This book is a curious mixture. It is well presented, with fine illustrations, and presents a wealth of interesting source material in a readily accessible form. Yet the family tree at the back omits the key Yorkist descent from Lionel, Duke of Clarence, and (by the misleading sleight of hand of concentrating on Henry VII’s descent from Catherine of Valois) appears, at first glance, to give Henry pride of place as though he were the senior descendant of Edward III. Regrettably, the book contains the usual inconsistencies in respect of female nomenclature. (Elizabeth Woodville rather than Elizabeth Grey, but Katherine Sywnford not Katherine de Roet, and Eleanor Butler not Eleanor Talbot.)

The author acknowledges that the source material covering some periods of Richard’s career (such as his childhood) is limited. When dealing with the relatively uncontroversial aspects of Richard’s life he provides a clear, concise and coherent account of events which at times appears to cut through the layers of later history to bring us closer to the real Richard. Dr. Cunningham acknowledges the difficulty of discovering what Richard was really like, but his stated aspiration is to set him in his contemporary, fifteenth century context, eschewing the rival stereotypes of later writers: Shakespeare’s villain, and the virtuous victim of Tudor propaganda. This is a laudable aim, but difficult to achieve, and despite the wealth of contemporary source material which his book presents, in the final analysis Dr. Cunningham is not always able to avoid the influence of later stereotyping.

Richard’s upbringing in the household of the earl of Warwick is seen as ‘deeply significant’, as is his relationship with his mother, the widowed Cecily Neville. In the matter of land holdings, and in his dealings with other noblemen and with his social inferiors, Richard is seen as typical of his social class and period. In this context his conduct was at times ‘aggressive’, and Richard is presented as having been able to combine a reputation for justice with the sometimes ruthless pursuit of his personal interest. Dr. Cunningham emphasises Richard’s apparently genuine piety, though not everyone would accept his characterisation of Richard’s sexual mores as ‘almost prurient’. Dr. Cunningham also emphasises the fundamental legitimism which underlies both Richard’s and his parents’ belief in the Yorkist right to the throne. Strangely, however, he then seems unable to see that Richard’s strict adherence to the legitimist principle is entirely consistent with his conduct in 1483 once one accepts that there may have been genuine grounds for doubting the validity of Edward IV’s Woodville marriage.

In fact, on the controversial issues of Richard’s accession large assumptions are made. The Edward / Eleanor precontract is consistently presented as a fabrication of 1483, and the Titulus regius of 1484 is described as ‘blatant propaganda’. The possibility that the precontract story was true is never seriously considered, although Dr. Cunningham does remark at one point that Cecily Neville, whom he sees as supporting Richard’s actions in 1483, ‘may have known the truth of Richard’s arguments over the illegitimacy of the Princes’. Relevant contemporary and near contemporary information bearing on the precontract issue (the pattern of secret alliances in the fifteenth century royal family; the character of Edward IV; the fact of the secret Woodville marriage; the conduct of the Talbot and Butler families vis-à-vis Richard III; Henry VII’s hasty and unprecedented suppression of the Titulus regius of 1484; the fact that the precontract remained a live issue for foreign courts well into the Tudor period) is not reviewed. In accounting for Richard’s change of policy during the summer of 1483, the intervention of Bishop Stillington, reported by Philippe de Comynnes, is never mentioned.

Likewise, Dr. Cunningham assumes that Edward IV’s sons were killed in 1483, under Richard’s aegis, and that the bones in the Westminster Abbey urn would, if DNA tested, prove to be their remains. In support of the former contention he presents what he acknowledges as the confused and rumour-filled writings of some contemporaries, and the fact of Lord Howard’s elevation to Richard of Shrewsbury’s dukedom of Norfolk soon after Richard III’s accession. The claim of ‘Perkin Warbeck’ to be Edward IV’s younger son is not seriously considered, despite the fact that it enjoyed widespread contemporary credence. Yet even if the ‘Warbeck’ claim was false, the fact that it was widely believed conflicts with Dr. Cunningham’s view that most contemporaries thought that the boys had been killed. On the issue of DNA analysis of the Westminster Abbey bones, any opinion as to the outcome is, of course, pure assumption.

There are other assumptions and errors in the book. Clarence’s death is described as ‘murder’, despite the fact that he had been condemned to death by due legal processes. Richard III is said to have ‘physically resembled his father’, which he may have done, but how can we be sure? Henry Tudor is presented as the Lancastrian heir, which he certainly wasn’t. ‘Many sources’ we are told, ‘emphasise...
Richard’s troubled dreams’ on the night before the battle of Bosworth. This sounds dangerously like reliance on the kind of later stereotyping which the book ostensibly set out to avoid. It is also astonishing, and deeply regrettable, to find Mr Cunningham retailing once again as though it were proven fact, the wholly unverified and extremely dubious seventeenth century tale of Richard’s body having been exhumed from his tomb at the Franciscan Friary in Leicester at the time of the Dissolution, and thrown into the River Soar.

There is no bibliography as such, merely a list of suggestions for further reading. This list is perhaps the author’s personal choice, but it is a pity, in my view, that it omits Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, *The Hours of Richard III*, while including the sometimes rather fanciful *Religious Life of Richard III* by Hughes.

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