



Henry IV

Chris Given-Wilson

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016

Review by: Alex Brondarbit

Henry IV. By Chris Given-Wilson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-0-300-15419-1. xiv + 590 pp. £30.

The English Monarchs Series (EMS) produced by Yale University Press has long garnered well-earned respect for its production of exhaustively researched biographies. The latest and long-awaited addition to the collection by Chris Given-Wilson completes the volumes dedicated to the Lancastrian kings, following in the footsteps of Bertram Wolffe's *Henry VI* published in 1981 and Christopher Allmand's *Henry V* released in 1992. Henry IV's reign has often received short shrift from historians as it occupies a position between the inglorious downfall of Richard II and the high-water mark of military glory achieved by Henry V. That he is the last king of his dynasty to be included in the EMS is altogether consistent with this tendency to unfairly glaze over the first Lancastrian king. Given-Wilson's diligent work meets the challenge to produce a definitive work in line with the more recent entries in the series. Using a range of primary source material throughout Henry's complex reign, Given-Wilson has crafted an engaging chronological narrative that brings not only the reign, but also the man into the forefront and establishes a more nuanced account of his significance in English monarchical history. The fundamental purpose of any biography is to provide the reader with an understanding of the individual in focus and Given-Wilson is wholly successful in this aim as Henry's life is examined comprehensively in a nearly 600-page volume comprising thirty-three chapters. The volume surpasses existing studies, namely Ian Mortimer's 2007 *Henry IV: The Righteous King*, in both breadth and research. Given-Wilson navigates the major triumphs and pitfalls of Henry's career, portraying an individual well-suited to the rigors of medieval kingship. Henry is shown to be a champion of chivalric values and militant piety which developed the traits necessary to act as a purposeful and practical ruler who remained capable of necessary ruthlessness when faced with challenges to his usurped authority. His willingness to execute an archbishop, the first since Henry II, is testament to that fact.

Given-Wilson portrays a proficient king, but one faced with difficult circumstances that kept his reign in a state of nearly constant tension and precluded him from reaching the ranks of the great. The lack of resources was a particularly consistent challenge, spawning numerous failed experiments in the search for solvency. The lingering problem of finance seriously constrained Henry's ability to expand his support beyond the Lancastrian faction that he rode into power in 1399. This only added to the unpopularity of both the king and his adherents. Henry's reliance on their support made him both master and prisoner of his own affinity, aptly described by Given-

Wilson as a “double-edged sword” (429). It is possible that it was Henry’s own retainers who forced the king to act contrary to his own wishes. Thomas Percy’s execution in 1403 in the aftermath of the battle of Shrewsbury and Archbishop Scrope’s execution after the primate’s rebellion two years later were rumoured to have been secured by the king’s own retainers who threatened to abandon him if they did not get their way. Attempts to operate a frugal government clashed with maintaining the grandeur expected in effective kingship and keeping the support of the men who had supported his bid for power. Nearly £30,000 a year of royal income was spent on pensions and fees (428). The need for conspicuous consumption and purchasing the continued loyalty of supporters was made all the important given the questions surrounding Henry’s legitimacy. His militarization of the royal household provided a barrier against threats, but cost him financially for “No king – certainly no usurper – could afford to be thought of a cheapskate.” (423)

One particular achievement of this study is the consideration given to the latter stages of Henry’s reign. The pendulum years (as Given-Wilson refers to them) of 1409-1413 have often garnered less discussion in favour of the more serious threats that faced the young regime following the usurpation. Of particular interest is the author’s investigation in chapter thirty-one of the disorder that gripped the realm in the wake of the Henry’s growing infirmities. Maintaining personal relationships with the aristocracy and energetically maintaining an acceptable level of public order were at the heart of effective medieval kingship. As Henry’s personal involvement waned and his movements grew more constrained so too did problems arise. Disorder grew as the more powerful figures took advantage of the king’s infirmity to wage private wars. Henry’s response was softtouch with offenders from the nobility or gentry, which earned him a great deal of contemporary criticism from the parliaments held in the closing years of the reign. Given-Wilson provides several examples of the complex challenges that existed in different localities and the varying origins behind the breakdown of order. Prince Henry’s willingness to punish malefactors contrasts with his father’s more pragmatic approach, and foreshadows the style of kingship that would be seen in the subsequent reign.

Where great attention to detail is given to Henry and his relationship with his father and his eldest son, additional emphasis would have been welcome toward other members of his immediate family; particularly with respect to his queen, Joan of Navarre, whose role at court is dealt with quite briefly (420-22). Given-Wilson concludes her influence fit within the usual conventions of her position, but his focus on the queen appears almost cursory. The king’s daughters, Blanche and Philippa, also receive fleeting

treatment as they are discussed little outside of the diplomatic achievements their marriages provided the House of Lancaster.

Given-Wilson's *magnum opus* examines the difficulties of Henry's pivotal reign in both evocative and accessible fashion. The bibliography is thorough, demonstrating the wide range of secondary literature and unprinted manuscripts that informed Given Wilson's work. Like the more recent entries into the series, the index is meticulous and comprehensive. A number of informative family trees, plates, and maps are provided in addition to a lone appendix detailing an itinerary of Henry's movements throughout the entirety of his reign. This latest entry into the EMS is a successful volume that will now undoubtedly become the principal biography of Henry IV for students and historians of the reign and late medieval England.

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