VINTAGE

THE FEARS OF HENRY IV

IAN MORTIMER

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ABOUT THE BOOK

In June 1405, King Henry IV stopped at a small Yorkshire manor house to shelter from a storm. That night he awoke screaming that traitors were burning his skin. His instinctive belief that he was being poisoned was understandable; he had already survived at least eight plots to dethrone or kill him in the first six years of his reign

Henry had not always been so unpopular – in 1399, at the age of thirty-two, he was greeted as the saviour of his realm after ousting the insecure and tyrannical Richard II. But, surrounded by men who supported him only as long as they could control him, he was soon transformed from a hero into a duplicitious murderer; a king prepared to go to any lengths to save his family and his throne.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian Mortimer has BA and PhD degrees in history from Exeter University and an MA in archive studies from University College London. From 1991 to 2003 he worked for Devon Record Office, Reading University, the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, and Exeter University. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1998, and was awarded the Alexander Prize (2004) by the Royal Historical Society for his work on the social history of medicine. He is the author of two other medieval biographies, *The Greatest Traitor: The Life of Sir Roger Mortimer* and *The Perfect King: The Life of Edward III,* published in 2003 and 2006 respectively by Jonathan Cape. He lives with his wife and three children on the edge of Dartmoor.

‘Mortimer has amply demonstrated his ambition as a historian. His book offers a wealth of challenging new insights into this fascinating but enigmatic ruler’

The Times Higher Education Supplement

‘Conventional wisdom claims that a ‘proper’ biography of someone from the medieval era is an impossibility. Too little evidence survives of the kind required to reconstruct a personality. In his remarkable life of England’s first Lancastrian King, Mortimer proves that wisdom wrong. Through subtle and imaginative use of primary sources … he has created not only a compelling narrative of a significant period in English history but also a convincing portrait of a complex and contradictory man’

Sunday Times

‘Mortimer argues effectively for an appreciation of a complex man … He writes with considerable verve and skill, unlocking numerous fascinating historical details from a thorough study of Henry’s surviving account books … The historian will welcome Mortimer’s trilogy of biographies, the general reader will appreciate this one in particular, as will any student of Shakespeare’

The Book Magazine

‘A full and richly detailed life … a fine biography’

Spectator

‘He has made fuller and more effective use than any other historian of the unpublished material in the records of the Duchy of Lancaster. He has an instinctive sympathy for the men about whom he writes, a real understanding of the mentalities of late medieval England, and a vivid historical imagination which lends colour and excitement to his pages

… McFarlane observed in his lectures that if Shakespeare had focused on the personality of Henry IV, he would have come up with a more complex Macbeth. Mortimer has avowedly set out to write about the more complex Macbeth that Shakespeare never gave us’

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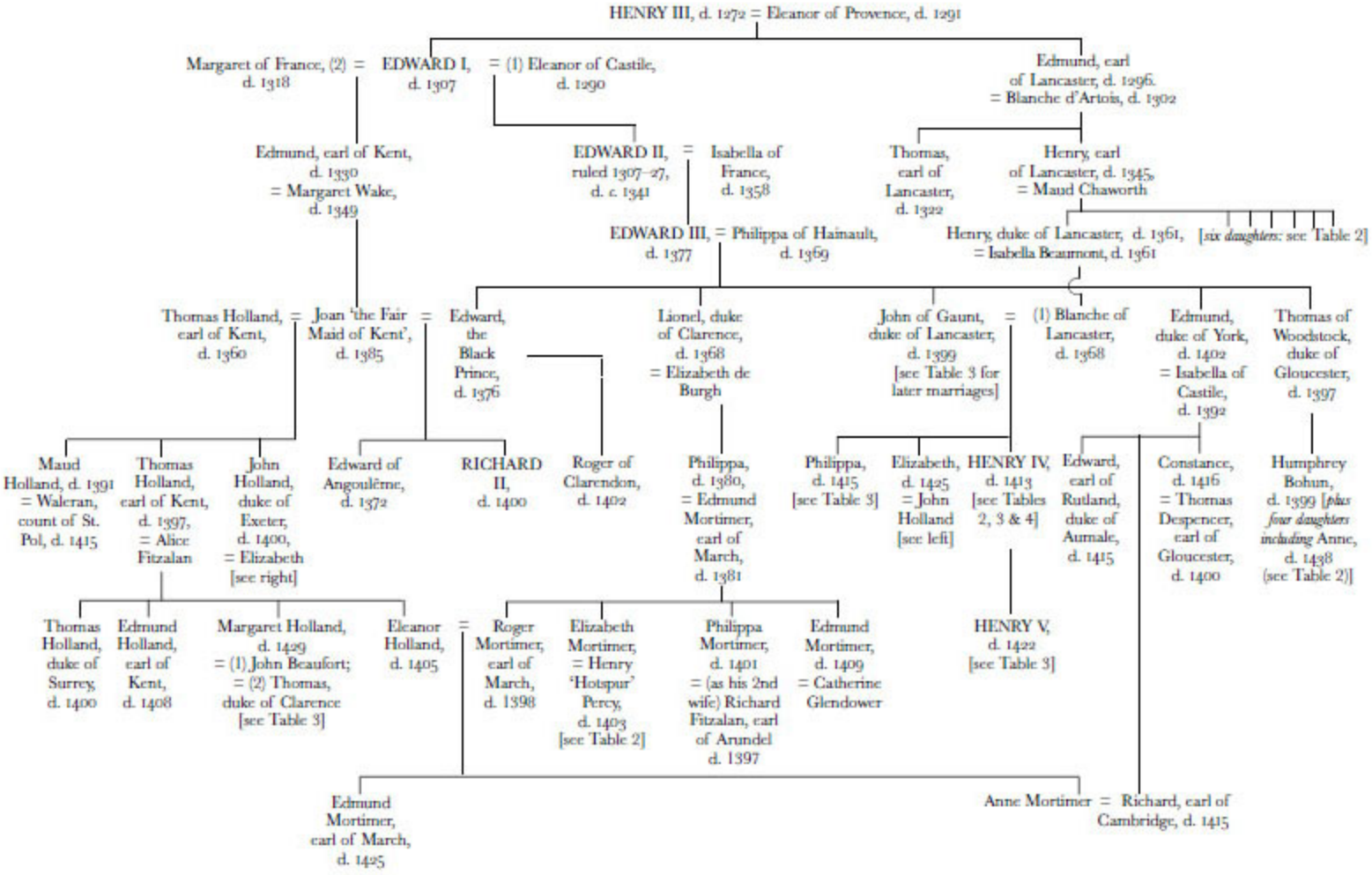

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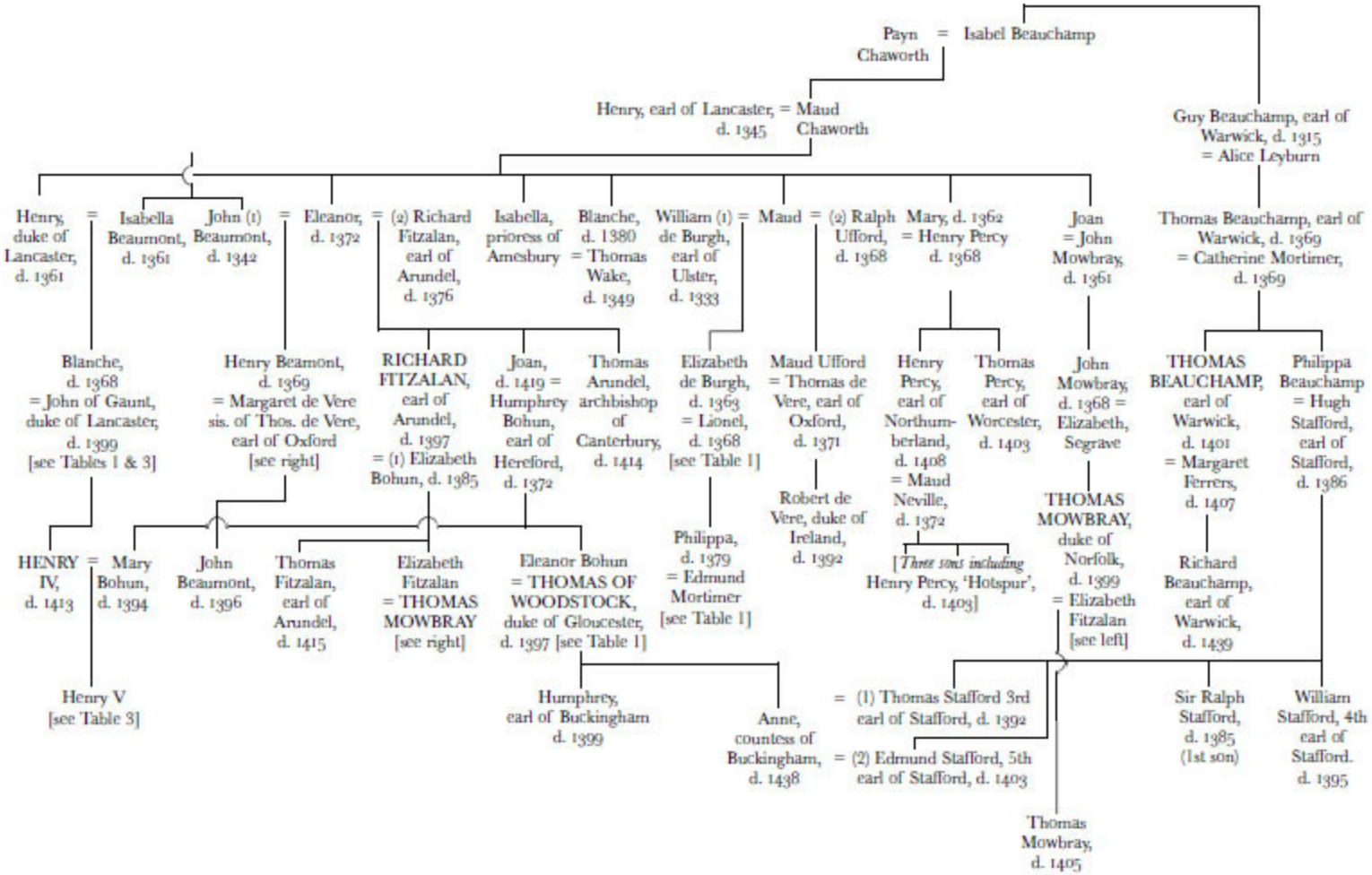

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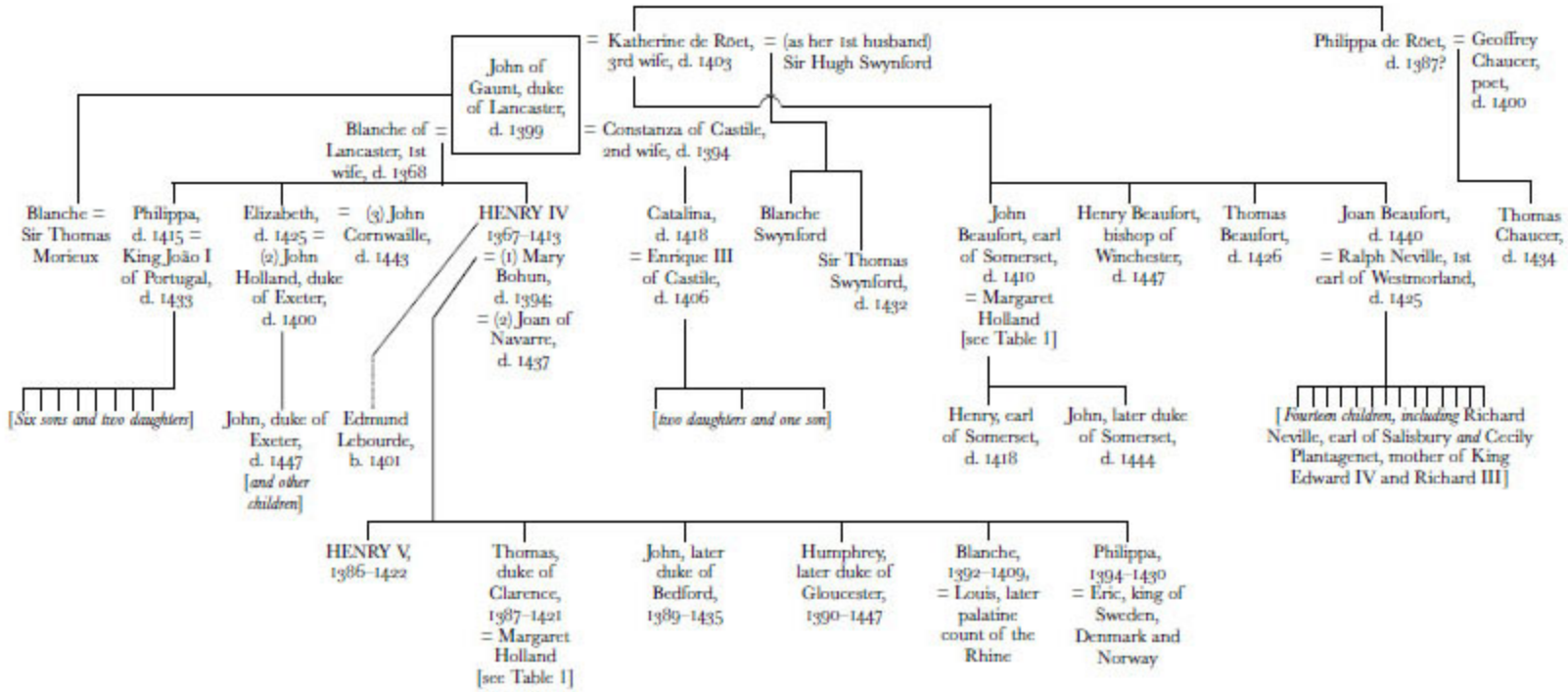

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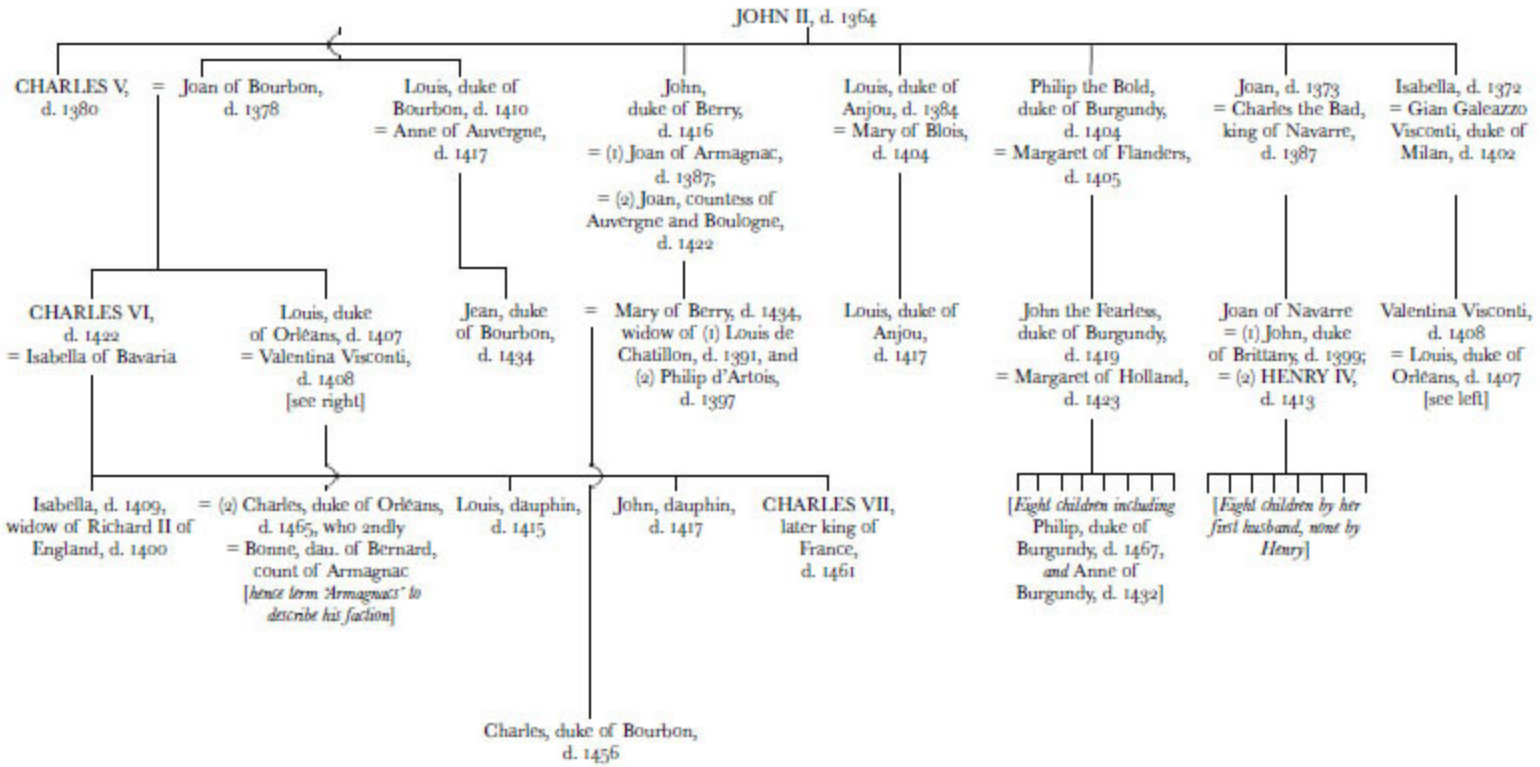

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Although most members of the English royal family were given their place of birth as a surname by chroniclers wishing to distinguish one Henry or one Edward from others of the same name, it was rare for a member of the royal family to adopt his place of birth as a part of his official identity. The earliest references to Henry being referred to as 'Henry of Bolingbroke' are historical: namely, the sections of the fifteenth-century continuation of the Brut chronicle (written about 1430) and his entry in John Capgrave's book *The Illustrious Henrys* which was written a little later. In all official documents for the period 1377–97 he is 'Henry of Lancaster, earl of Derby' or 'the earl of Derby, son of the duke of Lancaster', or a variation on one of these. His own household account books bear the name 'Henry of Lancaster, earl of Derby'. This is also the name by which his father addressed him in official letters and the way his father's treasurer described him in his accounts. The contemporary chroniclers Henry Knighton, Thomas Walsingham and the Westminster chronicler all consistently refer to him as 'Henry of Lancaster', and in claiming the throne he referred to himself as 'I, Henry of Lancaster …'. Although the indexes to the Oxford University Press editions of the contemporary chronicles all say 'Henry earl of Derby: see Bolingbroke' this style of nomenclature is anachronistic. It is also impersonal, comparable to describing Prince Henry as 'Monmouth' or Duke Henry of Lancaster as 'Grosmont'. As a result of this, the name 'Henry of Lancaster' has been used throughout this book. Where appropriate, the same format has been followed with regard to his father's name, although 'John of

Gaunt/Ghent' was an occasional contemporary appellation in his case.[1]

With regard to other names, most English surnames which include 'de' in the original source have been simplified, with the silent loss of the 'de'. Where it remained traditionally incorporated in the surname (e.g. de la Pole, de Vere) these have been retained. 'De' has generally been retained in French names.

The first names of members of the French royal family have been Anglicised. French forenames otherwise have been left in the standard French form.

With regard to Aquitaine, the term 'Gascony' has normally been used in a generic sense to mean all the English Crown's possession in southwest France.

This book is dedicated to my mother, Judy, mindful of the fact that Henry IV never knew his mother.

In one respect, at least, I have been more fortunate than a king.

IAN MORTIMER

The Fears of Henry IV

The Life of England's Self-made King

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare has a lot to answer for. While historians today might argue about the significance of the end of Plantagenet rule in 1485, and whether terms such as the Hundred Years War and the Wars of the Roses serve any useful purpose, Shakespeare has dictated the most important cut-off date in English medieval history: 1397. Quite simply, that is the historical point at which his great cycle of history plays begins. It is therefore the start date for our collective familiarity with the leading characters from British history. The well-educated modern reader is familiar with the idea of Richard II and Henry IV as eloquent, intelligent and sophisticated individuals in a way he or she is not with their predecessors. We all know the name of John of Gaunt – 'Time-honoured Lancaster' as he appears in Shakespeare's *Richard II* – but few people recall his father-in-law, the first duke of Lancaster, a more brilliant man in almost every way. The psychological characteristics of political figures before 1397 are known only to those who have studied them whereas, because of Shakespeare, we believe that the English royal family after 1397 was a crucible of glory and terror, and that its individual representatives changed the course of English history through their personal loves, fears, ambitions, vision and courage.

Shakespeare, however, was not a historian. His themes were exclusively living themes: the human struggle against the 'slings and arrows' of personal misfortune and the causes and consequences of political revolution. He was not concerned with accurate descriptions of past individuals or events. He also had little or no

understanding of the social and religious differences between the early fifteenth century and his own time. We only have to remind ourselves of his failure to mention the Peasants' Revolt to appreciate that his play about Richard II is not an attempt to provide a full picture of the king's life. Although there are elements of Shakespeare's fictional Henry IV which are closely related to the historical king, the result is an inevitable distortion of his personality and career. In short, the popular view of Henry IV is mainly an Elizabethan embroidery incorporating a few golden threads of historical detail. Henry IV may be a key figure in no fewer than three of the greatest history plays ever written but, as an individual, he lurks in the shadows of the popular imagination, as if still cautious of the judgement of other ages, hardly ever emerging to proclaim himself as the man he was, or openly to explain himself and his actions.

The image of Henry lurking in the shadows of the late middle ages is a good one with which to begin a study of him, for he is perhaps the most enigmatic of all the post-Conquest rulers of England. The great nineteenth-century historian William Stubbs declared that 'there is scarcely one in the whole line of our kings of whose personality it is so difficult to get a definite idea'.[1] Indeed, one of the reasons Henry was so useful to Shakespeare is his very obscurity. In the playwright's hands he could be Bolingbroke, the ruthless commander and ambitious usurper, and yet he could also be King Henry, 'mighty and to be feared', yet somewhat aloof and unengaging, being too full of majesty. This is not a sign of attention to him as a man but rather to his station, as a duke or king. There is no attempt to portray the Bolingbroke/Henry IV characters as having any key trait in common. In 1596 (the year in which *Henry IV Part One* was written) no one had any in-depth understanding of the man's personality. As the historian K. B. McFarlane pointed out, the Tudors in general – and

Shakespeare in particular – ignored Henry, and that proved fatal to his historical reputation.[2]

The Tudors had a good reason to ignore Henry, as demonstrated in the career of the one man who did *not* ignore him. This was Dr John Hayward, a Cambridge-educated doctor of law, who in 1599 published a historical study entitled *The First Part of the Life and Raigne of King Henrie IIII.* It was immediately both popular and vilified.[3] The first edition of a thousand copies sold out, but it came to the attention of the queen, Elizabeth I, who saw in it an attempt to compare her with Richard II and to justify her deposition. This was largely paranoia on the aged queen's part, who is supposed to have declared in her fury 'know ye not I am Richard II?'. Nevertheless, she sought to have the author arraigned for treason, and Hayward was accordingly locked up in the Tower of London for daring to write 'a storie 200 yere olde'. The second edition was banned, seized and burned. With that sort of review, all prospective publishers were persuaded that *The Second Part* (up to 1403) was far too dangerous to print, and the third part was never written. Indeed, the whole experiment in writing about the man who deposed Richard II was seen to be so controversial that no one attempted to follow Hayward's example until absolute monarchy was well and truly a thing of the past.

As a result, it is only in recent times that historians have begun to move closer to the historical Henry IV. In 1878, William Stubbs published the third and final volume of his landmark work, *The Constitutional History of England.* In seventy-four pages he provided his readers with an overview of Henry's reign which was both new and positive. Unlike any previous historian, Stubbs presented Henry as 'a great king', albeit troubled at every stage of his reign.[4] The reason for his greatness was only partly

because he founded a dynasty; mainly it was because (according to Stubbs) he initiated ‘a great constitutional experiment, a premature testing of the strength of the parliamentary system’.[5] Stubbs was particularly impressed by the fact that ‘there [was] much treason outside but none within the House of Commons’. This led to his conclusion that, by the time of his death, Henry IV ‘had exemplified the truth that a king acting in constitutional relations with his parliament may withstand and overcome any amount of domestic difficulty’.[6]

It has to be said that this is ‘greatness’ as defined by Stubbs, not as understood by Henry’s contemporaries. In the fifteenth century it was Henry’s grandfather, Edward III, who was regarded as the model for greatness: a man who took the war to France and Scotland and won, and who presided over peace at home for half a century. Henry IV was not deemed ‘great’ by his contemporaries for the simple reason that he failed to live up to this example. But even if we go along with Stubbs and accept that a man can be retrospectively ‘great’ because his constitutional ambitions come into vogue four centuries after his death, we still have a problem in that Stubbs assumed that constitutional achievements necessitate constitutional ambitions. They do not. Some of the most important parliamentary developments of the middle ages were achieved in spite of royal participation, not because of it. Indeed, as this book will show, Henry’s vision of kingship was substantially based on that of Edward III, and he approached parliament with a largely conservative agenda. The question of whether or not Henry was a great king in the fifteenth century, or subsequently, is a distraction. A man’s character may be obscured as much by the acclamation of greatness as by neglect.

Stubbs’s slightly younger contemporary Dr James Hamilton Wylie took the opposite approach to Stubbs.

Rather than describing Henry's reign in the context of the development of the constitution, Wylie looked at the administration of England in the context of the reign. *The History of England under Henry the Fourth,* published in four volumes between 1884 and 1898, is an astounding compendium of facts, showing very wide reading on the part of the author and containing many perspicacious judgements. It was also a pioneering work: no one had previously given so much attention to a period of just thirteen years before 1500. It includes a great deal of information about the king and many notes from his accounts prior to his accession, and remains the most complete chronology of the reign even today. However, it is first and foremost a history of England, not a biography, and so there is little or no attempt to reconcile the king's actions, writings and reported statements, or to present a coherent portrait of the man. And there are so many highly detailed digressions that at times it is difficult to remember where we are in Dr Wylie's narrative. Those searching for Henry's character will struggle to find it amid the tangled and seemingly endless documentary undergrowth.

Sir James H. Ramsay's two studies, *The Genesis of Lancaster* (1913) and *Lancaster and York* (1892), were written in the 'constitutional' wake of Stubbs. In these, as in Stubbs's own work, Henry is just one of the players in the political game, not the subject. As such he is adopted into the narrative, but again with no real effort to understand his personality. Only in discussing the end of the king's life does Ramsay try to sum him up, declaring that Henry was 'painstaking and industrious; merciful, temperate, and domestic; a traveller, but not a soldier or a sportsman'.[7] The last words are somewhat surprising considering that Henry won all three of the battles he commanded, habitually led his armies in person, went on crusade, was a famous jousting champion, and regularly

engaged in hunting and falconry. Ramsay's books are still useful for their easily accessible narrative structure, but, in terms of searching for Henry, best to move on.

If the ghost of Henry IV was hovering around in the early twentieth century, he (or it) would have despaired of finding a proper representation of his living self. The next writer to address the king, J. D. Griffith Davies, did not greatly help. After completing a popular biography on Henry V, Davies felt inspired to go back a generation and write about Henry IV. The result is an example of the sort of historical biography which gave the genre something of a bad name in the twentieth century. There is a distinct lack of attention to detail. Factual accuracy is sacrificed for an easy-to-read style. There is no examination of the sources on which crucial points of information and interpretation are based. Very few sources are directly cited, and, as for its supposed achievement of 'painting an impartial but living picture of Henry Bolingbroke', it fails to convince, for it does not go far enough into the man's character, being more concerned with the rustling leaves of his 'life and times' rather than the roots, trunk and branches of his personality.

Despite its shortcomings, Davies' book does contain an important idea which causes us to think again about Henry IV, and perhaps put a smile on the face of the dead king's ghost. If Henry V had ascended the throne in 1399 and Henry IV in 1413, would things have turned out differently? Although Davies fails to argue his own view on this, just raising the question implies that he believed the two men might have been of comparable abilities, and only significantly differed from one another with regard to their circumstances. In this Davies echoes a line in Stubbs's evocation of Henry IVs greatness: 'Henry IV, striving lawfully, had made his own house strong; Henry V leading the forces with which his father had striven, made England

the first power in Europe.'[8] If Henry IV secured the stable monarchy and administrative system which Henry V inherited in 1413, and saw off nearly all the opposition which otherwise his son would have had to face, does he not also deserve a portion of the credit for the successes of his son's reign? In addition, while we have traditionally judged Henry IV by the consequences of his actions in relieving Richard II of the throne in 1399, we have not considered the alternatives. What would have happened if he had *not* usurped the throne? This is not just 'virtual history' or a piece of speculation; it was very much the situation which Henry himself faced in 1399. Richard was thirty-two at the time; he might have lived and governed erratically and tyrannically for another twenty or thirty years. The potential danger to the nation as well as to the Lancastrian ducal family was obvious. Moreover, if Henry IV had not taken the throne, Henry V would have had to take on the mantle of the 'usurper', presumably when he came of age, in 1407, after eight more years of Richard's rule. Then he too would have faced the dynastic and political opposition which his father had had to overcome, including the Ricardian faction in the aftermath of the coup, the Welsh, the Scots and the French. So, in raising this question, Griffith Davies gave weight to Stubbs's view of Henry as a great king, not on the basis of nineteenth-century constitutional romanticism but in terms of a royal duke's duty to God, to his family, to his vows of knighthood and to his fellow Englishmen.

By 1961, when E. F. Jacob published his substantial volume *The Fifteenth Century* in the Oxford History of England series, the orthodox view of Henry was that he had received little credit for what had been a demanding struggle against overwhelming odds. Some of Jacob's statements on the progress of Henry's life were open to criticism; for example, his view that the king was 'neurotic'

towards the end. But his verdict was that Henry had reigned ‘gloriously’, as the chronicler Walsingham states, and that for this he had to thank his Lancastrian ‘administrative training ground and his own magnificent endurance’. It was a fair judgement, and one which still stands. The successor volume in the New Oxford History of England series, by G. L. Harriss, gives Henry the credit for acting with ‘energy and decisiveness’ against Richard II and against later rebellions in Wales and the north, and explains his compromises with parliament as the result of bankruptcy and political manoeuvres to bolster his authority. The authors of Henry’s entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* similarly state that, superficially, his reign appears to be difficult to count a success, but ‘once placed firmly in the context of his own reign, Henry IV can be seen as a considerable figure, a humane and cultivated ruler, politically skilled but by no means invariably unprincipled’. After fifty years’ consensus, the scholarly verdict on Henry IV as a king seems to be in: overall a successful ruler, despite some major drawbacks and disappointments, whose priority to the end of his life was securing his dynasty, in which he was quietly triumphant.

But what of him as a man? What of his character? This question echoes away into the darkness, and no answer comes. Astonishingly, Henry IV is the least biographied English king to have been crowned since the Conquest.[9] The only monograph wholly devoted to him by a writer familiar with the relevant primary sources is J. L. Kirby’s *Henry IV of England,* published in 1970. This is not a biography. Biography means a study of a life and there is no life in Kirby’s book. Of its 247 pages of text (excluding the ten-page introduction), only fifty deal with Henry’s existence up to August 1399. In other words, just twenty per cent of the book is given over to the first seventy per

cent of his life, including his inheritance, childhood and half his adulthood. The remainder is a discussion of the politics of his reign. Kirby shows no understanding of Henry's development from a child into a man and then a king. Yet to ignore the early part of Henry's life and to concentrate on the last fourteen years is dangerously misleading, if only for the reason that Henry was not born or bred to be a king. Moreover, Kirby shows no feeling for some key events in Henry's life. In describing the tragic deaths of the summer of 1394, he says simply 'Anne of Bohemia, Richard's queen, died on 7 June and Mary Bohun, Henry's wife, a few weeks later'.[10] That is all. Heavens above! The coldness is like an experimental scientist noting the deaths of two rodents in a laboratory cage. What about Henry's devotion to his wife, and his shock at the sudden loss of his supportive partner? Even though the evidence is minimal, we cannot assume his feelings were equally slight. Similarly, in describing Henry's decision to invade England in 1399, Kirby does not consider for a moment how much this must have weighed on Henry's mind. There is no suggestion of worry or optimism. There is no discussion even of the cultural context for fearing the removal of a legitimate monarch. Henry just did it, as if he was following a script from which he could not deviate and which guaranteed him success. Kirby's work remains useful as a political guidebook to the reign, but it is little more than that.

Fortunately for Henry IV, and for us, K. B. McFarlane had a far more rounded vision of the king's personality. His six chapters on Henry in the first part of *Lancastrian Kings and Lollard Knights* are the nearest thing to a biography yet to be published. These chapters were originally devised as a series of six lectures which McFarlane delivered at Oxford in the 1930s and rewrote in the 1940s, and which G. L. Harriss edited for publication in 1972. In McFarlane at last