

Review Article

‘The Yorkist Age’?

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Was there a ‘Yorkist Age’? The answer seems obvious. Yet my earlier realisation that the word ‘Tudor’ was hardly used in the ‘Tudor period’ has made me wary of dynastic labels.¹ In this case ‘Yorkist’ as such seems rare in contemporary records.² On the other hand there was a clear-cut distinction of principle between Richard, Duke of York’s claim to the throne by hereditary right enunciated in 1460 and the counter argument that Henry VI had by long usage a prescriptive right, and that the lords, including York, had solemnly sworn their oaths to him and indeed to his son as his heir.³ ‘House of York’ and, by reaction, ‘House of Lancaster’ were in current use, and ‘Yorkist’ (or ‘Lancastrian’) may therefore reasonably serve as modern designations of their members and supporters.⁴

¹ C.S.L. Davies, ‘Tudor; What’s in a name?’, *History*, vol. 97 (2011), pp. 24-42; C.S.L. Davies, ‘The Tudors; name and implications’, *The Ricardian*, vol. 20 (2010), pp. 70-72.

² *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Oxford 1989, gives 1601 as the first use of ‘Yorkist’, and 1828 for ‘Lancastrian’. (Checked with on-line ed., 1 Nov. 2013.) There may be earlier uses, but this at least shows that the terms were not common in the fifteenth century.

³ *The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England [PROME]*, Henry VI, 1447-60, ed A. Curry and R. Horrox, pp. 516-22. S.B. Chrimes, *English Constitutional Ideas in the Fifteenth Century*, Cambridge 1936, pp.27-31.

⁴ York’s claim polarised the issue. Chief Justice Sir John Fortescue could write ‘in defence of the rights of the House of Lancaster’ in the 1460s, see Fortescue, *The Governance of England*, ed C. Plummer, Oxford 1885, p.74. The ‘Lancastrian’ kings did not refer to themselves as such since they claimed, for a variety of contradictory and unresolved reasons, to be the natural successors of Richard II, not a new ‘dynasty’. See Michael Bennett, ‘Edward III’s entail and the succession to the crown, 1376-1471’, *English Historical Review*, vol. 113 (1998), pp. 580-609, esp. pp. 599-600. Their opponents did use the ‘Lancaster’ term to belittle them; e.g. the ‘Cambridge conspirators’ of 1415 referred to Henry V as ‘Harry of Lancaster, usurper of England’, *English Historical Documents, 1327-1485*, ed A.R. Myers, London 1969, p. 210. Classically, of course, the terms were popularised by Edward Hall in his *The Union of the Two Most Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster [and] Yorke* (1542; standard ed. by Henry Ellis, London 1809). The bridge-building papal dispensation for Henry VII’s marriage (presumably drafted in England) referred to his *praedecessores de Lancastria*, and to Elizabeth as *Eboracensis*, see *The Reign of Henry VII*, ed. A.F. Pollard, 3 vols, London 1913-4, vol. 1, p. 35. While the Mortimer claim was raised in Henry IV’s reign and in 1415, it appears not to have actively resurfaced until 1460. See L. Brown, ‘Continuity and change in the parliamentary justifications of the fifteenth-century usurpations’, *The Fifteenth Century*, VII, ed L. Clark, Woodbridge 2007, pp. 157-73, at p. 166.

Nevertheless it is interesting that chroniclers, rather than talking in terms of dynastic parties, nearly always personalised the issue: the ‘Queen’s party’ (Margaret of Anjou’s), the King’s (Edward IV’s), and so on.⁵ And, indeed, the whole ‘dynastic’ issue became, I would argue, pretty much irrelevant after the deaths of Henry VI and his son Edward in 1471; very strikingly in the readiness of such Lancastrian stalwarts as Sir John Fortescue and Bishop John Morton to move over to Edward IV. Richard’s coup in 1483 was, of course, a searing wound to the ‘Yorkist’ camp, as Edwardian loyalists formed the core of the so-called ‘Buckingham rebellion’ in the southern English counties.⁶ 1485 was by no means a ‘Lancastrian’ victory, but depended on ‘Edwardian’ support for Henry Richmond. Henry VII’s marriage to Elizabeth of York meant that Henry VIII in his turn could eventually claim to be indisputably king on Yorkist principles through his mother, except on the dubious premise that Richard III’s bastardisation of his brother’s children (and/or of Edward himself) was credible.⁷ Ironically the only logical ‘Lancastrian’ claim on Fortescue’s principles (discounting Henry VII’s both because of the dubiousness of the legitimisation of the Beauforts extending as far as a right to royal succession, and because of that right being transmitted to him through a woman), would seem to be that of Clarence’s son, Edward, Earl of Warwick, though I am unaware whether this was ever put forward.⁸ Such a claim, of the House of York’s being the residual successor to Henry VI and his son, through descent from Edward III through Edmund of Langley rather than through Lionel of Antwerp and the Mortimers, was of course that ascribed to Richard of York before 1460, advertised in his revival of the name ‘Plantaganet’; and again invoked in favour of Clarence during the Readeption. So, by Henry VII’s reign the most logical ‘Lancastrian’ claim lay with an imprisoned Yorkist prince, while the best ‘Yorkist’ claim lay in Henry’s queen, or at least her sons.

One wonders how much ‘dynastic’ feeling as such, as opposed to opportunism, pique, or more general dissatisfaction with the régime, lay behind the de la Pole plottings against Henry VII, or the Warbeck affair. (Perhaps some element of ‘Yorkist’ family feeling lay behind Margaret of Burgundy’s hostility to Henry, although it seems impossible to work out what actually

⁵ See, for instance, *Three Chronicles of the Reign of Edward IV*, ed K. Dockray, Gloucester 1988, passim.

⁶ C. Ross, *Richard III*, London 1981, pp. 105-27; R. Horrox, *Richard III; a Study in Service*, Cambridge 1989, pp. 150-77.

⁷ Henry VII used his marriage as a prop in his support, but took care to deny that his claim depended on it; in the event of his having no heir by Elizabeth, a child by a subsequent marriage would succeed; see Innocent VIII’s bull of 1490, in *English Historical Documents, 1485-1558*, ed C.H.Williams, London 1967, pp.445-46.

⁸ Henry IV himself was less clear. A statute of June 1406 settled the succession in the male line, but in December the rights of his granddaughters as possible heirs general to his sons were reinstated, possibly under pressure from Prince Henry. See M. Bennett, ‘The royal succession and the crisis of 1406’, in *The Reign of Henry IV; Rebellion and Survival, 1403-13*, ed G. Dodd and D. Biggs, York 2008, pp. 9-27.

motivated her to support first John de la Pole, Earl of Lincoln, and then Perkin Warbeck.⁹) As for Henry VIII's reign, one of the nobles accused of displaying an unhealthy interest in the royal strain of his genealogy, the duke of Buckingham, did not do so through a 'Yorkist' line. The earl of Surrey (Henry Howard) and the marquess of Exeter (Henry Courtenay), similarly accused, traced their most immediate royal descent from younger sisters of Elizabeth of York, and therefore could hardly claim priority over Henry VIII. Margaret, Countess of Salisbury, as Clarence's daughter, had perhaps a more plausible 'claim', although her loyalties seem to have been firmly to her former pupil, Princess Mary.¹⁰ None of these latter-day 'Yorkists' can be proved to have actively plotted to displace the king. In that sense the loose use of 'Yorkist' or 'Yorkist blood' by historians is misleading in giving the impression of a continuing and coherent dynastic claim, in the sense that would be true of, say, Jacobitism after 1689.¹¹

Some of the contributors to this volume voice their own unease about 'Yorkist'. Dynastic terms do suggest an all-pervading significance of high politics for general history which does not hold water for this period. Dynastic labels also carry an unwarranted assumption that a family relationship between kings will produce a particular style of kingship. I have argued elsewhere that the presumption of a 'Tudor kingship' leads us unjustifiably to lump together the very dissimilar régimes of Henry VII, Henry VIII, and Elizabeth I.¹² A concept of 'Lancastrian kingship' covering the reigns Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI, is even more dubious. 'Yorkist kingship' is obviously a non-runner. Edward V is out of the reckoning, Richard III surely reigned too briefly, and in too hazardous a situation, to be able to display a particular 'style'. In any case, his whole stance was based on the repudiation of his brother's regime; the denunciation of Edward IV's reign in the *titulus regis* of the 1484 parliament may

⁹ See C.B. Weightman, *Margaret of York, Duchess of Burgundy*, Stroud 1989, pp. 149-55. Margaret's support of Warbeck as Edward IV's younger son presupposes that Edward V was killed on Richard III's watch; it also implicitly denies Richard III's contention that Edward IV's children were illegitimate. While Margaret's actions are generally seen to stem from fierce family feeling, Weightman makes the point that other members of the family had accepted the outcome of 1485. She suggests as an explanation of Margaret's actions, Henry VII's failure to renew her trading licenses, and/or her close political alliance with her stepson-in-law Maximilian. This factor is also stressed by W. Blockmans, 'The devotion of a lonely duchess', in *Margaret of York, Simon Marmion, and The Visions of Tondal*, ed. T. Kren, Malibu, CA, 1992, pp.29-46. Whatever Margaret's motives, it is clear that 'family' loyalties were never straight-forward, especially after the events of 1483.

¹⁰ Any hypothetical claim on behalf of Margaret Pole must presumably accept Richard III's bastardisation of Edward's children, while ignoring his passing over the Clarence line.

¹¹ Accounts of Henry VIII often talk of his 'paranoid suspicion' of those with 'royal blood', while ignoring the considerable periods of favour enjoyed by his relatives. See the classic refutation of such a view in M.L. Bush, 'The Tudors and the royal race', *History*, vol. 55 (1970), pp. 37-48. I suggested, 'What's in a name?', p.7, that Henry VIII and Elizabeth I were keener on their Yorkist ancestry than the Lancastrian-Beaufort line, and showed absolutely no pride in descent from Owen Tudor.

¹² Davies, 'What's in a name?'

well be the most savage, indeed hysterical, denunciation by a government of its predecessor in English history.¹³ This leaves only the reign of Edward IV to represent 'Yorkist kingship', and perhaps indeed only his 'second reign', from 1471. Further, royal influence over the economy and society generally was minimal, except in one very important area, that of foreign trade, where foreign policy, war and peace, regulation, attempts to control bullion flows, were obviously vital. Derek Pearsall ('Was there a Yorkist literature?') argues that that term should be confined to productions, mostly political, influenced directly by the court. Beyond that, he argues, that 'courtly literature' on the French (and its derivative Burgundian) model was a continuation of that sponsored by Margaret of Anjou, or, further back, of the Anglo-French noble culture of the fourteenth century. Printing was, of course, heavily influenced by the court's patronage of Caxton. However, Pearsall asserts that 'religious and didactic writing of all kinds', or 'popular ballads and lyrics', were rarely distinctively 'Yorkist'. Margaret Twycross, in her excellent down-to-earth study of the practicalities of play-production ('Organising Theatricals in York') similarly denies that 'the man on the throne had any influence on the plays in the street or the guildhalls; why should he have had?'

All this may seem a quibble. 'Yorkist Age', it will be objected, is merely a convenient tool for historians, as are such labels as 'medieval' or 'Tudor'. Nonetheless language we use for convenience reflects back into our under-lying assumptions and distorts reality. Dynastic labels implicitly suggest far more influence by the royal court on society at large than is actually warranted. We need to be on our guard to prevent such concepts dictating the agenda. Michael Hicks ('The Yorkist Age?'), who asks many of the same questions as the above, tells us that the symposium was designed to answer the question 'In what sense, if any, was the Yorkist Age distinctive?' If that was the aim, most of the contributors ignored it, preferring to expound some topic relevant to the implied chronological limits without reference to the wider question.

Hicks himself provides an insightful outline of political development, stressing the greater significance of the Mortimer inheritance than the strictly 'York' one for the 'Yorkist' family itself, not only in relation to their claim to the throne, but in terms of financial resources. Simon Payling considers Edward IV's conciliation policy in his first reign, especially among the northerners, concentrating in this case on the gentry rather than the peerage; a combination of repression, and the exploitation of resentment at Margaret's alliance with the Scots, facilitated by the multiple 'cross-party' connections within families. This subtle and learned article merits reading and rereading; particularly in its use of a printed but largely ignored document which appears to be an early draft of the 1461 attainder act. James Ross on the 'Higher Nobility' argues that Edward was less discriminating than Richard III or Henry

¹³ Brown, 'Continuity and change', pp. 170-71, for the theoretical problems caused by Richard's statute.

VII in his choice of regional governors; also that court support rather than concentrated property was becoming the key to regional power. This latter represented, he suggests, a general 'waning of the peerage' in favour of a 'service nobility'; all interestingly reminiscent of Lawrence Stone's *Crisis of the Aristocracy* (1965), and implying a real 'Edward IV-Henry VIII' transformation of English political society, an interpretation in broad terms dating back as far as Francis Bacon's *Henry VII* (1622), although with some differences about whether to highlight 1471, 1485, or 1529.¹⁴ I wonder how far such tensions between court-based and local power were in fact perennial; even if this period did represent a significant and lasting shift in the balance. Anne Sutton makes a careful consideration of the confirmation or new grant of town charters by Richard III, arguing that such activity represents not weakness on the part of the Crown, but a careful consideration of the common good in response to local initiatives; she includes the case of Welsh and Irish towns. Nigel Ramsay reconsiders Richard's grant of corporate status to the Office of Arms (not actually a 'college' until 1555), printing Richard's ordinance and drawing attention to a remarkable collection of northern genealogies, in print but generally neglected since 1930. This, he suggests, may be a data-base compiled for its political utility for Richard. One is reminded of Edward IV's alleged spontaneous knowledge of gentry genealogies, presumably the result of efficient briefing. Sean Cunningham looks at leadership in the Scottish War of 1480-82, contrasting Edward IV's ineffectiveness in trying to lead a largely southern army, with Richard's and Northumberland's greater success with northern forces; Richard's reputation helps explain the success of his 1483 coup. A different military angle is explored by Oliver Hounslow in his medical examination of some thirty-nine or more skeletons from a Towton grave-pit. About a quarter suffered from some form of *spina bifida*, apparently due to the 'limited diet of their mothers'. The skeletons themselves suggest a diet poor in plant-life, though surprisingly rich in freshwater fish. Hounslow is careful to cover himself by suggesting that these soldiers may all have hailed from a particular and possibly untypical locality. The skeletons also attest to the savagery of the fighting, and to the presence of experienced soldiers. The footnotes indicate a mass of relevant archaeological literature of which historians are largely unaware; a sad commentary on the institutional tyranny of so-called 'disciplines', implicit in what material is sent for notice to which journals, and in the layout of libraries and websites.

A substantial article is that of two Belgian historians, Jelle Haemers and Frederik Buylaert, attempting to relate Anglo-French-Burgundian relations from 1475 to 1500 to the internal politics of each of the entities involved. It provides a mass of references and information on internal Netherlandish events, some unknown to those of us who have tried to tackle these problems from an

¹⁴ L. Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy*, Oxford 1965; F. Bacon, *History of the Reign of King Henry VII*, several modern editions.

English perspective. Unsurprisingly it misses some key articles on the English side. I find the exposition disorderly and muddling, and wish the authors had not embarked on the tired and meaningless question of the particular contribution of this period to the formation of the 'modern state'. Nevertheless the article will be indispensable to the study of the interrelationship between the tangled politics of the Flemish cities and the diplomatic and military activities of their Burgundian and Habsburg rulers; and hence on events in France and England.

Maria Hayward uses her work on the Great Wardrobe under Henry VIII to look at the clothing supplied by the Wardrobe for 'Yorkist prisoners in the Tower, 1485-1547'. She sees this as a form of 'control', rather like modern prison clothing, though of a style suitable to the dignity of the prisoners. It is unfortunate that she talks in terms of a 'Yorkist-Tudor struggle'; and mistakenly believes that Henry VII's claim derived from his father's, Edmund Tudor's, birth as the son of Owen Tudor and the widowed queen of Henry V, rather than through Henry's mother Margaret Beaufort. (Although Henry did use Edmund's being a half-brother to Henry VI to muddy the waters, especially in France.). And it would have been fair to acknowledge that Henry VIII showed considerable favour to his kin for long periods, as well as succumbing to suspicion at crucial moments.¹⁵ Nevertheless the article is a valuable introduction to a neglected topic, of how high-status prisoners (not just 'Yorkists', either in the genealogical or the 'supporter' sense) were treated in the Tower.

J.N. Laynesmith takes issue with C.A.J. Armstrong's influential article on the piety of Cecily, Duchess of York (1942).¹⁶ Her household ordinances represented only the very last period of her long life, and in any case played rather to the gallery of what was expected of a royal widow rather than giving an insight into her soul. This fits neatly with Charles Farris, who compares the pious practices of Edward I and Edward IV. The latter showed far less interest in the cult of the saints, especially pilgrimages and relics, or in monasticism; instead, he was alive to some of the newer manifestations of personal piety, including a rather surprising interest in sermons. Continuity, of the proper observance of the liturgical year expected of royalty, of a dutiful attention to royal foundations, is also apparent. Once again, the author makes ingenious use of administrative records, especially accounts, (of gifts of wine to monastic institutions, for instance). The stress is on the extent to which ordered religious observance was what was expected of kings, rather than on trying to tease out an intense personal piety on their part. In this connection one might again think of Richard III's *titulus regis*, and the incalculable damage it must have done to the standing of the House of York. In a similar vein, David Harry, in his

¹⁵ Bush, 'Tudors and royal race'.

¹⁶ Conveniently reprinted in C.A.J. Armstrong, *England, France and Burgundy in the Fifteenth Century*, London 1983, pp. 135-56.

examination of the *Cordyal* (on preparation for death), translated by Anthony Woodville, Earl Rivers, and printed by Caxton in 1479, challenges the alleged clash between a more traditional, pessimistic, 'monastic' piety, concentrated on punishment after death, and a more this-worldly, perhaps humanistic (in the widest sense), piety exemplified by books of hours and devotion to the Virgin. In short, a righteous or a merciful God? The two aspects were, as Harry suggests, necessarily complementary.

Jennifer Scott argues from tree-ring evidence that the familiar portraits of Elizabeth Woodville and Elizabeth of York in the royal collection are to be dated after 1513, although allowing they may be based on earlier portraits now lost. There are two articles on the college at Fotheringhay, originally founded by Edward, Duke of York, (d.1415) and actually built by his nephew Duke Richard by 1434-6. Nigel Saul reconstructs the now mutilated building. Clive Burgess traces its derivation from fourteenth century French *saintes-chapelles*, demonstrates that it was a proper college, with its fellows paid salaries from a common fund rather than using the prebendal system as practised in secular cathedrals, and that it enjoyed considerable freedom in its liturgical practice, with a good deal of scope for musicians. He quotes Roger Bowers' argument (which relates back to the issue raised by David Harry), that the purpose was primarily praise of God rather than family commemoration, although Burgess qualifies this argument. Interestingly, Archbishop Scrope, executed in 1405, features in a window. One wonders why Edward IV and Richard III did not make much more of him as a martyr in the 'Mortimer' cause.¹⁷ Alexandra Buckle looks at the construction of the magnificent chantry at Warwick for Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick (died Rouen, 1439). Beauchamp was soon buried in Warwick, but the chapel was not completed until 1464, and was consecrated, under the auspices of Clarence, in 1475. That was presumably the occasion of the elaborate reburial service which Buckle discusses.

Finally, there are three articles on history writing. The late Lister Matheson on 'National and Civic Chronicles' is primarily concerned with Caxton's *Continuation* of the 'Brut' chronicles, published in 1480, and thereafter a best-seller up to 1528; tracing its sources, noting also seepage back into manuscripts. The *Continuation* stops at Edward IV's coronation, further evidence of sensitivities about the most recent past. Interestingly, too, Henry VI's failures are ascribed to his personal incapacity as a ruler, and especially his marriage to Margaret of Anjou, rather than to the superior legitimist claim of the House of York. There is a useful extensive listing of manuscript London chronicles.

¹⁷ J.W. McKenna, 'Popular canonization as political propaganda: the cult of Archbishop Scrope', *Speculum*, vol. 45 (1970), pp. 608-23, shows a continuing cult at York, a discussion in the northern convocation in 1462 on possible canonization, a proclamation by Edward IV in 1471 invoking Scrope's memory 'which for the right of our ancestry ... died and suffered death and martyrdom'. Edward's interest in Scrope seems to have declined thereafter as he became more secure. The localised cult seems in striking contrast to the speed and extent of the cult of Thomas Becket three centuries before.

M.T.W. Payne reconsiders the life of Robert Fabyan, draper and author (apparently) of both the *New Cronycles* and the so-called *Great Chronicle of London*, in the light of the attribution to his ownership of a copy of the recently printed *Liber Chronicarum* (or *Nuremberg Chronicle*). The extensive marginal comments effectively constitute, Payne claims, a third chronicle authored by Fabyan, and in turn strengthens the case for his responsibility for the other two. Finally, Livia Visser-Fuchs and Carol Meade print and comment on an English text (no other survives) of a lost account by Olivier de La Marche of the momentous meeting of Charles, Duke of Burgundy, and the Emperor Frederick III at Trier in 1471. This was the occasion on which Charles came nearest to acquiring a kingly title, only to be foiled by the Emperor's inability or unwillingness to deliver and his abrupt departure. Unfortunately the account is almost entirely about the public ceremonial, celebrated as in itself a triumph for Charles's reputation.

There is a good deal to celebrate in this volume; excellent plates; a thorough index; footnotes accessibly on the page rather than tucked away; a massive bibliography which, while not complete, will be an invaluable resource. All the articles are worth reading. But the fundamental question of the utility of a concept of a 'Yorkist Age' is ignored by most of the contributors. Perhaps the implication is that it is only meaningful in the narrowest chronological sense.