

Cheshire and the March: Richard III to Henry VIII

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EDWARD OF Middleham as Earl of Chester did not, obviously, rule the county palatine in person. Richard III ordered a great seal in silver 'for oure derrest sone',¹ but the chamberlain and the sheriff were the effective powers. In 1483 both offices were held by Sir William Stanley,² whose brother, Thomas, Lord Stanley, was husband to Margaret Beaufort, mother to the future Henry VII.

By not betraying Richard until the last moment, shortly before Bosworth Field, Stanley remained undisturbed in his offices and, in the course of Richard's two years, improved his position. In Edward V's name he was granted the valuable wardship of Laurence Dutton; from Richard he had an annuity during the minority of Edward, Earl of Worcester, the renewed farm of the manors of Shotwick and Frodsham at the old rent, the lordship of Thornbury during pleasure, and a whole list of lordships to him and his heirs male.³ He was made Constable and Captain of Caernarvon for life; he was deputed to take possession for Richard of Bromfield and Yale, the Castle of Holt and the town of Wrexham; in January, 1485, with Lord Stanley and Lord Strange, he was made responsible for the defence of Cheshire.⁴

It was left for Henry VII, in January, 1495, to execute Sir William for treason. To this I shall return, after first considering the comparable career of William Brereton in the days of Henry VIII. For his rank, Brereton is uncommonly well documented: his papers were preserved in the crown archives and are now in print, edited by Dr. E. W. Ives, to whom I am indebted for what follows.

William Brereton was roughly of Henry VIII's age, being born about 1490, the sixth son of Sir Randolph Brereton of Malpas, chamberlain of the county palatine. His portion as a younger son was an annuity of £3.4s.1d. Taken into the royal service, from 1524 he was groom of the privy chamber, with ready access to the king; at the time of his fall, royal grants secured over the years were bringing him a minimum of £1016.18s.6d a year. Of this, his fees from the Crown brought him at least £109.12s.3d, and this as cash income was especially valuable in a world where the wealthy were apt to be short of ready money.⁵ Judicious lending increased both his income and his influence.⁶ He was of course well placed for negotiating grants from the king to such third parties as cared to employ him.

Most important of all was his connection with the Savage family, the descendants of the Sir John who commanded the left wing at Bosworth. The family estates being temporarily surrendered to the Crown, Brereton secured the farm of them in 1528, and in 1529 married Elizabeth, widow to a younger Sir John, the other's grandson; she was daughter to Charles, Earl of Worcester, Henry VIII's cousin and Lord Chamberlain.⁷

His income from all sources made Brereton financially the equal of many members of the House of Lords; when the expenses of estate management and so forth have been deducted, he can be reckoned to have had nearly £800 a year.⁸ As a comparison, Thomas More, Lord Chancellor of England, maintained a large household in suitable style on an official income of a little over £400 and a private income of £50.⁹

His crown appointments were not to Brereton merely a source of income. In Cheshire he had a near monopoly and in the Marcher lordships a complete monopoly of major office. He had a mass of relations and dependents to fill the lesser places. The Brereton faction indeed dated back in some form to Sir Randolph's tenure of the chamberlainship. This office William inherited on his father's death in 1530; from 1529, the other principal magnate of the Marches, Henry, Earl of Worcester, was his brother-in-law. All this made William the dominant power in the area.¹⁰

Naturally he made enemies, the most notable, Sir Piers Dutton of Halton. He was cousin to Laurence Dutton, Stanley's former ward, whose death in 1527 started a fight for the property. Sir Piers claimed as heir male; Sir John Savage, Elizabeth's husband, led the heirs general and had the Brereton faction supporting him.¹¹ Sir Piers, of course, accused Brereton of abusing his powers; other charges against him range from committing judicial murder to conniving at a large operation of false coining.¹²

The combination of offices that Brereton held approximated to that once held by Sir William Stanley. Among other differences, Brereton was never sheriff of Cheshire, and Stanley, though he was the elder Sir John's uncle, was not in control of the Savage estates, but the positions of the two are closely comparable.¹³ Brereton's downfall had two basic causes. In the faction fighting at court, as Norfolk's follower he was on the losing side; and he was too much of a local power in Wales and Cheshire to suit Henry VIII or Thomas Cromwell. Brereton, Dr. Ives suggests, represented the traditional policy of delegating power to a local 'man of worship'; to the new idea of a unitary sovereign state he was simply an obstacle.¹⁴ One might query this, in that Brereton represented a variation in policy, the building up of an unimportant local gentleman who should be plainly the king's servant, with nothing that the crown had not given, nothing solid to call his own. Brereton had as an outright grant in fee simple, in Cheshire two hundred acres yielding a rental of £6.14s.8d, in Kent the site of a house that Wolsey had suppressed, the abbey of Lesnes; all else he held for a term of years or for life.¹⁵ Like Stanley he was a local man, but Stanley had been much more of an independent power, with much of his wealth transmissible to his heirs.

By 1536, when Anne Boleyn's enemies were closing in on her, there had been for some time a power struggle in Wales between Brereton and the Council for the Marches, Cromwell's instrument. Abruptly, Cromwell introduced a new policy of radical reconstruction. An act of 1536 reduced the March to shires of the English pattern, yet how could it be properly implemented while powerful vested interests remained, in particular Brereton's?¹⁶ In the best Tudor style, Brereton was accused of committing adultery with Anne Boleyn and beheaded on May 17, 1536.

Arising from this, there are two points of Ricardian interest. Richard we

know was accused of filling every place with his northern followers; he was, Dr. Horrox suggests, at least reserving most major grants for his existing affinity.¹⁷ The Stanleys and Sir John Savage, in no sense Richard's own people, all had considerable favours from him;¹⁸ but certainly Richard was giving to bringing in men from distant parts, as when he established Sir Marmaduke Constable in Kent.¹⁹ It may sound a way to make enemies and influence people in the wrong direction, but Brereton's case suggests that it was the only effective thing to do: trying to counterbalance local magnates by elevating a minor local gentleman was not the answer.

The other point concerns Stanley. When Brereton was executed, the charge was in no sense doubtful, it was plainly false. In January, 1495, when Stanley was executed, the charge was at least very curious. According to Sir Robert Clifford, who received £500 for his evidence, Stanley was treasonably involved with Perkin Warbeck and had declared that if Perkin were indeed the son of King Edward he would never fight against him. Various arguments have been drawn from this as to what it might imply concerning the Princes in the Tower; the alleged fact itself generally passes for true. But should the charge be believed? Should it not at least rank as suspect? To put it another way, did Henry charge Stanley with treason because Clifford had provided evidence, or did Clifford provide evidence because Henry had decided to be rid of Stanley? More simply, was Clifford paid as a spy or as a perjurer?

Dr. E. H. Fellowes was sceptical enough to describe Stanley as beheaded for his 'alleged share' in the Perkin Warbeck conspiracy.²⁰ Miss Audrey Williamson mentions that the chance of confiscating Stanley's great possessions was said to be an additional factor in his execution.²¹ Mrs. V. B. Lamb suggests that Henry had been doubtful of Stanley's loyalty for the past three years, because the man who betrays one master can equally well betray another.²² Both she and Miss Williamson judge from what he said that Stanley had very little belief in the supposed murder of the princes; a fair inference, if Stanley really said it.

If the evidence was a pure fabrication dictated by Henry, it is interesting that he was prepared to have it on record that someone so near to himself as Stanley believed that Richard, Duke of York, might very well have survived. *Pure* fabrication, however, is probably less likely than the twisting of a genuine remark to give it a treasonable colour. It does perhaps indicate that Stanley's power in Cheshire and the March was of such a kind that Henry was prepared to have a well-known supporter and family connection publicly condemned as a Yorkist. It was advertising the weakness of the Tudor establishment to proclaim that Margaret Beaufort's brother-in-law was plotting to overthrow it. Yet Henry already aimed at a match between the Prince of Wales and Catherine of Aragon, whose parents would not willingly marry her into a shaky dynasty. If Henry was using Warbeck's attempt as a convenient pretext, regardless of diplomatic repercussions, it must have been very important to him to eliminate Stanley. It may be that, remembering the Kingmaker, he really saw Stanley as a potential rebel and struck first. Brereton's case, however, suggests he was eliminating an excessive local power in the interests of centralized government. Stanley's case, then, will show Henry VII's aspirations towards the unitary state, and Brereton's case the actuality of local power surviving late into Henry VIII's reign.

Was Richard also a centralizer? His appointments suggest it. He had not tackled Cheshire and the March, but he might, given time. There, perhaps, and not in any supposed affection for Henry VII, lies the explanation for the Stanleys' betrayal of Richard: they felt their position at risk, and struck first.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Rosemary Horrox and P. W. Hammond (eds.), *British Library Harleian Manuscript 433*, Vol. 2 (1980), p.17.
2. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1 (1979), p.117.
3. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp.49-51, 126, 227, 242; Vol. 2, p.34.
4. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, pp.138, 190-1; Vol. 2, pp.73, 189.
5. E. W. Ives (ed.) *Letters and Accounts of William Brereton of Malpas*, Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire, Vol. 116 (1976), Intro. pp.15, 17.
6. *Ibid.*, p.55.
7. *Ibid.*, pp.1, 18-20.
8. *Ibid.*, pp.53-4.
9. Christopher Hollis, *St. Thomas More* (London 1934), ch.11.
10. Ives, pp.28-31. A Roger Brereton was bailiff of the Hundred of Northwich under Richard III, Horrox and Hammond, Vol. 1, p.197.
11. Ives, pp.32-3.
12. *Ibid.*, pp.38, 40-1.
13. *Ibid.*, p.34.
14. *Ibid.*, p.2.
15. *Ibid.*, p.20.
16. *Ibid.*, p.40.
17. Horrox and Hammond, Vol. 1, Intro. p.xxvi.
18. *Ibid.* Savage: Vol. 1, pp.90-1, 207, Vol. 2, 18, 75; Thomas Stanley: Vol. 1, pp.100, 196, Vol. 2, pp.30, 61-2. Lord Stanley also received the Garter in 1483, his stall being that formerly occupied by William, Lord Hastings, Edmund H. Fellowes, *The Knights of the Garter 1348-1939. With a complete list of the Stall-Plates in St. George's Chapel*, Historical Monographs relating to St. George's Chapel, Windsor Castle, Vol. 1 (Windsor 1939), p.37.
19. Horrox and Hammond, Vol. 2, pp.60, 76, 81.
20. Fellowes, p.64.
21. Audrey Williamson, *The Mystery of the Princes* (Gloucester 1978), pp.171-2.
22. V. B. Lamb, *The Betrayal of Richard III* (3rd edn. London 1968), p.64.