

THE YEAR OF THREE SOVEREIGNS

IN England, 1553 had opened with hope. The crises which had darkened recent years seemed to be receding. The 1552 harvest had been good; prices, though high, had of late been weakening; debasement of the coinage had been stopped and the currency was stable; the pound had recovered its international value; royal debt was under control; law and order was back and the epidemic of ‘the sweat’ had eased. Fundamental problems remained, notably the inadequate revenue, but even here modest steps towards reform were in hand. Abroad, England had successfully avoided entanglements and the two ‘big beasts’ of Europe – France and the Habsburg empire – were once more at each other’s throats. Best of all, the country had a young and vigorous king on the verge of manhood – some three months past his fifteenth birthday. At that particular time Edward was at Greenwich enjoying the Christmas season. The festivities were lavish, with the Lord of Misrule descending on the court with a large cast of assistants and an elaborate programme for appearances at Greenwich and in London.¹ On New Year’s eve the lavish programme included a juggler, a mock joust on a dozen hobby horses and a Robin Hood sequence; on Twelfth Night there was a play, ‘The Triumph of Cupid’.² No expense was spared; overall it cost nearly £400. Whether Edward took part is not clear, but evidently he enjoyed himself because a further play was ordered for February. One unexpected absentee from court was John Dudley, duke of Northumberland, the minister who had presided over much of the nation’s recovery thus far. He was confined to his Chelsea home by, as he put it, ‘extreme sickness’ and a hope for some ‘health and quietness’.³ The country’s other duke, Henry duke of Suffolk, probably spent the twelve days of Christmas with his family, including his eldest daughter Jane Grey. This could have been at their Leicester home at Bradgate but possibly, as in 1550–1, with their Willoughby cousins at

Tilty in Essex, perhaps with theatricals again provided by the earl of Oxford's players and others.⁴ Barely twenty-five miles from Tilty was Hunsdon, the principal home of Henry VIII's daughter, the Princess Mary, though whether any of the Greys visited her that year is not known.⁵ What Mary must certainly have had on her mind was the ceremonial visit to court she was due to make in a few weeks. Nothing, nationally or personally, gave warning that, before the year was out, Edward and Northumberland would be dead, Jane a prisoner in the Tower and Mary the acknowledged queen of England.

The first indication that all might not be well came on 6 February when Mary arrived to visit her brother and found he was confined to bed with a feverish cold. She had to wait until the 10th to see him.⁶ The condition was dismissed as a chill – Edward was a healthy youth – but it was enough to cause the postponement of the play which had been called for 'by occasion that his grace was sick'.⁷ Throughout the month the king's condition continued to give concern, even putting in doubt his fitness to attend the meeting of parliament due on 1 March.⁸ Precisely what the trouble was is unclear. Medical opinion at the time eventually diagnosed tuberculosis, the disease which was believed to have killed his illegitimate half-brother, the duke of Richmond, seventeen years earlier. Modern diagnosis – in so far as the symptoms can be identified – is more cautious and has suggested that the presentation of the illness could indicate that the cold led to a suppurating pulmonary infection which developed into septicaemia and renal failure, a condition incurable before modern antibiotics.⁹ In the event Edward improved sufficiently to make it only necessary to transfer the opening formalities of the parliament to Whitehall Palace, and by 31 March he was well enough even to preside over the tiring, two-hour-long dissolution ceremony.¹⁰ In the second week in April he was allowed out, first to walk in St James's Park and then to travel to Greenwich.¹¹ Very probably it was during this illness that Edward began to speculate about the succession. It would be some years before he would marry and there was no certainty of a child arriving at the earliest opportunity. His father had to wait for a son until he was 46. Who should succeed if he died before becoming a father? The result was that Edward worked out what he called 'my devise [device] for the succession'.¹² This survives as a rough draft in the king's own handwriting, and specifies how the crown should pass if he died without children of his own and how royal power should be exercised in a minority, depending on the age of the prospective heir. Although Jane Grey's marriage to the duke of Northumberland's son Guildford Dudley must have been arranged early in

1553, she figures in the 'deuise' as only one of the prospective mothers of a possible successor.

Edward's health improved somewhat and in early May the ministers were excitedly exchanging news of his recovery.¹³ Whether this was one of the remissions characteristic of tuberculosis we cannot know, but it did not last. The French ambassadors saw the young king in mid-May and noted how weak he was and how persistent his cough.¹⁴ A secret case conference was held on 28 May, and the doctors gave Northumberland their professional assessment that Edward would not survive beyond the autumn.¹⁵ The duke of Northumberland must certainly have feared that Edward's condition was terminal. As the boy's chief minister he was, in the words of the earliest English account of the events of 1553–4, 'the man best aware of and acquainted' with the king's condition.¹⁶ But fearing and knowing are different. Now a change of monarch was inevitable and imminent. According to Henry VIII's will and a parliamentary statute of 1544, if Edward died childless, the crown was to go to his half-sisters, first Mary and then Elizabeth, but as hope in the king's recovery ebbed away, all this was revised.¹⁷ On 12 June, the senior judges and crown lawyers had an audience with the king at which Edward gave them instructions to put in legal form the provisions in his 'deuise', but with a crucial amendment which made Jane Grey his immediate heir. After some debate and revision, a patent naming Jane as the next queen was completed and signed on 21 June. Edward's death fifteen days later was kept a secret – or, rather, a badly kept secret – while the details of the succession were attended to.

Mary, however, was quicker off the mark. Hunsdon was twenty-eight miles from London, so when warned that her brother was near death she was able to get away rapidly to the security of her substantial estates in East Anglia. There on Saturday 8 July she had herself proclaimed queen, and sent out letters calling on local Catholic gentlemen to rally to her side. Thus, when on Monday 10th the councillors in London were preparing to proclaim Queen Jane, a letter arrived from Mary calling on them to proclaim her. Despite this Jane was proclaimed queen that afternoon and escorted to the Tower with traditional ceremony. A few hours after Edward's death, Robert Dudley – Northumberland's fourth son – had been sent with a few hundred men in a vain attempt to detain Mary, but with the princess asserting her right to the crown, more urgency was now vital. The council sent Mary a firm reply, calling her to order, and plans were put in hand. By Friday 14 July Northumberland was able to set out with limited forces but intending to rendezvous with reinforcements at Cambridge before marching on Framlingham which Mary had made

her base. He moved from Cambridge on the morning of the 18th but his promised reinforcements did not arrive. By then Mary's supporters in the Thames Valley had been able to muster sufficient force to make the councillors in London worry about their own skins. On 19 July the end came. At Bury St Edmunds Northumberland abandoned his advance against Mary, while in London the council jettisoned Jane Grey to the enormous relief and jubilation of the city. On 20 July the duke himself proclaimed Mary queen.

Through all this Jane Grey remained in the Tower with her husband, first a sovereign then a prisoner. On 25 July the duke was brought there under guard along with three of his sons, his brother Andrew and five prominent supporters; another nine followed shortly, including Jane's father, the duke of Suffolk, although he remained under arrest for only three nights. Trials began on 18 August, first Northumberland with his eldest son, the earl of Warwick, and also the Marquis of Northampton; the next day, Sir Andrew Dudley, the Gates brothers, Sir John and Sir Henry, and Sir Thomas Palmer. All seven were condemned, but only the duke, John Gates and Palmer were to die. However, on the day announced for the execution, the sentence was postponed for twenty-four hours to allow the duke and the others to take the sacrament according to the Catholic rite and one by one announce to a picked audience that they had come back to the true church. As the duke put it, 'he had erred from the true Catholic faith fifteen years and had been a great setter forth of the ill doctrine now reigning which he sore lamented'.¹⁸

The crown only got round to trying Jane Grey three months later, along with her husband Guildford, Thomas Cranmer, archbishop of Canterbury, and two more of Northumberland's sons, Ambrose and Henry. On 13 November each was found guilty and sentenced to death, but that was understood to be largely a formality. The expectation was that Cranmer would be dealt with by the church machinery and that the others could hope eventually to be pardoned. The trial of the other son involved, Robert Dudley, was delayed even longer; he was not condemned until 22 January 1554. By then, however, a new and quite distinct conspiracy was afoot, triggered by Mary's determination to marry Philip, king of Spain. Known now as Wyatt's Rebellion, it drew in the duke of Suffolk, and five days after Wyatt's surrender Jane and Guildford were beheaded. Her father went to the block on 23 February.

For each of those involved – Edward, Jane, Northumberland, Mary – the events of 1553 were wholly unexpected, and this raises historical

problems. There is not only the need to explain how and why each behaved as she or he did in those immediate events, but also to square that behaviour with the previous history of that individual. Postulating a sudden rush of blood to the head or an action entirely out of character is not convincing. Historical tradition is another problem. The simple fact is that the Edward, Jane and Northumberland of history are the Edward, Jane and Northumberland of 1553 – one a supposedly abused child, one a virgin saint beloved of the Victorian schoolroom, and the third an English Machiavelli. By contrast, thanks to the alleged disasters of Mary's subsequent reign, 1553 has counted too little in her favour; nothing ever became a Tudor better than Mary's conduct that July. The events of the year also raise wider questions. As we have seen, Jane's accession was not just endorsed by Northumberland but by the overwhelming majority of the governing elite. Such men were political survivors. They must have been aware that in switching from Mary to Jane they were taking a deliberate gamble. When the duke was on the point of leaving to capture Mary, he reminded his fellow councillors that

I and these other noble personages and the whole army go forth . . . upon the only trust and faithfulness of your honours, whereof we think ourselves most assured . . . which trust and promise if ye shall violate, hoping thereby of life and promotion, yet shall not God count you innocent of our bloods, neither acquit you of the sacred and holy oath of allegiance made freely by you to this virtuous lady the queen's highness.

The reply was: 'My lord, if you mistrust any of us in this matter your grace is far deceived; for which of us can wipe his hands clean thereof? And if we should shrink from you as one that were culpable, which of us can excuse himself as guiltless?'¹⁹ Nobody can have been under any illusion about the risk. Thus, if, as Matthew Hale claimed, the attempt to put Jane on the throne was 'only a small usurpation . . . which lasted but a few days and soon went out', we are faced with irrationality – men behaving like lemmings after lives spent successfully negotiating the uncertain and murky thickets of Tudor politics – and politics under Henry VIII!²⁰

The events of 1553 also raise issues of detail. The first is the date of the decision to crown Jane rather than Mary. When the princess paid her visit to court in February she was, so the imperial ambassador reported, 'more honourably received and entertained with greater magnificence . . . than ever before during the present king's reign'. Northumberland stood with the councillors at the outer gate of the palace and they 'did duty and obeisance to her as if she had been queen of England'.²¹ They then

escorted her to the presence chamber and through to the sick room where Edward entertained his sister with ‘small talk, making no mention of [the contentious issue of] religion’. Unless a very double game was being played, this looks very much as if no councillor had any doubt that Mary was ‘the second person in the kingdom’, i.e. the heir presumptive. If so, at the start of February, no move to replace her by Jane had been contemplated, let alone made. Evidently the decision was made in the four months between that visit and Edward’s orders to the royal lawyers in June. Along with the question ‘when’ goes the question ‘who’. As we shall see, Edward overbore the objections of his lawyers by force of his personal authority, but that tells us nothing of the origination of the scheme. Tradition may give the answer ‘Northumberland’, but on what justification?

A further question is suggested by a letter from Charles V to his ambassador in London, dated 11 July. It refers to ‘the carefully prepared course of action that Northumberland is working out with, as you suspect, the help of France’.²² Yet nothing seems less like a ‘carefully prepared course of action’ than the actions of the duke or the privy council in June and July 1553. Neither took any steps to neutralize Mary in advance of the king’s demise. Indeed, far from keeping her under surveillance, they furnished the princess with medical reports of the progress of her brother’s illness. Nor was anything done to conceal the imminent change of monarch. Few people can have misinterpreted the publication on 19 June of an order of prayer for Edward’s recovery, ‘meet to be used of all the king’s true subjects’.

O almighty and most merciful Lord . . . look down with thy pitiful eyes upon thy servant Edward our king . . . and as thou didst most favourably deliver King Hezekiah from extreme sickness and prolongest his life for the safeguard of thy people the Israelites . . . so we most entirely appeal to thy great mercies graciously to restore the health and strength of thy servant our sovereign lord.²³

Not much was done either to keep confidential the intended change in the order of the succession. Sixteenth-century diplomats followed the principle of reporting everything, be it fact or be it rumour, and the imperial ambassador had for months expressed a pathological suspicion of Northumberland’s intentions. However, by 15 June he had facts, and we can assume that if he knew, Mary knew.

In contrast to conciliar inaction, the prompt action of Mary both to put herself out of reach and to be ready to claim the throne argues for

considerable pre-planning. All that held her back was the need not to act prematurely. To claim the crown before Edward was dead would have been treason. But the council had no such constraint. So why, given the ample warning, was London not ahead of the game? When Henry VIII died, his executors had custody of Edward within hours and the interval between his father's death and the young king's proclamation was some fifty-seven hours, even though Edward had first to be fetched from Hertford, twenty-five miles away. It took a day more to proclaim Jane, and she was no further than Chelsea.²⁴ Mary built up her forces with speed. The need for troops caught the council in London flat-footed. Even with a danger which apparently was foreseen – Charles V sending a force from Flanders to support or rescue Mary – preventative action was tardy. On 4 July the necessary ships were reported to need a week to be ready to sail.²⁵

All this argues preparation on the part of Mary and a total lack of preparedness by those supporting Jane, even though hope for Edward had been abandoned days earlier. If Northumberland had been ready and so able to arrive at Bury St Edmunds a week earlier than he did, Mary's handful of supporters would have been swept aside and Jane would have won. And that deduction returns us to the whodunnit of character and motivation. Nothing in Mary's past would have argued for her display of vigour. Nothing in Northumberland's would suggest a ditherer. And the others?