THE

CONNELL SHORT GUIDE

TO

King EDWARD VI

"What fantastic guides these are – I wish I'd had them when I was eighteen."
EMMA THOMPSON

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Anna Neima

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Introduction

Henry VIII's only legitimate son, Edward, was born on 12 October 1537 at Hampton Court. The king, who had waited 27 years for the arrival of a male heir, wept with joy when he held the newly christened boy. Edward's mother, Henry's third wife Jane Seymour, died soon after, either of puerperal fever or a haemorrhage, after less than two years as queen. Working his way through three more wives, Henry VIII himself died on 28 January 1547, leaving his kingdom in the hands of his nine-year-old son. Edward would reign for only five and a half years, dying on 6 July 1553.

An Ecclesiastes verse was commonly cited at the time: 'Woe unto thee, O land, when thy king is a child'. The accession of a minor presented the potential for catastrophic instability – a possibility that many historians believe Edward VI fully realised. W.R.D. Jones bundles together Henry VIII's declining years, Edward VI's minority and his half-sister Mary's reign as a "mid-Tudor crisis", an aberration of misgovernment in a century of political consolidation. G.R. Elton judges the achievements of the boy-king so paltry that they are given a mere 12 pages in his classic 500-page narrative, *England Under the Tudors*.

Since the 1970s, however, revisionists have reconsidered this near universal indictment. In particular, they have convincingly challenged three

central "myths" about Edward's reign. The first of these portrays Edward as an articulate puppet, completely removed from government. The second typecasts Edward Seymour, Lord Protector from 1547 to 1549, as the "good duke" – an idealistic social reformer brought down by a conspiracy of nobles who saw him as a threat to landed interests.* The third dubs Seymour's successor, John Dudley, as the "bad duke" – an unscrupulous, even "psychotic" leader whose only ambition was to acquire and retain power.[1]

In place of these long-established myths, recent biographers have been uncovering evidence that Edward wielded more influence than hitherto thought, and that Seymour and Dudley, rather than being one-dimensional "good" and "bad" dukes, were men of complex political and personal ambitions, each achieving mixed results with their style of rule. Jennifer Loach has been one of several to identify a remarkable overall stability and continuity in government policy, practice and personnel during the Edward years, thereby forcing us to rethink the label "crisis".

Despite reappraisal of Edward's political significance, because of his minority this brief study of his reign is also, inevitably, a study of the rise and fall of his chief councillors, Somerset and Northumberland. It concludes with a look at the

* Edward Seymour was made Earl of Hertford under Henry VIII, and then Duke of Somerset on Henry's death. He is referred to here mainly as Somerset to avoid confusion.

dramatic religious changes of the Edwardian reformation and the legacy of the boy-king.

The education of the boy-king

Edward was given the humanist education Erasmus had prescribed for the ideal Christian prince.* He read Aristotle in the original, translated Cicero into Greek, and composed essays on political theory and moral philosophy in French and Latin. Tutors, courtiers and foreign visitors alike praised his precocity, and he seems to have been potentially "the ablest of all the Tudors".[2] Despite his intellectual prowess, many historians have speculated that had he lived longer he would also have been the least attractive ruler of his dynasty. By the time he died, the transition from infant prodigy to a high-handed, dogmatic king looked like a strong possibility.

Edward's lack of personal appeal may lie in his narrow, evangelical indoctrination – although scholars disagree as to how deep this religion actually went. He was tutored by Cambridge-

*Desiderius Erasmus (c1466-1536) was a humanist scholar and reformer who believed strongly in humanity's capacity for self-improvement through education. He had a huge influence on the generation that came of age under Henry VIII, including Edward's tutors and Thomas Cranmer.

educated humanists, including Roger Ascham, Roger Cox and John Cheke, all of whom demonstrated a zealous commitment to radical reform. These evangelicals assiduously promoted the idea of the monarch's fervent piety, in part to counteract anxiety about his youth but also to safeguard the religious reforms instituted by his father. They compared him to Josiah of the Old Testament, who purged his land of idols, and to King Solomon, son of David, who rebuilt the Temple of Jerusalem. The abiding image of the young king is a 1563 woodcut included in the Protestant hagiographer John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, which depicts him devoutly listening to a Lenten sermon given by Hugh Latimer (a bishop infamous for his fierce sermons who was later martyred for his faith under Queen Mary).

How valid and comprehensive is this image? The "Chronicle", a journal of foreign and domestic events kept by Edward throughout his reign, frequently mentions masques and jousts, but never sermons. For Jennifer Loach this "casts doubt on the depth of his supposed zeal". But it is known that the king also noted down court sermons in a separate ledger, now lost, and Diarmaid MacCulloch has drawn attention to the zeal and theological competence of Edward's surviving writings on religion – for example, a remarkable treatise against papal supremacy written in 1549. Many of his acts, such as repeatedly rebuking his

The Family of Henry VIII c. 1545 depicting (L-R) Mary I, Edward VI, King Henry VIII, Jane Seymour and Elizabeth I

half-sister Mary for her adherence to the Catholic Mass, or insisting on the removal of references to the saints in the oath of supremacy, could well be ascribed to a godly youth – but they could equally be attributed to a young king's impatience to have his regal will obeyed.

However accurate the conventional view of Edward's piety, what is certainly inaccurate is the traditional view of him as permanently sickly and studious. Until the final months of his life, he participated in the lavish rituals of a rich, cosmopolitan Renaissance court just like any other young nobleman. He was interested in fine clothes, jewels, court ceremony, sports and all things military. An observer noted him "arming and tilting, managing horses and delighting in every sort of exercise, drawing the bow, playing

rackets, hunting and so forth, indefatigably, though he never neglected his studies" – hardly a portrait of a sickly individual. His journal is full of mentions of military manoeuvres and he copied out copious notes about Henry VI's military occupation of Normandy. Ultimately, as Catherine Davies remarks, "chivalry and piety are not mutually exclusive".

How much power did Edward wield?

Scholars have generally been unimpressed by Edward VI's political significance. Edward "was obviously too young to rule", writes Jennifer Loach: "the history of his reign must therefore be the history of those who ruled in his name". For G.R. Elton, his "character and views matter little". His "so-called opinions were those of his advisers and his so-called acts were his endorsements of accomplished fact".

There is no doubt that under the Duke of Somerset, Edward was sidelined. The Lord Protector, ruling as a "quasi-king", largely ignored the young monarch except for ceremonial purposes.[3] This was a mistake he may well have regretted when, at the time of his fall, rebels upset his rule and Edward was readily convinced by

other councillors of his guilt and made no plea for the preservation of his life.

The Duke of Northumberland was subtler in his methods. When he took over the king was 12 and would soon achieve his majority; Northumberland knew that he risked losing power and favour if his actions were out of tune with Edward's wishes. In consequence he took great pains with Edward's political education: from August 1551 onwards he ensured that Edward regularly attended council meetings, and from May 1552 the king was directly participating in everyday financial affairs.

By his teenage years Edward was "an exceptionally capable student of state affairs" – his Chronicle demonstrates a precocious grasp of a vast range of political matters, from trade and debasement of coinage to the diplomatic intricacies of monarchical marriage.[4] In the latter part of his reign he increasingly initiated and adjudicated decision-making. He wrote a host of letters to key figures in the court and council and, between 1551 and his death, composed 17 state papers, some of which were read out at council meetings. Such was his grasp of affairs – Diarmaid MacCulloch calls him "a Henry VIII in the making" – that it was agreed to lower the age of his majority from 18 to 16. He would have taken formal control of his government in October 1554. All this has persuaded some historians that Edward was wielding power and influencing

politics, regardless of the fact he was so young.

Nonetheless, Edward's apparently dynamic role at court was, in part, smoke and mirrors. Northumberland radiated unusual force of character and quickly won the king's trust and admiration. As Dale Hoak observes, he could then afford to allow Edward's exercise of power in more peripheral matters, giving the impression that he was governing "as a king counseled" while in reality much of the king's thinking was being done for him. Northumberland's adroit technique was noted by one French visitor: "he visited the King secretly at night in the King's chamber . . . The next day the young Prince came to his council and proposed matters as if they were his own; consequently, everyone was amazed."

Does Somerset deserve his reputation as the "good duke"?

Edward Seymour (c1500-1553) was the second of ten children of a prominent courtier and educated at Oxford and Cambridge. His steady rise up through Henry VIII's court was boosted by his sister Jane's marriage to the king, and her subsequent production of a male heir. Few were

surprised that Seymour was named as one of the 16 executors of Henry's will.

The executors were supposed to form a regency council to govern the country collectively until Edward's majority (his 18th birthday), but even before Henry VIII's death Somerset had planned to subvert this arrangement. He plotted with Henry's secretary, Sir William Paget, to secure the other executors' support by promising them titles, commissions and lands. They appointed him Lord Protector of the Realm and Governor of the King's Person. Although this initially required him to govern with their consent, a patent dated 12 March 1547 widened his remit, allowing him, in effect, to act alone, and thus giving him more power than any other subject since the beginning of Tudor rule.

For a long time historians lauded Somerset as the "good duke". A.F. Pollard portrayed an idealistic, liberal leader, out to defend constitutional freedom, Protestantism and the poor. In the 1970s, however, this romanticised interpretation came under attack from M.L. Bush, among others, who probed Somerset's motives more closely and concluded that his "political behaviour was directed not by ideals, but by idées fixes". He was especially criticised for his grandiose obsession with pursuing a destructive Scottish war that would eventually bring down his government.

Was Somerset a true social reformer?

Somerset indubitably took certain humanitarian steps and many historians see him as a thoroughgoing social radical. He repealed Henry VIII's harsh treason legislation, and was the first to prohibit the custom of duelling "whose motive is vainglory rather than justice". He seems to have been genuinely averse to excessive cruelty or violence – as shown by his marked reluctance to do away with his political opponents, or to use violence to quell rebellion.

Nonetheless, many of the Protector's broader measures for social reform were executed with an inconsistency that may, as C.S.L. Davies would have it, indicate "sheer incompetence", but could also suggest that his heart was not entirely in the project. M.L. Bush has convincingly surmised that his liberalism was, to some extent, a pose adopted to bolster his unstable position as Protector: lacking the bulwark of the "divinely sanctioned" authority that kings could rely on, he courted popularity instead. While Somerset's sympathy with the grievances of the commoners may well have been genuine, he was ultimately keener to defend the natural order (which included his own and the king's supremacy) than to reform it.

This inconsistency is most evident in his measures against enclosure. The first half of the century had seen a rapid growth in the cloth trade,

resulting in huge demand for wool. Wanting a greater share in the trade, landlords began expanding their grazing by converting arable land to pasture and enclosing the common land traditionally used by villagers. This was bitterly resented and many pamphlets were written against the practice. In response, Somerset issued two proclamations against enclosure, established a commission to investigate malefactors, and tried to limit the number of sheep by imposing a poll tax on them. Yet his proclamations promised more than they delivered, the commission did little to slow the process of enclosure, and the poll tax was repealed after just eight months. A key reason for Somerset's fall was that he raised unrealistic hopes of liberal reform among the poor, and their subsequent disappointment led them to rebel.

A further measure that belies Somerset's image as a "friend of the poor" is his draconian Vagrancy Act (1547). This unprecedentedly ferocious legislation entailed threats of branding and slavery for the work-shy. It was repealed in 1549, in large part due to its unenforceability.

Why would a "good duke" have his brother executed?

Thomas Seymour, Somerset's brother, was described by Hugh Latimer as "a man furthest from the fear of God that ever I heard or knew of in