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**The Field of Cloth of Gold,  
Glenn Richardson  
(New Haven: Yale  
University Press, 2014).**

**Review by: Sean McGlynn**

*The Field of Cloth of Gold*. By Glenn Richardson. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2014. 288. pp. ISBN: 978-0-3001-4886-2. £35.

The Tudors continue to dominate historical printing presses, and Henry VIII is no exception. The 500th anniversary of his accession to the throne in 1509 saw the inevitable outpouring of biographies in 2009, as from Wooding, Wilson, Rex, Smith, Lipscomb (concentrating on 1536) and the scholarly collection of papers in *Henry VIII and his Afterlives: Literature, Politics and Art* edited by Rankin et al. But it did not stop there. Since then we have had Hutchinson on Henry's last days (2011) and full biographies from Matusiak and Loades in 2013. And that's not to mention the publishing industry built on Henry's wives and the attention given to the king's ministers: Cromwell (boosted by Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy started in 2010) has been averaging almost a biography a year since 2009, with books from Hutchinson, Scholfield, Coby and the ever-prolific Loades; and Wolsey has just been given an update, too. Is there room in this crowded, golden field for yet another Henry VIII title?

The answer in Richardson's case is assuredly yes, for here we are concentrating not on a whole life and reign, but an important occurrence in that reign. Rather like Lipscomb, but in an even more focused way, he takes a specific moment in time from Henry's reign—two—and-a-half weeks in June, 1520—to minutely scrutinise not only the event itself but what it tells us about King Henry VIII of England and King François Ier de France, and their national rivalries and posturing at that time. It is the first book in four decades to do so. Richardson, with his important research into renaissance monarchy and the otherwise (sadly) somewhat neglected area of early sixteenth-century foreign policy, is well placed to do this; in some ways he is the trans-Manche equivalent of Charles Giry-DeLoisin, who edited a French book on the Field of the Cloth of Gold in 2012.

Richardson sets out the diplomatic scene and preparations for this magnificent occasion before offering a detailed account of it. The international perspective is especially valuable here. The meeting was a consequence of the Treaty of London in 1518, one of those periodical grandiose non-aggression pacts that promise peace and invariably end in war. The Ottoman threat was one incentive for European powers establishing peace (not that it stopped François seeking an alliance with them); humanism, argues Richardson, was another. This should not be over-stated, however: humanist ideals were persuasive in that they could be exploited to the greater renown of Henry and François; the ruthless, calculating cynicism of the monarchs would be hard to exaggerate. Humanism was more an opportunity than an ingrained belief-system for these two. Humanists such as Erasmus and Budé were continuing

the tradition of later medieval writers espousing the (non-existent) golden age of chivalry in the forlorn hope of mitigating their sovereigns' wars. Indeed, Richardson importantly and refreshingly shows just how 'medieval' the monarchical mind-set remained; the Field was, after all, a massive tournament, as the author makes clear in vivid detail. The kings were meant to have met in 1519, but the imperial elections postponed matters. It says something for Henry's hubris that he threw his name into the electoral ring; this action in itself reinforces a constant and well-made theme throughout the book: the importance to the monarchs of accruing ever greater prestige and honour to themselves. Richardson therefore emphasises that the cementing of the alliance in 1520 permitted both sides to indulge in 'ostentatious rivalry', and this is what made the Field of Cloth of Gold so spectacular and, argues, Richardson, unique. He quotes Bishop Fisher of Rochester to make the 'connection between magnificence and competitiveness': 'Never was seen in England such excess of apparelment before. And thereof also must needs arise much heart burning and secret envy amongst many for the apparel. Thus many for these pleasures were the worse, both in their bodies and in their souls' (p.179). Consumer envy was part of power envy.

Both kings hoped to outdo each other in every way, each assembling 6,000 people in a massive, gaudy, ostentatious pre-fab town near Guînes (still English territory then) in the middle of June, 1520. The scale and expense is staggering, Wolsey pulling out all the stops in making the preparations on the English side. Richardson also does not hold back in lengthy descriptions of the display. For months whole industries were dedicated to the preparations of armour, tapestries, clothes, jewels and the food to nourish and awe the town's temporary occupants. (For a modern equivalent, think of the host nation's preparations for the Olympics or a football World Cup tournament.) Even a dolphin made its way onto the dinner table (but then again, Edward I fed one of his armies with a whale). One can gain a measure of the sheer extent of the opulence of the event in Berkeley Castle today, where the lavish lining of a tent from the Field serves as some of the costliest wallpaper to be found anywhere. Some readers will feast on the detail that is offered up; others may find the excess of excess and price tags a little tedious from time to time. But the resulting pre-Galbraithian effluence of affluence is very much the point, as Richardson makes clear. The display of wealth was not simply vulgar, but a form of power projection: basically, the kings were saying: 'Look: I can spend all this on hospitality; so just think how much I must have for my armies, weapons and mercenaries.' Richardson makes the case that both kings were keen to ensure peace at this time. They believed the thinly veiled threat of massive expenditure was a way to secure it. That these allies were at war with each other two years later marks it out as a poor investment.

The book has the full-scholarly apparatus plus two extremely useful appendices; with some 500 references and notes revealing the extent of Richardson's profitable delving into the archives, it is bound to be the standard text on the subject for a long time to come. But it would be an injustice to praise this book purely for its impressive academic merit. Richardson wears his scholarship lightly and the publishers have sensibly used unobtrusive end-notes. He writes extremely lucidly and with a pleasing style, so that the book will be an enjoyable read not only to other academics and undergraduates, but also to a wider public. The book's focused brevity—just over 200 relatively short pages—also helps in this regard. This, then, is history as it should be: authoritative, accessible and a pleasure to read.

*SEAN MCGLYNN*

University of Plymouth at Strode College