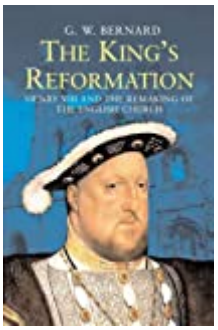
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences




**G. W. Bernard.** *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. xii + 736 pp. $22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-300-12271-8; $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10908-5.

**Reviewed by** Barrett Beer (Department of History, Kent State University)

**Published on** H-Albion (August, 2007)

## The Reformation Revised and Reassessed

As the title clearly indicates, this book is a study of the English Reformation during the reign of Henry VIII. What the title does not reveal is that this is not merely a new interpretation but a very large, polemical work that challenges most of the accepted scholarship of the past half century. The substantial body of the book contains six topical chapters some of which are over one hundred pages in length and heavily documented. In fact one chapter contains no fewer than 888 endnotes. The reader, who is not easily intimidated by sheer length and possessed of great patience, discovers that George Bernard, editor of the *English Historical Review*, has produced a highly readable book in which the author's arguments are set forth with vigor and clarity.

The fundamental thesis of the book is simple and straight forward: Henry VIII provided the inspiration and leadership for the Reformation from the inception of the divorce proceedings through the monastic dissolution until his death in 1547. The king's ministers and bishops, Thomas Wolsey, Thomas Cromwell, Thomas Cranmer, and Stephen Gardiner, played supporting roles in which they did as the king directed with very few exceptions. To achieve his objective the author challenges and rejects the scholarship of an impressive list of historians beginning with Sir Geoffrey Elton and including John Scarisbrick, John Guy, Diarmaid MacCulloch, Christopher Haigh, Michael Bush, and Susan Brigden. According to Bernard, Sir Thomas More, the most famous opponent of the King's divorce from Catherine of Aragon, was not so much a political threat as one who bore witness to "his profound conviction of the moral authority of Christendom" (p. 151). From the beginning, Henry VIII, who was no conservative, sought to reshape the English church along reformist and Erasmian lines (p. 237). The dissolution of the smaller monasteries reflected the king's desire to "reform and purify" the church (p. 276), while the Ten Articles of 1536, elaborated in the clerical injunctions of the same year, articulated his commitment to the "middle way." Bernard sees the Pilgrimage of Grace, as well as the earlier Lincolnshire Rebellion, as popular risings in which commoners swore oaths and protested against, and attempted to reverse, the suppression of the monasteries; he rejects the notion that Robert Aske's defense of the monasteries was based essentially on social and economic issues. He strongly criticizes

what he calls the pervasive tendency of recent historiography to assume that revolts must have multiple causes. As the king's determination to suppress the monasteries was not subject to negotiation, he dissembled in dealing with the rebels making Aske a "victim of royal deception" (p. 378).

In a formidable chapter of 119 pages it is argued that the king's religious policy shows a greater coherence and consistency that has been allowed by historians emphasizing factional rivalry at court. The king sought religious concord "based on his own religious convictions, best characterized as a search for a middle way between Rome and Wittenberg, between Rome and Zurich" (p. 475). Although Archbishop Cranmer is often associated with reformist efforts to shape religious policy, Bernard disagrees. Most of what Cranmer did was "entirely consistent with Henry's policies as presented in this book" (p. 506). It is also shown that claims that Cromwell actively strove for reforms not favored by the king rest on thin evidence. While the author concedes that Cromwell's personal views on the religious controversies of the 1530s are impossible to establish, he contends that Cromwell's energetic involvement in the production of the English Bible fails "to clinch the case for him as more of a religious reformer than was the king" (p. 527). The fall of Thomas Cromwell in 1540, often presented as a complex conflict involving religious factions and the consequence of the king's failed marriage to Anne of Cleves, is reassessed. Here it is shown that the fall of Cromwell was not the work of factional enemies, but "the calculated act of a tyrant," Henry VIII (p. 579). If the king is the hero of this account because he carried through a successful reformation of the church, he is also condemned as a wicked, bloodthirsty tyrant. A bold, ambitious book such as this offers the critic many opportunities. Ethan Shagan has already risen to the challenge and published a devastating critique of the book and its methodology.[1] Bernard's reading of many critical documents will attract widespread dissent as well as his low regard for modern scholarship. While it is argued that Henry VIII was committed to the "middle way" in church reform, it is not clear whether it was located between Rome and Luther or between Rome and Zurich. Bernard's rejection of multiple causation in his account of the Pilgrimage of Grace may be one of the book's most vulnerable sections. Close reading will reveal a number of internal contradictions; for example, it is argued that for Francis I and Charles V, Cromwell symbolized the religious radicalism of the 1530s although the author also maintains that Cromwell's religious program was similar to the king's. It is also noteworthy that the book neglects the last years of Henry VIII when chronic war and the emergence of new leadership in the persons of Sir Edward Seymour and Sir John Dudley altered the political balance of the country.

Bernard's interpretation of the Henrician Reformation contains echoes of the old concept of "Tudor despotism" and the views of A. F. Pollard.[2] Whatever one's assessment of this book, it is a safe prediction that its conclusions will be vigorously debated and challenged, while the author will undoubtedly welcome the opportunity to reaffirm his major arguments. It is most unlikely that the Henrician Reformation will become a historical backwater in the foreseeable future.

Notes

[1]. *Journal of British Studies* 45 (October 2006): 889-891.

[2]. A. F. Pollard, *Henry VIII* (London: Longmans, Green, 1925), 437-440.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion

**Citation:** Barrett Beer. Review of Bernard, G. W., *The King's Reformation: Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. August, 2007.

**URL:** http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13500

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.