

The Role of The Ricardian

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OVER THE YEARS the attitude of professional historians towards the Society has tended to be guarded and wary, if not overtly hostile, and this hostility has been generally reciprocated.

To the pure scholar, it would sometimes appear, a Ricardian is—by the very fact of being a Ricardian—guilty of the crime of *parti pris*. To the Ricardian there sometimes seems little difference in bias between Rous (John) and Rowse (A. L.), and historic prejudices appear to be alive and well and living in Cambridge, where a Regius Professor (G. R. Elton) is on record as not being disposed to 'regard Richard III with special favour' because he has been bothered by people who have read 'that exasperating book', Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time*. His message is clear: if Ricardians want Richard III to have a better press they must not be so impertinent or importunate as to bother Regius Professors.

Professor Elton is a distinguished historian and Dr Rowse an engagingly eccentric one. What, significantly, they have in common is that both are specialists in the Tudor Period who from time to time stray backwards into a period not their own. Their expressions of traditionalist, professional resentment at the 'exasperating' interference of questioning amateurs tells us more about the durability of Tudor influences (and themselves) than about Richard III.

To me all this hostility seems a pity, and fortunately attitudes are changing on both sides. There must be a presumption that those who hold university appointments are exceptionally gifted intellectually, and the professionals enjoy a mouth-watering advantage over us amateurs: they are able to spend more time studying the subject because they are paid to do so. Thus those whose speciality is the history of England in the fifteenth century must always have something to impart which is of interest and value to members of the Society and communication with them should surely be encouraged and welcome.

It is true that intellectual ability and soundness of judgement do not always go hand in hand. It is true that there are still historians who appear to take pleasure in assassinating the character of the dead, putting in the boot like bovver boys as, in the last century, Gairdner did to Richard III and Freeman to William II. But it is also true that belief in the involvement or non-involvement of Richard III in the supposed murder of his nephews is not a litmus-paper test for distinguishing good historians from bad. Where the evidence is so thin, everyone is entitled to a belief. What is unscholarly is to express that belief as a fact and make the bald statement 'Richard killed the princes'—or, equally, 'Richard did not kill the princes'.

Contrary to what some historians choose to suppose, Ricardians are not homogeneous. Some are male, and some have even refrained from writing

historical novels, romantic or otherwise. There are no loyalty tests or Society dogmas, and members have varied special interests and views. On the other hand, contrary to what some Ricardians choose to suppose, most historians are open-minded and unprejudiced.

When one year a university historian attended our Bosworth Day service at Sutton Cheney we greeted him with pleasure. A white rose was thrust into his buttonhole and he accepted it after a mild protest. The following year we were pleased to greet him again but, in view of the protest, had tactfully made up a special buttonhole for him—a white and red rose intertwined—so that he should not feel that association with Ricardians was denting his integrity. That seems to me the right approach. In years to come he may opt for the white rose alone.

To this and other historians who have recently taken the plunge into Ricardian-infested waters, addressing meetings of the Society and exchanging research findings and other information with us, we must be grateful indeed. Cross-fertilisation freshens arguments and widens perspectives. I would mention in particular Professor Ross of Bristol, Dr Williams of Leicester and Professor Wood of Dartmouth College, all of whom have delivered enjoyable, stimulating and enlightening addresses followed by discussion. They may have influenced our thinking, and we may perhaps have influenced theirs.

Influence, after all, is what matters, and how much the Society has had and is having remains an interesting question. I do not detect a stampede of historians abandoning the view that Richard was in some way responsible for the death of his nephews (even if he carelessly left Edward of Warwick over for elimination in the next reign). On the other hand, I do detect a growing view that this act would have been out of character and a more generally prevailing belief that Richard III was, by and large, not a dishonourable man by the standards of his time, even indeed a more honourable man than most.

All this is a long, but not irrelevant, preamble to an appreciation of Peter Hammond's editorship of *The Ricardian*. Peter is a scholar who could well have been a professional historian if he had not become a scientist instead. His concern with *The Ricardian* has been to produce for the Society a journal of high academic standards which would find acceptance in universities and thus develop and foster the kind of dialogue and relationship which I have been discussing.

In this, in my judgement, he has succeeded, and the Society is deeply in his debt. His editorial work has been an extension of his work as the Society's research officer and he has resigned only to devote more of his spare time to his own Ricardian research, to helping others with theirs, and to important Society projects such as the now impending publication of Harley 433.

The scene was set for the implementation of Peter's editorial policy when the committee decided, in the time of Zarosh Mugaseth's editorship, to divide the Society's quarterly publication into two parts: a scholarly *Ricardian* and a *Bulletin* which would serve as an information sheet for members. This was a sensible reflection of the Society's needs (and meant a not inconsiderable economy in printing costs). While assuming a wider role than that of an exclusively learned society, we must always seek to make a contribution to learning. In achieving a reassessment of the Shakespearean verdict on Richard III and general acceptance that much of what passes for the history of his times is little more than

speculation, the Society needs both scholarship and statues: academic argument and public debate at a popular level.

While it is this breadth of activity, backed by a world-wide membership of more than two thousand, which makes the Richard III Society unique, scholarship lies at the heart of the matter, of course, and it is here that Peter has made such a valuable contribution. There is much interesting material in the issues of *The Ricardian* which he has edited over a period of four years (Nos. 48-64, March, 1975-March, 1979) with the help, first, of his wife Carolyn and then of Irene Cooper as production editor. Among the contributors whom he has brought to *The Ricardian* from outside the Society's membership during this period are some well-known historians: Alison Hanham, A. N. Kincaid and Charles Ross. Now that the door is open, let us hope that these are just the first comers.

As for the future, it is good news that Anne Sutton, herself the author of a number of learned articles in recent *Ricardians*, has agreed to take over the editorship from Peter. Elected a member of the committee in 1977, Anne is a history graduate of St. Hugh's College, Oxford, and works at Guildhall as an archivist for the City of London. Peter's last service as editor has been to find a worthy successor.