

Lecture 6: Britain in the 16th century

During this period, the Monarch became much more powerful than before while barons became weaker due to the **Wars of the Roses**. **The Black Death or the Bubonic Plague** reduced their strength. When it started, almost 1/3 of England's inhabitants were killed in the middle of the 14th century, and it continued to come from time to time for almost 300 years. The lack of Labor that it brought about and the rising importance of trade in towns weakened the relation between feudal lords and peasants.

The Peasants' Revolt, also named Wat Tyler's **Rebellion** or the Great Rising, was a key **uprising** across large regions of England in **1381**. The rebels sought a decrease in taxation, an end to the system of unfree labor known as **serfdom**, and the exclusion of the King's senior officials and law courts.

The Wars of the Roses: two opposing groups that sought to win the Throne of England in the 15th century. The most powerful Nobles owned soldiers so they constituted a danger to the monarch. **The Lancastrians** (with the red rose as their symbol) supported the descendants of the Duke of Lancaster while the Yorkists (white rose) were supporters of The Descendants of the Duke of York. The fight for power became what is known as "**the Wars of the Roses**" (**1455- 1485**). They ended with the defeat of King Richard III who was also killed by King **Henry VII** at the Battle of Bosworth Field. Later, a period of stability arrived and favored a strong government because they were weakened and impoverished by Decades of War.

The Tudors Dynasty (1485- 1603) founded a system of departments with professionals who were loyal and obedient to a monarch. Consequently, the feudal barons were not necessary to apply policies of the government nor were they needed in the making of them. Parliament was divided into two houses. "**The House of Lords**" composed of the feudal aristocrats and the leaders of the church while "**the House of Commons**" contained representatives from the towns and ordinary landowners in rural regions. It was of vital importance to get the consent of the Commons to make government policies because that was where new rich people were represented.

Contrary to all the European countries, the immediate cause of the spread of Protestantism in England was personal or political instead of religious (**Henry VIII**). Who wanted to divorce but the pope refused. Additionally, being at the head of the Church of England and not controlled by Rome, all church land became his and this raised more money (more incomes).

When the Roman Church was rejected, a new spirit of patriotic confidence spread. England lost its lands in France that is why it became a distinct 'island nation'. Meanwhile, the European exploration continued in the Americas and other parts of the world. This means that England was nearer to the geographical centre of Western

Civilization rather than being on the edge of it. It was in the last quarter of this positive and adventurous Century that Shakespeare started writing his well-known plays.

Consequently, patriotism and the religious beliefs had led to Protestantism, which would become the most embraced religion by the end of the **16th** century. It became "**Anglicanism**" which was almost similar to "**Catholicism**" in its organization and ritual. Calvinism favored simplicity with no rituals and it became the dominant religion. From here came the stereotype "dour or Thrifty Scot" (a transformation of a Scot from a feudal vassal to the best-educated peasant in Europe). However, the Scottish Highlands remained Catholic. The same was true with Ireland. There, Protestants were the English who tried hard to control the whole country.

Henry VII, Henry Tudor reigned from **1485** to **1509**. He defeated King Richard II and killed him in the Bosworth Battle (see above). He then married Elizabeth of York and sister of Richard III and put an end to the conflicts between the Yorkists and Lancastrians.

Henry VIII (1509-1547) one of the most famous Tudor monarchs in England mainly because he got married to 6 wives in his life. It is during his time of rule that the Reformation happened in the 1530s. He used the parliament to enact laws, which made the Roman Church in England without real power. His conflicts with Rome were not religious but rather personal just because he wanted to remarry and appoint whom he preferred. In the meantime, he had the laws enacted, which called for total allegiance to Catholicism. Additionally, he wrote a polemic opposed to Protestantism for which the pope provided him with the title "Fidei Defensor" or "Defender of Faith". The initials FD still appear on British coins today.

Edward VI: became King after the death of his father King Henry VIII and reigned from 1547 to 1553. During his reign that the parliament enacted a law of uniformity; focusing on the Protestant nature of liturgy and made compulsory the use of the Book of Common Prayer that was written by Bishop Thomas Cranmer.

Mary Tudor (1553-1558), daughter of King Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon was a loving Roman Catholic. She married Philip II of Spain and founded the Papal authority in England. The Protestants were persecuted and she burnt 300 protestant in 3 days among whom was Bishop Cranmer in 1556. When she was queen, the French Calais became under English rule for 211 years.

Elizabeth I daughter of Henry VIII and the first of three long-reigning Queens in the history of Britain (the other two were Queen Victoria and Elizabeth II). During her rule, she showed skills in diplomacy, a reasonable degree of domestic stability in a very strict Protestant England fostering the development of a patriotic spirit and of general confidence. She never married and thus was called "the Virgin Queen". One of the many English Explorers Sir Walter Raleigh, named the State of Virginia in the USA after her.

Source: O'DRISCOLL, J., Britain; Oxford University Press, 2009

