

## **WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, THE WARS OF THE ROSES AND THE HISTORIANS.**

Keith Dockray. 2002. Tempus Publishing Ltd, Stroud, Gloucestershire. £12.99 (paperback.). ISBN 0-7524-2320-7.

This book should appeal to a wide readership, as there is something for those interested generally in Shakespeare, for those approaching the plays from the literary viewpoint but without much knowledge of the period, and for students of history.

The book opens with a review of the context and content of the two tetralogies. The plays may have been written as a moral story, or even a warning for Queen Elizabeth, with parallels in her own times, such as the patriotic mood following the defeat of the Armada reminiscent of Henry V's success in France, and the rebellions of Robert Devereux in the mid 1590s perhaps echoing Bolingbroke's actions in 1399. Shakespeare's plays concentrate on 'kings, magnates and the importance of the crown/baronial relations' and the problems which occur when a king is unfit to rule or is evil. This section concludes with a detailed review of the 'kings, queens and magnates' as portrayed in the cycle and the progression of the Wars of the Roses, the text copiously illustrated with quotations from the plays.

The second section is an examination of the eponymous kings as well as other leading characters such as Richard of York, his son Edward IV, Warwick and Henry VII. The examination is confined to the areas of kingship featured in the plays and shows their relative successes, or otherwise, of managing the nobility, conducting warfare, juggling finances and administering law and order. This is presented from the contemporary or near contemporary sources, thus Warwick is seen through the eyes of Philippe de Commines and Jean de Waurin and Richard III by the Crowland Chronicler and Dominic Mancini. This section provides a healthy antidote to Shakespeare's reliance on Hall and Holinshed, and ably demonstrates the weakness of these Tudor sources. There is nothing new here for historians, but this analysis provides an excellent introduction to the period for the general reader. The third section of the book, and that which the present reviewer found most useful, follows the development of the historical interpretation of the Wars of the Roses. It opens with the *Tudor Historians* where there are no surprises as the usual anti-Ricardian suspects are reviewed. Vergil is named as the 'first major architect of later Tudor tradition' about Richard III and there is further examination of Vergil as one of Shakespeare's major sources. The later Tudor period, however, saw a change in the study of history. There was a 'mania' for searching and preserving medieval manuscripts and in 1596 a society of antiquaries was founded, whose early fellows included William Camden, John Stow and Sir Robert Cotton. The Stuart and Hanoverian period saw the publication in 1622 of Sir Francis Bacon's history of Henry VII, the first revisionist work on Richard III by Sir George Buck and William Habington's life of Edward IV published in 1640. Narratives of the fifteenth-century civil strife abounded during the early 1640s, and in 1685 one work luridly described the violence of the Wars of the Roses, the writer perhaps influenced by contemporary events. By the next century history had become an essential part of an English gentleman's education and multi-part histories proliferated, such as those written by Paul Rapin and Thomas Carte. Rapin's work was 'well researched by the standards of the time', and he was to some extent, prepared to challenge the Tudor saga about Richard III. Carte, who consulted unpublished documents, valued the Crowland Chronicle, and exonerated Richard of his early 'crimes', and went so far as to believe Edward V might have died of ill health. Later in the century the Scotsman, David Hume, and Horace Walpole clashed over their conclusions on Richard III. Hume claimed to be an impartial writer but 'fell short of his ideal' when writing of the Wars of the Roses. The nineteenth century saw a dramatic change with the beginnings of modern historical research although initially this was closely aligned to the Whig interpretation of history as promulgated by Macaulay who had a greater literary style than deep knowledge of the subject. In 1866 William Stubbs was appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at Oxford, the first professional historian to hold the post. Stubbs believed that 'the time cannot be far off when all the records of the medieval world which are in existence will be in print'. His view of the fifteenth century was that the great magnates believed in "constitutional" principles when they were out of power, only to practice "despotism", if, and when, they obtained control' and he generally adopted a high moral tone, typical of the Victorians, when judging the late medieval kings; for example, Edward IV was described as 'vicious', cruel and bloodthirsty'. Stubbs' enthusiasm for the publication of records was also the life's work of James Gairdner at the Public Record Office who, apart from editing records, letters and documents, published the biography of Richard III, that remained the "standard" academic study of the king until the 1980s. He wrote that Richard was a calculating villain, but added 'I confess I am not satisfied of the justice of such a view.' Undoubtedly the twentieth century, after a rather slow start, saw the greatest advances in the study of the Wars of the Roses. The scholars, C.L. Kingsford, K.B. McFarlane, and later J.R. Lander, triumphed in the period of post-Whig history and McFarlane inspired a generation of scholars including Colin Richmond (Keele) and Charles Ross (Bristol), whose own students included Tony Pollard and Michael Hicks - 'the Bristol connection'. McFarlane's influence sparked a renaissance in the study of the fifteenth century in the 1970s; McFarlane himself had concentrated on the Lancastrian kings whilst others, such as Lander and Ross, focused on the Yorkist period. In 1970 S.B. Chrimes, Henry VII's biographer, in collaboration with Ross and Ralph Griffiths, another former student at Bristol, organised a colloquium of fifteenth-century historians in Cardiff, which inaugurated a series of colloquia which continues. The Bristol connection's approach was 'straightforward evidence-led, untrammelled by theoretical models or paradigms about politics and society' but a wind of change began to blow from Cambridge in the 1990s led by Christine Carpenter who urged historians to 'put back into our subject that conceptual edge which it seems to have lost' and promoted the study of political culture rather than personal ambition and self-interest of individuals. Dockray's review of the twentieth century concludes with some authors who

have a wider appeal than the narrow world of professional historians. The popular approach to the life and reign of Richard III had Sir Clements Markham, Paul Murray Kendall, and Jeremy Potter defending the king, while A.L.Rowse, Desmond Seward, and Alison Weir took the opposite view. The work of the Richard III Society is acknowledged, in particular *The Ricardian*, which attracts contributions from both academics and amateur historians.

The book ends with a perspective on the Plantagenet cycle in the form of a brief survey of post- Tudor performances and the historical inaccuracies in the plays, and Dockray concludes that, notwithstanding their historical shortcomings, 'no mere historian will ever paint a more compelling and dramatic picture of England's Lancastrian and Yorkist kings'.

The book is written in a lively and readable style, there are twenty-three black and white illustrations, a simplified genealogical chart, bibliography and index. There are no footnotes but quotes are attributed in the text. The book is a rather curious mixture of Shakespeare, original sources and historiography. It is, nonetheless, enjoyable and the kind of work to be expected from a historian who has already provided so many useful source books. In his opening paragraph the author suggests that without Shakespeare nobody outside of 'a few elite schools, universities and the Richard III Society' would have known of the wars. Perhaps this could be taken a stage further - would there be a Richard III Society without Shakespeare's history cycle?

WENDY MOORHEN

First published in *The Ricardian* Vol. 12, No. 159 December 2002.

© Richard III Society

This document is not to be reproduced without the permission of the Society.