intellectual interest as well as his private preoccupations, and he was thus willing to amend drafts of the Act of Six Articles or scribble comments in the margins of argumentative letters concerning his supremacy in the Church. The total of such corrections is not large, but there is enough to give some support for the view that absence of corrections—and the presence of corrections by others—argues absence of significant influence. The most striking example of all occurs in the preparation of the Act against Appeals to Rome (1533) which not only cost much labour but was also so central to the whole development of the Reformation that, if indeed it was Henry who thought up the policy and principles of that revolution, one would expect to find him actively participating in this if nothing else. There are eight surviving drafts of this statute, nearly all of them plentifully corrected, mostly by Cromwell. But the king, too, let his hand appear: on one draft he made a few minor corrections by addition and excision, some of which disappeared

<sup>1</sup> *State Papers of Henry VIII*, i. 79.

again at a later stage.<sup>1</sup> No one wants to argue that Henry did not know what was going on or fully authorise the policy embodied in this act and others; but it is apparent that there is no reason at all for supposing that his own mind was behind these measures and very good reason for supposing that it was not.

The evidence of the record is therefore quite definitely that the king more often than not simply accepted and endorsed policies and measures which he did not initiate. His was the activating force in an engine whose design owed most to other brains and hands. Documentary evidence is doubtless not the whole of history, but arguments relying on its neglect are surely neither here nor there. If the record tells the truth, one would expect the reign to show changing characteristics as ministers changed. And this indeed is what we find. The reign consists essentially of three periods: Wolsey's ascendancy, which was marked by an over-riding concern with foreign affairs and at home by the expansion of conciliar jurisdiction; Cromwell's years of power when the government was mainly occupied with the Church and the royal supremacy, with administrative and social reform, with finance, the use of Parliament and the recovery of common-law ascendancy; and the last seven years which ought to have been devoted primarily to the settlement of the religious question but were in fact bedevilled by war and economic crisis. Two brief periods (1509-12 and 1529-31) precede the arrival in power of the two great ministers and have no discernible character of their own, except perhaps ineffectualness. These different preoccupations are in themselves interesting enough, but more striking still are the unmistakable differences in mood, temper, method and attitude to business. The Wolsey period was one of outward glory, much ostentation and exuberance, so much so that some

<sup>1</sup> G. R. Elton, 'Evolution of a Reformation Statute', *English Historical Review*, 1949, 174ff.

historians—not all of them necessarily hostile to the Reformation—have been willing to see in 1530 the end of the really important and fruitful period of Henry's reign. The years of Cromwell's ministry give an impression of singular and relentless purpose, of ends achieved without fuss but with incisive assurance. The keynote of the last years is a frustrating devotion to opportunism—an uneasy tinkering with the great internal problem, unity in religion, combined with a reckless and once again unsuccessful foreign policy.

Now it has been objected, sensibly enough, that these differences merely reflect differences in problems and circumstances to which Henry reacted at need.<sup>1</sup> One can suppose him engaged in diplomatic and warlike games at a time when England's puny strength could make itself felt in a Europe still fairly balanced between the powers of France and Spain, until the virtual triumph of Charles V in 1525–8 rendered such pretensions futile. One may well agree that the Divorce and the break with Rome involved so many internal problems that Henry naturally abandoned Europe and concentrated on reorganizing his realm. One might even see some point in the argument that the end of Cromwell coincided with the king's realization that he was now internally secure and with the renewal of conflict between Charles V and Francis I: once again he was free to engage in large foreign ambitions. With greater reluctance still (and little respect for the facts) one might even be prepared to argue that the troubles of the 1540's were due to deteriorating economic circumstances, to inflation and other impersonal factors. A case of sorts can be made for seeing in the periods of the reign nothing more than the changing interests and capacities of one man, and Pollard so explained them in his idiosyncratic picture of Henry VIII 'maturing' in his late thirties.

Yet it will not do. Quite apart from the fact that Pollard's approach does not explain the very great

<sup>1</sup> Prof. R. B. Wernham in *English Historical Review*, 1959, p. 95.

changes in 'atmosphere' as distinct from things done, some of these arguments are plainly false. It was not changing circumstances but impatience, over-confidence and folly which turned policy after 1540 from internal to external preoccupations. The death of Cromwell did not coincide with an end to the sort of problems that he had given his first attention to. The troubles of 1544–6, including the inflation, resulted in great part directly from the king's warlike policy. If Henry, as it is often put, learned from Wolsey the folly of foreign entanglements, why did he resume war and entanglements in 1541? Why was the period of Cromwell's ascendancy the only one during which war would have seemed reasonable, because defensive, but never happened? Why was England totally neutral in only one of the Habsburg-Valois conflicts of the time, that of 1536–8? We are sometimes assured that the great administrative reforms of the 1530's were forced on the government by the ecclesiastical upheavals and political reconstruction of that decade. But this ignores the facts that administrative reform had been plainly necessary since Henry VII's death, that Wolsey at least twice contemplated but avoided reforms which would have weakened his personal control, and that many of Cromwell's measures answered perennial, not new, problems. Such problems as were new had been in great part created by the revolutionary measures of the government associated with Cromwell. Henry's own mind did not develop so as to explain the changes. He thought himself subject to no other power on earth both in 1516 and in 1534; but in 1521 he showed, by ascribing to the pope powers which even Thomas More thought excessive, that it would be quite wrong to deduce from this that he himself developed the notion of a royal supremacy in the Church. I have shown elsewhere that the contrasting policies towards Rome in 1529–31 (unimaginative, bombastic, sterile) and 1532–4 (direct, simple, successful) cannot be explained on the supposition that they were both inspired

by the king.<sup>1</sup> A general air of vigour and powerful life may well be seen emanating from Henry throughout his reign; the specific work of government, the ideas underlying it, and the policies put into effect at different times varied as Henry's ministers took over from one another. The genuine and increasing difficulties of the last seven years, most of them traceable to some particular error of policy at a time when Henry did without the support of a single strong hand and is most likely to have been in direct control himself, underline the quality of his own mind. He was no statesman, and inasmuch as qualities of statesmanship can be discerned in his reign they must be looked for elsewhere.

This absence of truly analytical and constructive abilities is also suggested by what we know of Henry's intellectual equipment. That he was intelligent is not in doubt: he had a very good brain. He could read men and pick men, no one better. His political understanding of what was within and what outside his powers practically never failed him. Perhaps this last quality, so surprisingly unaffected by the flowering of a native egoism nourished by adulation, is the hallmark of his particular genius: if he never failed in anything he attempted, it was because he never attempted anything in which he could not succeed. His judgment of this delicate dividing line was nearly unerring. In consequence he not only left the world gasping, but—to note it in passing—got his way like a despot without ever ruling despotically, ignoring the law, or stifling opposition in Council or Parliament. However, his upbringing had given his intelligence an interest in things intellectual, and the events of his reign (especially the break with Rome) raised fundamental intellectual, even academic, issues to a level of first importance in politics. It cannot be said that the questions asked by events found a perfect answer from the king. His known pronouncements on theory are mostly conventional or even platitudinous

<sup>1</sup> See above p. 7, n.<sup>2</sup>

though well expressed), like his book against Luther or his speech on religious unity to the 1545 Parliament.<sup>1</sup> When he tried his hand at a piece of political theory, he relied on something told him by his judges and was liable to get muddled in the process.<sup>2</sup> Thomas Starkey's *Exhortation to the People*, which elicited general if critical appreciation from Cromwell, roused no interest in Henry who in vain glanced through that Aristotelian exercise for a foundation in Scripture.<sup>3</sup> Conventionally, Henry is supposed to have displayed a genuine and competent intellectual interest in theology, but even here some curious chinks appear. Stephen Vaughan, in 1531, decided not to send him certain Lutheran works, not (as might be supposed) because to do so might prove dangerous to himself, but because he knew the king would only give the books to others to read and advise him on their contents.<sup>4</sup> Cranmer, who knew Henry better than Vaughan, confirmed this when he told Capito that the king had followed his usual practice about a book sent to him; that is to say, unwilling to labour over it himself, he had given it to two people of opposite views to read and report on it, after which he would base his judgment on an assessment of their criticisms.<sup>5</sup>

How well this fits the general picture that is beginning to emerge—the picture of a nimble opportunist, picking up ideas and suggestions from all around him and putting together a usable amalgam—a kind of encyclopædia article—without having to do the hard work himself. In scholarship as in policy, Henry, so to speak, used secondaries and did not go back to the sources. One may even wonder about his often stressed orthodoxy, allegedly founded on doctrinal learning of a professional kind.

<sup>1</sup> Edward Hall, *Chronicle* (ed. 1809), pp. 864ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Elton, *Tudor Constitution*, pp. 230, 357.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. my 'Thomas Cromwell's Political Creed', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 1956, esp. p. 83.

<sup>4</sup> *Letters and Papers*, v. 303.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* xii. II. 315.

Certainly he was no Lutheran; but why did he leave his only son to be brought up by known reformers, and why did he appoint a regency council in his will which assured that Protestantism would triumph after his death? If he was really attached to the mass, to transubstantiation, priestly celibacy and the rest, he went a strange way about serving his faith when he called in Cheke to tutor Edward VI, imprisoned the Howards, and cold-shouldered Gardiner.

The king, therefore, was a man of great vigour, intelligence, shrewdness and skill, but also somewhat shallow and an opportunist whose only real programme concerned the advancement of his own interests by whatever means seemed suitable and possible in terms of both law and politics. Since opinion in his day largely identified the interests of king and people, his desires did not of necessity harm the realm, and his opportunism could easily advantage it. More often than not this happened, though at times Henry's essential lack of depth, his inability to think problems of government through, and his willingness to adjust to the pressures of the moment as long as the ultimate, always personal, end was kept in view, proved a drawback to those like More or Cromwell who saw more clearly and deeply. A total egoist is unlikely to be able to see anything clearly in the dazzle produced by his single guiding star. The king and the country were saved by the unexpected qualities which partly redeemed a really rather deplorable character. Henry knew how to take advice and delegate power, and he had perfect political instincts. Better men without these gifts have certainly done much greater harm; Henry VIII, neither a good nor a wise man, employed them to make himself into a great king. If he was not Pollard's great statesman on the throne, he was also far more than the bloated, lustful, capricious tyrant of popular mythology.

The historian has no easy task with Henry VIII. He

must try to escape from the sheer physical presence of this handsome giant with his bright and penetrating eye, his frequent joviality, his ready manipulation of men. On the other hand, he must not surrender to a natural revulsion against a man who constantly introduced personal emotion into politics, pursued vendettas, displayed brutal indifference or vindictive hatred where he had ceased to approve. Henry's qualities, good and bad, explain a great deal about his hold over the imagination of contemporaries and later generations alike. As a personal monarch he was superior to the petulant, self-willed and often incompetent Francis I whose constitutional position was rather less hedged about by the laws and customs of his realm; he was rather inferior to the dedicated if unprepossessing Charles V. He ruled his realm, and his word was decisive in affairs. But it decided between and upon the ideas and the work of others. There is nothing very surprising in this, nor does it make him any less intelligent, quick-witted or skilful. It means, however, that he lacked originality and far-sightedness, and probably also an understanding of fundamentals. Using the brains of other men, he added his own political dexterity and that immense strength of will which carried him through even when he could see no light in the darkness. In the hands of Henry VIII personal monarchy did not mean personal attention to the business of government, though it had done so in the hands of Henry VII. Nor did it mean the constant weighing up of conflicting counsel and the pursuit of a personal policy based upon a personal assessment, as it did for Elizabeth. It meant the putting of the king's personal force behind policies not of his devising. His greatness lay in the rapid and accurate interpretation of the immediate situation, in a dauntless will, and in his choice of advisers; but not in originality, and it is doubtful if he was the architect of anything, least of all of the English Reformation.

This is no denigration; it is an attempt to get things

straight. A man of such evident power, equipped with such mixed qualities and presiding over such catastrophic events, raises a real challenge to any biographer, which perhaps explains why Pollard has been left for so long in occupation of the field. The next one, when he comes, may well end by agreeing with the final sigh of him who was the first to adventure upon that enterprise: 'To conclude: I wish I could leave him in his grave'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lord Herbert of Cherbury, *The Life and Reigne of King Henry the Eighth* (1649).

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