



HENRY VIII IN OLD AGE. This engraving of Henry at the age of fifty-three by Cornelis Massys eschews the heroic in favour of candour, the head bald, eyes lost in folds of fat. Nevertheless, Henry clambered on to horse the same year to make one last throw for military glory in France.

adolescent dreams of conquest. As usual, Henry was let down by his allies, and an enormous army of 40,000 men, assembled at appalling expense, succeeded in capturing only the town of Boulogne, handed back to the French ten years later. The war was paid for by a variety of desperate expedients, subsidies, forced loans, borrowing, depreciation of the currency, and alienation of the monastic properties. They combined to fuel a roaring inflation, which was well under way when Henry died in January 1547.

It is curiously difficult to strike a balance sheet for Henry's reign. The conventional interpretation suggests an enormous strengthening of the crown's position, the papacy excluded, the clergy brought under control, the nobility cowed, the wealth of the monasteries acquired, the administration reformed, Wales incorporated. But a closer look raises doubt. If the primary objective of Henry's policy was to secure the succession, he could hardly have done worse. Six marriages had produced one sickly son, and two princesses, whose inheritance had been placed in jeopardy by bastardization and reinstatement. A temporizing doctrinal policy had produced, not harmony, but deep and dangerous religious schism. The proceeds of monastic lands had gone to build up the economic strength of the gentry and nobility and place them in a position to resist the crown. The use of Parliament to effect the religious and dynastic changes had handed it a weapon with which to confront the monarchy in the future.