

The Tudors; Name and Implications

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May I augment and correct the summary of my article 'A rose by any other name' (*Times Literary Supplement*, 13 June 2008, pp. 14-15) which appeared in *The Ricardian*, volume 19 (2009), page 173. The summary misrepresents the main point. My argument is now repeated as part of my 'Reputation, repute, reality', a review article in *English Historical Review* volume 124 (2009) pages 1432-1447.¹

Far from arguing that the name 'Tudor' was wrongly attached to Henry VII, I do not dispute that his surname, had he used one, would have been 'Tudor'. (The point that it could as easily have been 'Meredith' was merely a wry comment on the hazards of converting Welsh patronymics into English surnames.) Hence 'Tydder' was rightly used by Richard III, and later by Perkin Warbeck, to disparage Henry's antecedents.² It drew attention to the somewhat scandalous marriage of Henry's grandfather Owen Tudor, a Welsh gentleman courtier, to Queen Catherine, widow of Henry V and princess of the French royal line. Precisely for that reason, the word was avoided by Henry, who, pre-Bosworth, was referred to by his supporters by his peerage title of 'Richmond'.³ More generally, royal families had little or no occasion to use surnames. 'Tudor' was not used by or about the royal family in the period 1485-1603. The name had some resonance in Wales, and seeps back to some extent in English works from 1589. Even so it is remarkable how few contemporary commentators referred in 1603 to a transition from 'Tudors' to 'Stuarts'.

The obsessive use of the word 'Tudor' by modern historians gives a false impression, therefore, of Sixteenth Century reality. There seems to be an entity called 'Tudor monarchy', for instance; take away the assumption that such an entity existed, and it becomes difficult to see anything distinctively in common between the régimes of Henry VII, Henry VIII, and Elizabeth I, let alone those of Edward VI and Mary I (oddly always designated 'Mary Tudor' by historians, a designation with no contemporary warrant⁴). This is not to deny that both Mary and Elizabeth made much of themselves as daughters of Henry VIII, perhaps because of their technical illegitimacy. Almanacs of around 1600 make much more of Luther's defiance of the Papacy, of Henry VIII's break with Rome, and of Elizabeth's

¹ A review of Kevin Sharpe, *Selling the Tudor Monarchy*, New Haven 2009.

² *The Reign of Henry VII from Contemporary Sources*, ed. A.F. Pollard, 3 vols, London 1913-14, vol. 1, pp. 3-6, 150-55.

³ As, indeed, in Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

⁴ See one example, itself testimony that the term was not in general use, in my 'Representation', p. 1438.

accession, than they do of 1485. In so far as Henry VII had a hereditary claim to the throne, (as opposed to the concepts of 'conquest' or 'victory' indicating God's will) it came very dubiously through his mother's Beaufort lineage from a bastard son, subsequently legitimised, of John of Gaunt.⁵ References to the ancient 'British History', to descent from Cadwaldr and connection to King Arthur, were made without specific reference to Owen Tudor, though Owen was indeed descended from Welsh princes (as of course were also Edward IV and his brothers through the Mortimer line). References to Edmund [Tudor], Earl of Richmond, were again made without reference to Owen, to assert his descent from the French royal family.⁶ In practice both Henry's invasion in 1485 and his subsequent position were enormously strengthened by the support of anti-Ricardian Yorkists and his eventual marriage to Elizabeth of York. Though acknowledging this, Henry was reluctant to publicise it once his position became established, and always maintained that, even if Elizabeth were to die without issue, any subsequent children of his own would have full rights of inheritance.⁷ In general, Henry VII was evasive on the whole issue of his rights. Henry VIII had no such inhibitions, of course, and could celebrate his own embodiment as 'The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families Lancastre and Yorke'.⁸ Far from picturing themselves as a 'dynasty' the 'Tudor' monarchs always claimed to represent the reunification of the ancient royal house, unhappily divided by a family quarrel in the Fifteenth Century. Interestingly, both Henry VIII and Elizabeth I seem to have valued their Yorkist descent far more than their somewhat indirect Lancastrian connection.⁹

If 'Tudor' is misleading about the royal family, the common designation 'Tudor subjects', 'Tudor men and women' having 'Tudor attitudes', is even more so. There is no evidence that people thought of themselves as such. The term gives a false sense of unity to the 118 years in question. It also makes it difficult to avoid the insidious but obviously false impression that somehow the Henrician Reformation or the glories of Elizabethan England were implicit in the reign of Henry VII; an impression buried deep in the sub-consciousness of historians and their readers, even though rationally absurd. Historians cannot help but use, from

⁵ See Henry IV's confirmation of Richard II's legitimisation of the Beauforts in *Henry VII*, ed. Pollard, vol. 2, pp. 8-9.

⁶ *Memorials of King Henry the Seventh*, ed. James Gairdner, Rolls Series, vol. 61 (1858), pp. 9-10.

⁷ See, for instance, the papal bull of 1486 in his favour, presumably drafted in London, *Henry VII*, ed. Pollard, vol. 1, pp. 35-41, esp. p. 38.

⁸ The title of course of Edward Hall's history (1548), reprinted as *Hall's Chronicle*, ed. Sir Henry Ellis, London 1809.

⁹ See my 'Representation', pp. 1441-43, for evidence from funerary monuments to that end. I suggested in my *ILS* article that the historian and philosopher David Hume made the term 'Tudor' the normal designation of the period when he published his *History of England under the House of Tudor* in 1757.

time to time, anachronistic terms. My own use of 'Sixteenth Century' is a case in point. 'Tudor' is, however, a special case. It has acquired such resonance, for the most part of glamour and glory, in some cases of deep-dyed villainy, as to be grossly distorting. A self-denying ordinance about its use, or at least a note of caution when it is used, might be in order while the implications of my argument sink in and are worked through.