

The Memoir of Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby by John Britton: An Early Exercise in Historical Research

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The existence, in Cambridge University Library, of an unpublished and little-known manuscript by John Britton, the topographer and antiquary, on the life of the Lady Margaret is of considerable interest for the unusual view taken of its subject's character and motivation.¹ The manuscript, only briefly touched upon in Britton's *Autobiography*,² was brought to my attention by its mention in *The King's Mother* by M.K. Jones and M.G. Underwood whose Introduction discusses the historiography of their subject.³

John Britton (1771–1857) was born in Kington St Michael, near Chippenham, Wiltshire; he has been called the spiritual founder of the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society. From humble beginnings Britton achieved national importance as a topographer and antiquary. He started work at the age of sixteen in London, being in turn a cellarman, clerk, compiler of a song-book and a dramatic miscellany. Subsequently, he was commissioned (with Edward Brayley), to compile *The Beauties of Wiltshire* (1800), to which he also supplied drawings and water colours. This was followed by *Architectural Antiquities of Great Britain* (1805–14), of which a later fifth volume was a pioneer work 'containing the first attempt at a coherent history of English Gothic architecture'.⁴ His most important project, *The Cathedral Antiquities of Great Britain* (1814–33), can be seen as a precursor to Pevsner.

In Britton's *Autobiography*, part of which was written by his secretary and amanuensis, T.E. Jones, the following passage occurs:

When a small premium was offered, some years ago for a biographical memoir of the Countess of Richmond, mother of King Henry the Seventh, Mr. Britton devoted much time to the subject, and collected a large mass of information respecting that remarkable personage; but his memoir was not finished by the stipulated time; and the manuscript remains imperfect.⁵

Apart from *The King's Mother* mentioned above, this is the only reference traced about Britton's aborted work on Margaret Beaufort. Whether or not it is completely accurate that Britton was too late for the stipulated closing date, it is a fact that Caroline Halsted's essay on Lady Margaret won the prize awarded by the directors of the Gresham Commemoration of Queen Victoria's accession. Halsted was motivated in her work by the idea of a young Queen Victoria 'to whom the females of Britain look with duty and affection, with pride as women, with devotion as subjects';⁶ Britton, however, was prompted in his Memoir by different considerations.

The accession of a new and youthful sovereign, Victoria, during a period of social change had stimulated a widespread hope that the faded reputation of the crown might be restored after the disrepute into which it had fallen under George IV — a reputation only partially salvaged during the short reign of his brother, William IV. While, however, there was almost universal goodwill towards Queen Victoria, there was also a measure of disquiet as to whether the accession of a young and relatively-untried girl would be successful. The significance of Margaret Beaufort for this dawning Victorian age would not have been lost on informed observers of Britain's history. As Caroline Halsted wrote in her preface:

The Crown of England after a lapse of glorious years again encircles the brow of a female Sovereign. Through few Queens have swayed the sceptre of these realms, they have all been descended from Margaret Beaufort . . .⁷

For John Britton, Lady Margaret also represented a significant figure who, through her son Henry VII, had presaged a similar period of new beginnings.

The present writer finds it a matter of considerable interest why Britton should have chosen to spend considerable time and effort in amassing a large amount of material regarding the countess of Richmond and Derby, whose life and concerns would seem at first sight to have been an unsympathetic

subject. Notwithstanding the mention of a 'small premium' being offered for such a memoir — possibly a temptation for one who was never a wealthy man — there must have been other considerations to induce him to take the trouble to consult several eminent authorities, and to undertake considerable research on a subject somewhat removed from his usual sphere. Furthermore, it was a subject in which research at that time would have been difficult.

It may be, that Britton as a 'modern' Protestant, was influenced in his considerations by the passions which had been aroused by the publication of Augustus Welby Pugin's book *Contrasts* in 1836, in which the eminent architect and designer had celebrated his conversion to Catholicism. This event, in the wake of the Catholic Emancipation Act some years earlier, and the Oxford Movement's attempt to revive Catholic traditions and practice in the English Church, were not developments which someone of Britton's background and 'touchy' susceptibilities could easily accept. Britton had already been associated with the elder Pugin in a collaboration on *The Architectural Antiquities of Normandy* and he must have been surprised and disturbed by the famous son's sudden religious metamorphosis.⁸ Feelings at the time were epitomised by the following verse:

Song on Pugin's 'Contrasts'.

Oh ! have you seen the work just out
By Pugin, the great builder ?
'Architectural Contrast' he's made out
Poor Protestants to bewilder.⁹

Britton, just as much as the younger Pugin, was often 'a slave to passionate excitement',¹⁰ and this publicity for Catholicism and its practitioners past and present must have seemed to him a further example of an insidious trend toward a glorification of all things Romanist, and thus a movement to be resisted by any means to hand. His contribution, would, he perhaps hoped, be a biography of Lady Margaret which would offer an opportunity for a counterblast to such Catholic celebrations.

Britton began work on his Memoir in about October 1838, and in his preliminary research appears first to have contacted Henry (later Sir Henry) Cole, who had recently been appointed by the master of the rolls. The Public Record Office was set up as a result of the 1838 Act, and Cole became one of four assistant-keepers.¹¹ Some of the difficulties confronting researchers like Britton, in those days, can be seen from Coles letter in reply to Britton's enquiry:

I am sorry I can give you no information about the Countess of Richmond. There is nothing about her in this Office to my knowledge. I learn also that they have nothing about her at the State Paper Office. The Chapter House I think may possess something which Sir F. Palgrave will know about. There may be something too, in the Exchequer Remembrancers Office, but if there be, it will be difficult to get at it, as the documents for that period are not arranged — of course the Catalogues at the Museums you have consulted.

When our new Record establishment is settled, I hope enquiries like yours will be rendered much easier to the searchers. You know all the Record Business by an act passed last Session was transferred to the charge of the Master of the Rolls who has powers to abolish Fees etc.

Access to the records of government and the central law courts, for the ordinary researcher, was not as we take for granted today. The Public Record Office in 1838 was, in fact, largely a creation of lawyers for their own convenience.¹² Many calendars of important records which make research so much easier today were not to be published until much later in the century, and a large amount of significant material such as the various letters and papers dealing with the Tudor and earlier periods had not then been either sorted or collated.¹³ Many offices in which records were kept were ill-organised for research, and enquirers could be actively deterred by expensive fees, or by uninterested custodians who seemed to regard archive material as their exclusive preserve. This can be illustrated by the example of John Caley, Keeper of the records in the Augmentation Office and Secretary to the Record Commission,

His offices were said to be dark and dirty, and his records in the utmost disorder. If it was necessary to consult them, application had to be made at his private house where he kept the only index which no one else was allowed to see. The document, often the wrong one, was brought there from his office by a footman, after a search which might last as long as two weeks. The charge was arbitrary . . . he had no sympathy with antiquarian zeal.¹⁴

The passing years of the nineteenth century did, however, gradually witness the spread of a more enlightened attitude, and a re-examination of the methods by which knowledge was to be made available — hence a greater concern with institutions which had to deal with public records. Inevitably, considerably more source material eventually became regularly available.¹⁵

The major part of Britton's *Memoir* is a brief history from the mid-fifteenth century until the death of Henry VII; it is thus largely concerned with recount-

ing the now well-known events in the dynastic struggles of Lancaster and York, and the rise and fall of Richard III. During the reign of the last Yorkist king, Margaret Beaufort was at the centre of a web of political machination on behalf of her son Henry Tudor's bid to gain Richard's throne. After the rather surprising Tudor success at Bosworth in August 1485, Henry became king while his mother, Margaret Beaufort, came into her own as his principal and truest supporter. He endowed her with vast lands to enhance her already considerable influence as the wife of Lord Stanley, Earl of Derby. A good case could be advanced that Margaret herself had a prior claim to the throne, but at that time there was no real support for a queen regnant — she was wise enough not to push her own claim, for the experience of Margaret of Anjou thirty years earlier had shown how little support there was for female rule. 'Always circumspect, the Countess chose to promote her son's interest rather than to advance her own'.¹⁶

What appears to be the final draft of Britton's Memoir contains eighty-four pages, of which the last six are unnumbered; these do not, however, adequately reflect the amount of work done by him and his secretary. There also exist over two hundred pages of notes, comprising preliminary and subsequent drafts, pedigrees, transcripts of letters between Margaret and the king, as well as Britton's own correspondence with various authorities. There are also copious notes regarding the various Cambridge Colleges, and on Wimborne Grammar School, institutions which owed much to Lady Margaret's patronage. Other material includes notes on Westminster Abbey Chapel of Henry VII, and long extracts taken from Britton's predecessors writing on the subject.¹⁷ In view of the volume of work which these notes represent, it must have been a matter of some chagrin to the author that his work did not achieve publication. As has been observed elsewhere, 'Britton seemed to be dogged by others writing on the same subject as himself'.¹⁸

In addition to his correspondence with Sir Henry Cole noticed earlier, he also received considerable practical support from the Reverend Joseph Hunter, author and antiquary, who was a fellow and vice-president of the Society of Antiquaries, to whose journal *Archaeologia* he contributed many papers. Britton called him 'my much-respected and learned friend'.¹⁹ Hunter wrote Britton a detailed list of suggestions regarding material which the latter should research for the memoir.²⁰ As a result of this a preliminary draft was produced. He also corresponded with Sir Henry Ellis at the British Museum who suggested merely that Britton should contact St John's College, Cambridge.²¹ Among other friends as well as business associates, Britton was also helped by John Gough Nicholls, one of the founders of the Camden Society and an editor of the *Gentleman's Magazine* until 1856. Nicholls was the third generation of

the Fleet Street publishing family responsible for many nineteenth century county histories, among them Hutchin's *Dorset*, Hunter's *South Yorkshire*, and Hoare's *Wiltshire*, to which he was also a contributor.²²

Britton's Memoir still awaited its definitive form when the project was abandoned. The most interesting and original part of his work is the first section of approximately sixteen pages, which discusses the character of the countess and her relationship with her son. Britton's observations on her character are strongly coloured by his view of the age in which Margaret lived, in which, as he said, the population were . . .

'slaves to an intolerant priesthood, who had accumulated vast wealth and landed possessions, and had attained a fearful domination over men's minds'.²³

Britton departs quite radically from the view accepted in most quarters — both then and today — of the Countess as a pious, virtuous and learned figure of moral virtue and unsullied integrity. He therefore disagreed fundamentally with his contemporary, Halsted, who wrote:

It is her Christian character, her moral virtues, her high integrity during that dark period when temptations to disloyalty and ambition assailed the collateral branches of royalty . . . that had secured for this illustrious princess so exalted a position among the most dignified females of England.²⁴

Britton took a much cooler and sceptical view of Margaret. Understandably he was not in sympathy with the medieval Catholicism of his subject, quoting Wilkin's *Concilia* regarding the religion of Margaret's age:

Its chief characteristics, fanaticism, intolerance, bigotry and superstition, prayers and fastings, abstinence, penance, celibacy, and other mortifications: formal and, in fact, pantomimic ceremonies . . .²⁵

Britton saw Margaret's own formalism in religion as superstitious, and her so-called charitable works as emanating from the purely selfish motive of benefitting the repose of her own soul. He also considered that her exercise of patronage, for which she had been praised, was merely another manifestation of her love of power and influence; these latter considerations, he thought, guided all her actions.²⁶ In this judgment, however, he was perhaps less than fair to the countess, who was merely acting in the time-honoured way of influential magnates. Much of the power of the nobility came from the patronage

which they were able to dispense; what perhaps made Margaret Beaufort's actions more noticeable was that she was one of the few women who was able to exercise such patronage on a scale similar to that of male members of her class. Of the countess's reputed humility and chastity, Britton had this to say,

On the contrary, rather than true humility, we think we can perceive an ill-disguised pride of birth and connections.²⁷

and,

What merit can justly be claimed by the eulogists of a woman of sixty years of age and thrice married, on the score of a vow of chastity we must confess that we cannot discover.²⁸

It has been noted elsewhere that Britton 'also detected Margaret's shrewdness, verging on trickery', in a letter in which she asked the king to write commanding her to retain men for the benefit of Prince Henry (the Duke of York), '... the command itself to be an excuse for my lord and husband'. Britton conjectured that in the same way she deceived the earl of Derby, she might also have deceived Bishop Fisher, her confessor, when she told him that a vision of St Nicholas guided her choice of husband. A woman of such good sense, he argued, would not have believed in such a vision; if she did, her superstition was contemptible.²⁹ Here again, Britton was adversely judging Lady Margaret from the sceptical viewpoint of his own time; and he appeared to take no account of the belief in extraordinary spiritual influences and revelations which formed such a part of the medieval creed. Fisher was not deceived, as Britton thought, by the preposterous vision which Margaret claimed, for evidence exists that when the case of Elizabeth Barton, the Maid of Kent, arose later, Fisher apparently also believed in *her* visions and prophecies, and these he supported to the ultimate detriment of his own standing with the king. Fisher seems therefore to have been a willing believer rather than a dupe.³⁰

As regards the much-vaunted close relationship between King Henry and his mother, Britton found little evidence, on the contrary as has been written elsewhere, he found: 'Henry's letters formal and distant, and Margaret's imbued with a wish to conciliate which banished real affection.'³¹ It is undoubtedly difficult to extract the genuine feeling existing behind many of the formal phrases in which these letters are couched, for example in salutation,

My owne swet and most deere Kynge and all my wordly joy, yn as humble maner as y can thynkle y recommand me to your Grace, and most heretely beseche our lord to blesse you . . .

and in closing,

And Our Lord gyve you as longe good lyfe helthe and joy as your moste nobyll herte can desyre, with as herty blessyngs as our Lord hathe gevyn me power to gyve you. At Colynwestn the xiiij day of January, by your feythful trew bedewoman and humble modyr.³²

Notwithstanding Britton's scepticism, it cannot be doubted that there was a strong emotional bond between Margaret and her son, as would be expected of a mother and her only offspring. Although they were parted for long periods when Henry was in exile, after he became king in 1485 it was noted how frequently Margaret accompanied the king and queen on royal visits or progresses. That there was a rapport between them seems obvious; but whether this was a result of their mutual affection, or a consequence of the vicissitudes through which both had passed in the long odyssey of their political wilderness-years is hard to judge.

Undoubtedly, the most noteworthy of Margaret Beaufort's many eulogists was her confessor, Bishop Fisher, under whose influence Margaret came towards the end of her life, and for whom the lady could do little wrong. In his panegyric month-mind sermon preached a month after Margaret's death on 29 June 1509, he extolled the character and merits of his subject and accorded her the highest praise for her many virtues. In only one passage — in Britton's words 'most singular' — did Fisher strike a critical note; one, however, not directed personally against the Countess:

Avarice and Covetyse she most hated, and sorrowed it full moche in all persons, but specially in ony that belong'd unto her.³³

As Britton commented:

Now the palpable reference in this passage to the ruling passion of the recently-deceased King, is very striking; and when we consider that the son of its object was on the throne, its *pointedness* appears a rather daring piece of hardihood.³⁴

At the time when Fisher made the above comment, the new king had reigned for only about two months, and had been welcomed by many people as offering a relaxation of Henry VII's perceived rapaciousness and fiscal exactions for, in his last years, the country had become somewhat disillusioned with the old king. The peace and prosperity which he had brought had begun to be taken for granted; and his increasing isolation and seeming obsession with

money matters had given rise to a sense of grievance among merchants and landowners. The truth of the matter, however, was that Henry and his agents had become not so much increasingly grasping, as progressively more efficient — the Tudor writ had become too successful and wide-ranging.

Henry VIII, unlike his father, had extravagant tastes and soon tried to divert the proceeds of Margaret's estates to his own uses; his selfish intentions were successfully opposed and eventually thwarted by Fisher, 'who proved an able champion of his benefactress's will'.³⁵ Indeed, it might sceptically be observed that Fisher had, for some years since he became Margaret's confessor in 1499, been assiduous in cultivating the countess with an aim of directing her great fortune away from its then intended beneficiary — the monastery of Westminster — and towards the education purposes of the university of Cambridge, of which he was first vice-chancellor and later, in 1504, chancellor. Margaret's spiritual advisor, 'strict Romanist as he was, knew that active learning, not lazy seclusion, was essential to preserve the Church against the spirit of the Renaissance',³⁶ His concern might also be seen that the church be guarded from any threat of heresy. His influence on Margaret — they shared a religious spirit based on strict orthodoxy — assured him a convinced supporter.

Both Bishop Fisher, in his uncritical adulation of Margaret — the Tudor matriarch — and Sir Thomas More, their younger contemporary, in their own way lent their prestige and support to the new Tudor monarchy. The pervasive nervous dread of a revival of the earlier dynastic struggles persisted through the reign of Henry VII, and even into that of his son. For Margaret Beaufort, such fears and forebodings would never leave her; her tears — even at Henry VII's ultimate triumph in his coronation — were noted by Fisher, and exemplified to him the fear that the wheel of Fortune might reverse all that had been so hardily won. Indeed, it was not until the last years of his reign that Henry finally rid himself of the most obvious pretenders to his throne. Even his son was fearful of the last remaining Plantagenets represented by the de la Poles, whom he had executed; they, as well as Fisher and More — were victims of the grandson of Margaret Beaufort.

It has been said of John Britton that 'he sometimes delivered harsh opinions which were coloured by his own feelings rather than founded on deliberate or abstract justice' — this in relation to his views, for example, on the architecture of Sir John Soane and others.³⁷ In his work on Margaret Beaufort, he might also be considered to have made adverse judgments which were subjective or difficult to prove; but his suspicions regarding his subject's character and motives could be considered as more realistic than the uncritical adulation which Bishop Fisher in the sixteenth century and Caroline Halsted in the nine-

teenth century adopted. A few years after her memoir on the Lady Margaret, Halsted wrote a two-volume life of Richard III which, in the dismissive words of Paul Murray Kendall, a later biographer, was 'conceived rather in the vein of a Victorian Gift-Book and . . . is almost unreadable'.³⁸ An unforgiving pen might offer the same criticism of her work on Margaret Beaufort, with its pronounced sycophancy.

Halsted, as Murray Kendall remarked, did some valuable research using Harleian Manuscript 433, as well as other source materials, for her later book on Richard III; but both her biographies suffer from a rather naive and artless approach. Britton, from a rather different background to Halsted, and with a certain temperamental antipathy to the medieval world represented by Margaret Beaufort and her confessor, was certainly prejudiced against his subject. In the words of Margaret's most recent biographers:

While one may reject as too narrow the terms of Britton's dismissal of the age of Caxton, Margaret of York, and the Master of Mary of Burgundy, his perspective affords a detailed critique of Margaret's saintly image which needs consideration.³⁹

Unfortunately for John Britton, Caroline Halsted's book on Margaret took the plaudits and the prize; it was her memoir that was published, whereas Britton's has only recently received any notice after a century and a half of neglect.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. M.K. Jones and M.G. Underwood, *The King's Mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort Countess of Richmond & Derby*, Cambridge 1992, Introduction, pp. 10–12.
4. R. Hatchwell, The Life and Work of John Britton (1771–1857), *Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Magazine*, vol. 85 (1992), p. 108.
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6. C.A. Halstead, *Life of Margaret Beaufort*, London 1839, Preface, p. xii. A report in *The Times* in 1836 on 16 May referred to the Gresham Commemoration at Mansion House as being the '3rd celebration of this interesting festival which has sprung out of moderate means under the responsibility of a very small circle, a lady of fortune generously taking the lead among them'. The festival appears to have been annual and largely a musical event but there are no references in the *Times Index* to any reports for other years.
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8. August Pugin and John Le Keux, (ed. John Britton), *Specimens of the Architectural Antiquities of Normandy*, London 1825–28; for Britton and A.W.N. Pugin see also Derek Parker and John Chandler, *Wiltshire Churches*, Gloucester 1993, p. 127.
9. B. Ferrey, *Recollections of Augustus Welby N. Pugin*, London 1861, p. 115. *Contrasts* was

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 26. Britton, Unpublished Memoir, p. 10.
 27. Britton, Unpublished Memoir, p. 13.
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 30. *DNB*, vol. 7, p. 60; see also John Bruce, *Archaeologia*, vol. 25 (1831), pp. 63–4, for a discussion of More and Fisher's 'belief' in Elizabeth Barton.
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 39. Jones and Underwood, p. 10.