
In the last half dozen years or so the nobility of Tudor and early Stuart England has made a strong comeback in published scholarship. In the genre of political history alone, studies of several specific peers and of the House of Lords in both the mid-Tudor and the early Stuart periods have greatly enhanced our understanding of this group. Now Helen Miller has given us the first full length investigation of the relations between the nobility and the Crown in the reign of Henry VIII.

Miller tells us that the English peerage had good reason for optimism in the early years of the new reign despite its numerical depletion. Young Henry quickly removed many of the oppressive burdens imposed on the peerage by his father, cancelling recognizances and bonds, reversing some attainders, and conspicuously punishing those two most notorious officials, the commoners Empson and Dudley. In addition, there were early signs that nobles would be allowed to dominate the King's council by reviving the tradition of the inner circle of councillors. The military adventures of 1511–1513 gave further cause for reassurance, allowing the nobility to display its loyalty and prowess. In return for these opportunities and assurances, the peerage danced to the royal piper, paying homage and honour at court, following the call to arms, heeding summonses to Parliament and accepting royal service wherever it led.

Yet these harbingers of restored prominence proved misleading, and if the peers danced gladly, they also danced without choice and in vain. If, as Miller concludes, Henry needed a nobility, he did not need any particular member of that group, and could prove a niggardly patron without political risk. In consequence, the nobility saw its position erode at nearly every turn during his reign. By adding treason trials and attainders (often in disregard for due process) to natural attrition and by replenishing diminished ranks with his own creations, Henry reshaped his nobility to suit his own needs rather than to observe tradition. Over half the noble families of 1509 were gone by 1547, and in their place were new, more administratively skilled and possibly more dependent men. More important, the very context of noble service changed at the same time. The successive dominance of Wolsey and Cromwell reduced direct contact between the King and his nobility, while the reform of the privy council in the 1530s placed greater emphasis on merit and loyalty than on birth. With few exceptions, only the House of Lords and the military remained areas for noble participation in national politics. Even in the latter, Henry's use of the militia in France in 1544 foreshadowed the end of royal reliance on feudal levies and the lords who led them.
Having reduced the power and the participatory scope of the nobility in government, Henry saw little reason to cement its loyalty by gifts of land or office. He almost never bestowed property outright before the monastic dissolutions, and did so only sparingly thereafter. In the end, Miller’s picture tells us as much about the King’s strength as about the ebbing position of his nobility.

Miller’s study is distinctive for its thorough research and its cautious interpretations, but also for its constricted scope. It is no surprise to see this author demonstrate once again her command of archival sources in, for example, reconstructing the details of an aristocratic career, and her conclusions are consequently very firmly supported. On the other hand, there are points where her argument is only implicitly linked to wider debates in published scholarship. The work fails to consider the nobility outside the narrow confines of political activity, leaving us to wonder if we can, after all, completely ignore the literature surrounding Lawrence Stone’s classic volumes, especially *The Crisis of the Aristocracy* of 1965, when considering the political crisis of the Henrician peerage. It fails also to discuss the political role of the peerage in relation to other groups or, some of the time, in relation to issues themselves. Thus, for example, while it peaks our interest to learn that Henry gave few rewards to his nobility, it would be more illuminating to know whether other groups fared any better from his largess. While it helps us to know when and to what extent peers served politically at court and in Parliament, we miss a discussion of their possibly partisan role on specific issues, or indeed, whether they perceived sufficient common interest to function at least some of the time as a coherent interest group.

In sum, then, the splendid calibre of Helen Miller’s scholarship is not always well served by her breadth of interest. *Henry VIII and the English Nobility* remains a lucid and authoritative commentary on a somewhat constricted approach to the subject.

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Odd as it may now seem, it was not until 1938 that one recognized a continuity in English humanist activity between the death of More and Fisher and the accession of Elizabeth. That recognition, made by Douglas Bush in the “obscure” pages of the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, sired the rich tradition of scholarship on the whole of Henrician humanism that has been upheld, in turn, by the likes of Zeeveld and Caspari; Ferguson, McConica