

R E V I E W S

HISTORY

RICHARD II. By Anthony Steel. Foreword by G. M. Trevelyan, O.M. (Cambridge University Press; 16s.)

This very scholarly work is invaluable to students; it should be carefully read by all who would have a clearer understanding of the reign of the last of our medieval kings. But is uncommonly hard going for the plain man interested in Richard II; for the many excited by the play of Shakespeare and anxious for further knowledge. The detailed discussion of the minor, but by no means unimportant, constitutional issues involved; the different conclusions arrived at by previous historians here conscientiously intruded into the text; these things are bound to deter the general reader in pursuit of knowledge. It is not that the author cannot give us lively and, I think, entirely just, portraits of the chief characters in the story. John of Gaunt, for instance, 'alternately blackened and whitewashed to a ludicrous extent, first by contemporaries, to whom a man in his position was bound to bulk large, whatever his true character, and (less excusably) by most modern historians,' is seen 'on the whole an amiable nonentity of no special attainments—a man neither good nor bad within the conventions of his age, yet always forced to fill a rôle too big for him.'

The Black Prince, too, is justly if severely portrayed: 'the perfect type of the debased and complicated chivalry of the later Middle Ages; great in tournaments, great in war, and master of a social code remarkable alike for senselessness, extravagance and complete indifference to the interest of classes other than his own.' The Black Prince, dying at forty-six, left his son, Richard of Bordeaux, to come to the throne of England a child of ten, formed to emulate the military prowess of his father without the physical capacity for such a career; possessing 'a sensitive and far from unintelligent, but at the same time a lazy and profoundly conventional mind.' Not lacking courage the boy king Richard; always the memorable hour, 'probably the supreme moment of his life,' when no more than fourteen he rode out to Smithfield and met face to face Wat Tyler and the peasants in revolt; persuading them to go home by promises that the ruling class of barons refused to fulfil. Mr. Steel puts all responsibility for the Peasants' Revolt on the 'blundering incompetence and selfishness, prolonged over many years,' of this class. Against the barons, the 'appellants,' Richard struggled in vain to be the king he would be; his so-called 'tyrannies' ended in deposition, imprisonment and death in Pontefract Castle. Not, the evidence suggests, a violent death at the hands of Exton, but probably

starvation. The last of our medieval kings—Richard of Bordeaux—done to death at thirty-two, as Bolingbroke his successor is the first of royal usurpers of the throne of England. A pathetic figure, Richard. Haunted by the fate of Edward II, and devoted to his memory; like Edward befriended by Dominicans. Mr. Steel stresses the neurotic weakness displayed by Richard in the last year or two of his short life.

Relations of king and barons can be more adequately judged after consideration of Mr. Steel's survey than in the works of earlier historians. Emphasis is laid properly on the disintegrating influence of the papal schism, on the general employment of English bishops as higher civil servants. The 'great' statute of *praemunire* made at the Parliament of 1393 turns out on examination to be 'not so important after all,' and the reason for contemporary annalists not even mentioning it is explained.

Finally, the reign of Richard II is the wonder time, 'the last great effort of the English Middle Ages,' in art and architecture; with the youthful king himself, 'a connoisseur of building, sculpture, painting, books and music, as well as of plate, jewellery and dress,' here by Mr. Steel's patient scholarship reinterpreted 'as the essentially medieval product of a medieval generation.'

JOSEPH CLAYTON.

HISTORY OF THE POPES. From the German of the late Freiherr von Pastor. Translated by Dom Ernest Graf, O.S.B. Vols. 33, 34. (Kegan Paul; 16s. each.)

The appearance, in these days of rigid literary restriction, of a fresh instalment of the English version of Pastor's great history is surely a considerable event, and will be hailed with pleasure by the student. It is a pity that the publishers give us no indication of the number of volumes yet to be issued before the work is completed. But we imagine that at least three more should come to us, since the German original carries on the story to the death in exile of Pius VI in 1799.

Those sections under review cover the period 1700-1740, and are concerned with the Pontificates of Clement XI (Albani), Innocent XIII (Conti), Benedict XIII (Orsini), and Clement XII (Corsini). The translation is generally on a high level, and only very occasionally do we meet with obscure phrases, and odd words that are scarcely English.

Clement XI, to whose long reign of twenty-one years the earlier volume is entirely devoted, might have been numbered among the great Popes, had his lot been cast in happier and more fortunate times. As it is, his was on the whole an unhappy Pontificate for the Church, and a crucifixion for himself. The disputed succession in Spain had led to a European war, in which the Pope found himself (as Pastor puts it) continually between the upper and the nether