

‘As the King Gave Out’

SUSAN E. LEAS

MANY MODERN historians have dismissed Sir Thomas More's highly improbable account of the murder of the sons of Edward IV by Sir James Tyrell. However, though pointing out the logical inconsistencies in the Tyrell story, some have also reported that Henry VII ‘gave out’ that Tyrell had confessed to the murder in 1502, before being executed for an unrelated treason.

For example, Kendall states that ‘if the King had got anything resembling a confession from Tyrell he would have published it; there is no proof that he even *tried* to get anything from Tyrell,’ but he also says, ‘Sometime—an unknown time—after Tyrell's execution, King Henry simply let it be known that Tyrell and a servant of his had, upon being examined in the Tower, confessed to the crime.’¹ And again, ‘King Henry VII, after Tyrell's execution, ‘gave out’ that Tyrell had confessed to dispatching the Princes.’²

If one is to question the first half of the myth, that Tyrell confessed, then surely one may also ask whether, in fact, Henry VII ever gave it out.

The earliest source for Tyrell's confession is Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard the Third*, probably written between 1514 and 1518.³ Hanham calls More ‘the least authentic of the early accounts of Richard’⁴ because, in her opinion, he was writing ‘something approaching comic history,’⁵ which was as much fiction as fact. Later Tudor chronicles, such as Hall and Holinshed, repeat More's account.

The only two pre-More references to Tyrell as the murderer are a rumour reported in the *Great Chronicle of London* and Vergil's *Anglia Historia*. The former mentions several different versions of the prince's death and adds, ‘of which Cruell dede sir Jamys Tyrell was Reportid to be the doer. . . But other putt that wyght upon an old servaunt of kyng Rychardys named’ [blank in the MS].⁶ Vergil describes the unwilling Tyrell, who, ‘being forcyd to do the kings commandment, rode sorowfully to London.’ Neither source mentions a confession, though both report Tyrell's execution.

More's story of the murder and confession is familiar: ‘Very trouthe is it and well knowen, that at such time as syr Iames Tyrell was in the Tower, for Treason committed agaysnt the moste famous prince king Henry the seuenth, bothe Dighton and he were examined, & confessed the murther in maner aboue writen . . . And thus as I haue learned of them that much knew and litle cause had to lye.’⁸ Unless one accepts More's questionable narrative, one cannot accept that Tyrell confessed to the murder, since earlier sources do not make the claim and later sources simply echo More.

As for the assertion that Henry VII gave it out, overtly or covertly, quite simply there is no evidence at all. Sir Thomas More does not claim that his information came from Henry VII or his intimates. Hanham remarks that

he 'omits nothing except the identity of his highly reliable sources, on whose credibility he contrives to cast a subtle doubt in the act of affirming it.'⁹

Nevertheless, many students of the period have assumed that Henry VII gave out the confession, even though Tyrell's supposed guilt is not suggested in any written source before Henry's own death in 1509. Had any confession been made, Henry VII would probably have made it public in order to invalidate the conflicting rumours about the princes' death.

Apparently the notion that Henry VII accused Tyrell of the murder originated in Sir Francis Bacon's *History of the Reign of King Henry VII*, first published in 1622. Bacon repeats More's version of the murder with Tyrell's subsequent confession. Henry caused Tyrell and Dighton 'to be committed to the Tower, and examined touching the manner of the death of the two innocent princes. They agreed both in a tale, as the king gave out . . . Thus much was then delivered abroad, to be the effect of those examinations; but the king nevertheless, made no use of them in any of his declarations; whereby, as it seems, those examinations left the business somewhat perplexed.'¹⁰ Kendall quotes portions of this passage to show Bacon's 'incredulity' at Henry's handling of the matter.¹¹

Markham directly links Bacon's history with the belief that Henry VII gave out the confession: 'The outline of the story of the murder was no doubt inspired, as Lord Bacon shrewdly suspected, by Henry VII himself.'¹² Markham finds the More version 'unworthy of credit' because 'it is very difficult to distinguish what parts were authorised by Henry, and what parts were fabricated by the writer himself.'¹³ He cites only Bacon as his authority for this idea.

Bacon's use of the More story actually adds confusion to the situation, for he implies that the confession was obtained at the time of Perkin Warbeck's appearance, stating that Tyrell was 'soon after beheaded in the Tower-yard for other matters of treason.'¹⁴ Tyrell, of course, was executed, not 'soon after' Warbeck put forth his claims, but in 1502, three years after Warbeck's execution.

Bacon is unlikely to have used sources other than Vergil and More and the later chronicles based on them. In particular, his account of the murder and confession are almost certainly derived from More. Living in the seventeenth century, he could have had no first-hand informants. The likelihood is that Bacon simply 'suspected' that Henry VII must have inspired More's version, because he did not suspect that More could have invented it. His spurious conclusion, drawn from a fictional history, has itself become part of the popular tradition.

Based on the available evidence, then, one may assert not only that Sir James Tyrell never confessed to the murder of the princes, but also that Henry VII never gave out that he did.

REFERENCES

1. Paul Murray Kendall, *Richard the Third* (1955), pp.403, 404.
2. *Ibid.*, p.410.
3. Richard S. Sylvester (ed.), *The Complete Works of St Thomas More*, Vol. 2, 1963, p. lxiv. Hereafter cited as More.
4. Alison Hanham, *Richard III and His Early Historians, 1483-1535*, 1975, p.189.

5. *Ibid.*, p.188.
6. *The Great Chronicle of London*, ed. A. H. Thomas and I. D. Thornley (1938), p.237.
7. *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History, Comprising the Reigns of Henry VI, Edward IV, and Richard III*, ed. Henry Ellis (1844), p.188.
8. More, *op. cit.* p.86.
9. Hanham, *op. cit.*, p.187.
10. Francis Bacon, *The Moral and Historical Works of Lord Bacon*, ed. Joseph Davey, 1852, pp.393-4.
11. Kendall, *op. cit.*, p.477.
12. Clements R. Markham, *Richard III: His Life and Character* (1906), p.169.
13. *Ibid.*, p.259.
14. Bacon, *op. cit.*, p.394.