
8 The crisis of kings and nobles

The crisis of kingship • Wales in revolt • The struggle in France • The Wars of the Roses • Scotland



Richard II. This is probably the earliest portrait of a sovereign painted from life to have survived to this day. This is a copy of the original in Westminster Abbey.

The crisis of kingship

During the fourteenth century, towards the end of the Middle Ages, there was a continuous struggle between the king and his nobles. The first crisis came in 1327 when Edward II was deposed and cruelly murdered. His eleven-year-old son, Edward III, became king, and as soon as he could, he punished those responsible. But the principle that kings were neither to be killed nor deposed was broken.

Towards the end of the fourteenth century Richard II was the second king to be killed by ambitious lords. He had made himself extremely unpopular by his choice of advisers. This was always a difficult matter, because the king's advisers became powerful, and those not chosen lost influence and wealth. Some of Richard's strongest critics had been the most powerful men in the kingdom.

Richard was young and proud. He quarrelled with these nobles in 1388, and used his authority to humble them. He imprisoned his uncle, John of Gaunt, the third son of Edward III, who was the most powerful and wealthy noble of his time. John of Gaunt died in prison. Other nobles, including John of Gaunt's son, Henry duke of Lancaster, did not forget or forgive. In 1399, when Richard II was busy trying to establish royal authority again in Ireland, they rebelled. Henry of Lancaster, who had left England, returned and raised an army. Richard was deposed.

Unlike Edward II, however, Richard II had no children. There were two possible successors. One was the earl of March, the seven-year-old grandson of Edward III's second son. The other was Henry of Lancaster, son of John of Gaunt. It was difficult to

say which had the better claim to the throne. But Henry was stronger. He won the support of other powerful nobles and took the crown by force. Richard died mysteriously soon after.

Henry IV spent the rest of his reign establishing his royal authority. But although he passed the crown to his son peacefully, he had sown the seeds of civil war. Half a century later the nobility would be divided between those who supported his family, the “Lancastrians”, and those who supported the family of the earl of March, the “Yorkists”.

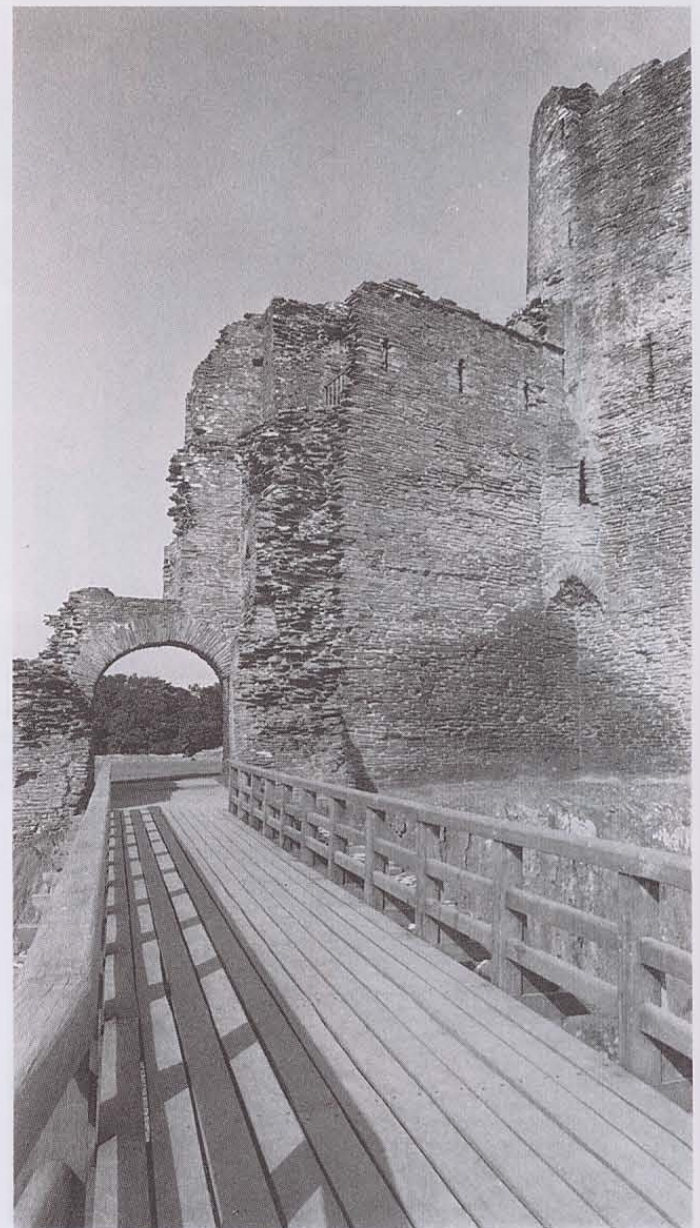
Wales in revolt

Edward I had conquered Wales in the 1280s, and colonised it. He brought English people to enlarge small towns. Pembrokeshire, in the far southwest, even became known as “the little England beyond Wales”. Edward’s officers drove many of the Welsh into the hills, and gave their land to English farmers. Many Welsh were forced to join the English army, not because they wanted to serve the English but because they had lost their land and needed to live. They fought in Scotland and in France, and taught the English their skill with the longbow.

A century later the Welsh found a man who was ready to rebel against the English king, and whom they were willing to follow. Owain Glyndwr was the first and only Welsh prince to have wide and popular support in every part of Wales. In fact it was he who created the idea of a Welsh nation. He was descended from two royal families which had ruled in different parts of Wales before the Normans came.

Owain Glyndwr’s rebellion did not start as a national revolt. At first he joined the revolt of Norman–Welsh border lords who had always tried to be free of royal control. But after ten years of war Owain Glyndwr’s border rebellion had developed into a national war, and in 1400 he was proclaimed Prince of Wales by his supporters. This was far more popular with the Welsh people than Edward I’s trick with his newborn son at Caernarfon in 1284. However, Glyndwr was not strong enough to

defeat the English armies sent against him. He continued to fight a successful guerrilla war which made the control of Wales an extremely expensive problem for the English. But after 1410 Glyndwr lost almost all his support as Welsh people realised that however hard they fought they would never be free of the English. Owain Glyndwr was never captured. He did for Wales what William Wallace had done for Scotland a century earlier. He created a feeling of national identity.



Cilgerran Castle, near Cardigan in southwest Wales, was captured by Owain Glyndwr in 1405. Although it had been built two hundred years earlier, it was clearly strong and must have been difficult to capture.

The struggle in France

By the end of the fourteenth century, the long war with France, known as the Hundred Years War, had already been going on for over fifty years. But there had been long periods without actual fighting.

When Henry IV died in 1413 he passed on to his son Henry V a kingdom that was peaceful and united. Henry V was a brave and intelligent man, and like Richard I, he became one of England's favourite kings.

Since the situation was peaceful at home Henry V felt able to begin fighting the French again. His French war was as popular as Edward III's had been. Henry had a great advantage because the king of France was mad, and his nobles were quarrelsome. The war began again in 1415 when Henry renewed Edward III's claim to the throne of France. Burgundy again supported England, and the English army was able to prove once more that it was far better in battle than the French army. At Agincourt the same year the English defeated a French army three times its own size. The English were more skilful, and had better weapons.

Between 1417 and 1420 Henry managed to capture most of Normandy and the nearby areas. By the treaty of Troyes in 1420 Henry was recognised as heir to the mad king, and he married Katherine of Valois, the king's daughter. But Henry V never became king of France because he died a few months before the French king in 1422. His nine-month-old baby son, Henry VI, inherited the thrones of England and France.

As with Scotland and Wales, England found it was easier to invade and conquer France than to keep it. At first Henry V's brother, John duke of Bedford, continued to enlarge the area under English control. But soon the French began to fight back. Foreign invasion had created for the first time strong French national feeling. The English army was twice defeated by the French, who were inspired by a mysterious peasant girl called Joan of Arc, who claimed to hear heavenly voices. Joan of Arc was captured by the Burgundians, and given to



Henry V is remembered as possibly the most heroic of English kings because of his brilliant campaigns in France. His death in 1422 brought to an end the English kings' hopes of ruling France.

the English. The English gave her to the Church in Rouen which burnt her as a witch in 1431.

England was now beginning to lose an extremely costly war. In 1435 England's best general, John of Bedford, died. Then England's Breton and Burgundian allies lost confidence in the value of the English alliance. With the loss of Gascony in 1453, the Hundred Years War was over. England had lost everything except the port of Calais.



The battle of Agincourt in 1415 was Henry V's most famous victory against the French. The English army with the royal standard attacks (left). The French royal standard is to be seen on the ground (bottom right) as French soldiers die. Although the English were outnumbered by more than three to one, Henry's archers destroyed the French feudal cavalry.

The Wars of the Roses

Henry VI, who had become king as a baby, grew up to be simple-minded and book-loving. He hated the warlike nobles, and was an unsuitable king for such a violent society. But he was a civilised and gentle man. He founded two places of learning that still exist, Eton College not far from London, and King's College in Cambridge. He could happily have spent his life in such places of learning. But Henry's simple-mindedness gave way to periods of mental illness.

England had lost a war and was ruled by a mentally ill king who was bad at choosing advisers. It was perhaps natural that the nobles began to ask questions about who should be ruling the country. They remembered that Henry's grandfather Henry of Lancaster had taken the throne when Richard II was deposed.

There were not more than sixty noble families controlling England at this time. Most of them were related to each other through marriage. Some of the nobles were extremely powerful. Many of them continued to keep their own private armies after returning from the war in France, and used them to frighten local people into obeying them. Some of these armies were large. For example, by 1450 the duke of Buckingham had 2,000 men in his private army.

The discontented nobility were divided between those who remained loyal to Henry VI, the "Lancastrians", and those who supported the duke of York, the "Yorkists". The duke of York was the heir of the earl of March, who had lost the competition for the throne when Richard II was deposed in 1399. In 1460 the duke of York claimed the throne for himself. After his death in battle, his son Edward took up the struggle and won the throne in 1461.

Edward IV put Henry into the Tower of London, but nine years later a new Lancastrian army rescued Henry and chased Edward out of the country. Like the Lancastrians, Edward was able to raise another army. Edward had the advantage of his popularity with the merchants of London and the southeast of

England. This was because the Yorkists had strongly encouraged profitable trade, particularly with Burgundy. Edward returned to England in 1471 and defeated the Lancastrians. At last Edward IV was safe on the throne. Henry VI died in the Tower of London soon after, almost certainly murdered.

The war between York and Lancaster would probably have stopped then if Edward's son had been old enough to rule, and if Edward's brother, Richard of Gloucester, had not been so ambitious. But when Edward IV died in 1483, his own two sons, the twelve-year-old Edward V and his younger brother, were put in the Tower by Richard of Gloucester. Richard took the Crown and became King Richard III. A month later the two princes were murdered. William Shakespeare's play *Richard III*, written a century later, accuses Richard of murder and almost everyone believed it. Richard III had a better reason than most to wish his two nephews dead, but his guilt has never been proved.

Richard III was not popular. Lancastrians and Yorkists both disliked him. In 1485 a challenger with a very distant claim to royal blood through John of Gaunt landed in England with Breton soldiers to claim the throne. Many discontented lords, both Lancastrians and Yorkists, joined him. His name was Henry Tudor, duke of Richmond, and he was half Welsh. He met Richard III at Bosworth. Half of Richard's army changed sides, and the battle quickly ended in his defeat and death. Henry Tudor was crowned king immediately, on the battlefield.

The war had finally ended, though this could not have been clear at the time. Much later, in the nineteenth century, the novelist Walter Scott named these wars the "Wars of the Roses", because York's symbol was a white rose, and Lancaster's a red one.

The Wars of the Roses nearly destroyed the English idea of kingship for ever. After 1460 there had been little respect for anything except the power to take the Crown. Tudor historians made much of these wars and made it seem as if much of England had been destroyed. This was not true. Fighting took place for only a total of fifteen months out of the

whole twenty-five year period. Only the nobles and their armies were involved.

It is true, however, that the wars were a disaster for the nobility. For the first time there had been no purpose in taking prisoners, because no one was interested in payment of ransom. Everyone was interested in destroying the opposing nobility. Those captured in battle were usually killed immediately. By the time of the battle of Bosworth in 1485, the old nobility had nearly destroyed itself. Almost half the lords of the sixty noble families had died in the wars. It was this fact which made it possible for the Tudors to build a new nation state.

Scotland

Scotland experienced many of the disasters that affected England at this time. The Scots did not escape the Black Death or the other plagues, and they also suffered from repeated wars.

Scotland paid heavily for its "Auld Alliance" with France. Because it supported France during the Hundred Years War, the English repeatedly invaded the Scottish Lowlands, from which most of the Scots king's wealth came. England renewed its claim to overlordship of Scotland, and Edward IV's army occupied Edinburgh in 1482.

Like the English kings, the Scottish kings were involved in long struggles with their nobles. Support for France turned attention away from establishing a strong state at home. And, as in England, several kings died early. James I was murdered in 1437, James II died in an accident before he was thirty in 1460, and James III was murdered in 1488. The early death of so many Scots kings left government in the hands of powerful nobles until the dead king's son was old enough to rule. Naturally these nobles took the chance to make their own position more powerful.

As in England, the nobles kept private armies, instead of using serfs for military service as they had done earlier. This new system fitted well with the Celtic tribal loyalties of the Highlands. The Gaelic word for such tribes, "clan", means "children", in other words members of one family. But from the

fourteenth century, a "clan" began to mean groups of people occupying an area of land and following a particular chief. Not all the members of a clan were related to each other. Some groups joined a clan for protection, or because they were forced to choose between doing so or leaving the area. The most powerful of the Highland clans by the fifteenth century was Clan Donald. The clan chiefs were almost completely independent.

By the end of the Middle Ages, however, Scotland had developed as a nation in a number of ways. From 1399 the Scots demanded that a parliament should meet once a year, and kings often gathered together leading citizens to discuss matters of government. As in England, towns grew in importance, mainly because of the wool trade which grew thanks to the help of Flemish settlers. There was a large export trade in wool, leather and fish, mostly to the Netherlands.

Scotland's alliance with France brought some benefits. At a time when much of the farmland was repeatedly destroyed by English armies, many Scotsmen found work as soldiers for the French king. Far more importantly, the connection with France helped develop education in Scotland. Following the example of Paris, universities were founded in Scotland at St Andrews in 1412, Glasgow in 1451 and at Aberdeen in 1495. Scotland could rightly claim to be equal with England in learning. By the end of the fifteenth century it was obvious that Scotland was a separate country from England. Nobody, either in England or in Scotland, believed in the English king's claim to be overlord of Scotland.