The author puts the blame for this book squarely on the shoulders of one of the publishers, Tony Morris, and admits that there are few reasons for studying the three kings together. He does his best to find some – apart from their names – but there are other problems: as we have learned from at least one similar study produced recently, a book covering such a long period demands that a wise author find readers expert in those periods to which he or she is a stranger. John Gillingham, an authority on Richard I, has no doubt polished up the sections on Richard I in the present book; Richard II is a speciality of the author himself. Readers of The Ricardian will not be surprised to find that this review is almost solely concerned with the sections on Richard III and the lack of polish they display. Even so only a few matters can be touched on, to do more would mean rewriting these chapters.

In the general section on his life the historiography of Richard’s reputation is covered adequately, with the firm statement that his evil reputation was current before 1485. As regards the protectorship Saul is heavily indebted to Colin Richmond; any plotting is seen as solely emanating from Richard and Buckingham, and there is no understanding of Richard’s legal claim to throne as explained by Professor Helmholz. Richard aims at the throne from the first, ‘convinced of his own destiny’ – unfortunately and rather unfairly this sense of destiny distilled from the humble phrases in the statutes of Middleham College, in which Richard showed his awareness of God’s bounty. Saul’s Richard is also determined to rid himself of the princes from the first, but it is acknowledged that other arguments exist. Despite many flaws, as regards the treatment of Richard III, the chapter on the death of kings is an interesting one.

Overall Richard is allowed little credit. The Scots campaign, for example, is defined as ‘on the surface’ successful, for only Berwick was taken and Richard ‘not even exacted reprisals on the city’s populace’ (of Edinburgh). What would the author’s comment have been if Richard had indeed sacked Edinburgh? Would that have agreed more happily with Richard’s ‘disagreeable traits’ that ‘became more pronounced over time’, his ruthlessness, intolerance of restraint, and acquisitiveness. Along these same lines, old and new myths, versions of events and innuendo are presented once more: Richard’s book of hours points to a ‘troubled’ personality; the author is convinced of Richard’s piety after his coronation, thereby repeating a myth created in the eighteenth century. It is the fate of Richard III that in the eyes of modern commentators he can never get it right.

There are also slips that need not have been made: no Roman was ever called ‘Guyus’, not even in William Worcester’s (not Tiptoft’s) translation of the Controversia de nobilitate; the many connotations of Richard’s motto are conveniently overlooked; Philip the Good’s feast at Lille is called the Feast of the Swans, even though the duke takes his crusading oath on a pheasant; Richard’s words to von Popplau are given in the old, less revealing translation; the illusory French pikemen at Bosworth are apparently here to stay, this time backed by ‘a French eyewitness’. The text makes clear that Richard of York was descended from Lionel of Clarence, the second son of Edward III, but this line of descent is conspicuously omitted from the illustrated pedigree, making the Yorkist line subordinate to Lancaster.

The Ricardian reader will be happy to know that things in England improved after 1485. Richard was a militarist – two pages develop this idea, derived from Colin Richmond – and the aggression of the English nobility needed to be controlled by engagement in a foreign war. Edward IV had failed to do this properly and the nobility were ready to tear out each other’s throats. The world changed after 1485, with Henry VII staging lavish tournaments to distract his aggressive nobility; the ‘chivalric ethic was losing some of its function’, and was now clad in a new ‘rich humanistic clothing’. The English could at last turn to ‘learning and good manners, and to ‘the service of the state’, and ‘It is doubtful if Richard III would have found much to identify with in this new definition of nobility’. Richard’s own learning and his books – except for a few devotional texts – are completely missing from the story. Which is odd, when one realises that Richard is the only medieval king of England, probably the only king of England full stop, about whose personal library it has been possible to write a three-hundred-page study.

The author’s heavy reliance on certain sources, constantly repeated in the notes and obvious from rather sudden changes of perspective – particularly on Richard’s piety – show that he is in fact by no means secure
in his opinions and facts as regards Richard III. He has derived any distinct notion of Richard’s personality from these sources and the reader should study the notes carefully in order to allot blame.

As for the illustrations, there are eight standard black and white pictures (portraits, Millais’ *Princes in the Tower*) and a few more interesting ones at the end of some chapters, sometimes to confusing effect: the reason for the inclusion of an image of Portsmouth Cathedral (p. 33) is only explained later (p. 170). Another image is explained as the tomb effigies of Richard I and his mother, but unless Eleanor’s effigy is no longer reading a book, it is not she in the photograph (p. 20). The heraldic drawing of the lost window in Skipton Church showing Anne Neville – clearly still duchess, not queen – as a donor at her *prie-dieu* dressed in full heraldic trappings, is a very worthwhile discovery, although it is confusingly placed at the end of a chapter on Richard II.

This is yet another popular book for that strange and mythical creature beloved by publishers, the average reader: Richard I and II have done well out of it, no doubt, but Richard III, as usual, is left at the gate. This book proves sadly that much serious new research is still ignored when a popular work is composed about Richard III.

ANNE F. SUTTON and LIVIA VISser-FUCHS

© Richard III Society
This document is not to be reproduced without the permission of the Society