Review Article

Phantom Bastardy and Ghostly Pikemen.

LIVIA VISser-FUCHS


I, Cecille, wife unto the right noble prince Richard late Duke of Yorke, fader unto the most cristen prince my Lord and son King Edward the iiiijth, … make and ordeigne my testament … my bodye to be buried beside the body of my moost entirely best beloved Lord and housbond, fader unto my said lorde and son, and in his tumbe within the collegiate church of Fodringhay, …

Thus Cecily Neville, the aged duchess of York, close to death and about to meet her Maker, in the will that she asked her confessor and others to witness on the first day of April 1495. According to Michael Jones, however, she was lying — twice, emphatically — for contrary to what she maintained in her will, she had been unfaithful to her husband for the sake of a tall, blond archer in France, and Edward IV was not her husband’s son. This faux pas, according to Jones, was to pursue her and her family for the rest of their life and it traumatised her youngest son, Richard, until the day of his death on Bosworth field.

This book is about two things: psychology and a battle. I can only discuss a limited number of points from each part, but generally speaking on the psychology its arguments, to me, are as unconvincing as the evidence adduced for the battle seems to be compelling. To take the battle first. The documentary evidence that the author brings to his discussion of the battle of Bosworth is fascinating. In this part of the book he is obviously on his own territory, his style is clear and he expertly carries the reader along without leaving much room for doubt or protest. The relocation of the actual place of conflict, supported by a map of the ‘old’ theory and the new one I found convincing — but I am not an expert, and others, more knowledgeable than I, have undermined Jones’ evidence. Significantly, while doing so they needed words and phrases almost identical to the ones I will have to use below about other matters put forward in this book.

On aspects of the battle other than the site I have grave doubts of my own, particularly about Jones’ use of his sources. First, the all-important force of French pikemen, whose novel methods of fighting are said to have given Henry Tudor the victory. The only source for the presence of these pikemen appears to be the 1897 article by Alfred Spont on the French local infantry militia, the francs archers, who ‘flourished’ from 1448 to circa 1490. Referring to this secondary text Jones claims that a force of a thousand French pikemen, from a ‘recently disbanded war camp’ (pp. 131, 162) of francs archers at Pont-de-l’Arch in Normandy, was the backbone of Henry’s army. This camp, however, had been disbanded in 1481 and it would have been a remarkable feat for Henry to keep a thousand of these infamous soldiers, aussi poltrons que brutaux (as cowardly as they were merciless), under control during his years of exile until he needed them. There is no evidence that the French mercenaries who did fight at Bosworth had anything to do with Louis XI’s model camp. More importantly there is no indication that they were pikemen rather than archers; Jones’ pikemen are ghostly men, present only in his own mind. The Swiss, renowned for their competence at handling pikes en masse, had been sent home in 1484 and did not return

1 This is what I have to infer: Jones does not mention or use Cecily’s will.
2 Dr Peter Foss’ comments in Ricardian Bulletin, summer 2003, p. 29, col. 2, paragraph 2.
3 ‘La milice des francs-archers (1448-1500)’, Revue des questions historiques, new series, vol. 59 (1897), pp. 441-89. The letter in French, quoted by Spont, that is said to report on the battle, dated 23 August, does not seem to survive, but I entirely agree with Jones that de Chester (Spont’s words) probably refer to Leicester: le cestre for lecestre is a very common mistake with French scribes of the period.
4 Spont, p. 470.
5 Spont, p. 473.
into French service until 1486. The French ‘eyewitness’ of the battle of Bosworth quoted by Jones — and (carefully?) called a ‘soldier’ (p. 165) — is taken to prove the presence of pikemen at the battle, but this man was actually an archer du camp (professional archer).6 Spont himself keeps much closer to the evidence and introduces this (very short) section about Bosworth and the man in question (Colinet Leboeuf, archer du camp sous M. d’Esquerdes) by saying that ‘Des archers du camp figuraient plus honorablement à la bataille de Bosworth…’. He means that their ‘more honourable’ role at Bosworth was in stark contrast to the plundering and raping they had been indulging in during the preceding months in Flanders. Contrary to what Jones says we do not ‘know that the French recruited by Tudor had been drilled in Swiss fashion’ (pp. 132, 166), all that is known is that francs-archers were divided into for categories: archers du camp (archers), arbalétiers (crossbowmen), rousleurs (halberdiers) and later lanciers or piquiers (pikemen), and that a number of men from one of these categories, the archers du camp, were present at Bosworth, where, they later claimed, they had given Henry the victory. It is also not true that these men, with ‘wry humour’, called the Bosworth campaign ‘the English adventure’ (p. 162); according to the evidence they called it the voyage (d’Angleterre),7 a common word for a military expedition and (almost) correctly quoted by Jones himself in an earlier publication.8

If Jones’ theory about the presence of pikemen were true, it is amazing that captain Juan de Salaçar (usually called Jean de Salazar), who had been fighting the French for years, did not warn Richard earlier, instead of advising him to flee when it was too late. Nor does le petit Salaçar create a link, ‘ritual’ or otherwise, between England and Castilian military history, as Jones argues, but his presence proves that there was an exchange of military expertise between England and Burgundy. Salazar had gained an outstanding reputation in the Low Countries as a war leader, and if there had been an unusual body of particularly dangerous men in the opposing army he would have informed the king he was serving in detail, including the best way to deal with them.9 Whatever happened at Bosworth, we have as yet no evidence that Richard was the victim of a lack of information about new developments in military strategy on the continent.

Whether Richard really staged a ‘second coronation’ before the battle may be a question of emphasis, particularly when the most important of the two (and a half) sources that are supposed to suggest this, the Crowland Chronicle, also has the unlikely and tendentious statement that the king hardly managed to have an ordinary mass celebrated.10 The evidence for such a ceremonial crown-wearing, though the sources are said to be ‘many’ and ‘good’, seems actually rather thin, however much one drags in John of Bedford’s sartorial magnificence at the battle of Verneuil in 1429(!) for comparison. It is unlikely that Richard took the crown of St Edward along on campaign, and the processional cross found in the area, though impressive, does not suggest anything out of the ordinary. One only has to compare this cross — if comparisons are needed — to the numerous saints’ relics, portable altars, chalices and liturgical vestments found by the Swiss after Charles the Bold’s defeat at Grandson. It is always a mistake to assume that the English kings were less ‘magnificent’ than the Burgundian dukes (and therefore to regard any show of splendour by English princes as particularly significant).

As I said, the first half of the book is about Richard’s psyche. Or rather, it is about the author’s ideas about Richard’s obsession with his father and his father’s death, and his reaction to the ‘fact’ that his brother Edward was illegitimate. On Richard’s father fixation I have nothing to say, except quoting the author himself (on another matter, p. 136): ‘Such a subjective question always has to be put with caution, for we have no direct way of knowing how Richard thought’. As to York’s death, we do not know how exactly he died, but rumours about treason are persistent. To give but one unusual version of the story: Adrian de But, the Flemish monk-chronicler, who had a gift for obtaining important news, wrote c. 1480 that York had been killed in a Cistercian monastery by Andrew Trollope and that his head was exhibited detail, including the best way to deal with them.

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6 Spont, p. 474.
7 Spont, p. 474, n. 1.
9 Salazar obviously needs to be studied more closely, not least because he appears to have plundered my home village in the years before he departed for England and Richard’s service.
martyr. Jones puts Richard’s crown-wearing before Bosworth in this context — ‘family honour was now restored’ — (and next compares Richard the son to George Bush Junior, a comparison to which this reviewer, writing in the summer of 2003, objects in the strongest possible terms). York’s magnificent reburial must certainly be seen in the context of the legitimacy of his claim to the crown, but there is no evidence, contrary to what Jones suggests, that the reburial ‘owed much to the prompting of Richard’. That Richard and not Edward himself was the chief mourner at their father’s funeral — at least during the body’s journey from Pontefract to Fotheringhay — is due to the fact that during the burial ceremony the effigy of the dead king was felt to vie in authority with the living king, which made it impossible for the latter to play a major part. We do not know who was the chief mourner during the actual ceremony in the church of Fotheringhay — except that Edward did offer the mass penny, a service usually performed by the chief mourner.

What, one may ask, is the evidence for the main thesis of this section of the book, that Edward was a bastard? The date of his birth, apparently, and his father’s absence from his mother’s side at the time of his conception. I would be prepared to believe that if I were given the evidence, and preferably in such a way that I could test it. The statements: ‘Historians have underestimated the duration … of this campaign’ (p. 49) and ‘the campaign was far more extensive and York did not return to Cecily until after 20 August.’ (p. 67), accompanied by references to French archival sources that are not quoted or even paraphrased, are not sufficient and do not oblige us to believe any of this. We await the details.

Who, then, are Jones’ real witnesses for the prosecution? I will skip More’s tendentious descriptions of Cecily Neville in a rage. Why quote him when he does not even claim that Cecily said Edward was illegitimate? In this context it must also be pointed out that here, as in most discussions of Edward’s marriage to Elizabeth Woodville — which is what the duchess of York is supposed to have been so furious about, though not enough, apparently, to forget herself and throw her reputation to the dogs — the reader is not reminded sufficiently that Elizabeth was descended from one of the most powerful and well-connected families of France and Burgundy; her proud and complicated coat of arms was included in the glazing of the College at Fotheringhay — admittedly after Cecily had left there in 1469. Which brings me to Jones’ next amazing theory, that the duchess of York moved to Berkhamsted in 1469 because she had dared reveal that Edward was a bastard. The evidence that she did make such a statement in 1469 is circular: in that year the accusation was made for the first time (see below) that Edward was a bastard? The duchess of York moved to Berkhamsted in 1469 because she had dared reveal that Edward was a bastard. The evidence that she did make such a statement in 1469 was made for the first time (see below) and she was ‘suddenly exiled to a near ruin at Berkhamsted’. In fact, no later than 1428 Berkhamsted Castle had been designated one of the winter residences of the young Henry VI, and in the summer of 1450 and on other occasions in the late 1450s Henry stayed there. By 1469, according to Jones, it was no longer fit for human habitation, a ‘crumbling and dilapidated’ (p. 74) place. In spite of this Cecily went on living there for another twelve years after Edward’s death, and Richard when king shared her hardship (?) for five days in May 1485.11

The first ‘genuine’ witnesses concerning Edward’s bastardy are Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick, and his comrade-in-arms George, Duke of Clarence, who started the rumour in 1469. The latter stood to gain from Duke Charles’s death on the field of battle with theMexican soldier, Luis de Ampudia y Cavero, who was a native of Burgos and was captured by the French during the Battle of Parnawa in 1423. He was executed in Paris in 1424. The phrase Charles is said to have used is curious and worthy of further study. According to Comines the duke appelait le roy d’Angleterre Blaybourne, fils d’un archer qui portait son nom, et toutes les mocqueries que en ce monde il estoit possible dire d’homme, literally: ‘he called the king of England Blayborne, son of an archer who bore his [soi] name, and all the mocking names in this world that one can call a man by’. This is just the version in one ms, as edited by J. Calmette, Philippe de Comines. Mémoires, 3 vols, Paris 1965-81, vol. 2, p. 50. It is usually assumed that Comines’ memoirs were dictated, which led to several confusing mistakes. In this instance other ms read Blanc borgne, ray borgne and Bley bourgne, capitals being uncertain and v and b interchangeable. Bourgne could possibly mean ‘one-eyed’, ‘cross-eyed’ or ‘blind’, and son now is also curious. Whose name is this referring to?


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patron — he was in a position similar to Louis XI’s servant mentioned above: he had ‘repeatedly gone over [the story] in [Cato’s] presence’. Few stories do not gain in the telling.

Another piece of circumstantial evidence brought forward by Jones is the will of Edward IV. He says its executors refused to execute it, that this was agreed upon in the presence of, among others, Cecily of York, and thus ‘under the auspices of his mother, the right of the late King to determine dynastic succession was now undermined’ (p. 85). The larger implications of what the executors meant and of what was done or not done according to Edward’s instructions clearly also need further and more convincing research, but it is highly unlikely that the actual succession was ever an issue in this context, and there are a couple minor things that can be pointed out here: according to the document in the register of Archbishop Bourchier the executors did not ‘refuse’ to do their work, they ‘deferred’ taking it on, probably because of the complications that any king’s will would cause, and Cecily was not among the witnesses present, though the meeting was held in her house.13

This is a very readable book — though I am personally not convinced by most of its arguments — and it will give rise to a satisfactory amount of controversy and further study. I wish the author had put his notes where they are really needed, i.e. when he first makes his controversial statements and the reader is dying to know what he bases them on. What is also sorely missing is extensive quotations from these mysterious French sources that tell us everything about Richard of York’s absence when the future Edward IV was conceived.

As a production the book is pleasing to the eye, but, as we have learned to expect from this publishing house, the efforts to economise are obvious: few owners of objects or makers of photographs illustrated in the book seem to have been asked for their permission and most pictures are obviously ‘second-hand’; there is no bibliography; the index is a mess; the endnotes are given in the usual exasperating way, that is, under the chapter number, while in the text the chapters only have running titles. One of the book’s amazing minor oddities is the photograph of the carving on the misericord of Edward’s personal stall in St George’s Chapel, Windsor, showing a number of armed men standing behind the king during his conference with Louis XI on the bridge of Picquigny in August 1475, which led to the profitable peace-treaty that Edward regarded as the major achievement of his career.14 The caption (mis)explains that this ceremonial scene illustrates ‘leading from the front’ (in battle). (The incorrect story that Richard pointedly absented himself on that day is, of course, also repeated.)

The jacket design is sombre but attractive and bears witness to the author’s incredibly felicitous in situ discovery of a contemporary wall painting of the battle of Verneuil, which was fought fifty-five years before Bosworth. Finally, I am grateful to Margaret Condon for discussing various points with me — and agreeing with me!

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