Winter King: Henry VII and the Dawn of Tudor England by Thomas Penn

It was 1501. England had been ravaged for decades by conspiracy, violence, murders, coups and countercoups. Through luck, guile and ruthlessness, Henry VII, the first of the Tudor kings, had clambered to the top of the heap—a fugitive with a flimsy claim to England’s throne. For many he remained a usurper, a false king. But Henry had a crucial asset: his queen and their children, the living embodiment of his hoped-for dynasty. Queen Elizabeth was a member of the House of York. Henry himself was from the House of Lancaster, so between them they united the warring parties that had fought the bloody century-long Wars of the Roses. Now their older son, Arthur, was about to marry a Spanish princess. On a cold November day sixteen-year-old Catherine of Aragon arrived in London for a wedding that would mark a triumphal moment in Henry’s reign. In this remarkable book, Thomas Penn re-creates the story of the tragic, magnetic Henry VII—a controlling, paranoid, avaricious monarch who was entering the most perilous years of his long reign. Rich with drama and insight, Winter King is an astonishing story of pageantry, treachery, intrigue and incident—and the fraught, dangerous birth of Tudor England.

My Personal Review:
Henry’s defeat of Richard III at Bosworth which ushered in the Tudor Era was not the coup of a Henry V but the crafty usurpation of the crown by a man who had only the tenuous claim to it. Henry was lucky: Richards defeat was more due to the abandonment of his nobles on the battlefield than to any heroics on the part of Henry. The crown more or less fell in Henry’s lap and although not a hero type, being much more sneaky than your average knight in shining armor, he wrenched the crown away from the Plantagenets and founded the Tudor Dynasty.

This fine biography begins with the winter of Henry who had sat on the throne for 16 years, keeping control over the fledgling Tudor monarchy
with guile and avariciousness, a king who always guarded his back, who trusted nobody.

The portrait author Penn paints of the King may be as close to the real monarch as you can get. He had a sallow face, shoulder length dark hair and a cast in his left eye that made his gaze disconcerting, as one eye was looking at you, the other was not. He also favored wearing black, not as an austere measure but because dyeing fabric black was very expensive and therefore suitably royal. He was thin and wiry but often ill and seldom ventured into the public eye.

When he married Elizabeth of York, the daughter of Edward IV, Henry combined the Houses of York and Lancaster, the white and red roses. But although the marriage ended the War of the Roses, England remained a land of treachery, intrigue and danger. As Henry sought to keep the governing reins securely in his hands, his rule acquired the aspect of his character: paranoid, suspicious, controlling.

Several imposters plagued Henry's reign, the most famous being Perkin Warbeck, the son of a boatman, who managed quite convincingly to pass himself off as Richard Duke of York, the younger of the two Princes in the Tower. Warbeck was backed and supplied with arms by both Maximilian, Holy Roman Emperor, and James IV of Scotland, two rulers who hated Henry. Author Penn describes Warbeck as swanning through the streets of York in his borrowed finery. Warbeck was finally captured and exhibited in the royal palaces as a sort of performing bear or freak. The young man escaped but was easily apprehended, sent to the Tower and eventually executed.

If Henry could be penurious, he could also be lavish when he wished to make a statement about the glory of the Tudor Crown. He pulled out all the stops when young Catherine of Aragon arrived to be the bride of Arthur, Henry's oldest son. The authors descriptions of Catherine's entrance into London and the marriage ceremony are fascinating and he'll take you right there, gawking with the Londoners at the spectacles that went on for a week.

You'll relish glimpses you get of Arthur, whose demeanor was one of constrained politesse in contrast to his little brother Henry a bundle of barely suppressed energy. Arthur was the mirror of their father, Henry, their mother. Arthur's death after four months of marriage shook Henry VII to the very core. The author makes you part of this tragedy, too, the prince is coffined, his body disemboweled, embalmed spiced and wrapped in waxed cloth but buried in Worcester Cathedral, not Westminster Abbey, because Henry VII, always the schemer, did not want the vulnerability of the Tudor throne with only one son left to be nosed about in populous London.
Worse was to come. Queen Elizabeth, pregnant with her seventh child died as she went into labor, her new little daughter succumbing as well. It was the Queen’s thirty-seventh birthday. Henry shut himself up for six weeks in his private chambers, described by the author as a black hole. He became very ill, possibly tubercular, and emerged changed, more detached, suspicious and controlling. Author Penn makes you sympathize with him, a monarch as vulnerable physically to the vicissitudes of life as any man, the trappings of royalty being no guarantee against misfortune.

The poor little widow, Catherine, who always maintained throughout her entire life that her marriage to Arthur had not been consummated, had to endure the seismic consequences of her virginity virtually forever - the subject of Catherine’s virginity was a cause célèbre in Tudor England and still is. As she languished unwed for over six years, Henry seemed to have lost interest in her. She became part of the furniture.

Henry never ceased rooting around his kingdom for money. He implemented a novel taxation system called Mortons fork. Criminals could often buy their way out of a prison sentence. Henry preferred to stay in the background, unseen. But like a spider in a web he was aware of any twinge that meant money for his exchequer. His reign degenerated into oppression, extortion and a kind of terror.

When the Grim Reaper came for Henry on the night of April 21st 1509, the King died clutching a crucifix to his breast. Catherine, of course, finally got her Prince, Henry VIII. and the two were happy for a while. Winter King is a very rich story, a tapestry woven together with great skill.

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