

Review Article: Memoirs of a Yorkist Civil Servant

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THE CROWLAND CHRONICLE CONTINUATIONS: 1459-1486. Edited by Nicholas Pronay and John Cox. Richard III and Yorkist History Trust, London, 1986. £25; £15 to members of the Richard III Society.

STUDENTS OF YORKIST ENGLAND have waited a long time for the appearance of a modern edition of the Second Continuation of the Crowland Chronicle. Nicholas Pronay and John Cox have rendered 'a considerable service to all historians of fifteenth-century England who hitherto had to rely either on the rare copies of Fulman's Latin text or Riley's old translation for what is without doubt the principal narrative source for the history of England between 1459 and 1485. Now we possess not only a thoroughly prepared parallel text*, but also a scholarly and, moreover, highly readable introduction.

At the heart of the introduction, which contains a valuable discussion of the historiography of the Second Continuation (including a delightful exposé of the bee in Sir Clements Markham's bonnet), lies the painstaking and utterly convincing demonstration that the text was indeed written as one continuous narrative by one man residing temporarily at Crowland in the last ten days of April 1486. In an exciting exercise in historical and literary detection we are guided along a tortuous path from the somnolent scriptorium at Crowland through Fulman's busy office, past the blazing Cottonian library, into the Victorian restoration room at the British Museum finally to peer once more at the fragmentary remains of the original through a visual spectral comparator (whatever that might be). By placing the handful of fire-damaged original folios against Fulman's surviving transcripts, his so-called printers' notes and his published edition they are able to show without any shadow of doubt that Fulman did indeed publish an extremely accurate version of the original, which followed carefully and respectfully what was first set down. Along the way fanciful notions about 'ur-texts' and 'redactors', secret visits and credulous monks, shuffled papers and incompetent printers are dealt mortal blows. There

is clearly something about the strange history of the text and its transmission to us which have tempted successive commentators into wonderful inventions and speculative games; games which the editors describe in the case of Mrs. Hanham, as ducks and drakes and in the case of Professor Kelly, as musical chairs. It is a wonder that no-one had suggested that in reality the lost manuscript contained Aristotle's lost book on comedy, coated with deadly poison and shelved not in Otto B XIII but in *Finis Africae*! It is the greatest achievement of the edition that they have disposed of such nonsense and settled once and for all that what we have is what the author wrote, as he wrote it.

Who that author was is perhaps not so decisively resolved. Pronay and Cox argue convincingly that he was not Bishop Russell or, as has only recently been canvassed, Archdeacon Lavender. The case against Russell is particularly elegantly and persuasively presented; that it is not written from the perspective of a great officer of state or leading diplomat; that the quality and quantity of information declines at precisely the time (after 1483) when we would expect Russell to be best informed; that in the circumstances of 1486 he was the last person to have sat down to write a history of his own times; that the style in which the chronicle is written is totally unlike Russell's known style; and that finally it is hardly credible that the succeeding author would not have known that his own Bishop had written it. Their alternative, Henry Sharp, is indeed a much more likely candidate.

There is, however, one impediment to Sharp's candidature which the editors slip past and by which they appear to be contradicted through their own meticulous scholarship: the well-rehearsed fact that Sharp was a civil lawyer, while *Ille qui hanc historiam compilavit* is described (or describes himself) as a canon lawyer. In fact, as they point out, the exact phrase used is '*Doctor in Jure Canonico*' which is a term that did not then exist: correctly a canon lawyer was '*Doctor Decretorum*'. They suggest therefore that the transcriber (Fulman or his clerk — it is not made clear) misread '*Doctor Juris Civilis*'. But if the reader examines plate 2, the best surviving folio, thoughtfully provided by the editors, it seems difficult to imagine that '*Juris Civilis*', as they suggest, was misread in the seventeenth century as '*in Jure Canonico*': in the hand illustrated, for example, an 'a' is hardly confusable with an 'i'. Moreover Pronay and Cox are at pains to show that the seventeenth-century transcriber and corrector were extremely careful, drawing attention to any doubtful and difficult readings (such as the very first word) and making only very few and then minor errors. How then are we to explain this uncharacteristic yet critical mistake? One fears that this will be an Achilles heel at which lurking controversialists on the issue of the author will aim.

Yet does it really matter whether we know precisely who the author was? Pronay and Cox are themselves properly cautious (unlike supporters of other candidates) in reminding their readers that the case in favour of Sharp should not be overstated. In the end they conclude, and surely correctly, that the author cannot be identified with any certainty. What does matter is that the author was well-placed in the senior ranks of the civil service, that he did on occasion attend meetings of council, that he was generally well informed, and that he wrote his account of his times from a worldly perspective.

Nevertheless, as is here clearly established, the work is not a simple political

narrative: it is a skilled work of art, counterpointing the story of a corrupt world against the story of an innocent monastic community. The scheme followed by the author, in which he interposes the history of Crowland with the history of the realm, is brilliantly laid bare. At the appropriate moment in the narrative when a prior dies the story switches to an account, in the form of an obituary note, of the monastery during that prior's rule. So rigid is the scheme that the story of the autumn rebellion of 1483 is broken off at its climax, four sentences before its end, just because Richard Croyland died on 10 November. This plays havoc with our reading of the story of the rebellion, but as the editors show, fits exactly into the correct chronological framework. The scheme may, as they say, be too clever by half, but the literary artifice is to be admired. The effect is a little like a Shakespearean sub-plot. The author pokes gentle fun at the petty nature of the monastic cares and crises. There is something comic about Lambert Fosdyke locking himself in the sacristy to escape the fury of the tenants of Whaplode whom he has tried to prevent uprooting trees in the cemetery. Likewise we are solemnly informed that the great inhumanity of the abbey's enemies was revealed when 'they cruelly transfixd with arrows the cellarer's guard dog'. One wonders, indeed, whether we are not meant to see these events as parodies of the real tragedies happening concurrently in the world outside, as a Queen of England herself flees to sanctuary to escape her enemies and a saintly King is killed by desperate rivals.

The editors rightly liken the author to Commynes and Machiavelli. He was a practical man writing about political history who no longer saw the hand of God as the prime mover in all human history. He appreciated 'real-politic'. But from time to time he reveals a more traditional attitude. Edward IV's taxation of the clergy in 1483, 'a servile and pernicious ruin for the Church', was punished, it is suggested, by the terrible events which followed his death. And, although it is true that he only reports that Henry VII was welcomed by everyone as a saviour through whom God deigned to visit his people, there is nothing in his subsequent comments to suggest that he dissented from this view. Indeed his poems and peroration make it quite clear that he welcomed Henry's accession heartily and was relieved at the fall of Richard III.

The author was also seemingly influenced by Tacitus in providing a justifiatory conclusion. He asserts that he wrote 'without any conscious introduction of falsehood, hatred or favour'; a disclaimer worthy of further analysis. And like Tacitus he has revealed that he was quite decidedly partisan. As Pronay and Cox comment, there is 'a note of bitter condemnation close to hatred' in his attitude to Richard III. In this respect it is a pity that they do not consider more fully the relationship between the text and the later, Tudor characterization of Richard III. The editors accept without question the received wisdom that this author, who lived through three Yorkist reigns, with access to privileged information, enjoyed an independence from the later Tudor version of the reign of Richard III which gives his account a unique objectivity. 'Its thesis and views are also remarkable because they prove that this view of the place of Bosworth Field in history was not an *ex post facto* invention of Tudor propaganda'. 'The work is also important because it is wholly independent' (p.99). All this may be so but it is not proven or self-evident. He *could* have written what he personally and independently considered was the awful truth

about Richard III; so too *could* the author of the *Great Chronicle* twenty years later. But eight months, no less than twenty years, is long enough for someone to be infected by hostile propaganda. We know from independent sources that Henry VII was already laying down the skeleton of his view of the recent past. Before the last days of April 1486 the new King had begun to encourage his subjects to see him as a saviour uniting the warring dynasties. He had already begun to deploy the symbolism of the warring roses united, which the author himself repeats. Since, as the editors establish, the author did write his account in ten days at the end of April 1486, it is not too early for him to have swallowed the official line. We have an unresolvable dilemma here. His account could be an entirely independent view of Richard III; on the other hand it could equally be coloured by the victor of Bosworth's propaganda. There is no way of telling which.

It is in the context of this dilemma that the suggestions that Polydore Vergil consulted the Second Continuation become particularly pertinent. It is therefore a matter of regret that these ideas, advanced both by Hanham and Kelly, are relegated to, and dismissed in, a couple of footnotes. What happened to the Crowland Chronicles in Henry VII's reign is perhaps a matter of greater interest. If, as is surely now accepted, there was not a common source which both the continuator and Vergil consulted, is it possible that Vergil might have come to see the Chronicle and its continuations (the original Otto B XIII itself)? The Chronicle, we are told in an addendum, disappeared from the monastery by 1506. Margaret Beaufort was the monastery's patron. Could the Chronicle have come into her hands, her library, where it was seen by Vergil? This is the kind of speculation rightly distrusted by the editors. A suspicion however remains that the Second Continuation may yet have been part of the interrelated chain of Tudor histories. At least the possibility warrants further consideration:

There are, no doubt, other matters of debate which the editors will stimulate by their introduction. These pale into insignificance compared with the achievement of presenting for the first time a parallel text. The translation is carefully and sensitively handled. The author writes, with some flourish, a Latin which was essentially the language of the senior civil service of his time. The editors do not seek to reproduce the literary flourishes, but keep, especially in potentially ambiguous or sensitive passages, to a literal translation. They do, however, capture some of the ironic, almost sarcastic tone which from time to time breaks through. Thus, the translation (p.161) of *elevatae mentis* in the comment that 'there was no shortage of treasure then to implement the aim of his so elevated mind' is both more accurate and more subtle than Riley's 'his haughty mind'. Or, again (pp.148-9): '*Haec sunt quae in Scotia dux ille confecerat*' — 'This is what the duke accomplished (sic) in Scotland' nicely suggests and sustains the heavy (and unjustified) sarcasm which seems to underlie the author's report of Gloucester's campaign in 1482.

It is however regrettable that it was not possible to provide a fully annotated, critical text enabling the reader to appreciate more fully the difficulties and ambiguities involved in translating certain passages. This can be illustrated by reference to the following sentence from page 146:

Ab hoc actu multi Regem Edwardum persuasum relinquebant quod ad libitum dominari posset super totum regnum exterminatis nunc idolis universis in quorum facies popularium, oculi novarum semper rerum cupidi, transactis temporibus respicere consueverunt.

The translation given is:

After this deed many people deserted King Edward who was persuaded that he could rule as he pleased throughout the whole kingdom now that all those idols had been destroyed to whom the eyes of the common folk, ever eager for change, used to turn in times gone by.

This translation corrects Riley's mistake in suggesting that it was the many who were persuaded that Edward could rule as he pleased rather than the King himself. However the phrase *Ab hoc actu* and the word *relinquebant* are ambiguous. *Ab hoc actu* could be translated as either temporal or causative in sense; that is as 'After this deed' or 'Because of this deed'. Similarly *relinquebant* could mean either 'deserted', as here, or more neutrally 'left'. Earlier (p.40) the author uses *deficere* for 'desert'. The possibility exists, therefore, that he intended another meaning. In fact the deed referred to is the death of Clarence which occurred just after the meeting of the parliament which tried him. It could possibly be therefore that the author means simply that after this event the many went away, as it were 'went down to the country'. The use of many, as opposed to all, however, implies something more particular, so that it may well be that the word is being used in the sense of withdrawing support. But in which case 'Because of' might be preferable to 'After'. A problem also occurs with *novarum . . . rerum*, here translated as 'change'. *Res novae* is used commonly in classical Latin to mean 'revolution': in this context it could mean 'rebellion'. The translation given is not incorrect, it is however debatable. It is because of this, and given the importance of the text, that the reader would be greatly assisted by critical annotation. No doubt the cost of doing so was judged to be prohibitive, but readers who are not skilled Latinists (or do not have ready access to a classical scholar) need to be aware that alternative translations are, in places, possible. Elsewhere, for instance, on p.128-9 *Taceo hoc temporum institio inventum esse corpus Regis Henrici in Turri Londoniarum exanime* could just as convincingly, perhaps more so, be translated as 'I shall say nothing about the discovery at this time of King Henry's lifeless body in the Tower of London' as 'I shall say nothing at this time about the discovery . . .' Without scholarly apparatus this edition is, unfortunately, incomplete.

For readers who know Riley's translation there are, nevertheless, several welcome improvements. Riley rendered *Unde et agens tyranni patiensque gloriosi Martyris titulum mereatur* (pp.128-30) as 'Hence it is, he who perpetrated this has justly earned the title of tyrant, while he who thus suffered has gained that of glorious martyr'. The new translation gives the more accurate and more pithy: 'And so, let the doer merit the title of tyrant and the victim that of glorious martyr'. This has the added advantage of emphasising that the

remark is the author's own judgement and not reported fact. Similarly '*vulgatum est*' (p.162) is translated 'a rumour arose', rather than 'a rumour was spread', an important correction considering the weight of speculation which has sometimes been placed upon *who* spread the rumour. Finally, and perhaps of greatest significance to those interested in the history of Richard III, is the translation of '*color autem introitus et captiae possessionis hujusmodi is erat*' (pp.158/60). Riley gave (famously) 'the colour for this act of usurpation was as follows'. Pronay and Cox give more literally 'The pretext of this intrusion and for taking possession in this way was as follows'. Again a critical discussion of *captiae possessionis*, which could just possibly mean forced possession, might have helped. *Introitus*, too might conceivably be seen as being more neutral — 'entry', but it has the added sense of unwanted. Indeed this sentence immediately follows '*in cathedram marmoream intrusit*', translated more positively as 'he thrust himself into the marble chair'. The translators have been cautious in handling the key sentence in this sensitive passage, but even as it stands their English version, following the Latin text, leaves the clear understanding that in the view of the author Richard III's occupation of the throne was unwarranted and the reason advanced, contrived. Indeed a few lines later he states unequivocally that the claim was seditious and infamous. Riley may have gone beyond the literal sense, but he nevertheless captured the author's meaning by the use of the word 'usurpation'.

The book is not free from typographical error. But the editors are to be congratulated, so too the publishers — the newly established Richard III and Yorkist History Trust, for at last producing a modern edition of this invaluable text. It is a particularly appropriate way to launch the new venture. The Trust has rescued a project which has lain too long on the shelf; it has also appropriately begun with a source which more than any other writing established the idea that there was such a thing as the Yorkist period, with its own unity, however distasteful the author held it to be. Members of the Richard III Society, under whose auspices the Trust has been founded, can feel proud that, following upon the earlier publication of Harleian Manuscript 433, the Society is more than fulfilling its avowed aim 'to promote in every possible way research into the life and times of Richard III'.

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