Richard, Duke of York as King's Lieutenant in Ireland: The White Rose A-Blooming

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RICHARD LANGLEY alias Mortimer alias Plantagenet has remained one of the more enigmatic figures in English history. Scholarly assessments of the man have run the gamut from adulation to deprecation, yet all such evaluations are equally lacking in any serious attempt to analyse their subject in depth. York is seen as the champion of the 'white rose' during the last ten years of the reign of Henry VI, and even during this period, his own abilities are overshadowed by the concrete events of the civil wars. As K. B. McFarlane has aptly stated: 'Sir John Fastolf in his querulous old age is almost as living a figure today as Shakespeare's fat knight; not so Richard Plantagenet, Fastolf's last of many masters, who only speaks to the historian in his political manifestoes.' The man who should know him better than any modern historian, Joel Rosenthal has lamented: 'Richard of York, unfortunately, is and will remain a cipher as an individual.'[1] Since the private correspondence of the Duke has all but perished, it is indeed impossible to know York as intimately as the figures who people the Paston letters. It is, however, perhaps, possible to obtain a somewhat clearer picture of the duke of York through an examination of his career.

The traditional interpretations of the civil strife commonly called the War of the Roses emphasise alternately the high birthright of Richard of York and his capacity as a general and an administrator. There is a modicum of truth in each of these assertions, but that truth is not to be found in the forthright acceptance of either of these traditional views. York's pedigree was of the utmost importance for the Duke's career. It provided him with a strong claim to the throne, as all historians have been quick to point out. This is indeed a fact of some importance since it did not escape contemporary notice. The succession question was very much alive from the death of Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, until the birth of Henry VI's son Edward. One of the charges brought against the Duke of Suffolk in 1450 was that he had conspired to marry his son to Margaret Beaufort, and then to advance his daughter-in-law's claim to the throne.[2] On the other hand, Sir William Oldhall and some other supporters of York seem to have been involved at about the same time in a conspiracy to secure the crown for their master.[3]

The succession issue is, however, only one facet of the importance of York's birthright. On the material level, the Duke inherited lands in England which, in 1436, were worth £3,231 in addition to Welsh lands valued (in 1444) at £3,430 per annum after all taxes and reprives had been met and Irish estates of indeterminate value.[4] Less readily assessable, but none the less of undeniable

importance in a deferential and formalistic society, was the prestige and obedience that Richard was able to secure as a part of his birthright.[5] A great deal of York's trouble and his success can be understood in terms of the financial and personal resources at his command as a prince of the blood.

Finally, Richard's own estimation, and he seems to have had a high one, of the power and respect which should be accorded him as the foremost peer of the realm is an important factor in any calculation of the motivation of the man. An examination of the Duke of York's personal talents shows him to have been a moderately effective administrator and general, but certainly not an outstanding figure. He seems to have adhered reasonably consistently to the programme of justice and sound finance with which his name is usually associated. He was of course not above reproach on either score, but York does seem at least to have been more attached to these principles than were his opponents. The Duke, however, seems to have lacked the resolve to carry any project to a firm conclusion, albeit he could take impetuous action on occasion. York does seem to have generally realised his limitations, and he, therefore, relied heavily upon counsel except when his frustration led him to take sudden and frequently arrogant action during the last decade of his life.

Thus, York does not fit the rôle of the great leader which some historians have drawn for him. The reign of Henry VI was a period of rule by *epigoni* especially after the deaths of the Duke of Bedford and Cardinal Beaufort, and in comparison to rivals like Edmund Beaufort the Duke of York did appear as a paradigm of a competent governor. This undoubtedly influenced many Englishmen to look to the house of York to restore the lost fortunes of their realm. Thus, the traditional views of Richard of York can with a little reshaping be made to throw some light upon a very shadowy figure.

Richard had first come to prominence as Henry VI's lieutenant in France where the Duke provided competent if uninspired leadership for Normandy. He took up the task of ridding the Duchy of disbanded free lancers and masked marauders known as *'faulx visaiges.'* The Duke had some military success although he was not a vigorous campaigner, and he kept Normandy in good order during his administration. York had every reason to expect that he would be reappointed when his second term expired in 1445, but when the time came, a competitor for the post appeared in the person of the brother of his old rival for glory and power in France—the recently deceased John Beaufort—Edmund. Henry VI's government exhibited its usual degree of indecision, and thus prolonged the contest. This delay caused both men fully to commit their honour to the quest. York's reappointment was actually proclaimed at Rouen in July 1446, and he obtained an order for the payment of a retinue of eight hundred men to serve with him in France. The long delay and false appointment made defeat all the more galling when he was defeated, and in his own eyes humiliated yet again by the Duke of Somerset. Richard never forgot the degredation he had suffered from the Beauforts and a desire to cleanse his escutcheon of this humiliation was one of the primary motivations for his actions during the remainder of his life.[5]

The Duke was clearly unhappy with his treatment in France, and he was no friend to either Somerset or to Somerset's ally, the Duke of Suffolk who dominated the council in England. One vocal opponent of the Beaufort-de la Pole coalition, Humphrey of Gloucester, had been silenced through assasination in

February of 1447, and it was felt advisable to quiet York as well. In the summer of 1447, the council entered into negotiations with York to undertake the lieutenancy of Ireland. York entered into indentures for his service in September, and he was officially appointed as the King's lieutenant, the highest title that could be accorded to an Irish viceroy, on 9 December, 1447.[6]

The appointment was not one which Richard would covet. As a prince of the blood he felt his rightful place to be at the council table, not in a Celtic wilderness. In order to emphasize his due, York revived the surname Plantagenet which bore with it not only the proclamation of high birth that the Duke certainly intended, but also connotations concerning the dignity of the crown itself.[7] Yet Richard Mortimer was well suited by birth for his position as the head of the Irish administration. He was the largest landholder in Ireland, having inherited the earldom of Ulster and the lordships of Trim and Leix from his maternal uncle, Edmund Mortimer, to complement the honorific earldom of Cork that he derived from his paternal uncle, Edward of York. Richard was thus a prisoner of his own ancestry. It was natural to appoint a Mortimer to govern Ireland; the Duke could hardly refuse the post. It probably was not lost upon Suffolk and the council that three Mortimer heirs had died in Ireland in the past half-century. While the Irish lieutenancy was clearly a means to shunt York aside, it does not seem that the appointment was intended as the virtual exile most scholars assert since his indentures provided that he might appoint a deputy and return to England whenever he pleased, but to an England in which he had little authority.

Richard, in fact, was not overly zealous in taking up his new duties. He did not arrive in Ireland until 6 July, 1449 when he disembarked at Howth with great glory and pomp.[8] York's birth immediately came into play in his relationships with his Irish subjects. 'This race, both English and Irish,' wrote Sir John Davies, 'did ever love to be governed by great persons.' The saying was never more justified than in Richard of York.[9] Richard was able to employ his Irish heritage to conciliate both the Anglo-Irish and the Celts to royal authority and to lead them—not under the standard of England—but under the black dragon of Ulster against one O'Byrne who had long posed a threat to the Pale. O'Byrne submitted to the new lieutenant as did most of the Irish chiefs.[10] Richard rather than press his initial advantage was happy to accept these formal and largely meaningless submissions.

The most impressive of these treaties was made with Richard's greatest Irish vassal in Ulster. On 27 August, 1449, at Drogheda, Henry O'Neill, the eldest son of Eoghan, acting for his aged father, declared his family to be men of the Earl of Ulster and pledged to restore all such manors, castles and lordships formerly possessed by the earls of Ulster which Eoghan, Henry and their family had occupied. The O'Neill also recognized the ancient *'bonnacht'* or military service due from the Irish chiefs of Ulster to the Earl. Henry also promised to surrender all lands usurped from the Englishry, especially the Fews where a cadet line of the family had been established. Finally, Henry undertook for the homage and fealty of the O'Neills to pay six hundred fat beeves to the Duke.[11] The submissions of the Irish chiefs were optimistically recorded by Philip Wode who proclaimed:

> 'all these beth kynges, dukes, erlys and barones that beth come to my lord of Yorke befor Mighelmas A.D. 1449 anno regni Henrici sexti XXVIII° and beth sworn trew

legemen to ye kyng of England and his heyrs male, and to my lord of York and his heyrs male and leid hostages and beth ibound by endenture, and with the myght of Jesus or twelvemonth come to an end ye wildest Yrishman in Yrland shall be swore English.'[12]

Many a wild Irishman has sworn at the English, but it seems that twelvemonth was the twelfth of never!

York made no strong effort to follow up upon this promising beginning. In Ulster, the Duke got his fat beeves, which were plentiful enough in Ireland, but there is no evidence that any English tenants entered again into the occupation of lands which the Irish had recovered or that the *'bonnacht'* of Ulster was exercised in the future by the earl. When the inevitable disaffection of the Irish of the south occurred, Richard simply came to terms without battle in 1450 with the rebels led by MacGeoghegan. Thus, the Annales of Ireland concluded—not unlike a modern nursery rhyme: *Dux Eboracensis venit in Hiberniam cum magno exercitu ad pacificandum Hibernicos et rebelles, qui nihil estimabile potuit agere, nec pacem concludere, nec Hibernicos vincere.*

In fairness to the Duke, it must be said that he was financially strapped, and that this greatly limited his freedom of action. York had been a heavy—and unrepaid creditor—of the financially troubled Lancastrian régime in France, and his appointment to the lieutenancy of Ireland intensified his financial plight. At least one third of the cost of the Duke's voyage to Ireland had come from his own pocket according to the Exchequer's warrants of issue.[13] The Duke was to receive a salary of four thousand marks for his first year's service as lieutenant and two thousand pounds for each subsequent year of his ten year term. The first half-yearly instalment on this salary, however, was delivered a year late, and York received no further funds from the Exchequer prior to his return to England.[14] York protested to Henry's council in September 1449 that he was forced to contemplate selling or mortgaging some of his English manors to a group of friends and servants: 'to helpe hym to the charges and costes that he hath and shall at this tyme bore to your highnesse service.'[15] The Irish parliament attempted to alleviate the lieutenant's financial difficulties by authorizing him to call out the Irish levies in spite of a prohibition upon such summonses for a decade, but this measure was futile. Richard was forced to appeal to his brother-in-law, the Earl of Salisbury in a letter which reveals York's concern for his good name as well as his need of funds without which:

'my power cannot stretch to keep this land in obeisance. . . for I had lever be dead than any inconvenience should fall thereunto in my default; for it shall never be chronicled nor remain in scripture, by the grace of God that Ireland was lost by my negligence.'[16]

In 1450, York claimed that the king owed him as lieutenant of Ireland alone, the sum of £3,133 6s. 8d. in addition to £6000 from other annuities and sources of income.[17] In Parliament four years later, he was still lamenting that he had been forced:

'to cell a grete substance of my lyvelood, to leye in plege all my grete Jowellys, and the most partie of my Plate not yet raquited, and therfor like to be loost and forfaited; and ovre that, to endaungere me to all my Frendes, by chevisance of good

of thaire love, for their accomplisshement of the service and charge, whiche at the seid desire I toke upon me in the saide Reaume of France, Duichie and Lond of Irlond, not faisible without notable good, for the which divers sommes of monneye bee to me due; for paiement wherof, mony promisses have been to me made, not parfourmed...'[18]

The failure of the government to attend to York's financial needs contrasted sharply with its care to honour its obligations to John and Edmund Beaufort, and this inequality helped to intensify without any dynastic overtones the resentment which York already felt toward a family he distrusted and a government which discriminated against him.[19] The Irish experience was particularly distasteful for to go into debt to win honour in France was quite another thing than to risk financial ruin in the thankless task of governing Ireland.

Richard of York did make an effort to govern Ireland. He showed the same concern for law and order which he was to champion England in the next decade. The Irish Parliament of October 1449 made an attempt to limit retinues and to stop unjust exactions by lords and their retainers. This same Parliament also attempted to control crime albeit admitting that the king's justice was ineffective by making it lawful for any man to kill notorious felons.[20] When York returned to Ireland in 1460, a resumption act was passed in an attempt to place the Irish administration upon a sounder financial basis. This resumption act, however, also revealed the limits of the Duke's altruism as he was careful to secure exemption for himself from its provisions.[21] Indeed, the Duke's ability to deal with Irish problems was limited; he was unable to develop any real policy. He, therefore, sought counsel from the great Anglo-Irish families, and he was led to adopt their policy as his own. Edmund Curtis, writing in 1923, characterised this policy with perhaps pardonable anachronism as home rule.

It is doubtful if the Butlers or the Geraldines thought in terms of home rule, but they certainly did advocate autonomy for themselves. During York's tenure in Ireland, he came to rely heavily upon James Butler, the 'White Earl of Ormond.' On 28 July, 1450, Richard formalised the relationship when he retained Ormond for life with an annual fee of one hundred marks.[22] When disturbed conditions in England caused York suddenly to leave Ireland in September 1450, Ormond served as his deputy until his death in August 1452 although J. T. Gilbert, in his *History of the Viceroys of Ireland,* mistakenly thought that it was Ormond's son, the future Lancastrian stalwart, who received the nod. The younger Butler, Earl of Wiltshire and brother-in-law of the Beauforts, secured the lieutenancy itself in 1453 when York was temporarily powerless, but the Duke recovered his office when Henry VI lost his senses and the Duke was named Protector of England for the first time.[23] Clearly the Butlers were no longer available to Richard. The Duke shifted personnel but he still left policy to the Anglo-Irish aristocracy when he appointed the Geraldine Thomas, Earl of Kildare as his deputy.

When York was forced by another severe reversal of fortune to seek sanctuary in Ireland in 1460 in the aftermath of the Ludlow, he was well received by the Geraldine earls of Kildare and Desmond who were able to manipulate him for their own ends just as the Earl of Warwick could do in English affairs.[24] As Warwick made use of the Yorkist dynastic issue, the Anglo-Irish used York to justify their demands for autonomy by treating this officially condemned viceroy as a king. A Parliament summoned to Drogheda on 7 February, 1460 ratified

York's appointment as Lieutenant in the terms indicated by the letters patent of 1457 which had renewed it, and it declared that for York 'much reverence, obedience fear ought to be given as to our sovereign lord, whose estate is thereby honoured, feared and obeyed.'

Thus, to plot against the lieutenant was high treason. William Overey, a squire of the Butler Earl of Ormond and Wiltshire soon felt the force of this ruling. He arrived in Ireland with the writs for the arrest of York in accordance with the attainder passed by the Coventry Parliament, but Overey was arrested himself for having introduced 'many writs and letters of Privy seal contrary to the liberties and privileges of Ireland'. For his offences, Overey was convicted of treason and executed.[25] The liberties of Ireland were, in fact, broadened in a revolutionary fashion. A statute which justified a separate Irish coinage declared:

> 'Et pur ceo que nient solment le Ducherie de Normandie, mez auxi le Ducherie de Guyenne, quant ils furent desouth le oubeisaunce del dit reaume d'Engleterre, nient meyns seperat leiez et statutez dicel, avoient auxi coyens par ceux mesme, ceperat de le coyne del dit reaume d'Engleterre. Et issint, en semblable manere, la dit terre Dirland que, sil soit desouth le obeissance de le mesme reaume, est nient meyns seperat icel, et de toutz leiez et statutez dicel, forprise tielx quex sount illeosquez de lez Seigneurs espirtualx, temporelx, et communes, de lour propre liberte, et frankment, admisez et acceptez en Parlement, ou Graund Counseille.'[25]

Here is Lancastrian constitutionalism run wild under a Duke of York.

Once in power in England, the Yorkists regarded this statute as a mere aberration not corresponding to any constitutional fact. The only result of the statute was the production of three Irish coins: a groat, an Ireland valued at 1 d. and a patrick worth 1/8 d. York himself had little sympathy with Irish autonomy, but he was willing to play the green card in an effort to defend his honour in the face of attack, to secure remedy of his financial grievances, and perhaps to enforce a programme of sound government upon Henry VI. Beyond these personal goals, York had no real policy, nor was he anxious vigorously to formulate or pursue any concrete objections on his own.

The Duke of York appears as a cipher to modern historians because (as his tenure in Ireland illustrates) that is what he was. As medieval Ireland's foremost historian has said of York:

> 'He was peculiarly fitted by descent to accomplish in his person a union of much divided land, to check the evils of rampant feudalism and ensure good government and prosperity to the people. But though he was a statesman who could reconcile men in his cause, who endeared himself and his course to the greater part of Ireland by his popular gifts, he wrought no lasting service to her.'[27]

Richard Plantagenet was a man of modest abilities. He does seem to have respected the ideas of order and sound fiscal policy, but he did not have sufficient resolve to implement a programme based upon these or any other principles without the counsel and support of others. The Duke achieved his prominence as a result of his inherited rank, a rank of which he was inordinately proud. It was this pride that frequently led him to folly over matters of honour. Richard lived during an era when England was acutely short of talented politicians, and this fact contributed greatly to the Yorkist success. Richard had no desire to challenge Henry's title to the crown, he simply wanted to be honoured as a prince of the

blood should be. The Duke was driven to claim the crown as a last desperate measure when all other forms of recourse had failed. The Yorkist claim was likewise only accepted because of the failure of the Lancastrians to provide a viable alternative. The most talented of the contestants in the political struggles of the epoch was Margaret of Anjou, but she was French and had in any case devoted her talents to the maintenance of a factional party that had little concern with the commonweal.

Thus, it is not the unusual ability of the Duke of York or even that of his son, Edward IV, that explains the flowering of the White Rose; rather as Bishop Stubbs has noted:

> 'It was the lack of the strong hand in reform, in justice and in police, the want of governance at home, that definitely proved the incapacity of the house of Lancaster, and that made their removal possible. It was the fatal cause of their fall. . . The dynasty that had failed to govern must cease to reign.'[28]

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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