This book is a combined biography of Richard, Duke of York, younger son of Edward IV and ‘Richard of Eastwell’, until now thought of as the possible illegitimate son of Richard III. David Baldwin attempts to show that these are one and the same person. This is not an easy exercise since the only indisputable fact about Richard of Eastwell is a burial entry in Eastwell parish register to say that a man named Richard Plantagenet was buried on 22 December 1550.

Baldwin takes as his starting point a long and circumstantial story about this mysterious Plantagenet which first appeared in print in 1735. There are later versions of the story which embellish it in many ways. In essence Sir Thomas Moyle, owner of Eastwell in the mid-sixteenth century discovered that one of his building workers could read and understand Latin and asked how this came about. Plantagenet told him that he was an illegitimate son of Richard III and had been brought up by a nurse and later educated by a clergyman. He met his ‘father’ only twice, the last time just before Bosworth when Richard said that if he won the battle he would acknowledge him as his son and if he lost Plantagenet should flee, which he did, going to London and becoming a bricklayer.

Baldwin accepts this story without asking why it should be true and why it did not surface for 185 years and finds a number of facts which he claims support it and which link it with Richard of York. His argument is detailed and it is not possible to deal with all of its ramifications in a short review. However, departing from his source Baldwin has Plantagenet go to Colchester rather than London in the years between Bosworth and being in Eastwell. He has him taken there by Lovell who was a man whom Richard could trust to spirit his nephew (as Lovell knew him to be) safely away from Bosworth rather than be left to his own devices to flee as the 1735 account has it.

No proof is put forward to show that Plantagenet was in Colchester, only some facts which can be interpreted in various ways. First of all, for example, that Lovell took sanctuary there. Why flee there Baldwin asks unless he had a particular secret purpose, that is to take Prince Richard to the Abbey of St John’s, known to be a refuge for dissident Yorkists. Why too Baldwin asks was Lovell allowed to stay there for six months not the statutory forty days unless he was negotiating with Henry VII for the safety of the prince? Henry is assumed to have known about Richard’s survival and indeed visited Colchester frequently to check on him. A novel piece of evidence put forward is that one Eleanor Kechyn, a widow of Colchester, was pardoned for unspecified offences provided that she never went at large for the rest of her life but remained in the custody of her relatives. Baldwin speculates, using a court case, which may have brought her to the attention of Bishop Morton, that she may have become too friendly with Prince Richard and this was a way to prevent her marrying him. Baldwin concludes this part with the remark ‘or are we allowing imagination to run away with us’. Indeed.

Of course one major problem with Baldwin’s use of the 1735 story is that Richard Plantagenet claimed to be a bastard son of Richard III. Baldwin gets over this by further speculation that Plantagenet decided that it would be better not to admit that he was actually Richard of York but would say that he was illegitimate, thus making himself no threat to the Tudors. The probable fate of John of Gloucester might show the fallacy in this thinking. Why tell the story at all if he was still unsure if he was safe or not? He could surely have found a less complicated way to explain literacy. As noticed Baldwin departs from his source at several points when he wishes.

In the rest of the book there are chapters covering the known life of Richard of York. The introductory chapter discusses what contemporaries said about the death or possible survival of Prince Richard and goes on to discuss more recent speculation such as that by the late Jack Leslau and the Reverend John Dening who obtained his information on what happened by means of a medium. The book ends with several appendices including a long poetical version of the legend of Plantagenet and an account of the legend of the mediaeval Hopper ring, another unlikely story about a possible mistress of Richard III and dating from the nineteenth century.

To sum up, there is no evidence that the story of Richard of Eastwell is anything other than a pleasant story told to an eighteenth century antiquarian. Its embellishment with increasing detail as time goes on does not prove that the original is not true but it is suggestive of something that is not anchored in anything other than the imagination of the latest teller. Some of the details, for example the first appearance of Richard III has him embellished with the star and garter, the young man being schooled by a clergyman in the country and a ‘fine great house’ with stately rooms where Richard III first meets his son sound more like details an eighteenth century gentleman would think of rather than something a
fifteenth century man would recall. I suggest that the story is a classic example of the ‘missing prince’ legend, built around the entry in the Eastwell parish register, and has nothing at all to do with Richard of York who may or may not have survived his uncle. The story of Richard of Eastwell in its origins and development is a fascinating one and it is a pity that Baldwin did not tell this but chose instead to pile speculation on speculation in an attempt to prove a theory.

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