

John Wesley: An Eighteenth Century Ricardian?

IVOR HAYTHORNE

Wesley records in his Journal on June 17th, 1769, that he has read Walpole's "Historic Doubts" (published the previous year), and that he is amazed that writers and poets have portrayed Richard as an "amazing monster" when, in truth, he was nothing of the kind. Wesley continues: "... Mr. Walpole makes it more clear than one could expect at this distance of time (1) that he was not only not remarkably deformed, but, on the contrary, remarkably handsome; (2) that his queen, whom he entirely loved, died a natural death; (3) that his nephew, Edward the Fifth, did so too, there being no truth to the contrary; (4) that his other nephew, Richard, was the very person whom Henry the Seventh murdered, after constraining him to call himself Perkin Warbeck; (5) that the death of his brother, the Duke of Clarence, was the sole act, not of him, but Edward the Fourth; (6) that he had no hand at all in the murder of Henry the Sixth, any more than of his son; and, lastly, that he was clear of all blame as to the execution of Lord Hastings, as well as of Rivers, Grey, and Vaughan. What a surprising thing this is, then, that all our historians should have so readily swallowed the account of that wretch who "killed, and also took possession" of the throne; and blundered on, one after another! Only it is to be observed, for fifty years no one could contradict that account but at the peril of his head."¹

Now Wesley appears to have been no admirer of the Tudors—he describes Henry VIII as "the great spoiler,"² accepts "Bloody Queen Mary"³ as a fair description of Mary I, and believed that Elizabeth I was "as just and merciful as Nero, and as good a Christian as Mahomet"⁴—so he decided to set the record straight; and he had the means to do it.

Wesley believed in education as well as evangelism, and he worked hard throughout his long life to make available to his people cheap books, many of which he wrote himself. One of these was his "Concise History of England," and it was in this four volumed work that he set out to exonerate King Richard. Writing in his Journal on January 14th, 1776,⁵ he records that during the previous week, he has worked hard to complete the "Concise History" which, he knows, will give offence to many because of his treatment of Richard's story which does not follow the traditional line. Nevertheless, he feels he must write what he now believes to be the truth.

Let us see then how Wesley attempts to exonerate Richard III.⁶ First of all, he tries to throw Richard's character into sharp relief by placing a short

1. John Wesley's Journal, Standard Edition, Bicentenary Issue, Epworth Press, 1938, Volume V, p.322.

2. Journal, Vol. V., p. 441.

3. Journal, Vol. V., p. 248.

4. Journal, Vol. V., p.257.

5. Journal, Vol. VI., p.96.

6. To save boring the reader with copious footnotes, let me state now that all quotations are from John Wesley's "A Concise History of England from the Earliest Times to the Death of George II." Volume II, between pages 56 and 75.

I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. John C. Bowmer, M.A., B.D., of the Methodist Archives and Research Centre, City Road, for making available to me this valuable book.

(only 3½ pages) and not very complimentary chapter about Edward IV immediately before his chapter on Richard's accession to the throne—which, incidentally, he entitles "Edward V." He sums up Edward in one sentence: "His best qualities were courage and beauty; his bad, a combination of all vices." Secondly, in this same chapter, he sails into his defence of Richard by crediting the responsibility for Clarence's death to Edward's account. The king, Wesley writes, was hunting on the estate of Thomas Burdet, a friend of Clarence, and here slew a white buck. Burdet, angry because the animal was a special favourite, declared that he wished the animal's horns were "in the belly" of the man who had encouraged the king to kill it. For his outburst, Burdet was tried and publicly executed at Tyburn. Clarence objected to this treatment of his friend and so was himself tried before the house of peers and condemned. He chose drowning in Malmsey wine to be the mode of his execution. According to Wesley, Richard had no part in this.

The next two chapters tell the story of Richard's accession, reign and death. Wesley's method of defence is somewhat unusual in that he tells the story along 'traditional' Tudor lines, but interpolates comments, often in the form of footnotes, to show which passages are false in his opinion. The first event to be dealt with in this way is the Stony Stratford incident. After outlining the happenings, Wesley adds: "I doubt many of these facts. And, everything that follows against the duke of Gloucester, we must remember, is Henry the Seventh's account." Wesley records that when the Princes reached London, "they were both lodged in the Tower, then a royal palace; (though one part of it was also a prison.) It was the usual place from whence the procession at a coronation began." He then adds the footnote: "Their being placed here therefore, was no manner of proof of any ill design against them."

A full More-Moreton version of the discussion about strawberries and the eventual condemnation of Hastings is given, but is demolished by Wesley's comment: "I doubt this whole account. It is no way probable." Again, he sweeps away the charge that Richard vented his wrath on Jane Shore by adding a footnote to the effect that: "This tale likewise is quite improbable."

He gives the full Shakespearean treatment to the tale of the Gloucester-Buckingham plot to bastardise the Princes and have Richard proclaimed king. "Remember," he hastily reminds his readers, however, "this also is Henry VII's story." He states his view that it is an "idle, senseless, improbable tale! But such as the desperate cause of King Henry required."

Naturally, the alleged murder of the Princes engages Wesley's attention. As before, he tells the generally accepted story in the all too familiar terms, and then adds notes to show the absurdities. He declares that the double murder "undoubtedly is an absolute falsehood: for both of them were alive long after his (i.e., Richard's) death.".. (He does not say on what grounds he makes this assertion but, as he was so influenced by Walpole, we may assume that he accepts the latter's reasoning on this point; which is, that Henry VII's behaviour towards Perkin Warbeck—as opposed to that towards Lambert Simnel—suggests that the Tudor believed Warbeck to be indeed Prince Richard.) Wesley underlines the unlikelihood of the murders by stating that: "These facts appeared in the succeeding reign (i.e., Henry VII's), being confessed by the perpetrators;

who, however, escaped punishment." Then Wesley comments: "That is, they affirmed what king Henry invented: no wonder, that they 'escaped punishment.'"

It needs to be pointed out that there are inaccuracies in Wesley's version. His too simple reason for Clarence's liquidation is, to use his own phrase, "no way probable." He makes no mention of the codicil in Edward IV's will which made Richard Protector. The dying king, he writes, merely "expressed a desire, that his brother the duke of Gloucester should be entrusted with the regency" According to Wesley, Lord Stanley "was married to the widow of Edward." (Perhaps he meant "Edmund"?) His account of Richard's last minutes in the battle at Bosworth are inaccurate: after slaying Brandon and Cheney, he claims, Richard went "to inspire his troops at another quarter; but at length perceiving his army every where yielding or flying, and finding that all was gone, he rushed with a loud shout into the midst of the enemy, and sold his life as dear as he could." He rather overstates the case, too, when he describes the effect that the protracted civil war had had on the country which was, he claims, virtually in chaos: "These dissensions had, for some time, reduced the kingdom to a state of savage barbarity. Laws, arts, commerce, which had before emitted some feeble gleams, were entirely neglected, for the practice of arms: and to be a conqueror was sufficient in the eyes of the brutal people, to stand for every virtue."

Wesley's final step in the defence of King Richard is to devote over seventy pages of his book to a massive quotation from Walpole's "Historic Doubts" which states in detail the case against the Tudor portrait of the last Plantagenet.

Nevertheless, in spite of the inaccuracies in Wesley's history and the fact that he frequently states opinions without quoting his evidence, there is no doubt as to which side of the fence he stood regarding Richard III: he was, indeed, an 18th century Ricardian!

Think for a moment of Wesley's background and experience: he had received a traditional education at Charterhouse and Oxford, which would presdmbably include the 'authorised version' of Richard III's history; he was a university don; he was, by and large, a Tory upholder of the 'establishment'; and he was conservative by nature. Not, it would seem, the most fertile soil for the germination of a new radical concept! And yet, when the facts about Richard were presented to him, unadorned and divorced from Shakespearean melodrama, he was 'converted' to the Ricardian viewpoint—and bear in mind that, as his university's Moderator in the Public Disputation in the Classics, to say nothing of his lifetime of arguing religious matters, he was not unversed in the art of examining and exposing fallacious argument. The truth, plainly presented, had such power in the 18th century. Can it have less in the 20th, with scholarship greater than Walpole's now available? I venture to think not.

Praising Thomas More ?

ISOLDE WIGRAM

Unless he had had the industry to read all back numbers of *The Ricardian* Mr. Mowat could not be expected to know about my article "Sir Thomas More's 'Historie'" in *Ricardian* No. 12 (May, 1965) which was based on an anony-