

Review Article: Microcosm or Mere County? Greater Warwickshire in the Fifteenth Century

ROWENA E. ARCHER

LOCALITY AND POLITY: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401-1499. Christine Carpenter. 1992. Cambridge University Press, £75.

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IN THE PAST DECADE research into the lives of the English gentry has caught up with the older pursuit of the interests of the nobility. Major work through individuals and county studies has been done by such scholars as Nigel Saul, Colin Richmond, Susan Wright, Simon Walker and Simon Payling. There is now a powerful school of thought which believes that real political power in the fifteenth century lay with this middle class. It is twenty years since Christine Carpenter began her work on Warwickshire political society and during that time, through a number of articles, she has presented her own distinctive view of the gentry. Now she has committed her whole picture, with some major revisions, to a single volume of staggering, not to say daunting, proportions.

Dr. Carpenter presents her work in two parts. The first surveys the gentry as a class and here the reader will discover quickly that the book is by no means confined to Warwickshire. Dr Carpenter makes it clear that the county boundary was an administrative convenience that should not be regarded as a ring fence so far as locality is concerned and indeed her oft repeated view of Warwickshire is that it was a county singularly lacking cohesion and unity whose component parts faced outwards to neighbouring counties. It is surely right to look across these boundaries especially in the case of greater gentry with lands and connections straddling the borders. The problem perhaps is knowing where to stop and where to lay the emphasis. When does a Warwickshire man become a Leicestershire man? The maps on pages 62-63 purport to show by a series of arrows neighbouring counties where *Warwickshire* gentry had estates in 1436 but how far do they show Leicestershire gentry holding estates in neighbouring Warwickshire? For Dr Carpenter's knights in 1436 'whose major land holdings were elsewhere' (p.91), the answer is surely self-evident. This question of county loyalty is crucial if such

men are portrayed as belonging to a local affinity that seeks to rule the shire – an aspiration in itself that is ill at ease with the argument about Warwickshire's artificiality and fragmentation. If the county did not exist in any meaningful way why would anyone seek to dominate it?

Questions about belonging to county society hang over Appendix 1, the Directory of Warwickshire Gentry – a list of nearly 1000 individuals who have been chased through intractable archives for their connections in the county. Confusingly, it is at once all gentry with any kind of interest in the shire but yet not all. It is selective on the basis of principles which cannot be discerned for any single individual. Too many make their only appearance in the book here and in a listing by rank (knight, esquire, gentleman), in Appendix 2 and there is an undue weighting to the late period, in some instances beyond 1499. The dates may indicate one of two things but which of the two cannot be determined for a specific person. Some of these should certainly not be labelled as Warwickshire gentry though without individual references it is impractical to attempt to check their credentials. Thomas Palmer is a good example. He is described as resident in Northamptonshire (p.663) but in fact resided in the middle of a compact estate at Holt in Leicestershire and was clearly a leading figure in that county. It is true that he acquired some Warwickshire lands by marrying one of the coheirresses of William Bishopestone but far from residing in these he sold them to the husband of the other coheirress, a fair indication surely of his true regard for this county.¹ William Cope, Henry VII's cofferer (1494-1507), appears with the date 1485 though there is no evidence of his holding his only two Warwickshire manors there until 1498. As the Cope archive makes clear the family came from Northamptonshire and eventually settled in Oxfordshire. Their Warwickshire connection was brief, if dramatic. William sold his two properties to John Spenser in 1503 and it was not until the seventeenth century that the Copes again bought property in the county. William never resided in these manors and it must be asked in what sense he could, by owning two manors for five years, be regarded as a Warwickshire man. It is surely unsatisfactory to use him as an example of the low level of involvement in the shire by royal servants when his absence can be explained so easily.

In spite of these reservations the work is at its best in this section. Aware of the limits of her evidence, the author meticulously and skilfully defines the gentry as a class from the least to the greatest. There is excellent discussion of estate management contrasting the successful with the less successful practitioners and a full exposition of the patterns of expenditure which reveal the wide variety of their interests. Conscientious and constructive in the organisation of their property, balancing the need to husband resources with the need to spend, this powerful class emerges displaying a strong sense of its own self-importance and, equally, a sense of self-preservation. These were indeed men worthy of the attentions of a magnate or even of a king.

The second and larger part of the book is chronological, divided into a narrative history of the county dictated by the arrivals and departures of successive aristocratic, then royal, interests. Following the death of the apparently all powerful Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick in 1439 and the failure of his line in 1449 came four periods of crisis. No single nobleman achieves what Beauchamp had achieved. He is the yardstick by which all others are measured. Two periods under

Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick to 1461 and then to 1478, the latter period being partly under George, Duke of Clarence, fail to bring stability to the county. Both men had the powerbase necessary for full control and the gentry were desirous of noble leadership but Warwick was greatly inferior to Beauchamp as a political manager and Clarence was inept, hopelessly inadequate. Crisis remains the keynote for the closing years of Edward IV and the reign of Richard III and for Carpenter's last period, 1495-99. Edward IV bears some comparison with Richard Beauchamp in his distant but effective management of Warwickshire but Ricardians will find the Duke of Gloucester's monumental stupidity writ large, his treatment of the county revealing what went wrong in his rule of the country. Henry VII fared little better, misjudging the situation in the shire and indeed achieving less than Edward IV had done in the 1470s, a singularly harsh view of the first Tudor.

Though essentially a study of the county gentry this book also seeks, ambitiously and controversially, to stand as a contribution to what its author calls constitutional history. She attacks the study of personalities as a way of understanding politics, insisting that it is an avenue ending in a *cul de sac* and that its great pioneer, K.B. McFarlane, only intended the study of individuals as a first step on the road to reassessing the constitution. She offers herself as a champion of the master and her work as an investigation of the political morality and ideologies of landowners in general. It is not at all clear, however, that the more we learn factually about people the less we seem to understand them (p.4), and it remains highly questionable whether historians should accept this local study rather than any other as a model of political society in totality. In her own conclusion Dr Carpenter makes it apparent that there are compelling arguments against Warwickshire being a typical county and though she advances contrary arguments, doubts must remain about conclusions that can be drawn from this region for the country as a whole.

In addition to this wish to change the agenda for the study of politics Dr Carpenter seeks to make a contribution to the problem of how to do late medieval local history (p.13) but the methodology employed here raises serious concerns, ones which must make readers cautious with regard to the conclusions drawn and future researchers wary of regarding the volume as a model to be followed. None can doubt that Dr Carpenter has laboured with a huge quantity of source material, much of it difficult to interpret, often fragmentary and incomplete. The footnotes, like the appendices, are at one level impressive but they are also extremely difficult to use, either to follow up internally or to check by returning to the sources. They are often circular, one footnote referring to another and finally ending in the largely unreferenced appendices. Many substantial manuscripts are cited without membrane numbers, and one example of citation which appears to go beyond a matter of proof reading errors is the endless confusion of Egerton Charters and Egerton Rolls in the British Library.

Dr Carpenter does not minimise the problems of her sources and is at pains to point out their inadequacies both in terms of survival and difficulty of interpretation. She also recognises the risk of undiscovered material that might alter one's conclusions and indeed the substantial collection of letters, held in the Chetham Library, of the Arneburghs of Mancetter (the manor alone receives but a single reference in the book), shows that such recognition is important. Nevertheless, Dr Carpenter insists upon a right to speculate on the grounds that it is

too limiting to confine conclusions to what can be readily demonstrated and that such a restriction biases interpretation towards more fully documented areas. She asks for a profession of faith in what she feels after living so long with the records (p.12). It is a fair request but the demands upon faith are excessive and too much rests upon speculation. Theories over reliant upon phrases like 'seems to have' or 'may well have' or 'is likely to have' with 'probably was' and 'presumably acted because' (see in particular p.127) are worrying. One might with equal validity, in the absence of evidence, write such phrases negatively and historians less certain of their thesis might prefer to emphasise what the evidence does not say. Supposition moves all too swiftly to proof. The unprovable or uncertain has a disturbing way of developing into hard fact.

It is a central plank of Dr Carpenter's thesis that Warwickshire was controlled in the 1420s and 1430s by Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick. This view of Beauchamp, however, rests unhappily too often upon suppositions. It is not immediately obvious that so important a figure would have had either the time or the inclination to seek the domination of this incoherent fragmented county or that Dr Carpenter's level headed self-important gentry would become as putty in the hands of this absentee Earl. His role as marriage broker for example is almost entirely based upon inference and will scarcely bear detailed examination. In the examples of matches supposedly made within 'the powerful and cohesive following' of the Earl (p.101-2) there is no direct evidence of Beauchamp's hand – no contract naming him as witness or feoffee; no sign of his attending the wedding; no giving of gifts to the couple.

In the example of Robert Arden, a man who was a ward in the Countess of Warwick's household in 1420-21, the Earl's influence cannot be proved and as Arden's marriage and wardship were subsequently granted to Joan, Lady Abergavenny and the marriage did not take place until 1435 it would seem safer to attribute any brokerage to the guardian. The estates of groom and bride, we are told, fitted beautifully together, reason enough surely for these level headed gentlemen to see the value of such a union for themselves. Did they need a broker? How far could the Earl have been involved anyway since he was absent in France for most of 1435? The bride was the heiress of Richard Clodesdale but the latter disappears from Carpenter's view in 1428 (p.652) seven years before the date of the marriage. Clodesdale is described as *another* Beauchamp retainer (Arden is not known to have been retained or in receipt of an annuity or even a fee), but in the appendix listing the Beauchamp affinity the former is described, perhaps more accurately, as an officer, 1417-18 (p.686). Was he in the Earl's service in 1435? To Richard Beauchamp too goes the credit for helping William Catesby's marriage to one of the Bishopestone coheiresses. William was certainly feed by Beauchamp, but in 1420-21 only, though curiously he is *not* listed as a member of the Earl's entourage (p.685)³. William Bishopestone had served in the Earl's war retinue in 1414-15, a fact in itself insufficient to admit him to the Beauchamp affinity. He is not known ever to have held a fee or annuity from the Earl though he was *grand maitre de l'hotel de la duchesse de Bedford*. More important, perhaps, on page 100, footnote 17, Carpenter uses this union as an example of connections made through the law leading to marriage. The picture is further complicated by uncertainty about the date of the marriage 'sometime before 1444', that is possibly after Warwick's death, at any rate not definitely while Catesby held his fee or

during Bishopestone's war service. Is this really the stuff of marriages made within affinities?

It is clear that Richard Beauchamp was frequently absent from England and that when he was in the country he was often preoccupied with national affairs or non-Warwickshire business. Not enough is made of this fact, though it would seem to be rather important. Certainly when the Earl resigned in 1436 as Henry VI's tutor he excused himself on the grounds that he needed more time to devote to his own affairs. In spite of keeping close contact with his ministers during his long absences in France he suffered speculation by his employees on his estates. The best known example, that by his surveyor and receiver-general, John Baysham, does not stand alone.⁵ How much more difficult would Earl Richard have found it to control a county? Dr Carpenter argues that the rule of the shire for the absent Earl fell upon the Beauchamp affinity. A number of problems arise with this group. The first and perhaps the most serious problem is the very composition of that affinity. Dr Carpenter uses the terms feed man, servant, agent, retainer, associate, annuitant without discrimination but some of these terms have come to enjoy quite specific meanings. Most historians would draw a sharp distinction between a retainer and an associate and the level of commitment by the latter to Beauchamp interests would hardly compare with that of the former. A second problem is that once a man has performed any service to Beauchamp he is counted as belonging to the affinity regardless of the length of his service. A third and very disturbing problem is Dr Carpenter's uncertainty about some members of the affinity given in Appendix 3 (pp.684-90). Henry Archer is described as a 'servant, 1407-14' but he was a life annuitant; Robert Brome is described as an 'officer, 1396 - temp. earl Rich', but he had an annuity as early as 1393; Robert Burguloyne is listed as 'agent, 1396-7' but he was feed from 1391-96; William Muston given as keeper of Countess Isabel's lands 1439-46 had been in Richard Beauchamp's inner household as early as 1428. In the main text Thomas Harewell is called one of the 'pivotal members of the affinity' (p.333) but he is given in Appendix 3 as a member of the war retinue 1417 (p.686) and seems never to have had either fee or annuity. Thomas Mollesley, though called a Warwick retainer (p.339), does not appear at all in the retinue list in Appendix 3 and nor does William Bagot, described as one of the Earl's prominent servants (p.337).

There are, moreover, specific difficulties with those who were feed by the keepers of the Beauchamp estates after the Earl's death. As Beauchamp's most recent biographer makes clear these individuals have to be treated with caution for they were often crown appointees⁶. John Beaufitz does not belong in a Beauchamp affinity list for he is only known to have been a keeper and has no genuine Beauchamp connection. Far more important and trustworthy as a source is the inquisition *post mortem* for Henry Beauchamp, Devonshire County Record Office Charter 722. From this it is clear that Thomas Holden listed by Carpenter simply as a keeper had been one of Earl Richard's life officers; and William Lucy likewise listed, had been feed for life.

With such problems as these doubts begin to arise about the affinity and its effectiveness. Much of Dr Carpenter's discussion about the affinity at work derives from deeds and their witness lists but this is extremely treacherous territory. Even if every witness could be shown to have been a Beauchamp retainer it would still not permit the historian to conclude that the deed was the result of the lord's

affinity at work rather than Dr Carpenter's level headed gentry choosing friends and neighbours as feoffees. Paucity of evidence must not stand as a pretext for intuitive guesswork and imaginative reconstructions of what *must* have happened must not be turned into facts.

The size of this book, the quantity of archival material used and the proposals which are put forward undeniably make it an important work. It is, however, seriously flawed by the use which is made of evidence and it will need to be read and cited with the greatest care.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. E. Acheson, *A Gentry Community: Leicestershire in the Fifteenth Century, c1422-c1485*, Cambridge, 1992, p.136.
2. A.F. Sinclair 'The Beauchamp Earls of Warwick in the Later Middle Ages' unpublished Ph.D.Thesis, University of London 1986, p.131.
3. *Ibid.*, p.329.
4. I am indebted to Dr Sinclair for this information.
5. Sinclair, thesis, pp.163-4, 172, 194-95.
6. *Ibid.*, p.318.

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