Edward IV: Playboy or Politician?

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Over the last five hundred years Edward IV's reputation has fluctuated considerably: the king has attracted both powerful criticism and fulsome praise.* This contrast, interestingly enough, is already to be found in the judgements of contemporaries and near-contemporaries; these, in turn, help explain the variety of verdicts brought in by historians since. In later fifteenth-century France, for instance, Edward was castigated by Philippe de Commines as an indolent and pleasure-loving prince who much preferred his mistresses to his ministers and had little taste for the arduous day-to-day business of government; yet, at home, the anonymous second continuator of the *Crowland Chronicle* simultaneously found much to admire in his behaviour as king, not least his devotion to the task of restoring the royal finances. In the later nineteenth century, Edward was condemned in no uncertain terms by the Victorian historian Bishop William Stubbs for his cruelty and immorality; while at the same time, by contrast, he was being credited with the foundation of a 'New Monarchy' in England by J.R. Green. More recently, in the later 1950s and 1960s, Edward IV's claim to be regarded as a successful ruler – the able precursor of Henry VII, indeed – seemed to have been firmly established by J.R. Lander, B.P. Wolffe and others; but, since the early 1970s when Charles Ross first sought to question Edward's newly enhanced reputation, the king's prestige has once more been considerably set back.

Historiography of Edward IV

The notion of Edward IV as a popular figure emerges very early on. Within six weeks of his seizure of the throne, a contemporary ecclesiastic reported enthusiastically:

> I am unable to declare how well the commons love and adore him [Edward IV], as if he were their God. The entire kingdom keeps holiday for the event [the battle of Towton], which seems a boon from above. Thus far, he appears to be a just prince, and to mean to amend and organise matters otherwise than has been done hitherto; so all comfort themselves with hopes of future well-being.[1]

For the monastic first continuator of the *Crowland Chronicle*, the young king, 'now in the flower of his age, tall of stature, elegant in person, of unblemished character, valiant in arms', was, indeed, an illustrious defender of the kingdom raised up by God.[2] The contemporary chronicler John Warkworth, by contrast, was notably critical of Edward IV's first decade as king and his failure to live up to men's expectations of him:

> ... when King Edward IV reigned, the people looked [for] prosperity and peace, but it came not; but one battle after another, and much trouble and great loss of goods among the common people; as first, the fifteenth of all their goods, and then a whole fifteenth, and yet at every battle to come out of their countries at their own cost; and these and such other brought England right low, and many men said that King Edward had much blame for hurting merchandise; for in his days they were not in other lands, nor within England, taken in such reputation and credence as they were before ...[3]

The most important contemporary narrative source for Edward IV's reign as a whole is the second continuation of the *Crowland Chronicle:* its author, whoever he was, probably knew the king well and believed his achievements were considerable. Not that he ducked the question of the king's excesses: on the contrary, he portrayed him as a man 'addicted to conviviality, vanity, drunkenness, extravagance and passion'. Yet he also found a good deal to admire, emphasising the attractiveness of the king's person, his remarkable memory, his orthodoxy in religion, the magnificence of his court and his application to the work of government. In his later years, according to this chronicler, Edward became 'a very wealthy prince': indeed, 'not one of his ancestors could match his remarkable achievements' in this respect. Unfortunately, with increased wealth came growing high-handedness and arrogance (most clearly demonstrated by the execution of his own brother George Duke of Clarence in 1478), as a result of which:

> ... many people deserted King Edward who was persuaded that he could rule as he pleased throughout the whole kingdom. [The King] exercised his office so haughtily thereafter that he seemed to be feared by all his subjects while he himself feared no man.[4]

The Italian Dominic Mancini, in London during Edward IV's last year and writing within a few months of the king's death, was similarly struck by the paradoxes in Edward's character and behaviour, seeing him as a man of 'gentle nature and

cheerful aspect' who was 'easy of access' and lent 'a willing ear' to complaints of injustice, yet who was also 'licentious in the extreme' and notably avaricious.[5] Clearly, then, Edward IV received a mixed reaction in contemporary sources: admiration for his financial achievements, for instance, was offset by criticism of some of his pecuniary devices and inclination to avarice; similarly, conventional disapproval of his love of pleasure and taste for debauchery sat side by side with comment on his considerable ability, capacity to get on with people and willingness (despite an evident lack of moderation in his way of life) to devote himself to the business of government when necessary.

Strangely enough, as J.R. Lander pointed out many years ago, the most influential of contemporary writers on Edward IV has probably been the often ill-informed and inaccurate Burgundian commentator Philippe de Commines.[6] He seems to have met the king at least twice (once during Edward IV's great expedition to France in 1475) and was obviously impressed by his appearance – but not by his ability to rule! Commines's portrait, in fact, is of a handsome and courageous prince but an immature and unsophisticated king who, in his early years, was dominated by Warwick the Kingmaker and, later on, preferred the role of royal playboy to that of politician. King Edward, he declared, was:

> ... very young and the handsomest of the fine princes of his generation when he achieved a mastery of all his affairs. No man ever took more delight in his pleasures than he did, especially in the ladies, feasts, banquets and hunts. [In later years] he pursued his pleasures more than before, fearing nobody, and growing very fat and gross. And in the prime of his life he reached the limits of his excesses and died suddenly [of] apoplexy.[7]

By contrast, several writers in early Tudor England believed Edward IV had been a judicious and popular king whose political achievements were certainly as worthy of note as his sexual stamina and athleticism. Most notably, Polydore Vergil and Sir Thomas More – both of whom could draw on the reminiscences of a wide circle of men who had known and served the king – painted portraits of Edward that were notably well-balanced and, seemingly, free of prejudice: both believed he had been a diligent, business-like king, who had done much to restore the kingdom to peace and prosperity, and whose rule had been both firm and popular. Polydore Vergil, for instance, tells us that:

> King Edward was very tall of personage, exceeding the stature almost of all others, of comely visage, pleasant look, broad breasted, [of] sharp wit, high courage, of passing retentive memory touching those things which he had once conceived, diligent in doing his affairs, ready in perils, earnest and horrible to the enemy, bountiful to his friends and acquaintances, most fortunate in his wars, [albeit] given to bodily lust. ...

Only towards the end of his life did Edward begin:

> ... to slide little by little into avarice, who before had used towards all men high liberality: but after all intestinal division appeased, he left a most wealthy realm abounding in all things, [and] so bound to him the people's goodwill that they mourned for him long after his death.[8]

Whatever his moral failings, echoed Sir Thomas More, during Edward IV's later years:

> ... this realm was in quiet and prosperous estate; no fear in hand nor none toward, [the] people toward the prince not in a constrained fear but in a willing and loving obedience ...[9]

Later Tudor writers such as Edward Hall and Raphael Holinshed, moreover, followed Vergil and More in presenting a generally balanced view of Edward IV as a man who managed to combine a liking for lechery with a capacity for ruling. And during the seventeenth century, too, Edward got a mainly good write-up from those relatively few authors who chose to discuss his life and reign.

Not until the eighteenth century, in fact, did Edward IV's reputation begin to sink significantly, when the French historian Rapin and the English philosopher-cum-historian David Hume – placing undue reliance on the judgements of Philippe de Commines – now sought to present Edward as a lazy, debauched, cruel and avaricious king who only roused himself from his accustomed lethargy in times of crisis. Such a view clearly appealed to many Victorians: it seemed only right to them that the career of a king so blatantly immoral as Edward IV should serve to demonstrate the incompatibility of combining a debauched private life and a successful public one. Most notably, Bishop Stubbs concluded that 'even those writers who have laboured hardest to rehabilitate him have failed to discover any conspicuous merits'. Indeed, according to Stubbs, Edward was:

> ... a man vicious beyond any king that England had seen since the days of John; and more cruel and bloodthirsty than any king she had ever known ... The death of Clarence was but the summing up and crowning act of an unparalleled list of judicial and extra-judicial cruelties which those of the next reign supplement but do not surpass.[10]

William Stubbs's contemporary John Richard Green, by contrast, believed that, although Edward was indeed 'the most pitiless among the warriors of the civil war', his 'winning manners and gay carelessness of bearing' were instrumental in securing him 'a popularity which had been denied to nobler kings'; in fact, for Green, Edward's 'indolence and gaiety' were:

> ... mere veils beneath which [he] shrouded a profound political ability ... While jesting with aldermen, or dallying with his mistresses, or idling over the new pages from the printing-press at Westminster, Edward was silently laying the foundations of an absolute rule which Henry VII did little more than develop and consolidate.[11]

Most early twentieth-century discussions of Edward IV continued to depend over much on Commines and to draw variously on the sorts of judgements

contained in Stubbs, Green and other Victorian writers.[12] The most notable work on the king, without doubt, was a massive two-volume political biography by Cora L. Scofield, published in 1923. Exceptionally detailed and scholarly, Scofield's reconstruction of the political history of Edward's reign is both accurate and reliable: unfortunately, it is cast almost entirely in narrative form and the author was too often reluctant to draw meaningful conclusions from her encyclopedic researches. Nevertheless, the frequent footnote references to it in Charles Ross's biography of the king certainly show the extent of *his* use of Scofield's magisterial narrative. Ross, indeed, specifically paid tribute to:

> ... the remarkable pioneer work of Miss C.L. Scofield. Her two-volume study [was] a piece of sustained and meticulous scholarship, which provided an exhaustive (and sometimes exhausting) but indispensable narrative of the reign which is unlikely ever to be superseded.[13]

And Scofield's judgements, when she chose to make them, do carry a good deal of conviction.[14]

Not until 1956 did J.R. Lander pen the first modern reassessment of Edward IV. Rightly identifying Philippe de Commines as primarily responsible for the 'modern legend' of Edward as a king given to lust and luxury (in preference to the hard work of ruling), Lander set out to restore his tarnished reputation by drawing, in particular, on record evidence. Despite his debaucheries, Lander concluded, Edward did apply himself closely to government business and was well-advised by experienced councillors. He took vigorous measures to curtail lawlessness, especially in the 1470s, and ended up with real financial achievements to his name: it is not surprising, declared Lander, that Edward should have gained a reputation for avarice given his 'natural capacity' for detail and his 'care in financial matters'. Combining a good deal of conventional ability with a close attention to matters of state, the evidence of his wealth, his interest in the disturbed parts of his kingdom, his extensive use of the signet and sign manual, his establishment of regional councils and his development of the royal chamber as a financial institution:

> ... go far to confirm J.R. Green's guess that Edward was a king of iron will and great fixity of purpose. These factors are enough to warrant at least a challenge to the conventional view of the reign and to suggest that we may plausibly substitute for it the picture of a strong man who began to 'break the teeth of the sinners', to restore order and even possibly financial stability, and who made easier the work of Henry VII.[15]

Historians in the late 1950s and 1960s, for the most part, showed a willingness to accept Lander's reassessment. B.P. Wolffe's studies of Yorkist and early Tudor government, in particular, served further to emphasise the notion of Edward IV as an able forerunner of Henry VII;[16] while, in 1964, S.B. Chrimes felt justified in penning a notably positive judgement on Edward in his little book *Lancastrians, Yorkists and Henry VII* as:

> ... a realist who sought after solid gains rather than vainglory. He did much to consolidate the monarchy, to rehabilitate its finances, and to restore its prestige. He stopped the process of decay in monarchy and government ... The foundations of what has commonly been called the 'New Monarchy' were laid not by Henry VII but by Edward IV.[17]

In 1970, however, Charles Ross, in a paper to a symposium of fifteenth-century historians held at University College, Cardiff, set himself to sound 'a maverick note of scepticism' concerning recent reassessments: his conclusions were published in 1972. Then, in 1974, Ross followed this up with his full-scale biography of Edward IV and this will, no doubt, long remain the standard work on him.[18] Charles Ross's Edward IV is a soundly educated, intelligent, generous, good-natured, even-tempered and courageous man, with a good deal of personal charm and affability. He is also a man with considerable confidence in himself and a natural capacity for leadership who, from the very beginning of his reign in 1461, made it clear that he had a mind and will of his own (with no intention of being dominated by Warwick the Kingmaker or anyone else). Throughout his reign he took his kingly duties seriously, kept a close personal control over the work of government and proved himself very active politically. Yet he was also notably inconsistent in his policies and not infrequently unsuccessful. His political failings, not least his impulsive marriage to Elizabeth Woodville in 1464 and subsequent encouragement to the formation of a powerful Woodville clan at court, led not only to the temporary Readeption of Henry VI in 1470/1 but, ultimately, the downfall of the Yorkist dynasty altogether. In his so-called 'Second Reign' 1471-1483, Ross saw Edward firmly pursuing the traditional ambitions of English kings on the Continent (including leading a major expedition to France in 1475) and, during his last years, busying himself with the perceived threat posed by Scotland. Eventually, in 1483, he was carried off in his prime (probably thanks to an excess of gluttony!). By then, moreover, his foreign policy was in ruins (largely due to his own mistakes), while his failure to resolve the feud between the Woodvilles and his own brother Richard Duke of Gloucester provided the opportunity for the latter's seizure of the throne in June 1483. In Ross's view, too, Edward IV was less successful in the financial sphere than J.R. Lander and B.P. Wolffe had suggested, while the financial successes he did have are largely to be explained in terms of the king's growing avarice. Again, although Edward enjoyed a greater degree of success in dealing with lawlessness than Henry VI, Ross was at pains to stress the evidence of continuing failure by his government to get to grips with the root cause of so much violence: the overmighty subject. Certainly, then, Ross's Edward IV was more fallible, more impulsive, more inconsistent, more self-interested, more lacking in principle and less far-sighted than reassessment along Lander/Wolffe lines had implied. In particular, in any comparison with Henry VII, Edward IV

appears the less successful of the two. Both Edward and Henry were usurpers, both faced repeated rebellions and both experienced serious financial problems. But, concluded Ross, Henry was more ingenious and ruthless in his methods, as well as demonstrating a consistency of purpose Edward never had.

Charles Ross's interpretation of Edward IV has certainly not gone entirely unchallenged. In particular, it has been suggested, he overplayed the king's weaknesses; his sharp criticisms of royal foreign policy in the aftermath of the 1475 expedition were less than just; and he was too ready to blame Edward for what happened after his death in April 1483.[19] Nevertheless, historians writing since 1974 have not shown the degree of enthusiasm for Edward IV that briefly prevailed in the 1960s: the superficiality of his achievements, and their dependence on his continuing at the helm, were, it has been widely felt, rapidly exposed once he was no longer there. J.R. Lander, for instance, has significantly modified his conclusions of 1956. When writing of the king again, in 1980, his verdict was decidedly mixed: Edward IV was, indeed, 'a compound of dissipation and ability'; he was 'undoubtedly opportunist and far from scrupulous'; and, although anxious from the start 'to rule upon as wide a basis of power as possible', he had no choice but to rely on the local power of magnates and put up with the less desirable consequences of such dependence. The 1460s, Lander now admitted, may have ended with Edward's rule almost as discredited as Henry VI's a decade earlier, not least as a result of the king's handling of Warwick the Kingmaker, seriously flawed as it was. Moreover although, towards the end of his life, 'the benefits of his government were recognised by his relative popularity in spite of growing resentment against financial stringency', his family, especially George Duke of Clarence ('always a nuisance' and, eventually, 'a menace'), had proved notably less than solidly supportive of his policies.[20] Then, in stimulating pamphlet on Henry VII published in 1985, Alexander Grant really put the boot in. Edward IV, he concluded, was a 'typically medieval monarch' in his approach to the fundamental problems of governing England. As a general, although he did indeed win several victories, he also twice found himself entirely outmanoeuvred by his opponents: in 1469, when he was captured, and in 1470, when he was forced to flee the country. His marriage to Elizabeth Woodville was a disastrous mistake. Moreover, although Edward was personally vigorous enough for the most part, his employment of 'regional troubleshooters' was potentially, if not actually, dangerous to his regime; his power structure was narrowly based and potentially unstable; and, even in his later years, the overmighty subject remained very much in evidence. The king was aggressive and unrealistic in his policy towards France in 1475 and Scotland towards the end of the reign; as for his fiscal achievements, although they were real enough, Edward was not as successful financially as Henry VII. In fact, according to Grant:

> ... when the differences between Edward IV's and Henry VII's kingship are put into a long-term perspective, then a case can be made for regarding Henry VII's accession as a most important turning-point after all – and certainly as a sensible point for beginning a period of English history.[21]

Edward IV in Person

Certainly, Edward IV was a striking personal contrast to his predecessor Henry VI. For a start, Edward was handsome: Henry, surely, was not and would, no doubt, have been distressed if he had been (as well as pathetically unable to use physical plus-points to good advantage in the way Edward clearly could and did). The sources are virtually unanimous on this: a German visitor Gabriel Tetzel described Edward, in 1466, as 'a handsome upstanding man'; an 'elegant figure' of a man, declared the second Crowland continuator; a 'goodly personage and very princely to behold', according to Sir Thomas More, 'of visage lovely, of body mighty, strong and clean-made'. Philippe de Commines, for all his criticisms of Edward IV as a ruler, found him 'a very handsome prince and tall': indeed, enthused the Burgundian, 'I do not remember ever having seen such a fine-looking man as he was when my lord of Warwick forced him to flee from England'. As for Dominic Mancini, he reported a justifiable streak of vanity in the king regarding his physique:

> Frequently he called to his side complete strangers, when he thought that they had come with the intention of addressing or beholding him more closely. He was wont to show himself to those who wished to watch him, and seized any opportunity [of] revealing his fine stature more protractedly and more evidently to on-lookers.[22]

Unfortunately, existing portraits of Edward IV are a disappointment: all are of late date and, as Charles Ross remarked of the most familiar of them, it 'may be doubted whether Edward's contemporaries would have recognised such bovine and lack-lustre features'. The king's great height is certainly not in doubt: when Edward's skeleton was measured in 1789 it was found to be both 6 feet 3½ inches in length and broad in proportion. Moreover, he clearly took a good deal of care when it came to the adornment of his magnificent frame (as his household accounts reveal): a list of 1480, for instance, shows him in possession of twenty-six gowns, doublets and jackets (among them garments in rich materials like cloth-of-gold and furred with ermine and sable), as well as hats, bonnets, forty-eight handkerchiefs and several dozen pairs of boots, shoes and slippers; as for jewellery, a bill presented by 'Cornelius the goldsmith' in 1478 recorded gold rings, gold flowers and even a gold tooth-pick (all lavishly garnished with rubies, sapphires, diamonds and other precious stones).[23] The second Crowland continuator recorded that,

during Christmas festivities at court in 1482, the king was:

> ... very often dressed in a variety of the costliest clothes very different in style from what used to be seen hitherto in our time. The sleeves of the robes hung full in the fashion of the monastic frock and the insides were lined with such sumptuous fur that, when turned back over the shoulders, they displayed the prince ... like a new and incomparable spectacle before the onlookers.[24]

No doubt it was on occasions like this, too, that Edward was liable to indulge to the full his seemingly voracious appetite for food and drink. Indeed, so Dominic Mancini learned, it was even his habit 'to take an emetic for the delight of gorging his stomach once more'. For this reason, Mancini added, and 'for the ease which was especially dear to him after his recovery of the crown' in 1471, he grew 'fat in the loins whereas previously he had been not only tall but rather lean and very active'.[25]

Virtually all narrative sources allude to Edward IV's prodigious sexual appetite (with varying degrees of circumstantial detail and moral judgement). Most nearly contemporary, it seems, is the London chronicle usually known as *Gregory's Chronicle,* whose author remarks that 'men marvelled that our sovereign lord was so long without any wife' – Edward did not marry until 1464, when he was twenty-two years old – and 'were ever feared that he had not been chaste in his living'. No doubt their suspicions, even of the young Edward, were entirely justified! According to the second continuator of the *Crowland Chronicle* he was much given to passion, while Polydore Vergil judged him a man 'who would readily cast an eye upon young ladies'.[26] Philippe de Commines, of course, was always quick to criticise Edward IV's excessive devotion to pleasure and its implications: in the process, however, he does provide us with a couple of nice anecdotes. Reviewing the reasons why the city of London opened its gates to Edward in April 1471, he mentions 'several noble women and wives of rich citizens, with whom [the king] had been closely and secretly acquainted, [who] won over their husbands and relatives to his cause'; moreover, when Edward met Louis XI of France as Picquigny in 1475, Commines reports the French king as telling Edward that:

> ... he ought to come to Paris, [where] he would dine him with the ladies, and [also provide] the cardinal of Bourbon as [his] confessor, since the latter would very willingly absolve him from sin if he should have committed any ...[27]

In similar vein, there are the remarks in the *Great Chronicle of London* concerning Edward IV's personal efforts to raise cash in the early 1470s for the imminent invasion of France. As the king 'passed by a town in Suffolk', the chronicler tells us, he:

> ... called before him among others a rich widow and asked her what her

> goodwill should be towards his great charge. [When] she liberally granted him £10, he thanked her and after took her [to] him and kissed her; the which kiss she accepted so kindly that, for that great bounty and kind deed, [she decided] he should have £20 instead.[28]

Dominic Mancini and Sir Thomas More are, perhaps, the most interesting sources for Edward IV's proclivities and tastes. According to Mancini, he 'pursued with no discrimination the married and unmarried, the noble and lowly'; moreover, although 'he took none by force', it was said of him that:

> ... he had been most insolent to numerous women after he had seduced them, for, as soon as he grew weary of dalliance, he gave up the ladies much against their will [to] courtiers.

Indeed, Mancini suggests, Edward had 'many promoters and companions of his vices', most notably the queen's two sons by her first husband (Thomas Marquess of Dorset and Richard Grey) and her brother (Sir Edward Woodville); as for the king's closest friend and most loyal supporter William Lord Hastings, not only was he 'the author of the sovereign's public policy' but also 'the accomplice and partner of his privy pleasures'.[29] Sir Thomas More was certainly forthright on the subject of Edward's peccadilloes. The king's 'greedy appetite was insatiable', he declared; indeed, it was:

> ... everywhere all over the realm intolerable. For no woman was there anywhere, rich or poor, young or old, whom he set his eyes upon [but he would] have her, to the great destruction of many a good woman ...

As for the king's regular mistresses, they were particularly well chosen to suit Edward's varying moods. 'The king would say that he had three concubines', so More tell us, who:

> ... in three diverse properties diversely excelled. One the merriest, another the wiliest, the third the holiest harlot in the realm, as one whom no man could get out of the church lightly but it were to his bed.

More particularly dwells on Mistress Shore: the 'merriest' of the three, he reports, in whom the king took 'special pleasure', for 'many he had but her he loved'. The saintly Sir Thomas cannot resist drawing a moral, however, not least since Mistress Shore was still alive at the time he was writing. It is certainly a poignant picture of the former courtesan:

> Proper she was and fair [with] nothing in her body that you would have changed ... Thus say they that knew her in her youth: [but] some that now see her, for yet she lives, deem her never to have been well visaged. [For] now she is old, lean, withered and dried up, nothing left but shrivelled skin and hard bone. And yet being even such, whosoever well regards her visage might guess and imagine which parts, how filled, would make it a fair face.[30]

In view of all this, it is a puzzle that Edward IV acknowledged so few bastards: if Henry I could clock up at least twenty, why did Edward only manage two or three? The answer may well be that there were others who remained unacknowledged (perhaps because the king never knew of their existence!). And could it be that Edward was even more catholic in his sexual tastes than contemporaries and near-contemporaries were prepared to disclose? Anxious to win the support of the diehard Lancastrian Henry Beaufort Duke of Somerset, so *Gregory's Chronicle* tells us, Edward:

> ... made much of him; insomuch that he lodged with the king in his own bed many nights ... The king loved him well, but the duke thought treason under fair cheer and words ...[31]

It is certainly tempting to believe that Edward IV was, indeed, prepared to cast convention utterly to the winds (as his predecessors William Rufus and Edward II probably had) but what we may, in fact, have here is Edward in chivalric rather than sexual mode, making a determined (if futile) effort to resolve the long-standing feud between the York and Beaufort families. The king clearly *did* defy convention, however, by his marriage to Elizabeth Woodville in 1464: moreover, the indications that it was, as Charles Ross believed, 'the impulsive love-match of an impetuous young man' are compelling. A Milanese envoy reported, on 5 October 1464, that King Edward 'has determined to take the daughter of my Lord Rivers, a widow with two children, having long loved her it appears'. The monastic first continuator of the *Crowland Chronicle* comments that the king 'prompted by the ardour of youth and relying entirely on his own choice, without consulting the nobles of the kingdom, privately married the widow of a certain knight'; Commines believed it was a love-match; and Vergil remarks that Edward was led into marriage 'by blind affection and not by the rule of reason'.[32] As early as 1468, however, it was being alleged on the Continent that Edward only reluctantly married Elizabeth when he found there was no other way he could persuade her to succumb to his sexual advances![33] Dominic Mancini certainly does full justice to this splendid tale. When 'the king first fell in love with her beauty of person and charm of manner', he tells us, he found that:

> ... he could not corrupt her virtue by gifts or menaces. The story runs that, when Edward placed a dagger at her throat to make her submit to his passion, she remained unperturbed and determined to die rather live unchastely with the king. Whereupon Edward coveted her much the more, and he judged the lady worthy to be a royal spouse who could not be overcome in her constancy even by an infatuated king.[34]

Much the same story is to be found in Sir Thomas More. Elizabeth Woodville, he reported:

> ... perceiving the king's appetite, virtuously denied him. But that she did so [well] that she rather kindled his desire than quenched it. And

> finally, after many a meeting, much wooing and many great promises, she well espied the king's affection towards her greatly increased. [In] conclusion she showed him plainly that she thought herself too good to be his concubine. The king [therefore] determined in all possible haste to marry her.[35]

And, although legends of this kind inevitably grow with the telling, it is by no means entirely implausible.

Clearly, love and sex meant a great deal to Edward IV: not so religion, it would seem. The second Crowland continuator, it is true, does tell us that the king was:

> ... a catholic of the strongest faith, the sternest enemy of heretics, the kindliest patron of wise and learned men and of clerics, the most devoted venerator of the Church's sacraments, the most penitent of men for all his sins.[36]

Yet this sounds suspiciously stereotyped and it is more significant, perhaps, that most narrative sources make little or no reference to royal religious practices and interests; moreover, evidence such as the king's frequently political appointments to high ecclesiastical office and notably sparse personal patronage of things religious suggest he was, at best, only conventionally pious. He certainly did not have either the nauseating religiosity of Henry VI, the narrowly orthodox and morally censorious religious interests of Richard III or the obviously sincere religious devotion of his mother Cicely Duchess of York. Nor can Edward be regarded as an intellectual or man of culture (as were, for instance, his aristocratic contemporaries George Neville Archbishop of York and John Tiptoft Earl of Worcester). Intelligent he probably was and, very handy from a public relations standpoint, possessed of a notably retentive memory, as the Crowland chronicler noted. Yet, though the king could both read and write English and French, what we know of his library suggests his reading habits were very conventional; he had no interest in contemporary humanism or, seemingly, the new art of printing; and, unlike his predecessor Henry VI, he had no enthusiasm for education. Nor was he a great patron of learning and the arts unless we include his undoubted interest in building. Even here, though, what we have demonstrated most clearly is his liking for a comfortable lifestyle: the magnificent St. George's chapel at Windsor apart (and it was primarily intended as a spectacular monument to the house of York and repository for the king's own mortal remains), most of his architectural patronage was directed towards improving living conditions in his favourite residences in south-eastern England (such as Eltham palace). Nevertheless, the second Crowland continuator concluded that:

> ... in the collection of gold and silver vessels, tapestries and highly precious ornaments, both regal and religious, in the building of castles,

> colleges and other notable places, and in the acquisition of new lands and possessions, not one of his ancestors could match his remarkable achievements.[37]

Edward IV the Politician

As in person, so as a politician, Edward IV was certainly a striking contrast to Henry VI and, in almost every way, more cut out for the tricky task of ruling England in the fifteenth century. Henry VI had been excessively religious, obsessionally moral and fatally prone to fall under the influence of ambitious and grasping councillors; Edward IV was, at best, only conventionally devout, not even conventionally moral and, in all probability, very much in control of government from the very beginning of the reign. Perhaps the most obvious contrast between the governments of Henry VI and Edward IV, in fact, lay in the increase in the amount of personal activity by the king after 1461. Late Lancastrian government had suffered badly from the personal incapacity of Henry VI (particularly following his mental collapse in 1453): Edward IV, a man of considerable self-confidence and vigour (when he chose to exercise it!) can be found regularly presiding over meetings of the council, appearing in parliament from time to time, undertaking judicial progresses and, seemingly, taking personal responsibility for policy-making from the very start of the reign. Edward IV, like Henry VII later on, clearly laid a good deal of stress as well on the visible trappings of kingship: in particular, he felt that men should be impressed by the magnificence of the royal court and, as a result, devoted much attention and cash to it. In 1466 Gabriel Tetzel concluded that Edward IV had 'the most splendid court that could be found in all Christendom'; while the second continuator of the *Crowland Chronicle*, writing of the king's later years, commented:

> In those days you might have seen a royal Court such as befitted a mighty kingdom, filled with riches and men from almost every nation ...[38]

For most of the 1460s Edward IV was in pretty dire straits financially while, towards the end of his reign, he was accused of avarice: yet, throughout, he spent lavishly on his court.

Edward IV's first decade as king shows him at both his best and his worst. Militarily, his victories at the battles of Mortimer's Cross and Towton in 1461 were crucial in establishing him on the throne (whereas Warwick the Kingmaker lost the second battle of St. Albans); the defeat of the Lincolnshire rebellion in March 1470 owed much to the king's own energy and speed of action; and the Barnet/Tewkesbury campaign of March to May 1471 was a triumph for him and ensured his retention of the throne for the rest of his life. Edward IV was no military genius but, when he put his mind to it and shook off his distaste for the rigours of campaigning, he was probably as good as any English commander in the

Wars of the Roses. Yet his failure to take a more active role in countering Lancastrian resistance in the early 1460s (especially in the north-east of England), however compelling the political reasons for it, probably helps explain why it was so protracted; while, in the summer of 1469, his extraordinarily sluggish response to the Neville-inspired rebellion of Robin of Redesdale (in Yorkshire) resulted in the debacle of Edgecote and the king's own short-lived imprisonment by Warwick the Kingmaker.

Politically, the pattern is similar. Edward IV was, by temperament, generous to proved supporters and conciliatory towards former opponents. Polydore Vergil, indeed, relates how the king:

> ... provoked the people generally to love him by all kind of liberality, giving to the nobility most large gifts; and moreover, to gain universally the favour of all sorts, he used towards every man of high and low degree more than meet familiarity, which trade of life he never changed ...[39]

By contrast, though, it was reported from Norfolk in the *Paston Letters* in July 1461 that the common people:

> ... grudge and say [that] the king receives such of this country [as] have been his great enemies and oppressors of the commons, [while] such as have assisted his highness be not rewarded.[40]

Edward certainly did reward with office, land and his personal confidence men whom he felt he could trust, and sometimes this paid off admirably. William Lord Herbert, for instance, not only brought the troublesome Wales to heel but also paid the price of loyalty in 1469 when he was peremptorily executed on the orders of Warwick the Kingmaker. William Lord Hastings, similarly, was built up to good effect in the midlands, proved notably loyal to Edward IV thereafter through thick and thin and, eventually, was eliminated by Richard Duke of Gloucester in June 1483 precisely because he could be depended upon to resist the duke's seizure of the throne. Yet John Tiptoft Earl of Worcester, another of the so-called 'New Yorkists', proved a disaster: such was the reputation of the 'Butcher of England' by the autumn of 1470 that his execution was one of the few undeniably popular acts of the Readeption government. The king's attempts to win over stalwart Lancastrians, too, could all too easily prove counter-productive: the Courtenay, Hungerford and De Vere families were singularly unimpressed; Sir Ralph Percy turned out to be a notably slippery customer; as for Henry Beaufort Duke of Somerset, made so much of by Edward in 1463, that 'false duke and traitor' (in the words of *Gregory's Chronicle*) basely deserted the Yorkist cause before the year was out.[41]

In 1464 Edward IV secretly married Elizabeth Woodville. Perhaps it was indeed a love-match made with no thought for the political consequences; perhaps Edward, only too well aware of the results of Henry VI's marriage to the strong-

minded French princess Margaret of Anjou, deliberately (and most unusually) sought and won an English wife on his own initiative; or, perhaps, recognising the importance of providing for the succession to the throne, he eagerly seized the opportunity to wed an attractive woman who, although not a virgin, had certainly proved her capacity to hear children. As it turned out, however, the king's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville proved a major political blunder, as contemporary and near-contemporary sources make abundantly clear: the 'greater part of the lords and the people in general seem very much dissatisfied', reported a Milanese envoy on 5 October 1464; the marriage 'has greatly offended the people of England', echoed another; and, according to the Burgundian Jean de Wavrin, the royal council expressed the opinion that Elizabeth was 'not his match, however good and however fair she might be, and he [the king] must know well that she was no wife for a prince such as himself'.[42] Warwick the Kingmaker, in particular, may well have been 'greatly displeased' (as John Warkworth put it) when he learned of the marriage: he was certainly unhappy at the advancement of the Woodville family which followed. Warwick had no real grounds for complaint at his *own* treatment by Edward IV in the 1460s. Nevertheless, his growing dissatisfaction is all too evident: probably first sparked by the king's marriage, it was further stimulated by the marital successes of the queen's family (not least since Edward refused to sanction marriages for either of Warwick's daughters with either of his brothers) and finally brought to the surface by the snub he (perhaps rightly) perceived in the king's decision to conclude a Burgundian marriage alliance in 1468 despite the earl's own consistent advocacy of an Anglo-French pact. The second Crowland continuator, indeed, specifically identified disagreement over foreign policy as the truly authentic key to Warwick's behaviour in the later 1460s. The outcome of all this, of course, was Warwick's repudiation of Edward IV, his unholy alliance with Margaret of Anjou (surely the wily Louis XI of France alone could have pulled this one off!), the surrealistic Readeption of Henry VI in 1470 and, eventually, Edward's classic resurgence and triumph at Barnet and Tewkesbury in 1471.[43]

Edward IV's real achievements in politics and government, such as they were, belong to his 'Second Reign' 1471-1483. As in 1461, so in 1471, the king was generous in his treatment of former opponents: only thirteen individuals were attainted (and, of these, at least six were already dead), while many others received pardons. Rewards for those who had proved loyal during the crisis of 1469-1471 (for instance, William Lord Hastings and the king's younger brother Richard Duke of Gloucester) were appropriately lavish; even George Duke of Clarence (who had backed the Readeption and only rejoined Edward shortly before Barnet) received more generous treatment than he deserved. Clarence's chronic inability to recognise how lucky he had been and his continued determination to prove himself a thorn in the king's flesh eventually brought him a well-earned trial and execution

in 1478; Richard of Gloucester, by contrast, served Edward loyally and effectively during his 'Second Reign' (even succeeding, remarkably enough, in bringing a degree of order and stability to the north of England). The diehard Lancastrian John de Vere Earl of Oxford failed dismally in his Cornish adventure in 1473; thereafter, Edward's possession of the throne was more or less unchallenged. During these years, too, the king did make real progress in restoring the authority of the crown and he did so largely through the medium of his household (although J.R. Green's notion that he established a 'New Monarchy' in England cannot be sustained). As the second Crowland continuator noted, he tackled in particular the problem of royal insolvency (which had bedevilled government in the 1450s and 1460s) and, there is no doubt, he enjoyed considerable success here (even if not as much as has sometimes been claimed).[44] Several commentators, in fact, accused Edward of growing avarice and high-handedness in his last years amounting almost to despotism. Dominic Mancini, for instance, believed that by 1483 the king had:

> ... gathered great treasures, whose size had not made him more generous or prompt in disbursement than when he was poor, so that now his avarice was publicly proclaimed.

The Crowland chronicler commented critically on Edward's increasingly tyrannical behaviour, and reputation, following Clarence's death; while Polydore Vergil, in early Tudor times, similarly remarked that the king:

> ... being delivered from all care of wars and civil seditions, [began] to mark more severely the offences of noblemen, and to be more covetous in gathering of money, by reason whereof many were persuaded in their opinions that he would from thenceforth prove a hard and severe prince ...[45]

Certainly, the crown's income, particularly from land and customs duties, did increase significantly in Edward's later years (partly reflecting the king's own efforts, as in the development of the royal chamber as a financial organ more efficient than the Exchequer, partly as a result of an upturn in the country's economic fortunes), and this no doubt helps explain, too, why he had so little trouble with parliament (which scarcely met in the last decade of the reign, anyway). Moreover, although the evidence has as yet hardly begun to be investigated in depth, there can be little doubt that England was less lawless in 1483 than it had been in 1461. Nevertheless, indications of growing high-handedness cannot easily be set on one side; nor can the criticisms of Edward's foreign policy post-1475 (which left England isolated and, perhaps, on the brink of a new continental war by 1483). The Crowland continuator's strictures on the 1482 expedition to Scotland may well be overdrawn,[46] and strong government almost invariably brings charges of despotism in its wake: yet, on balance, a distinctly

mixed verdict on Edward IV's 'Second Reign' seems appropriate.

What of the king's political legacy? Sir Thomas More believed that Edward IV's failure to resolve magnate factionalism opened the door to Richard of Gloucester's usurpation; while Colin Richmond has advanced the interesting argument that the outcome of the 1475 expedition to France (which could have united Englishmen in a common cause *à la* Henry V) made it all the more possible that Edward's greatest subjects *might* turn against each other in 1483.[47] Certainly, the king must bear at least part of the responsibility for what happened after his premature death. The queen, in all probability, was indeed a force to be reckoned with at court (and, perhaps, an unpopular one at that); there is considerable evidence of a growth of Woodville power and influence in the regions during Edward's later years (notably Anthony Earl Rivers in Wales and the Marches and Thomas Marquess of Dorset in the south-west); and the king's eldest son and heir (who was, of course, still a minor in 1483) had long resided at Ludlow in a Woodville-dominated environment. At the same time the king's only surviving brother Richard of Gloucester (who, arguably, had the best claim to be protector in 1483) enjoyed enormous power in the north of England. Evidence of aristocratic divisions cannot easily be argued away and Dominic Mancini, for one, clearly believed that Edward IV bequeathed a court and council which were seriously split.[48] Gloucester may well have disapproved of his brother's court and disliked the influence exercised there by Queen Elizabeth Woodville and her supporters; William Lord Hastings, long the most trustworthy and intimate of Edward's men, was on bad terms with Thomas Marquess of Dorset; and the loyalty of Henry Stafford Duke of Buckingham, a powerful but thwarted outsider, might easily crack if he detected an alternative road to advancement. Yet historians need to be careful here. As Rosemary Horrox has recently suggested, Mancini may have exaggerated the influence of the Woodvilles in political circles, underestimated the degree to which (even before 1483) Richard of Gloucester was a force to be reckoned with in London, and misread the significance of the council's deliberations in the weeks following Edward IV's death.[49] Despite everything, there might have been a smooth succession in 1483 – as there had been after Henry V's sudden death in 1422 – but for Richard of Gloucester. It was his behaviour in 1483 and after – whatever his motivations (and historians will never agree on them!) – that provided the scenario which eventually brought the Yorkist dynasty down.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

* This paper is an expanded and footnoted version of a lecture I have given, at various times, to Historical Association meetings, student societies and the Yorkshire branch of the Richard III Society. It also reflects many years spent teaching Edward IV to final year BA and MA students at the University of Huddersfield.

1. Nicholas O'Flanagan Bishop of Elphin to Pigello Portinari, manager of the Milan branch of the Medici bank, 14 April 1461: B. Wilkinson, *Constitutional History of England in the Fifteenth Century,* London 1964, p. 173.
2. H.T. Riley, ed., *Ingulph's Chronicle of the Abbey of Croyland,* London 1854, pp. 423-24.
3. J.O. Halliwell, ed., *J. Warkworth's Chronicle of the First Thirteen Years of the Reign of King Edward IV,* London 1839, p. 12, reprinted in *Three Chronicles of the Reign of Edward IV,* Gloucester 1988.
4. N. Pronay and J. Cox, eds., *The Crowland Chronicle Continuations 1459-1486,* Gloucester 1986, esp. pp. 139, 147, 149, 151, 153.
5. C.A.J. Armstrong, ed., *The Usurpation of Richard III,* Gloucester 1984, esp. pp. 65, 67.
6. J.R. Lander, 'Edward IV: the modern legend and a revision', *History,* vol. 41 (1956), reprinted in *Crown and Nobility 1450-1509,* London 1976, esp. pp. 161-62.
7. M. Jones, ed., *Philippe de Commynes: Memoirs,* London 1972, esp. pp. 413-14.
8. H. Ellis, ed., *Three Books of Polydore Vergil's English History,* London 1844, esp. p. 172.
9. R.S. Sylvester ed., *Sir Thomas More: The History of King Richard III,* Yale 1963, esp. p. 4.
10. W. Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England,* vol. 3, Oxford 1878, esp. pp. 225-26.
11. J.R. Green, *A Short History of the English People,* London 1874, esp. p. 286.
12. Kenneth Vickers, for instance, had little doubt in 1913 that Edward was an able man with a remarkable memory and considerable achievements to his name; but he was also, Vickers concluded, selfish, feared by his subjects and even despotic in his later years: K.H. Vickers, *England in the Later Middle Ages,* London 1913, esp. pp. 480, 481, 483, 486. As late as 1952, A.R. Myers's picture of Edward IV as tall, handsome, affable and pleasure-loving, owing his throne largely to his cousin Warwick the Kingmaker and very much dependent on him in his early years, still reflected the influence of Commines; yet, and here J.R. Green's conclusions are mirrored, beneath his pleasure-loving exterior there was 'hidden the ruthlessness of a Renaissance despot and the strong-willed ability of a statesman': A.R. Myers, *England in the Late Middle Ages,* Harmondsworth 1952, esp. pp. 112-13.
13. C. Ross, *Edward IV,* London 1974, p. xiii.
14. C.L. Scofield, *The Life and Reign of Edward the Fourth,* 2 vols., London 1923, esp. vol. 1, pp. 281-3, 354-5, vol. 2, pp. 2-3, 160-61, 364-65.
15. Lander, 'Edward IV' esp. pp. 169-70.
16. B.P. Wolffe, 'The Management of English Royal Estates under the Yorkist Kings', *English Historical Review,* vol. 71 (1956); 'Henry VII's Land Revenues and Chamber Finance', *English Historical Review,* vol. 79 (1964); *Yorkist and Early Tudor Government 1461-1509,* Historical Association pamphlet, 1966; *The Crown Lands 1461-1536,* London 1970.
17. S.B. Chrimes, *Lancastrians, Yorkists and Henry VII,* London 1964, pp. 111, 125.
18. C.D. Ross, 'The Reign of Edward IV', in S.B. Chrimes, C.D. Ross and R.A. Griffiths, eds., *Fifteenth-Century England 1399-1509,* Manchester 1972, and *Edward IV.* See also K.R. Dockray, 'Charles Ross 1924-1986: An Appreciation', *Medieval History,* vol. 2 no. 1 (1992).
19. Among reviewers of Ross's biography, B.P. Wolffe was perhaps the most critical, considering the author both unduly played down the king's achievements and exaggerated his degree of culpability for events in the spring of 1483 culminating in his brother's seizure of the throne; Delloyd Guth believed Ross chanced his arm rather rashly (given the inadequate evidence available) when criticising Edward IV's

policies in the sphere of law and order; and Colin Richmond wondered if, in so ruthlessly revealing the king's inconsistencies and frailties, Ross might be guilty of overplaying his weaknesses: *English Historical Review*, vol. 91 (1976); *History*, vol. 61 (1976); *Historical Journal*, vol. 18 (1975). On the other hand, Wolffe allowed that Ross *did* effectively demonstrate the depth and extent of political anarchy 1460-1471; Guth warmly commended 'a political biography in the best tradition of K.B. McFarlane', its author thoroughly informative and readable, 'infusing life and meaning' where C.L. Scofield had 'regularly foundered in a wealth of facts and episodes'; and Richmond considered Ross's judgement 'hardly to be faulted', particularly when analysing the tensions of later fifteenth-century political society..

20. J.R. Lander, *Government and Community: England 1450-1509*, London 1980, esp. pp. 307-309.
21. A. Grant, *Henry VII, London 1985, esp. p. 2.*
22. Ross, *Edward IV*, p. 10; Crowland, p. 149; More, p. 4; Commines, pp. 413-14; Mancini, p.5.
23. Ross, *Edward IV*, esp. pp. 10, 257-64.
24. Crowland, p. 149.
25. Mancini, p. 67.
26. J. Gairdner, ed., *Historical Collections of a Citizen of London* (for *Gregory's Chronicle*), London 1876, p. 226; Crowland, p. 153; Vergil, p. 117.
27. Commines, pp. 194, 258-59.
28. A.H. Thomas and I.D. Thornley, eds, *The Great Chronicle of London*, London 1938, reprinted Gloucester 1983, p. 223.
29. Mancini, pp. 67, 69.
30. More, pp. 55-56, 72. Kit Hardwick has plausibly argued that Mistress Shore may well have been one of More's informants, particularly regarding the king's sexual liaisons: 'Edward IV: Master of Men, Servant of Women', *Medieval History*, vol. 2 no. 2 (1992), pp. 101-2.
31. Gregory, p. 219.
32. Ross, *Edward IV*, p. 86; Wilkinson, *Constitutional History*, p. 178; *Ingulph* (see n. 2) p. 439; Commines p. 353; Vergil, p. 117.
33. Ross, *Edward IV*, p. 87.
34. Mancini, p. 61.
35. More, p. 61.
36. Crowland, p. 151.
37. Ross, *Edward IV*, esp. ch. 11; *Crowland*, pp. 153, 139. For Edward IV as a book collector, and the significance of his collection, see A.F. Sutton and L. Visser-Fuchs, 'Choosing a Book in Late Fifteenth-century England and Burgundy', in C. Barron and N. Saul, eds., *England and the Low Countries in the Late Middle Ages*, pp. 61-98.
38. Ross, *Edward IV*, p. 259; Crowland, p. 149.
39. Vergil, p. 116.
40. John Berney to John Paston, 16 July 1461: J. Gairdner, ed., *The Paston Letters*, rep. Gloucester 1983, vol. 3, p. 470.
41. Gregory, p. 221.
42. Wilkinson, *Constitutional History*, p. 178; Ross, *Edward IV*, p. 89. For a more sympathetic view of Elizabeth Woodville than that suggested by so many contemporary and near-contemporary commentators, see A.F. Sutton and L. Visser-Fuchs, '"A Most Benevolent Queen": Queen Elizabeth Woodville's Reputation, her Piety and her Books', *The Ricardian*, vol. 10, no. 129 (June 1995), pp. 214-45.

43. Warkworth, p. .3; Crowland, p. 115. For a rather different assessment of Warwick the Kingmaker's political role and behaviour *c.* 1461-1471, see M. Hicks, 'Warwick – the Reluctant Kingmaker', *Medieval History*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1991).
44. Crowland, p. 139.
45. Mancini, p. 67; Crowland, p. 147; Vergil, p. 168.
46. Crowland, p. 149.
47. More, pp. 9-11, 15-17; C. Richmond, '1485 and all that, or what was going on at the battle of Bosworth?', in P.W. Hammond, ed, *Richard III: Loyalty, Lordship and Law*, London 1986, esp. pp. 188-91.
48. Mancini, pp. 71, 73, 75.
49. R. Horrox, *Richard III: A Study of Service*, Cambridge 1989, esp. pp. 90-93; see also A.J. Pollard, 'Dominic Mancini's narrative of the events of 1483', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, vol. 38 (1994), pp. 152-63.