

The Rebellion of 1483: A Study of Sources and Opinions (Part 2)

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NEARLY as much mystery surrounds Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard the Third*¹ as the fate of the two princes! Five versions of the text survive of differing length, with the first published version (1543) being markedly altered from the 'authentic' text of over a decade later. Moreover, some question More's authorship, giving Morton a major role in the work at the very least. Alison Hanham,² contributing to the further problem of what was More's intentions in the work, maintains it is a 'Satirical Drama'. That the book is important is not doubted: 'The work not only gives in minute detail an account of all the important events from the death of Edward IV to the outbreak of Buckingham's rebellion, but it presents the most finished portrait of Richard's person and character.'³ Certainly More's work appears (as often as any) in the footnotes of most books on Richard. The Duke of Buckingham plays a central role in the tale, from his first appearance as 'Edwarde [sic] Duke of Buckingham, and Richarde [sic] Lorde Hastings and Chamberlayn, both men of honour and of great power' to the last line (in Rastell's 1557 English edition) of the text, where the Bishop of Ely has planted the idea of the crown itself in his mind. Buckingham, until his rebellion, is linked with Richard throughout: he sees that Gray and Vaughan are arrested, when young Edward protests; with Rivers, they are traitors because 'they hadde contryued the destruccyon of the Dukes of Gloucester and Buckingham', whilst, later, Hastings' conspiracy was 'to have slaine ye lord protector and ye Duke of Buckingham sitting in ye counsel'. It is the Duke who is the main figure for ten pages of narrative, holding forth at the Guild Hall ('as he was neither unlearned, and of nature marveilouslye well spoken').

From the time of Richard III's coronation 'fell ther michieves thick... so began he with the most piteous and wicked, I meane the lamentable murther of his innoocent nephewes'. And there was no time to rest after the murders, 'for hereupon sone after began the conspiracy or rather good confederacion, between ye Duke of Buckingham and many other gentlemen against him. Thocccasion wheruppon the king and the Duke fell out, is of divers folke diverse wyse pretended.' More then relates 'as I have for certain bene enformed' that Buckingham had pledged his support, through a servant Persal, to Richard when the latter was still at York, had met up with the Protector at Northampton, and 'from thence still contynued w^t, partner of all his devises.' Thus, why the rebellion? As to motives, More says 'the occasion of theyr variance is of divers men diversly reported'; but, basically, there were three main possibilities.

Buckingham required of Richard the Duke of Hereford's lands, 'to which he pretended himself the just inheritor'; but Richard had rejected this request with 'many spiteful and minatory wordes', hence Buckingham 'ever feared his own life' and 'verilye looked to have bene murdered' at Gloucester. But other right, wise men thought this story unlikely as, at the very least, Richard would 'never have suffred him to escape his handes' if he had thought Buckingham on the verge of rebellion. More probably, it was due to the Duke being 'an high minded man, and evyll could beare ye glory of an other'-to the extent of being unable to bear the sight of the crown on Richard's head! The third version maintains that in fact 'both w^t gret giftes and high behestes, in most loving and trusty maner (Buckingham) departed at Gloucester' and it was only Cardinal Morton, the Duke's prisoner at Brecknock, whose 'wisdom abused his pride' and who fed him with 'faire wordes and many pleasaunt praises', who aroused Buckingham's 'envy toward ye glory of ye king...'. More's book breaks off with Morton in the foxy role of holding out even the crown to the Duke: 'it might yet have pleased Godde for the better store, to have geven him some of suche other excellent vertues mete for the rule of a realm, as our lorde hath planted in the parson of youre grace.' More, thus, has left the question of the Duke's motives for rebellion open and concludes his narrative before dealing with the insurrection itself.

The history of Polydore Vergil is, next to More's work, of greatest importance in the development of the historiography of Richard III's reign. Vergil says 'common belief' had it that Richard told Buckingham of his intention of usurping the throne as early as their first meeting at Northampton, and thus the latter held ever with him. Vergil, Hanham's *second Italian*, 'produced a sophisticated work by applying modern humanist principles to native material' ...while Fabyan and his fellow writers might sometimes indicate some doubts about a story, Vergil's stature as a historian is clearly shown by his handling of conflicting interpretations'.⁴ He writes down a variety of opinions - some merely rumour - then tries to evaluate them. Hanham then gives Richard's relations with Buckingham as an example of this treatment. The first clash occurred when Buckingham demanded the Hereford inheritance, and Richard replied 'in great rage: What now, duke Henry, will yow chalenge unto you that right of Henry the Fourth wherby he wyckedly usurpid the crowne, and so make open for yourself the way therunto? Which king Richerd's awnswer settlyd depe into the dukes breste, who from that time furth, movyd muche with ire

and indignation, began to devise by what means he might thrust out that ungrateful man from the royal seat'. And, in this high dudgeon, he is off to Wales. Provoked partly by 'fresh memory of the late received injury' he is in the right frame of mind to talk to Ely. Moreover, 'partly repenting that hitherto of himself he had not resisted King Richard's evil enterprise, but much had furthered the same', Vergil suggests Buckingham was overtaken by a fit of conscience or remorse. It was also Buckingham who suggested the title of Henry Tudor to Morton and the Earl of Richmond's union with Elizabeth of York. 'This truly was the matter for the which dissension sprang betwixt King and the duke, and whereupon the conspiracy was made against him'. But the common report was otherwise - Buckingham encouraged Richard's usurpation so that when the latter 'being hated both of God and man' might be expelled, Buckingham himself would become king, 'whereunto he aspired by all means possible, and that therefore he had at the last stirred up war against King Richard.'

Vergil also maintains that 'before the duke all in a rage had begun to be alienated in mind (and) after the slaughter of King Edward's children was known', a parallel plot has been hatched between Elizabeth Wydeville and Margaret Beaufort for the marriage of Elizabeth of York to Henry Tudor. Margaret 'appointed Raynold Bray her servant . . . to be chief dealer in this conspiracy' and he gathered together Giles Dawbeney, Richard Gylfoord and many more; moreover, Margaret was about to send Christopher Urswick to Henry Tudor, when 'behold she was suddenly advertised of the same practice purposed by the duke of Buckingham' . . . so she sent Hugh Conwey instead with a 'good great sum of money', advising Henry to arrive in Wales. So Vergil's story is of two parallel conspiracies aiming at the same end: the crowning of Henry Tudor as king of England.

Meetings were held, 'so secretly solicited the commonalty to sedition . . . others finally, of which number John Morton bishop of Ely was chief, provoked, by secret messengers, all men to this new conspiracy whom they knew assuredly to hate King Richard no less than themselves did'. Vergil's version is that of noble men driven to rebel because of tyranny. Richard hears of it and sends for Buckingham, first with fair words and then with threats, because he knew him to be 'the head of the conspirators'. 'The duke with all made ready for war, and persuaded his confederates forthwith, soon when soon other, to raise the people'. Vergil then deals with the leaders of the Yorkshire, Devonshire and Kent rebels and the treachery of Humfrey Banyster in handing over Buckingham. 'When his confederates, who had now begged war, knew that the duke was forsaken of his people. . . they were suddenly dismayed, every man fled. . .'. Buckingham suffers death of King Richard, 'whom he had aided against his own conscience. . . Hereof surely may we mark, that he lost his labor, and charged his own life with heinous offence, who helpeth an evil and wicked man . . .'

If More and Vergil were to provide much of the material for the more scholarly histories of the next few hundred years, it was to be William Shakespeare who provided the popular version of Richard III. In his play, Shakespeare fastens on Buckingham's desire for the 'earldom of Hereford and the moveables/The which you promised I should possess', whilst Richard, himself peeved that 'high-reaching Buckingham grows circumspect' and is not willing to give immediate support to the idea of the princes' murder, realises 'The deep-revolving witty Buckingham/No more shall be the neighbour to my counsel.' Buckingham decides to flee to Wales: 'O, let me think on Hastings, and be gone/To Brecknock while my fearful head is on!' Rogues have fallen out - Buckingham rebels due to Richard's deep contempt for his request for the earldom and in a desire to get the knife in first! Henry Tudor attempts an invasion, 'stirred up by Dorset, Buckingham, and Ely', and a series of messengers reveal to the King that insurrection has broken out in Devonshire, Kent, Yorkshire and Wales. Buckingham's demise at Salisbury in 1483, is sandwiched between Tudor's landing in Pembroke and the camp near Tamworth in 1485! So much for Shakespeare the historian.⁶

Sir George Buck's apologia for Richard III, written between 1605 and 1621, was a comprehensive defence of the King, and naturally Buckingham and Morton get short shrift. 'The subtil Doctor Morton, who was extremely his Enemy, and the Chief Instrument that secretly mov'd against him' knew Buckingham to be 'a broken Reed. . . for the Duke was now secretly in his heart defected from the King and become male-content' and so 'but touched his pulse, and knew how the distemper lay, which he irritated into such sparklings as gave him notice where his constitution was most apt and prepared . . .'

'We are now to take notice of the Duke of Buckingham's revolt, for this was the preparative and sourer of the rest: And to give it the more taking feature and spacious pretence, it must be given out, That the cause was the Reformation of an ill Government and Tyranny, under which species they must take up Arms against the King.' Far from this being the true reason, Buck maintains 'all these Colours were but to give complexion to the face of his defection, the true cause was well devined and found out by the King, his Ambition and aime to be Sovereign . . . those embers lay but luke-warme in his thoughts, were quickened and revived by the animation of Doctor Morton (who) pregnantly tickles and feeds that humour . . .'. It was Morton who got Buckingham to see that any rebellion was better than none, even if it led to Henry Tudor not Henry Stafford becoming king, and to be content with 'the first and

greatest man, the Kingdome was to know next the king. . . And here, if we view him in the figure of his Ambition or Fate, we shall find Doctor Morton his Caput Argoll, or the malignant Planet of his fortune; who, as Sir Thomas Moore confesseth and affirmeth, by his Politick Drifts and Pride, advanced himselfe, and brought the Duke to this ruine.⁷

In an article of this length it is impossible to cover every source, particularly secondary, on the reign of Richard III and, more especially, the causes and nature of the 1483 revolt. I have concentrated on the following eighteenth and nineteenth century authors for two good reasons: they are a fair enough cross section of opinion about the rebellion, and their books happen to be in my library!

William Hutton's *The Battle of Bosworth Field* naturally concerns itself mainly with the 1485 campaign, but he does comment on Buckingham as the step by which Richard mounted the throne and who was then destroyed; a man who was won over by delusive promises, never to be fulfilled. He feels that Richard's gift to the Earl of Surrey of the High Constablership for coronation day was the start of Buckingham's resentment, 'the first umbrage, causing his revolt, and raising that tempest which beat down the white rose.'⁸

David Hume's *History of England* was to remain influential until well into the nineteenth century. A. R. Myers' opinion of Hume's work is low - 'he does not deserve to be taken so seriously as his contemporaries ... he found the Saga presented in nearly all the histories and it was easier to accept it than to question it.'⁹ Buckingham, in Hume's mind, is a fit ally for a Richard 'unrestrained by any principle either of justice or humanity'. The Duke had a 'vicious mind, which knew no motive of action but interest and ambition'. Although Richard seemed determined to spare no pains or bounty in securing Buckingham to his interests and had given him the office of constable and had promised him the Bohun inheritance of the estate of Hereford, 'it was impossible that friendship could long remain inviolate between two men of such corrupt minds'. The rupture was effected possibly because Richard was too slow to give over the grant and made unnecessary difficulties; or refused other demands; or resolved to ruin Buckingham anyway. Buckingham, by his mother allied to the Lancastrian party, was easily induced to espouse their cause and was encouraged by Morton to cast his eye towards Tudor - 'he seemed to be the only person from whom the nation could expect the expulsion of the odious and bloody tyrant.' Buckingham assents readily to the marriage of Henry and Elizabeth of York. Hume's version of the revolt is essentially a rehash of the traditional story .¹⁰

Sharon Turner, 'who was to become one of the most distinguished British Historians of the Romantic Revival' according to Myers,¹¹ devoted far more time to personal research than Hume had ever done, investigating as far as possible original evidence rather than mere tradition. He discusses the reasons for Buckingham's revolt in some detail: besides the story of the Bohun inheritance, the Duke also stated other grievances. He declared that he had been refused the high constablership of England, which many of his predecessors had enjoyed. Moreover, Richard showed himself to be an independent king and to need no lordly governor, and Buckingham was quite probably outshone in splendour and state, since Richard too liked pomp. Turner feels the parting at Gloucester may have been for several reasons: Buckingham may have been making himself too prominent, or assuming too much authority, which irked Richard. That the Duke's wounded vanity was the main cause of his rebellion, Sharon Turner has little doubt.

The mid-nineteenth century saw the maintenance of extensive interest in and sympathy for Richard III, with several biographies of him being written. Caroline Halsted's two volume work, with a wealth of documentation, set out to prove that Richard was a good man corrupted by ambition. That Buckingham should lead a rebellion was 'one of the most remarkable instances on records of the perverseness of human nature'. Halsted feels that Buckingham was aware of the disappearance of the Princes, but, not knowing where they were spread the report that they were dead with the aim of advancing his own position. Morton merely added to the 'envious, jealous and fickle temperament' already there - the Duke was not firm to any party or cause, but only to his ambition. Married to Elizabeth Woodville's sister, he had deserted that family to favour Richard, had proclaimed the illegitimacy of the Princes to place Gloucester on the throne, and now circulated reports of their murder hoping to become king himself. Although the cause of the rebellion was ostensibly to avenge the young princes' death, vanity and perfidy and inordinate ambition were the true reasons; it was a revolt 'characterised by perfidy and ingratitude of the blackest dye'. However, Halsted agrees that there was a compact between Morton and Buckingham and the southern counties were on the eve of revolt anyway to release the Princes. Morton and Buckingham released the story of the latters' deaths to gain support for Tudor - in fact Halsted thinks that a plot to restore the Lancastrian dynasty in the person of Henry was contemplated *before* Edward V's deposition. Why Buckingham supported Henry was a mystery that defies solution! 'Whatever commiseration may be excited for the duke. . . yet his heartless and unfaithful conduct to the widowed queen his sister-in-law, to his nephew Edward V, and to his friend and kinsman Richard III, proves him to have been so utterly bereft of principle, and so strongly actuated by feelings of wild and

selfish ambition, that few will hesitate to admit that his premature death was well merited, and altogether of his own seeking.¹²

J .H. Jesse's *Memoirs of King Richard III* also laid stress on the importance of moral principles. Richard is a man of 'aspiring nature and boundless ambition' who used 'consummate cunning and ability' to gain the throne, 'Buckingham, a man of great ambition and avarice (whom) the protector seems to have found little difficulty in corrupting'. Jesse's view of the rebellion is that numerous meetings were being held in the south and west 'with the object of effecting the princes' release from imprisonment'. Richard was planning to encounter this storm 'with the energy and resolution which characterized him in every emergency' when 'to his exceeding astonishment, he received intelligence that the Duke of Buckingham had entered into a secret alliance with his enemies. . . that his accomplice should league himself with his deadliest foes appears to have wounded and disturbed the usurper more than any other event of his life.'

'Buckingham's apostasy has been attributed to different motives. . . the probability we consider to be - and the supposition accords with the state of reaction in the public mind in favour of the young princes - that the principal, if not the sole, cause of Buckingham's defalcation, was that which he himself assigned to Morton, Bishop of Ely, at Brecknock.' In other words, the murder of the two Princes. In fact, 'the increasing conviction in men's minds, that the innocent princes had met with a cruel and untimely end, excited deep and almost universal commiseration,' - a conviction that Jesse himself held.¹³

One of Jesse's sources was John Lingard's *History of England*, published in eight volumes between 1819 and 1831. Lingard, a Roman Catholic priest, shows in particular a veneration for tradition and for the authority of Sir Thomas More. His Richard 'was a prince of insatiable ambition, who could conceal the most bloody projects under a mask of affection and loyalty'. Lingard believes that friends of the princes pursued their object of working for their release and looked for the support of a powerful ally. The Duke of Buckingham joined them, engaged to restore to the crown young Edward, whom he had contributed to dethrone. Then, however, he received the mournful intelligence of the murders and changed his allegiance to Henry Tudor. It was 'vain to conjecture' why the Duke changed sides as he had been amply rewarded. Perhaps it was the knowledge of Richard's cruel and suspicious character which made him fear for himself; perhaps he was persuaded by the 'artful and eloquent observations of his prisoner Morton'.¹⁴

J. R. Green felt 'there are few periods from which we turn with such weariness and disgust as from the Wars of the Roses'; it was clear that it was Morton who 'took advantage of the disappearance of the two boys to found a scheme which was to unite discontented Yorkists with what remained of the Lancastrian party, and to link both bodies in a wide conspiracy'.¹⁵ J. H. Ramsay also maintained that the rising did not originate with Buckingham, but 'was in its inception a popular movement, as things went in those days; that is to say, a rising of country squires personally connected either with Edward IV, Clarence, the Wydevilles, or the Greys; aided by broken-down Lancastrians; Sanctuary men and the like. In short the movement represented a coalition of all hostile elements. These gentleman had originally banded together in the cause of Edward V, and with the intention of re-placing him on the throne.' Morton was the first promoter, if not the originator of the idea of Tudor's marriage to Elizabeth of York and of furthering Henry's claim, when the news of the murders spread. Buckingham's fall made an end of the rising, but the number of persons implicated was very alarming.¹⁶ Alfred O. Legge was another popular historian 'who carried on the mid-Victorian tradition of vigorous moral judgements' (Myers). He deals in detail with the revolt and its causes, using Hall, Holinshed, Grafton, Vergil and Croyland as his chief sources. 'Under the organising hand of Buckingham the movement in the south and west for the liberation of the Princes was converted into a conspiracy. . . the rescue of the Princes was put in the foreground as appealing to general sympathy', then reports of the Princes being foully murdered led to incredulity, amazement, and horror. The disappearance of the Princes favoured the designs of Buckingham, but the report of their murder was prematurely circulated and he was unprepared for the outbreak of rebellion when it came.¹⁷

By the late Victorian period a more systematic study of English history was taking place in the universities and elsewhere and a greater respect for professional historical scholarship was emerging. One of the most influential scholars of the late fifteenth century was James Gairdner, a man deeply respectful of tradition. His 'great reputation for scholarship and careful editing, and the general respect for specialist historians of proved competence sufficed to secure the acceptance of his view by the leading historians of his day' (Myers) and it was Gairdner whose minute study of the facts was more and more to convince him 'of the general fidelity of the portrait with which we have been made familiar by Shakespeare and Sir Thomas More.'

Gairdner says of Buckingham's revolt that 'it is a thing almost unaccountable, even to the historian!' His treachery may have been due to a 'change that he had discovered in the king' or because 'from the first he had pursued a merely selfish policy'. Buckingham's position in the country was 'unique as to influence and authority; he had precedence of all other nobles except princes of the blood. A host of minor offices also had been liberally showered upon him . . . no subject had ever been so great since the Earl of Warwick fell.' Yet, Gairdner feels Buckingham questioned Richard's good faith over the Hereford grant and dreamt of the crown itself: 'he was himself of royal blood'. It was left to Morton to sway the Duke (Gairdner follows More's story of the conversations at Brecknock), and to the Countess of Richmond to gain his allegiance for her son. To Gairdner Buckingham was a 'tool and catspaw of greater intellects' - to be won over and used first by Gloucester then by Morton and the Countess of Richmond. 'In such men, strength of partisanship for a time is more to be expected than political consistency.'¹⁸

One famous writer of late Victorian England did not agree with Gairdner: Sir Clements Markham, editor, translator or writer of 'some eighty books, dictionaries and papers, including three historical romances and eighteen biographies' (Myers). Long before Gairdner's biography appeared, Markham had become convinced of Richard's innocence of most of the charges laid against him by *Tudor Legend*; now he was stimulated into a counter-charge. The villains are now Henry VII, and Cardinal Morton; Buckingham is early branded, with Stanley, as a false friend of Richard and a traitor. Richard had generously conceded all that Buckingham had asked for with regards to the Bohun estates, thus 'never was there an act so unprovoked and treacherous' as his ensuing rebellion. 'The Duke seems to have been a weak unprincipled man, full of vanity and self-importance, and his worst qualities were worked upon by the insidious old intriguer Morton. . . Buckingham's ambition was to seize the crown. . . its motive was misrepresented by Morton, with the object of creating a belief that the Duke advocated the cause of Henry Tudor. . .' Morton's and Vergil's argument that Buckingham rebelled because of Richard's refusal to grant him the moiety of the Bohun lands 'can be proved to be false'. His aim was the crown and 'it is certainly astounding that the childish nonsense which Morton puts into Buckingham's mouth should have been gravely accepted as true by subsequent historians'. Markham then proceeded to demolish the '*childish romance*' and also went on to show that 'almost every source has either been suppressed or twisted to serve the conspiracy against Richard. . . Markham's romantic enthusiasm and Victorian moral fervour make his book fascinating, even compelling reading. He is still the most persuasive out-and-out defender of Richard III' (Myers).¹⁹

Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century, most of the ideas and motives for Buckingham's rebellion had been endlessly mulled over and definitive opinions given. Inevitably much depends on whether you accept More (Morton?) and Vergil as reliable sources; on whether you see Buckingham as a *weak tool* used by others throughout his life,²⁰ or as a scheming, later vengeful, egocentric aiming from the first for the throne of England; whether one accepts the idea of an insurrection being planned to release the Princes well before and quite independently of the Brecknock tergiversations; and, above all, whether one accepts that the Princes were dead by the late summer of 1483 and that 'among all the inhumanities of the late civil war, there had been nothing so unnatural' as their murder and, with the horrid deed benefiting only his opponents, the secret disaffection against Richard was now undisguised and 'general excitement led to a premature outbreak'.²¹ The most recent biographer of Richard III has this to say of Buckingham: 'The duke's motives for turning against his master were a mystery both to his own contemporaries and to early Tudor writers who knew the people involved. They are always likely to remain so.'²² Truth may not be the daughter of time in this instance.

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20. Philip Lindsay, *King Richard III: A Chronicle* (Nicholson and Watson 1933). I have not chosen to deal with twentieth century 'authorities' in this article, but Lindsay's Chapter 3 portrays a weak man, smirking under Morton's flattery, changing from 'a vain but harmless courtier into an ambitious revengeful maniac', p.261.
21. James Gairdner (*op. cit.* n.18), p.130.
22. Charles Ross, *Richard III* (Eyre Methuen 1981) pp.113-114. 154

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