BOOKS

REVIEWED BY:

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Henry the Eighth, by Francis Hackett. Horace Liveright. $3.00.

The story of Henry VIII, the notorious English monarch, offers a splendid opportunity to the historian or biographer who is able to grasp it. Here is a king whose "amourousness" (as he himself would have called it) had a profound effect on the course of history—led to the destruction of the power of the Pope in the English realm and to the establishment of the Anglican Church. Such is the appearance! And the reality? Every schoolboy nowadays knows that these events were the culmination of century-old historic processes, closely associated with the profound economic, social and political changes that were transforming the face of Europe. The biographer of Henry VIII should consider it as his underlying task to forge the link between the appearance and the reality, to explain the transformation of the objective into the subjective, to illustrate by means of his concrete material the essential role of the individual in history, the effective reciprocal relation between the "man" and the "course of events."

Mr. Hackett has made no attempt to take advantage of the great opportunity. Even if we do not take seriously the astonishing remark that: "Anne Boleyn's refusal to accept the role of Henry's mistress unconditionally changed the course of English history." (p. 167).—If we did the book would hardly be worth noticing!—yet it cannot be denied that nowhere in this book is any real attempt made to provide any adequate explanation for the actions of Henry VIII or to show their true relations with the historical forces of which they were the expression. True; there are some gestures here and there as connecting up the royal conduct of the English king with certain events in the contemporary high-politics of the continent but precisely these vain gestures expose the essential emptiness of Mr. Hackett's historical perspective. In general the correlations offered us are formal, trivial and superficial—and uniformly unconvincing. The chapter supplying the historical introduction (the last chapter—"The Background") is precisely the kind you would expect of one who has the temerity to maintain—with a straight face—that Anne Boleyn's obstinacy changed the course of events in English history!

It never seems to occur to Mr. Hackett that the tremendous economic developments, the profound realignments of classes and class relations taking place in the world in which Henry found himself just possibly might have had something to do with his actions and conduct, might perhaps even help explain the marvellous historical effectiveness of Anne Boleyn's obstinacy. After all there have been obstinate women before who have not changed the course of history—there have even been amorous kings with unattractive wives and pretty mistresses and yet no Church schisms have taken place. Really something more is needed. But Mr. Hackett gives us nothing more. Picture to yourself a biographer of a Tudor monarch who never so much as mentions the break-up of the feudal economy, the enclosure movement, the creation of a "vagabond proletariat," the social role of merchant capitalism! Picture to yourself a biographer of Henry VIII, the "founder of the Anglican Church," who ignores entirely Lollardism and Wyckliffe, the exploiting role of the Church and the Papacy and the age-old antagonism between the hierarchy and the masses, the expropriation of the clerical possessions and the "nationalization" of the Church! Picture to yourself the biographer of Henry VIII, the autocrat, who has nothing to say of the War of the Roses, of the creation of a new "modernized" nobility, of the rise of merchant capital as the solid foundation of the Tudor monarchy. Picture to yourself a biographer who, in this day and age, devotes countless pages to insipid trivialities or to spectacular machinations of monarchs, "forgetting" entirely that after all there actually were human beings in existence neither of the nobility nor of the higher clergy who might collectively exercise some influence upon the course of history and upon the lives of historical personages! Does Mr. Hackett think that on such a basis and with such an outlook it is possible to attain to any real understanding of the life and relations of Henry VIII, however extensive the scholarship or acute the psychological insight?

A serious biographer of Henry, King of England, would base his work upon a brief but incisive examination of the multiform phenomena that accompanied the decay of the feudal economy and the rise of capitalism. He would analyze the forms and manifestations of merchant capital, then slowly assuming a dominant role in European economy, as well as the beginnings of capitalism in agriculture—in fact all of those delightful phenomena that plunged Merrie England in one generation from its "golden age" into its "iron age." He would trace the social consequences of these changes, the emergence of new classes and the decline and disappearance of old ones from the stage of history.

Against such a background—which would require no more space than Mr. Hackett devotes to his trivialities—the story of Henry VIII would acquire sense and meaning. It would then be possible to understand how the man who could cow Convocation and Parliament apparently could not move the obstinacy of Anne Boleyn, how the man who declared to Thomas More: "We (the king) are so much bounded to the See of Rome that we cannot do too much honor to it; whatsoever impediment be to the contrary we will assert the authority of the Pope to the uttermost, for we received from the See of Rome our crown imperial!" could later behead the same More for his refusal to accede to the supremacy of the king in ecclesiastical matters, how the arbitrary tyrant who berated Parliament as if they were a pack of dogs and destroyed his friends and foes alike with despotic fitfulness was at the same time without standing army and entirely dependent upon the merchants in the first place and the peasantry afterwards. In fact it might then be possible to cast light upon the huge paradox that was Henry VIII. For Henry VIII was the expression of his age which was quick with the paradox and contradiction of life.

As it is, Mr. Hackett's story—in spite of its many good points—is futile, empty. Why should we be particularly interested in the worries and intrigues of Henry Tudor—any more than in those of John Smith? The personal drama of Henry is not shown in its relation to the great impersonal drama of the age. And so we see the marionettes, sometimes the strings—but never the guiding hands behind the stage.

Yet *Henry the Eighth* has its good points. It is a stirring and stately pageant well worth watching if you are not too curious as to what it all means. It is well written altho it appears to me that here and there creeps in a note of affectation and artificiality. The whole story of Kathryn Howard (Henry's fourth wife) an astonishingly modern flapper who met her death with a courageous avowal of her true love: "I die a Queen, but I would rather die the wife of Culpepper!" is told with a beauty and touching quality that cannot be forgotten.

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