



Henry VIII.

A. F. Pollard

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It is perhaps a matter rather for regret than for surprise that so few attempts have been made to describe, as a whole, the life and character of Henry VIII. No ruler has left a deeper impress on the history of his country, or done work which has been the subject of more keen and lasting contention. Courts of law are still debating the intention of statutes, the tenor of which he dictated; and the moral, political, and religious, are as much in dispute as the legal, results of his reign. He is still the Great Erastian, the protagonist of laity against clergy. His policy is inextricably interwoven with the high and eternal dilemma of Church and State; and it is well-nigh impossible for one who feels keenly on these questions to treat the reign of Henry VIII. in a reasonably judicial spirit. No period illustrates more vividly the contradiction between morals and politics. In our desire to reprobate the immorality of Henry's methods, we are led to deny their success; or, in our appreciation of the greatness of the ends he achieved, we seek to excuse the means he took to achieve them. As with his policy, so with his character. There was nothing commonplace about him; his good and his bad qualities alike were exceptional. It is easy, by suppressing the one or the other, to paint him a hero or a villain. He lends himself readily to polemic; but to depict his character in all its varied aspects, extenuating nothing nor setting down aught in malice, is a task of no little difficulty. It is two centuries and a half since Lord Herbert produced his *Life and Reign of Henry VIII.* The late Mr. Brewer, in his prefaces to the first four volumes of the *Letters and Papers of the Reign of Henry VIII.*, published under the direction of the Master of the Rolls, dealt adequately with the earlier portion of Henry's career. But Mr. Brewer died when his work reached the year 1530; his successor, Dr. James Gairdner, was directed to confine his prefaces to the later volumes within the narrowest possible limits; and students of history were deprived of the prospect of a satisfactory account of Henry's later years from a writer of unrivalled learning.

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