

More about More

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Review Article: Richard Marius, *Thomas More*, Dent 1985, £16.95.

ONE OF MY ENDEAVOURS in publishing an account of what historians and others have written about King Richard in the five hundred years since his death' was to implant a sense of shame in anti-Richard writers and help put an end to the continuing rehearsal of the fictions of More, Shakespeare and other Tudor chroniclers as though they were historical fact. Tradition is created by repetition, and repetition does not validate defamation.

My particular target was blind faith in Sir Thomas More and William Shakespeare as historical sources. It was also central to my purpose to clear away subsidiary and patently false charges against the King so that the real Ricardian issues of usurpation and infanticide could be reviewed in proper perspective. It was, I felt, surely time that every serious writer on this subject came to recognise that the Lancastrian Prince of Wales was killed in the fighting at Tewkesbury, as all contemporary sources agree,¹ and that there is similarly not a jot of evidence to support the Tudor libels that Richard had a hand in the death of Henry VI, his own brother Clarence and his own wife Anne. There is no reason to doubt that Anne died of natural causes, and Henry and Clarence were manifestly victims of Edward IV. Those who refuse to accept Kendall on the innocence of Richard on the latter charges should heed Ross's judgment that they are 'quite unrelated to the mundane facts of historical evidence'.² The idea that Edward IV would employ his own brother in the role of executioner of King Henry lies some way outside the bounds of probability, and if there was a secret aider and abettor of Clarence's downfall it is likely to have been, not Richard, but the person identified by Mancini — Edward's queen.³ What, in brief, I was seeking to establish was that in April 1483 when Edward died Richard was a man of good character and high reputation, as Mancini noted.⁴

But when *Good King Richard?* was published in May 1983 two other students of the fifteenth century had already completed their anti-Richard

labours. Desmond Seward's *Richard III: England's Black Legend* had appeared in February, and Giles St. Aubyn's *The Year of Three Kings: 1483* was to follow in August. Both are the works of prosecuting counsel. Evidence in Richard's favour is discounted; unfavourable reports are accepted as true however dubious the provenance. Reliance on unreliable sources leads inevitably to questionable statements and subjective judgments. Mr. St. Aubyn admits that in More's *History* 'fidelity to fact was of secondary consequence'; but this does not deter him from reciting More's version of events as though it represents what is actually known to have happened. Mr. Seward concedes that it is not known how King Henry met his death, but cannot prevent himself thereafter from referring to Richard as his murderer. Mr. St. Aubyn likens Richard to Hitler, Stalin and the Devil, and Mr. Seward is so overcome with revulsion that he cannot even bring himself to acknowledge that he was really King of England. The relevant chapter heading runs 'King Richard The Third' — his inverted commas, not mine.'

This gambit introduces a new historical game. Which other of the Kings of England are not to be recognised as *de jure* monarchs and should therefore be referred to only in inverted commas? 'Henry IV', 'Henry VII' and 'George I' for starters. And if 'Henry IV', then, inescapably, 'Henry V' and 'Henry VI'; if 'George I', then 'George II' and 'George III'. As the son of Edward IV's eldest daughter, Henry VIII may perhaps be spared the indignity.

Mr. St. Aubyn (who taught history at Eton) plays another game. In summoning Mancini as a witness to Richard's murder of Edward V, he quotes from him thus (his inverted commas): 'and already there was a suspicion that he had been done away with,' but 'by what manner of death, so far I have not at all discovered'. But what Mancini actually wrote (in the Armstrong translation) was: 'and already there was a suspicion that he had been done away with. Whether, however, he has been done away with, and by what manner of death, so far I have not at all discovered.' By the use of a connecting 'but' Mr. St. Aubyn has neatly saved himself from the necessity of inserting the three dots which might have alerted the reader to the fact that he has omitted a phrase which would embarrass his argument. Like everyone else, Mancini did not know what happened to Edward V. He was honest enough to say so and should be accurately reported.

Among academic historians today it seems to me that the Seward/St. Aubyn line finds favour with those of the Tudor period, but no longer amongst mediaevalists. The unparalleled villainy of Richard III remains the departure platform for Tudor studies and scholars like Dr. Rowse and Professor Elton react with extraordinary fervour against any suggestion that Richard may not have been as black as the Tudors painted him. So there is fifteenth-century history seen from the fifteenth century and fifteenth-century history seen from the sixteenth century. The sharpness of this division between mediaeval and Tudor historians was dramatically exposed in *The Trial of Richard III*, the television programme transmitted on Channel 4 in November 1984. Defence counsel quoted Professor Ross's words, 'More's highly elaborate account of the death of the Princes has long ago been dismissed as contradictory and deserving of nothing but scepticism', and went on to obtain the agreement of Jeffrey Richards, a mediaevalist, that he had written in similar terms: 'More is full of provably false facts and is too discredited to build on.' There followed a memorable clash

between counsel and Dr. David Starkey, a Tudor historian, who vigorously denounced criticisms of More as 'very small minds attacking a very big one'."

More indeed lies at the heart of the Ricardian controversy, for unlike Shakespeare he was a near-contemporary and Shakespeare's monster is More's creation. In history's condemnation of Richard, More is the leading witness for the prosecution. In determining the truth about Richard's character and career More's own character is therefore a relevant consideration. His latest biographer is Richard Marius who, after some twenty-five years' hard labour as a member of the editorial team of the Yale edition of More's complete works, has now published *Thomas More*, a work of 562 pages replete with erudition in which the abstruse theological arguments between Erasmus, Luther and More are set out in admirable if forbidding detail. Professor Marius' knowledge of his subject is formidable, and he is no hagiographer. As well as a man of great talent and strong religious principle, More is seen to have been a wily lawyer, devious politician, foul-mouthed polemicist and gleeful burner of Protestants, not for the sake of their souls but so that they should roast in hell for eternity as an example to others. His integrity, so crucial to Richard's reputation, is not above suspicion. It was his death, not his life, which made him a saint.

More, it seems, was a witty man but an unpleasant one. His 'great wit' was 'mingled with taunting and mocking', Edward Hall complained, while Dr. Marius complains that it was of such a kind that a biographer 'cannot always tell when More speaks seriously and when not'. Against those who thought it better to read the Bible than obey the Pope he unloosed an 'acid flood of vituperation'. His anonymous attack on Luther was 'almost hysterical', full of 'plodding insults', 'witless vulgarity' and 'monotonous scatology'. 'He could love with devotion and hate with passion . . . He was almost obsequious to Wolsey as long as Wolsey was in power, but when Wolsey fell, More turned on him like a hawk diving to prey'.

More's services to the Church of Rome in the persecution and extermination of heretics make it surprising that he was not canonised soon after his martyrdom: 'that he did not succeed in becoming England's Torquemada,' writes Dr. Marius, 'was a consequence of the King's quarrel with the Pope and not a result of any quality of mercy that stirred through More's own heart.' Three sixteenth-century biographies — by William Roper, Nicholas Harpsfield and Thomas Stapleton — were all open applications for his canonisation, but he was not beatified until 1886 (by Leo XIII) and his canonisation (by Pius XI) came only in 1935, four hundred years after his execution on 6 July 1535 (the anniversary of the coronation of Richard III, a fellow victim of the Tudors).

The chapters in this book of special interest to Ricardians are *The History of King Richard III* (Chapter 7) and *The Richard Hunne Affair* (Chapter 8). Dr. Marius tells us that More had 'a vivid imagination', 'was the greatest English storyteller between Chaucer and Shakespeare' and 'would have made a fine novelist'. Nevertheless, his *History* is 'the first true work of Renaissance historiography done by an Englishman'. Here an accent must be intended on the word 'Renaissance', for it is scarcely a work of historiography by modern standards. Its primary purpose is to point morals, not recount facts; a full third is in the form of imaginary dialogue; and it is stuffed with errors, even to the extent

of getting the christian names of major characters such as Buckingham and Hastings wrong.

In his Introduction to the *History* in the Yale edition Professor Sylvester argued as follows: 'Insofar as More credits some of the wilder features of the legend, he can be accused of being just as inaccurate and just as prejudiced as those writers who first set down the scandalous details. But the fact that others had originated the account of Richard's "crimes" also allows us to say that, insofar as More's work agrees with their versions, he is an accurate reflector of current sentiments'. In other words More was setting down the libels circulating among Richard's enemies, whether or not he himself believed them to be true. Whether this absolves him from guilt as a propagator of malicious falsehoods is another matter. 'His narrative,' Professor Sylvester continued, 'seldom claims to be more authoritative than his sources; it asks us first of all to credit not that "what men say" really happened, but that men really say that it did happen'. The drift of this argument appears to be that More's narrative can be dismissed as historically worthless without too much reflection on his integrity; although this line of defence takes no account of More's own original contributions to the saga — his invention of Richard's crookback and long-time ambition to be king — and his injections of bile and bias.

Dr. Marius judges the *History* to be 'perhaps the finest thing' More ever wrote, and it is perhaps his admiration for its literary qualities as well as his approach from the Tudor period which leads him into more dubious judgments. Can it really be the case, for instance, that More 'seems throughout this tale to sift the evidence in a genuine effort to find the truth'? How can this be reconciled with 'he gives us a villain much like Shakespeare's Iago, doing evil continually only because evil is his nature'? And did More really believe that Richard had a withered arm? Could he really have made a genuine effort to find out whether he had? Or wasn't it just a good story which he must have known to be untrue but as a good storyteller couldn't resist?

More's damning attribution of hypocrisy is a much more serious libel. That Richard was secretly plotting for the crown before Edward's death is a highly improbable piece of fiction. Even Polydore Vergil chooses to date his invention of Richard's 'ardent desire of sovereignty' only from the moment when he learns of his brother's death. Neither of them could, of course, have had any knowledge of Richard's ambition or lack of it. In fact, Edward died prematurely and unexpectedly and before then Richard could have had no expectation of the succession. Afterwards it was the Woodvilles, not Richard, who made a pre-emptive bid for power, and throughout the month of May 1483 when he held the reins of government in London all business was transacted in the name of Edward V and there is nothing to suggest that the Protector was aiming to depose him. If he had been, it is unlikely that letters would have been sent out in the young Edward's name as late as 5 June to fifty esquires commanding them to prepare to receive knighthoods at his coronation on the 22nd and report to the Tower four days in advance. From this it seems plain that the change of plan came later — presumably on 10 June when Richard sent urgently to York for troops to protect him from a plot against his life.

More's story about Mistlebrook and Pottyer is of interest in this connection. During the night following Edward IV's death Mistlebrook, an official of the

dead King, is said to have brought the news to Pottyer, one of Richard's officers, and Pottyer exclaimed: 'By my troth, man, then will my master the Duke of Gloucester be king'.¹⁰ The Latin text of the *History* gives More's own father as the authority for this tale, and this has been cited as evidence that More enjoyed less partial sources than the Mortons, Urswicks and Foxes who would scarcely have had a good word to say for the King against whom they had committed the mortal sins of treason and regicide, which could be excused only if he was a monster. John More, however, was devoted to the memory of Edward IV, who had allowed him a coat of arms and the status of gentleman, and in gratitude his will provided for masses to be said for Edward's soul. He too, then, is unlikely to have entertained friendly feelings towards the man who had turned Edward's son off the throne.

All the same, there is no reason to doubt the truth of such a straightforward story. But what is its significance? As Dr. Marius acknowledges, 'the story in itself does not prove that Richard was already plotting to seize the throne. More knew as much and said so'. Then he adds: 'such dark confidences exchanged in the middle of the night were rather a sign that people who knew Richard found in him no room for human sympathy or natural affection.'¹¹ Really? Might it not rather be no more than a sign that one of his affinity thought him the best man for the job? And by 'king' might he even have meant no more than king *de facto* as an all-powerful Protector?

In somewhat similar fashion Dr. Marius acknowledges that More's account of the murder of the Princes is open to doubt, that some details seem too good to be true, and that it is apparent from the text that More himself is doubtful about the truth of much of it; yet then declares himself against rejecting it entirely. This is because he has what he describes as 'an interesting conjecture' to offer, and it is this.

More was friendly with the younger Thomas Howard and knew the elder, who as Earl of Surrey had fought at Bosworth for Richard. The Howards were nursing a guilty secret: John Howard, the elder Thomas's father, was the man who had the Princes put to death on Richard's instructions. He, not Brackenbury, had been Constable of the Tower on the relevant date and he wanted the younger boy's dukedom of Norfolk. The Howards told the story to More, but shifted the blame from John Howard to Brackenbury. 'It would not be surprising if' Tyrell, the go-between, had been dissatisfied with his reward and told Henry Tudor what had happened, so that Henry's invasion was made in the knowledge that the field was clear. Tyrell's confession in 1502 was not made public because Henry's early collusion with him would have brought odium at home 'and perhaps diplomatic disaster abroad'.¹²

I must confess to finding this conjecture less interesting than its author does — except to ponder how many more deceptions More's sources may have practised on him if this one were an authentic example. But no supporting evidence is offered, and any plausibility it might have is dependent on a misunderstanding and misdating concerning the dukedom of Norfolk and the Mowbray inheritance. The younger Prince's claim was disputed by two other heirs — not only John, Lord Howard, but also William, Lord Berkeley — and one of Richard's first acts after his accession was to settle the matter in their favour. As recorded in the Charter Rolls, Howard was created Duke of Norfolk, his son Earl

of Surrey, and Berkeley Earl of Nottingham (all of them Mowbray titles) on 28 June, not 28 July as stated by Dr. Marius. The death of the younger Prince was not a prerequisite to these creations, and no one has ever supposed that he was already dead before the end of June. Indeed anyone who places reliance on the traditional accounts of his death, particularly More's, must believe that he was still alive until Richard went on progress after his coronation on 6 July.

The earliest recorded speculation that Howard might have murdered the Princes was made — somewhat tardily — in 1844, when Payne Collier misinterpreted a reference to two sacks of lime in Howard's household accounts. These were used in work undertaken several weeks before the younger Prince left Westminster Abbey for the Tower, and the Tower mentioned is almost certainly not the Tower of London but a house of Howard's in the city of London known by that name. For it is a further objection to Dr. Marius' theory that, although Brackenbury's formal appointment as Constable of the Tower was not made until 17 July, he was probably doing the job before then and in any case his predecessor is most unlikely to have been Howard as Dr. Marius assumes.

What Howard was granted in 1479 was no more than a second reversionary right to the office. The Constable at that date was the elderly Lord Dudley, and first in the queue for dead man's shoes was Richard Fiennes, Lord Dacre. But, whilst incapable of exercising the office, Dudley continued to hold it during Edward IV's lifetime and tottered on into his eighties, not dying until two years after Bosworth. In the Tower he was represented by a Deputy, so that the *de facto* Constable when Edward died was the Queen's brother, Earl Rivers. There is no surviving record of a new appointment on Richard's assumption of the protectorship, but without doubt he would immediately have installed one of his own loyal supporters such as Brackenbury, and not a powerful magnate like Howard.

These facts about Howard and the office of Constable were admirably set out in an article in *The Ricardian* in 1980 by Anne Crawford¹⁰, which Dr. Marius appears not to have read. In another article in *The Ricardian*, the following year,¹¹ the same author set out the facts about the Mowbray inheritance. After the death of the infant Anne Mowbray the inheritance should, by law, custom and practice, have passed to Howard and Berkeley (Mowbray descendants through the female line), but Edward IV secured it for his younger son, the dead heiress's boy widower, by illegally overriding the laws of inheritance with two Acts of Parliament. This was the wrong which Richard righted (although he too acted illegally: in not formally annulling Edward's Acts).

Dr. Marius' strange surmise at the expense of the Howard family betrays his unfamiliarity with the Yorkist period, and this is evidenced by other errors. He believes, for instance, that the examination of the Westminster Abbey bones in 1933 confirmed that they were male, whereas everyone involved in Ricardian studies knows that this is significantly what it did not do, Tanner and Wright did not attempt to determine this question. And he believes that Richard was buried, like Wolsey, in Leicester Abbey, where 'shortly afterwards people were calling the church "the tomb of the tyrants"'. (Even though Richard's was known to be in the church of the Greyfriars a mile or more away?)

In the Richard Hunne affair Dr. Marius is back in his own period and on his own subject. 'Along with *The History of King Richard III*', he writes, 'it has often

been made a test of More's integrity. Here it is impossible to avoid the conclusion that More distorted the facts to uphold the official view of the church that Hunne was a heretic and a suicide'.¹ A wealthy London tailor in good standing who quarrelled with the church on a matter of principle, Hunne resorted to the courts to establish the sovereignty of common law over canon law. He filed a suit under the statute of praemunire and another for slander against a priest. The church retaliated by charging him with heresy. He was arrested, interrogated and imprisoned in the Lollards' Tower of old St. Paul's, where in the early morning on 4 December 1514 his body was found hanging in his cell. The claim of the bishop's men that he had committed suicide was not accepted by a coroner's inquest, which found that he had been murdered.

That Hunne was indeed murdered (by the bishop's chancellor, a bell ringer and a jailer, who confessed) was established beyond any reasonable doubt. The case created a furore in the city of London. It raised the most important question of the day — the supremacy of church or state. On such a matter there could be no doubt where More stood and it was not on the side of truth. 'Years later when More presented his account of the case in *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, he twisted the issues almost beyond recognition. If we had only More's story of Richard Hunne, we would have almost no idea that strong evidence existed to indicate that Hunne had been murdered and that serious people were convinced by the evidence that murder had been done. More made it seem that all good men believed that Hunne had killed himself and that the only information to the contrary was foolish gossip.'

The relevance of the Hunne case to More's defamation of Richard III scarcely needs stressing. If in the one the Machiavellian More, the lawyer making a case regardless of the truth, stands unmistakably exposed, should the other continue to be defended as the work of a saint who could not tell a lie? Once again Dr. Marius adopts his 'yes, but' posture. The 'wilful distortions' in the Hunne case do indeed reveal that 'More was not above wrenching a historical tale around to make it prove what he wanted it to prove'. But in the case of the *History* More's account is 'consistent, detailed and plausible', 'less open to the charge of malice' and 'enjoys the advantage of agreeing substantially with much other evidence from the time'. Such 'buts' are questionable, to say the least, and, seem pale beside undeniable proof that a wilful distorter is at large.

'Events destroy theory, history defies abstraction' is the conclusion of Dr. Marius' chapter on the *History*. I would put it the other way. More's so-called *History of King Richard III* is a vivid example of theory destroying events, abstraction defying history.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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5. Mancini, *op. cit.*, p.62.
6. Giles St. Aubyn, *The Year of Three Kings: 1483* (London 1983), p.178.
7. Desmond Seward, *England's Black Legend* (London 1983), chapter 9.
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9. Richard Drewett and Mark Redhead, *The Trial of Richard III* (Gloucester 1984), pp.54, 55.
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11. Richard S. Sylvester (ed.), *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 2 (New Haven and London 1963), p.lxxviii.
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13. Sylvester, *op. cit.*, p.9.
14. Richard Marius, *Thomas More* (London 1985), p.17.
15. Marius, *op. cit.*, pp.111-114.
16. Anne Crawford, John Howard, Duke of Norfolk: A possible murderer of the Princes? *The Ricardian*, vol. 5, no. 70, September 1980, pp.230-234.
17. Anne Crawford, The Mowbray Inheritance, *The Ricardian*, vol. 5, no. 73, June 1981, pp.334-340.
18. Marius, *op. cit.*, p.123.
19. Marius, *op. cit.*, p.135.