

## ROYALTY

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# God's Lieutenant on the Road to Reform

THE KING'S REFORMATION: HENRY VIII  
AND THE REMAKING OF THE  
ENGLISH CHURCH

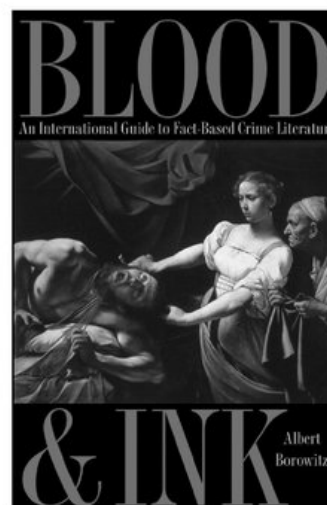
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By G W Bernard  
(Yale University Press 736pp £29.95)

THE MOST DECISIVE developments of Henry VIII's turbulent reign came in the 1530s, when the king denied the authority of the Pope, asserted his own supposedly God-given right to control the Church, and set about redesigning English religion, a process which he was to continue until the end of his reign. These actions were to have momentous consequences. Henry effectively reconfigured English kingship by adding to the crown the enormous wealth and authority of the Church, yet at the same time endangered it by creating a basis for principled religious opposition to royal authority. He left a legacy of conflict to English Protestants and Catholics alike, who ever since have been fighting over quite what the religious ambiguities of his reign should mean for their separate traditions. He also created a thorny historical problem. What exactly had the king intended to achieve with this religious and political revolution? Was he merely trying to replace his obstinate wife, whose sons had all died, with a more likely child-bearing contender, and getting carried away? Was this the beginning of Protestantism in England, as the institution of an English Bible and the dissolution of the monasteries seem to suggest? Or was it 'Catholicism without the Pope', as many others have argued, since Henry always upheld the importance of the Latin Mass, and refused the central doctrines of Protestantism? Had Henry been tempted by the possibilities of Continental reform, only to lose his nerve? Many historians have taken refuge in the argument that Henry's apparent inconsistencies can best be explained by the workings of faction: the picture emerges of a king who was forceful but wayward, impulsive and vindictive, swayed by his councillors, courtiers and wives. In short, we have been led to believe, the Henrician Reformation was an exercise in incoherence; the alarming vacillations of a king desperately anxious about the future of his dynasty, and prepared to countenance any possible way of producing a legitimate male heir and securing his authority.

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variations on this view are wrong. Henry did have a clear vision of what he wanted, and pursued it remorselessly, energetically and with conviction. The same could be said of the author in pursuit of his thesis. This book bears all the hallmarks of Bernard's characteristic approach: it is polemical, passionate, original, often persuasive and repeatedly contentious. He cuts impatiently through the tangles of both complex historical debate and convoluted historical evidence, swiftly and pithily providing a clear account, but racing ahead to the next

conclusion. He has little mercy on the reader who does not share his compulsive enthusiasm or who lacks the necessary background knowledge: the wider historical context is provided by a prologue ten lines long, before the narrative plunges into the intricacies of the historical problem. It is a historical *tour de force*, formidable in its scholarship, indefatigable in its attempts to convince, written with an energy at the same time invigorating and exhausting.

Bernard's idea is that we have misunderstood Henry, and his intentions, again and again. He argues that, far from vacillating over how best to get rid of Catherine of Aragon, and replace her with Anne Boleyn, the king pursued a clear and forceful line against the papacy from the beginning of his campaign in 1527. His appeals to the Bible, arguing that he had been wrong to marry his brother's widow, and that the papacy had been wrong to let him, indicated his commitment to a reformed view of Christianity in which papal authority was far from total. His persistent threats to break with a Pope who refused to see the justice of his cause indicate that, from the first, he was determined to challenge a notion of papal authority which stood in his way. In Bernard's view, it was not Anne Boleyn who withheld her sexual favours in the hope of tantalising the king into making her his wife; on the contrary, sexual abstinence until success was in sight was the king's idea, so determined was he to secure a legitimate marriage and subsequent heir.

The 'royal supremacy', which was effectively the replacement of the Pope by the King as head of the English Church, was therefore not a solution arrived at by trial and error, but the logical conclusion of a series of policies aimed at advancing a reformed view of religion in which biblical authority had greater prominence, and corruption and superstition were to be subdued. The religious changes implemented piece by piece during the remainder of Henry's reign were not a



Four evangelists stoning the Pope

random selection of doctrines and ideas, but a concerted attempt to purge the realm of all that was fraudulent, unbiblical and ignorant, whilst upholding many traditional Catholic doctrines in the face of Protestant doctrinal innovation, which the king always distrusted. This was a 'middle way' between the extremes of Rome on the one hand, and Wittenberg or Zürich on the other, a reformation unique to the monarch who created it, and bearing eloquent testimony to the diversity of religious views available in the

early years of the European Reformation.

The picture of Henry VIII which emerges from this book is a very different one from the usual picture of a blustering, bullying, but irresolute monarch. Bernard's Henry is a lot cleverer, a lot crueller, a great deal more impressive but at the same time a lot more frightening, like any leader with an ideological conviction and an objective that brooks no opposition. It seems that Henry worked out for himself a great deal of his complex case against the papacy, and the religious reformation which followed: subsequent commentators have had difficulty believing a king could be this ingenious, but contemporaries appreciated how far the king was in control. Yet if his theological convictions were essentially moderate, the impact of his campaign against his Queen, his Pope, his opponents and the monasteries was devastating. Henry's religious vision may have been nuanced, even persuasive, fired by humanist and biblical scholarship, but his religious policies were ruthless, vindictive and shattering. He may initially have intended to reform rather than abolish the monasteries, but once they were tainted with rebellion, he showed no mercy. It was little comfort to the many who opposed him, and who suffered crushing defeat, that the king still upheld the seven sacraments, or the Catholic Mass, since he was destroying their conception of a Church, and effectively shredding the social fabric of religious life in the provinces. Bernard's Henry VIII is a tyrant, inspired but implacable.

The case for consistency can, of course, be overstated, and many people will argue that this book goes far too far. Even those who find much of it persuasive might argue that if Henry was consistent in the pursuit of his own will, that does not mean he always wanted the same thing from year to year. Equally, even if the king was not manipulated, that does not mean that his councillors did not attempt to pressurise him; the case for the acquiescence of Cranmer and Cromwell,