

The Rebellion of 1483: A Study of Sources and Opinions by Kenneth Hillier

In his recent biography of Richard III, Charles Ross devotes an entire chapter to 'The Rebellion of 1483 and its consequences'. He maintains that 'the series of associated risings which broke out in the southern and western counties of England in the autumn of 1483 proved to be a key event in Richard's political fortunes'. However, he feels that the label, 'the Duke of Buckingham's rebellion' is very misleading, as the risings were planned before the duke's adherence became known and few of those involved had any known connection with him. Moreover, his failure to raise a worthwhile army in the Marches and Wales 'did nothing to assist and much to discourage a potentially powerful rebellion in England'. Who, then, rebelled against Richard in 1483, and why?¹

Most of my own interest and research into Richard's reign has centred around this revolt – hence the series of articles in previous *Ricardians*. What I hope to do in this essay is to show where the sources are to be found for a study of this topic, both primary and secondary, making the minimum comment myself. In other words, I wish to present the mine rather than the miner on this occasion.

Before looking at the contemporary or near-contemporary sources available, it would be useful to mention two secondary works which are of great value to the researcher: George B. Churchill's *Richard III up to Shakespeare*, first published as long ago as 1900, but more recently reproduced by Alan Sutton in 1976, and Alison Hanham's *Richard III and his Early Historians*, published in 1976 by the Oxford University Press. Churchill set out to show what exactly was the nature and scope of the primary sources available to Shakespeare when he began to write his play *Richard III*. Here are extracts from the contemporary chronicles and memoirs and the early Tudor histories, as well as a useful section on 'Richard III in Poetry and the Drama'. Hanham, of course, has had access to the fruits of the tremendous amount of research on the fifteenth century which has taken place since Churchill's day, and her work is a scholarly approach to 'the vexed question of Richard III's political motives and ... the problems of transmission, the connections between sources, and the character of accounts ...'. I propose to divide this article into two, looking first at the contemporary or near-contemporary accounts, then at how commentators and historians since the early sixteenth century have used these sources to write their own versions of events.

Contemporary or near-contemporary sources

C. L. Kingsford's *English Historical Literature in the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford 1913) is still important for the narrative sources. Although his opinions have been modified in the light of recent research, Kingsford is correct when he asserts that the city chronicle contained in the British Museum, Cotton MS. Vitellius A XVI, is 'of special value as representing the type of chronicle which was used by Fabyan from 1440 to 1485.' Here is the section covering the rebellion:

'In this yere many knyghtes and gentilmen, of Kent and other places, gadred theym togider to have goon toward the Duke of Bokyngham, beyng then at Breknok in the March of Walis, which intended to have subdued kyng Richard; for anoon as the said kyng Richard had put to deth the lord Chamberleyn and other Gentilmen, as before is said, he also put to deth the ij childer of kyng Edward, for whiche cause he lost the hertes of the people. And thereupon many Gentilmen entendid his distruccion. And when the kyng knewe of the Dukes entent, anoon he went Westward; and there raysed his people, wherof the Duke fled, because at that tyme his people were not come to hym. [Buckingham took refuge with Banaster, who betrayed him; the Duke was brought to Salisbury] where the second day after his commyng, w^oute spekyng with kyng Richard, behedid ... Then the Gentilmen which had entendid to have goon to hym, heryng of his takyng, fled sore dysmayed, ffor at this tyme, when the Duke tooke contrary part agayn kyng Richard, the more party of the Gentilmen of England were so dysmayed that they knewe not which party to take but at all adventure.'

Thus the Vitellius manuscript clearly states that, even if the opposition was fragmented and leaderless before, many were willing 'to have goon' to Buckingham and link up with his rebellion against Richard.²

The Chronicle of the Grey Friars of London³ is terse to the point of indifference:

'And the two sonnyes of kyng Edward were put to cilence, and the duke of Glocester toke upone hym the crowne in July, wych was the furst yere of hys rayne. And he and hys qwene crownyd on one

daye in the same monyth of July. Ij. ° A°. Thys yere the duke of Buckyngham was be-heddyd at Salsbery, and is burryd at the Gray freres. And many lordes (and) knygettes with dyvers other flede into France at that tyme.'

Robert Fabyan was a merchant and alderman of London in Henry VII's reign and, according to his own statement, his chronicle was finished in 1504. His report is of importance as showing the view of Richard III held in the city of London. He comments on men bearing grudges towards the king:

'the foresayd grudge encreasinge, and the more for asmoche as the common fame went that kynge Richarde hadde within the Tower put unto secrete dethe the II sonnes of his broder Edwarde the IIII for the whiche, and other causes hadde within the brest of the duke of Bukkyngham, the sayd duke, in secrete manner, conspyred agayne hym, and allyed hym with dyverse gentylnen, to the ende to bryng his purpose aboute.' The story of Buckingham's arrest, bringing to Salisbury and execution then follows.⁴

Hanham maintains that the city chronicles present a 'baffling mixture of borrowed material and innovations'.⁵ Certainly the evidence provided by these sources is vague and conflicting, with legend and occasionally deliberate falsification being placed side by side with known 'facts'.

John Rous of Warwick may have been an important chronicler or antiquary, but as a 'historian' he is, to be charitable, suspect. His *Historia Regum Angliae* was dedicated to Henry VII and the narrative of Richard's reign is, according to Hanham, 'a ragbag of gleanings'. On the 1483 rebellion he has little to say, save to stress it was a great conspiracy:

'And shortly after such rejoicing [Richard III's son Edward being knighted and made Prince of Wales at York] a great conspiracy was made against the king and a great insurrection. The king rode south with his followers in a great army, and the Duke of Buckingham was taken and led to the king at Salisbury and there beheaded. Then many lords fled from the country, and shortly after the prince died a tragic death at Easter-tide.'⁶

Charles Ross deals at length, in his introduction, with the authorship and importance of the Second Continuation of the Croyland Chronicle.⁷ He sees it as 'the most important single source for the reign as a whole' and few would quarrel with that assessment. It is far too detailed to print the whole extract relating to the revolt, but I have given enough to show the tone of the source:

'In the meantime ... the two sons of king Edward before-named remained in the Tower of London, in the custody of certain persons appointed for that purpose. *In order to deliver them* [my italics] from this captivity, the people of the southern and western parts of the kingdom began to murmur greatly, and to form meetings and confederacies ... at last, it was determined by the people in the vicinity of the city of London (and southern counties) to avenge their grievances beforestated; upon which, public proclamation was made, that Henry, duke of Buckingham, who at this time was living at Brecknock in Wales, had repented of his former conduct, and would be the chief mover in this attempt, while a rumour was spread that the sons of king Edward before-named had died a violent death, but it was uncertain how.'

The chronicler then detailed Buckingham's revolt, capture and execution; Richard's progress westwards to Exeter; and the flight of many rebels to Brittany. After an aside about local monastic problems, the Croyland Continuator deals with Henry Tudor's arrival 'at the mouth of Plymouth harbour, where he came to anchor' and departure on hearing of the failure of the uprising. Thus, the source clearly states that plots had been afoot *before* Buckingham's involvement, that the idea was to deliver the princes from the Tower. Only on Buckingham's being brought into the rebellion is there mention of the murder of the princes. The chronicler also commented on the financial cost to Richard of the campaign even though 'he triumphed over his enemies without fighting a battle'.⁸

Three other interesting contemporary sources for the reign are written by foreigners. The first, Dominic Mancini's *De Occupatione Regni Anglie per Riccardum Tercium* was written down for his friend Angelo Cato, Archbishop of Vienne, about four or five months after the former left London early in July 1483.

Hence, the account does not include the October rebellion.⁹ Jean Molinet (1435-1507) served the dukes of Burgundy and continued until 1506 the *Chroniques de ce Temps*, begun by the celebrated Georges Chastellain and added to by J. M. Chastellain. Molinet was a leading member of the school of poetry known as *les Rhetoriqueurs*, which flourished in Burgundy in the fifteenth century. A brief paraphrase of Molinet's confused account may be given: because of the murder of his two nephews and other monstrous and execrable deeds, the princes and nobles of England, especially those of the church, rose up against and displayed the banner of Saint Guibert the bishop, and many barons and knights assembled to attack. The utmost effort was made to find the bodies of the suffocated children, begotten of the blood royal. Molinet concludes by saying Richard was to reign in great cruelty, plundering the churches!¹⁰

Philippe de Commines was a valued counsellor at Louis XI's court in Richard's reign; the first six books of his memoirs were written between 1488 and 1504. They were first printed in 1524, and went through several editions before 1548, when Edward Hall used them in compiling his chronicle. In Book 6, 'The Last Years of the Reign of King Louis XI, 1477-1483', Commines writes of examples of revolutions in other states and comments on the English scene:

'King Edward left a wife and two fine sons ... the duke of Gloucester had his two nephews murdered and made himself king, with the title king Richard ... All his late brother's loyal servants, or at least those he could capture, were killed on his orders. The cruelty did not last long; for after he had become more filled with pride than any of his predecessors as kings of England in the last hundred years and he had killed the duke of Buckingham and gathered a large army, God raised up an enemy against him.' Commines later in Book 6 returns to the topic: 'King Richard did not last long; nor did the duke of Buckingham, who had put the two children to death, for a few days later King Richard himself had Buckingham put to death. ...'¹¹

None of these foreign sources, then, are of much use excepting that Molinet and Commines do suggest the rebellion occurred because of 'monstrous and execrable deeds' and cruelty.

Private correspondence can be of immense value because it can usually be dated very accurately and it is usually, as Ross puts it, unselfconscious. The Paston Letters are by far the largest surviving collection but only four of the fourteen relating to 1483-1485 can be called political.¹² One of the most widely used letters for the Buckingham rebellion is that sent by John, Duke of Norfolk to John Paston:

'To my right well beloved Friend John Paston, be this delivered in haste and written in London, the 10th day of October'. The letter asked that 'with all diligence, ye make you ready and come hither, and bring with you six tall fellows in harness. ...(as) the Kentishmen be up in the Weald, and say that they will come and rob the city.' This suggests that the Kent rising went off too soon - it did mean that Norfolk, with this early knowledge, was able to seize the Thames crossings at Gravesend and successfully stop any move across the river.

Most of the Plumpton and Stonor Letters are involved with local and business affairs, but both sets of family papers contain a letter directly related to the rebellion. A letter from Edward Plumpton to his singular good master Sir Robert Plumpton, knight, was written on the very day on which the Duke of Buckingham first openly took up arms against Richard III. Interesting information is given of the duke's attempt to gain allies in Lancashire:

'People in this country be so troubled, in such commandment as they have in the Kyngs name and otherwyse, marvellously, that they know not what to do ... The Duke of Buck: has so mony men, as yt is sayd here, that he is able to goe where he wyll; but I trust he shalbe right withstanded and all his mallice: and els were great pytty.'¹³

The head of the Stonor family, of course, rebelled in 1483 and his estates were forfeited, but this is not commented on in any correspondence, A letter does survive, written by Francis, Viscount Lovell,¹⁴ on the eve of the rebellion:

'Cosyn Stoner, y commawnde me to youe as hartely as y cane: for as myche as hit plesyth pe kynges grace to have warnyd youe and all other to attende upon his grace, and your compeny pat ye wolde come in my consyans and my compeny to come with you: and I ame sewre pat schall plese his grace beste, and y trust schalbe to your sewrte ... Your hertely loving
Cosyn ffranceys Lovell

Also Cosyn, pe Kyng hath commawndyd me to sende youe worde to make, youe redy, and all your compeny, in all hast to be with his grace at Leyceter pe Monday xx day of Octobyr: for I have sent for all my men to mete me at Bannebery, pe Soterday pe xvij day of Octobyr.
To my Cosyn (syr) William Stoner,'

These letters are valuable for the precise dating and record of people's movements and links. They show how local politics interacted closely with national affairs.

Finally, the researcher can breach the dam of the mass of state papers and town records. The Fine Rolls, Close Rolls and Patent Rolls are all vital for a close study of the rebellion, giving as they do cases of forfeiture, official proclamations and land redistribution.¹⁵ Moreover, the *Calendars of Inquisitions Post Mortem* exist for several of the rebels who died in the immediate years around the revolt. *The Rolls of Parliament* for Richard III's reign (1484) and Henry's first parliament also give in full the Acts of Attainder and reversal.¹⁶ The York Records record the letter sent from Richard to the city, asking for help as 'the duc Bukingharn traiterously is turned upon us contrary to the duete of hys ligeance, and entendeth the utter distruccon of us ...' Further city documents record the soldiers to be sent to the king, the wages of the captain and the standard bearer, and the Proclamation from Richard about the traitor Buckingham. Also included is a fascinating account of the honesty of one John Key, after being accused of stealing a horse on the journey to Salisbury.¹⁷

Thus, it can be seen that 'evidence' does exist for the study of the 1483 rebellion: a mixture of chronicle and private correspondence, of official record and hearsay, of ascertainable fact and highly biased fiction. In the second half of this article I shall chart the Rebellion of 1483 through more modern eyes.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. J. G. Nichols (ed.), *Chronicle of the Grey Friars of London* (Camden Society 1853), p.23.
4. Quoted in G. B. Churchill, *Richard III up to Shakespeare* (reprint Gloucester 1976), p.72, and see pp.66- 75 for this chronicle generally.
5. A. Hanham, *Richard III and his Early Historians* (Oxford 1976), p.115.
6. *ibid.*, p.106. T. Hearne (ed.), John Rous, *Historia Regum Angliae* (Oxford 2nd ed. 1745), p.217, translated Hanham op. cit., p.122. See also R. S. Sylvester, *Complete Works of St Thomas More*, vol. 2 (Yale University Press 1963), pp.lxxi-lxxii.
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14. C. L. Kingsford (ed.), *The Stonor Letters and Papers 1290-1483*, vol. 2 (Camden Society 1919), no.333.
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