

George Buck senior and George Buck junior: A literary-historical mystery story

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HISTORICAL MYSTERIES become more intriguing when they produce mysteries of their own. One such detective story surrounds the fate of Sir George Buck's *History of King Richard the Third*, written in 1619, which has yet to see the light in anything like the form in which its author wrote it. What we find on the shelves of our libraries and antiquarian booksellers is a very different work: George Buck, Esq.'s *History of the Life and Reigne of Richard the Third*, published in 1646, reissued in 1647 from the sheets of the original publication, and, despite its almost complete worthlessness and comparative accessibility, recently reprinted.

Sir George Buck was a well-reputed figure of his age. Master of the Revels under King James I, he is of vital importance to literary scholars because he licensed the later works of Shakespeare and many plays by other noted Renaissance authors. Scholarly attainment and acumen were essential to his official task, but he put them to use in the pursuit of his hobby, which was antiquarian research. Born in 1560 and trained possibly at Cambridge and certainly at the Inns of Court,¹ he became one of the most exemplary scholars of his era. His account of the educational facilities in contemporary London, *The Third University of England*, was published in the 1615 edition of Stow's *Annales*.² To celebrate the accession of James I he wrote an historical poem *Daphnis Polystephanos*, extolling James's royal ancestors, and published it in 1605. It is here that we get the first intimation of Buck's interest in Richard III:

Fame hath been sharp to th'other [Richard], yet because
All accusations of him are not proued,
And he built churches, and made good law's,
And all men held him wise, and valiant
Who may deny him then his *Genest* plante ?³

Buck's great-grandfather had perished in the executions after Bosworth. Reputedly Controller of the Household under Richard III, he had remained loyal to his king in battle. His orphan children were, Buck tells us, taken under the wing of the Howards, also loyal to Richard, and Buck himself numbered among his associates several members of the Howard family, notably Charles Howard, the Lord Admiral; Lord William Howard of Naworth; and Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel, who were all, like himself, collectors of books and

manuscripts and interested in antiquarian studies. The *History of King Richard the Third* is dedicated to Thomas, Earl of Arundel.

We might hope that from people whose ancestors were closely associated with Richard might have come some family papers and family traditions. But these are not numerous. All we have in the way of tradition—aside from general appreciation of Richard III's virtues—is an account of Surrey's fate after Bosworth. And of documents we have mentioned only a letter written by Elizabeth of York to the Duke of Norfolk, expressing her desire to marry Richard III, which Arundel showed to Buck.

The existence of this letter has been doubted since it is no longer extant, but there seems to be no reason to question the authenticity of Buck's sources. Even more than his increasingly conscientious contemporaries, he was careful about his documentation, and sharply critical of writers who 'deliver all... upon their own bare and worthless word.' One of a group of enthusiastic scholars who sought to systemise as well as to collect sources for historical research, his interest was in sharing, not concealing his knowledge. Probably a member of the original Society of Antiquaries, he certainly numbered many of its known members—Camden and Cotton for example—among his close friends and associates, and his and Camden's expressions of gratitude to each other in their respective works bear witness to the fruits of this sharing. Buck's other extant manuscript antiquarian tome, *A Commentary on the Book of Domus Dei*,⁴ now in the Bodleian Library, shows, in a finished and undamaged work, his care in citing sources. His *History of King Richard the Third* never reached fair copy state, and its margins suffered extensive burning in the Cotton fire of 1731. But even so we are able to trace in it and in the early manuscript copies of it a standard of accuracy and thoroughness which is, for the time, outstandingly responsible.

The picture which critics over the intervening centuries have handed down to us of Buck as a careless and irresponsible scholar has attached to him accidentally from two major causes. The first is the carelessness of those who wrote about him and did not seek far enough for his sources. Miscataloguing in the Cotton collection has obscured to careless seekers the whereabouts of many of these sources, but only six or seven—not counting commonplace books and collections of proverbs from which Buck drew rhetorical flourishes—cannot now be found. This is an astoundingly small number, out of the hundreds used, in an age when incidence of disappearance by fire, water, vermin, and theft was so very high. Of those we lack, only half can be considered of material importance. Those missing are:

El Reuseurg, from which he derives a brief marginal reference to Bona of Savoy's eventual marriage;

Sir Edward Hoby's manuscript history *La Anatomia de Espagna*, to which he makes one passing reference in a generalisation about Spanish kings;

A list of sobriquets showed to Buck by Sir William Dethick, mentioned in a digression on the name 'Plantagenet';

the letter from Elizabeth of York to the Duke of Norfolk on her plan to marry King Richard, showed to Buck by Thomas, Earl of Arundel;

the tract by Morton which is reputedly the source of More's history, not seen by Buck but by Sir Edward Hoby who reported its whereabouts;

'an old manuscript book' from which Buck derives a reference to a plot by Morton and 'a certain Countess' (of Richmond?) to poison the Princes;

a 'chronicle manuscript in quarto' in Cotton's collection, to which Buck makes six brief references, usually to material that can easily be found elsewhere; possibly the same work as the 'old manuscript book' mentioned above.

The existence of two of these is documented elsewhere than in Buck's *History*. Hence only four or five remain untraced for which the only known extant reference is Buck's *History*. This hardly suggests irresponsibility on the part of the author.

No slight harm has been done, either, by the tendency of commentators like John Strype in 1706⁵ and A. R. Myers in 1973⁶ to describe not only previously untraced manuscript material but also readily available published references as items which can no longer be found. The most blatant example of this is their comments on a reference Buck documents as being in a specific section of Camden's *Britannia*,⁷ a remark that Richard was worthy to be numbered among good princes. Despite the *Britannia*'s popularity, leading it through many editions, this reference, which can be found by looking in the index under 'Richard'⁸ has eluded both Strype and Myers.

However, by far the worst damage to Sir George's scholarly reputation derives from the amazing alterations made in his work by the mysterious George Buck, Esq., who, in the year 1646, twenty-four years after the author's death, published a truncated and heavily revised version of the *History* under his own name.

Who was this impostor? Since a man who is so impoverished as to need to steal another's work and call it his own is not likely to have produced anything of much value in his own right, we have little record of George Buck, Esq. All we know of him is that he was a very minor poet and seems to have spent his career seeking preferment by devious means and failing to gain it. When Sir George died in 1622, contention over his will placed his property in the hands of a nephew, Stephen Buck. Nephew in turn of a notorious forger, John Buck (the surname is coincidental—Stephen's relationship to Sir George is through the female), and later accused of forgery himself, Stephen Buck and his son George failed to hand over some of Sir George's property when the will was settled. Thus the manuscript of the *History* fell into the hands of his great nephew, who shared some of his forger-forbears' proclivities, as well as his scholar forbear's name.

His first audacity was to publish in 1635 under his own name, and revised by his own hand, a new edition of *Daphnis* updated to celebrate Charles I.⁹ Practice on a published work was too dangerous, and it seems that he was detected. Hence in future dedications of Sir George's work under his own name he takes care to state coyly that no other copy is extant except 'my rough papers.'¹⁰ 'Rough papers' is a not inaccurate description of Sir George's *History of King Richard the Third*,¹¹ now residing in the British Library as Cotton Tiberius E. x. It is heavily, but often not completely revised, with revisions written between the lines and down the margins. George Buck, Esq. first tackled the

manuscript itself, making his own revisions—mainly stylistic—between the lines. This was beneficial to the work, which suffers from prolixity and from too little grammatical subordination, but then he began cutting. In the later stages of his revision process he progressively reduced important material, softened the criticism of Henry VII and his followers, especially Morton, expunged autobiographical details and references to sources of information. Two of the younger George's early manuscript copies of the *History*¹² have dedications to prospective patrons, and the third¹³ has blank pages on which one could have been written. As one patron fell in favour, George Buck, Esq., turned to another. Finally on the death of Arundel, the original dedicatee, he felt safe enough to try publication again, and this time he dedicated his severely truncated version of Sir George's *magnum opus* to Philip Herbert, Earl of Pembroke. Revisions for this version were drastic.

Sir George, who disapproved of the annalistic style of history writing, approved of prolixity. Though this tends to annoy the reader it is valuable for its thoroughness and for the tendency to heap up evidence rather than to follow the contemporary custom of reliance on one single 'authority.' By this method Sir George is able to arrive at a critical appraisal of his sources. He seems to have been the first critic to have recognized the overlay of irony with which More covered an essentially plausible account of Richard's actions, and in using More as a source Buck simply applies charitable motives—for he believes charity to be an essential part of history writing—to actions which More ascribes to vicious motives. All consideration of popular literature is excluded from the *History*. That a Master of the Revels did not use Shakespeare's and other contemporary plays on Richard as sources is often regarded as odd, but as a professional historian Sir George was precluded from taking popular literature seriously.

Buck's documentation, which appears in the margins of the manuscript, is unusually copious and painstaking. A considerable portion of it was unfortunately destroyed in the Cotton fire. When he has seen a primary source in manuscript he tells us so and gives details of its whereabouts. When, less frequently, he has been unable to see one himself, he gives the word of a reliable colleague who has seen it. When forced to use a copy of a document he cites the whereabouts of the original. For *viva voce* information he gives the sources and circumstances under which it came to him. In quotations he is generally accurate, though he follows his age's tendency to paraphrase without changing the sense of the passage.

His intention in writing the *History* is to allow truth to come to light. The inaccuracy of the common chronicles, he says, have made a defence of Richard III necessary. His attitude to Richard is temperately favourable. He conducts his defence as a lawyer: where possible he exonerates on the basis of evidence; where proof cannot be adduced he pleads for mercy on the basis of precedent and lack of evidence. The hatred of Morton which he manifests was probably intensified to divert blame from Henry VII, toward whom is he ambivalent: Buck does not object to his having the crown but only to his not having awaited the Lord's leisure! His historiographical ethics are such that no modern historian would shame to own: 'the historiographer must be veritable and free

from all prosopolepsies and partial respects. He must not add nor omit anything, either of partiality or of hatred.¹⁴

Into this work blundered the younger George Buck. While revising the original manuscript to make stylistic improvements, he began to tamper with material in ways that became more pronounced with each successive revision. The three main manuscripts he compiled and had written out by a scribe whose familiarity with foreign languages and with historical names was very slight, are two-thirds the length of the original. George Buck, Esq., introduces his own style, which is more flowery than his great uncle's. He dilutes or deletes the numerous uncomplimentary references to Morton and Henry VII: 'malitious Morton,' for instance, becomes 'Bishopp Morton'. He cuts out references to Sir George's other works, to his experiences, to his contemporaries, including the scholar friends who assisted him. And in this connection he tampers with the documentation so that information is given with no indication of its source. Cotton's library was shut in 1629, so notes citing this collection had to be deleted. Since he was too young to have known Sir George's older antiquarian friends, he could not attribute to them information at first hand. Thus when Sir George describes in detail a discussion with his friend Stow, the famous scholar, in which he pressed for Stow's opinion of the evidence for Richard's murdering the Princes and Stow gave answer 'as peremptory as short', the younger Buck first makes nonsense of this by this deletion of the personal: Stow 'affirmed confidently vpon occation, pressing to know', and then gives it the flavour of hearsay in his next version by saying only that Stow had 'affirmed confidently to some'.

With each reworking the revisions became more drastic. The edition printed in 1646 is less than half the length of the original. It relies on drastic summary to achieve this brevity. Eliminated are the dispassionate tone of the original, statements of opinion, critical comments on the authority of sources. The florid and elaborate style clogs the sense by rhetorical flourish or puzzles by too drastic summary. Rewriting is often careless of sense and omits important details. Printing errors abound. We may easily see how the changes made by the great nephew have affected the work's reputation to the present day. Marginal documentation (the equivalent of today's footnotes) is often omitted, and frequent errors are made in it where it does exist. *Viva voce* references are reduced to the status of hearsay, and all sense of close association with other eminent scholars well placed to give reliable information is lost. In references to manuscript sources, the constant allusion to firsthand research, 'I have seen,' is consistently omitted, so that there is no indication of how information reached the author. The compression and stylistic flourish do violence to Sir George's method of argumentation. Whereas Sir George relies on gradual accumulation of evidence and rational argument, the younger Buck jams together accusation and refutation so that the tone of the work is made to appear polemical.

One may take as an example of the younger Buck's violence to the work his treatment of the famous letter from Elizabeth of York, to which rearrangement and omission of material gives more prominent importance and more uncertain reliability. In the original¹⁵ the letter appears only as a sideline,

an additional matter of interest, not a crucial proof. It is a digression within the argument that Richard could if he wished have procured a divorce, and the letter is adduced to show that Elizabeth spoke as an ignorant young girl in not realising a man could remarry without his wife's dying. It appears that Buck's main purpose in referring to the letter at all is to compliment Arundel by making use of his splendid collection: he refers at length to Arundel's taking the letter from his 'rich cabinet' to show him. But in the printed version the context of the reference is altered.¹⁶ The discussion of Richard's contemplating marriage with Elizabeth is now headed by prominent statements in italics, prefaced by the word 'Item', that Elizabeth detested the prospect of the match and that Richard did not propose it until after his wife's death, as if these were the main points to be disproved. The letter is then cited as evidence to disprove them. No statement is made of the author's actually having *seen* the letter, and all details of Arundel's showing it to him and expressions of gratitude to him for doing so are gone. And of course the change of dedicatee obscures our awareness that accuracy in citing this document is especially important for the author, since it was owned and showed to him by the man to whom he dedicates the *History*.

In view of the younger George's depredations, it is not surprising that Kendall, apparently knowing the work only in the printed form, should refer to the *History* as 'blundering and uncritical'.¹⁷ This is the typical view taken by critics who have not troubled to take a close look at the original and the stages through which it has been transmuted. George Buck, Esq., has turned his great uncle's history, well-documented and researched through original documents with the help of the most noted scholars of his age into a concise summary, careless in its scanty documentation and giving as hearsay what was actually firsthand information. And it is in this form that most of its critics have approached it. But they have not been discriminating in so doing and have attached their criticisms to the original work, Sir George Buck's *History of King Richard the Third*, which one suspects they have not read. Sir George's reputation has given a boost to his great nephew's book, and it in turn has tarnished his fame as a responsible scholar.

If we return to the original we have the work of a tried and trustworthy antiquarian researcher, close to the memory of Richard III and to others who were seriously interested in uncovering the facts about him. Prolix as it is, it is notable for its critical approach to sources, its high standards of documentation, its intelligently dispassionate approach to its subject.

It was as long ago as 1925 that Frank Marcham said,¹⁸ that since the edition of 1646 was 'nearly worthless', the author's version of the *History* should be carefully edited.¹⁹

NOTES

1. For full biographical details see Mark Eccles, 'Sir George Buc, Master of the Revels' in *Thomas Lodge and Other Elizabethans*, Ed. Charles J. Sisson (1933), pp.408-506.
2. John Stow, *The Annales or General Chronicle of England*, 1615.
3. G(eorge) B(uc), Knight, Δαφνις Πολυστεφανος. *An Eclog Treating of Crowns, and of Garlandes, and to Whom of Right They Appertaine* (1605), sig. E4^v.

4. George Buc, *A COMMENTARY Vpon the New Roulle of Winchester, Commonly called Liber Domus DEI*, Bodleian MS. Eng. misc. b. 106.
5. In (White Kennet), *A Complete History of England* (1706), Vol. I, p.525: Buck 'does not tell us where *Camden* speaks so well of him.'
6. A. R. Myers, Introduction to George Buck, Esq., *The History of the Life and Reigne of Richard the Third* (1646 ed., repr. 1973), vii: Buck 'quotes a statement in Camden which no one has seen since.'
7. Sir G. Buc, *The History of King Richard the Third*, British Library MS. Cotton Tiberius E. X, f.37v: 'Camden in *Dobuni*.'
8. William Camden, *Britannia* (1607), p.261.
9. George Buc, Gent., *The Great Plantagenet*, 1635.
10. British Library MS. Egerton 2216, ff.2v-3.
11. Cotton Tiberius E. X.
12. Egerton 2216 and Bodleian MS. Malone 1.
13. In the Thomas Fisher Collection, Robarts Library, University of Toronto.
14. Tiberius E. X., f.2 (spelling modernised and words burnt out conjecturally filled in).
15. *Ibid.*, ff.238v-239.
16. George Buck, Esq., *The History of the Life and Reigne of Richard the Third* (1646), pp.126-7.
17. Paul Murray Kendall, *Richard III* (1955), p.506.
18. Frank Marcham, *The King's Office of the Revels, 1610-1622* (1925), p.3.
19. Sir George Buck, *History of King Richard the Third*, edited, with an introduction and notes, by A. N. Kincaid, to be published in September, 1978, by Alan Sutton.