

Good King Richard? ***An Account of Richard III and His Reputation*** **By Jeremy Potter**

(Book Review)

Lea Ann Alexander
Librarian

London: Constable and Company Ltd, 1983.

It is proof of our civilised values that something as esoteric and fragile as a reputation is worth campaigning for .

--Richard, Duke of Gloucester

Remarks at the unveiling of a statue of Richard III, Leicester, 1980



Richard III may have reigned only from 1483 to 1485, but those two short years and the events leading to them have provoked centuries of historical debate over Richard's character. Richard was not king long enough to write his own history. It was historians writing under Henry VII and Henry VIII, including the sainted More, who created the image of Richard as the usurping, murderous Crouchback; it was William Shakespeare, writing under the last Tudor, Elizabeth, who insured that it would be this evil image of the deposed king that captured the public imagination for generations to come. Yet in each generation Richard has found his champions, and the fascination he has cast over both professional and amateur historians continues today. The Richard III Society has members worldwide. Books continue to appear either defending Richard from his detractors or supporting the Tudor viewpoint (q.v. Alison Weir's *The Princes in the Tower*, 1992). Each August 22, an obituary is inserted into major newspapers including the *New York*

Times: "PLANTAGENET -- Richard, great king and true friend of the rights of man, died at Bosworth Field on August 22, 1485. Murdered by traitors and, dead, maligned by knaves..."

(261) Jeremy Potter's *Good King Richard? An Account of Richard III and His Reputation* serves admirably as an overview to portrayals of Richard from the time of the first histories written under Henry Tudor to the present day.

Primarily known as a mystery/crime/suspense/romance/historical novelist, Jeremy Potter's greatest qualification to write of Richard III rests in an amateur interest in that much maligned monarch. He admits his bias toward his subject in his foreword -- as Chairman of the Richard III Society, [he] "makes no claim to impartiality." (xi) He does, however, attempt balance by presenting both sides, traditional and revisionist, of the Great Debate over the character and

actions of Richard III. Potter appears to be a moderate revisionist, exhibiting the ability to note Richard's flaws while exploding the theories of those adhering strictly to Tudor realities. His thesis is that the combined genius of Thomas More and William Shakespeare proved deadly to Richard's reputation and that, in accordance with the adage, "while history may or may not repeat itself, what is certain is that historians repeat each other." (252)

The greater part of *Good King Richard?* consists of a brisk overview of the Tudor historical tradition which provided the basis for future histories of Richard's reign. Even before Bosworth, Henry VII worked to discredit Richard as a means to strengthen his own claim to the throne; once he became king, Henry sought to destroy or muddy the record Richard left behind. , V.B. Lamb, a modern revisionist, believes this hatred stemmed from the fact that Richard "had possessed two things which Henry never had -- a sound title to the throne and the love of his subjects." (119) Coloring all accounts written in the Tudor era was the necessity to please the new king. Potter notes that Richard's major peculiarity was not a hunchback but that he was the only English king to come from the North of England (253) and that his reputation might not have suffered so drastically had not all principle contemporary sources, including that of John Rous, been written in the South. The most respected Tudor author on the subject of Richard, Sir Thomas More, had a reputation as an intellectual joker. (110) Potter feels that More may well have written his *History of King Richard III* as a parody of Polydore Vergil's *English History*, an account of Richard's fate as a morality tale. By embroidering on Vergil's evil and ugly king, More created a monster. Even though his account is frequently qualified by phrases such as "some wise men think," "it is for truth reported," and "as the fame runs," (111) historians since have taken "tittle-tattle" for fact. (111) Shakespeare, writing in the time of Elizabeth I, took entire passages of More's *History* and incorporated them into *Richard III*. Potter notes that "Shakespeare made the worst of Richard III, and Richard III brought out the best in Shakespeare." (145) In the play, Richard is accused, variously, of murdering his wife; her father, husband, and father-in-law; his own brother; and, of course, his nephews. Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard, a grotesque caricature of a human being -- a "lump of foul deformity", has defined the public consciousness ever since. (145)

With the rise of the Stuarts in the seventeenth century, writers did not have the same impetus to portray Richard as evil incarnate. Defenses of his reputation were published as early as 1617. While Francis Bacon was, after More, the second chancellor to pass a verdict of guilty on Richard, Bacon's contemporary Sir George Buck wrote that "all King Richard's guilt is but suspicion." (162) In his *The History of King Richard III*, Buck accused the public of mistaking pamphlets, ballads, and plays for history. Buck refuted the many accusations made against Richard and made a strong case for the king's good works and virtues. Richard's greatest fault lay in the leniency he showed his enemies -- he should have collected the heads of Morton and Stanley as well as those of Hastings and Buckingham. (164) Buck was a pioneer of revisionism; unfortunately his account was tainted when he died insane. Horace Walpole was the leading revisionist of the eighteenth century. His *Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard the Third* points out that historians blackened Henry VII's rival "till Henry, by the contrast, should appear in a kind of amiable light." (177) Walpole took direct aim at More and Bacon: "And here let me lament that two of the greatest men in our annals have prostituted their admirable pens, the one to blacken a great prince, the other to varnish a pitiable tyrant." (177) Walpole's *Historic Doubts* enjoyed immense popularity and excited a vigorous scholarly debate

with Hume and Gibbon. The French translation of this work exonerating the reputation of one unfortunate monarch was made by another, Louis XVI, imprisoned in the Bastille awaiting execution. (183)



The nineteenth century was, overall, a disappointment for those hoping to resuscitate Richard's reputation. Victorian moralizing carried the day. While Sharon Turner saw Richard in the context of his violent age, acting as would any of his contemporaries, Sir Walter Scott described his villain in *Rob Roy* as a "bandy-legged, bull-necked, limping scoundrel! Richard III in all but his hump-back." (191) The discovery of the Harleian Miscellany, a depository of valuable and previously unknown Ricardian documents, at last presented a factual challenge to Thomas More and Shakespeare. Yet Caroline Halsted's *Richard III as Duke of Gloucester and King of England*, the first book to incorporate these documents, was dismissed by many as hagiography and engendered "chauvinistic sneering" (197) from male historians. The historians lined up on both sides of the debate: on Richard's side were Sir Clements Markham, Sharon Turner, and Caroline Halsted; against him were James Gairdner, John Lingard, and John Richard Green (the latter acknowledging Richard's virtues as an administrator). The view which survived was that embodied in Charles Dickens' *A Child's History of England*: Richard was "as brave as he was wicked." (205) The Great Debate has continued into the twentieth century, with the opposing arguments best represented by Paul Murray Kendall ("revisionism at last triumphant" (253) and Charles Ross, whose *Richard III* represents a "guarded retreat from the excesses of traditionalism." (253) Kendall depicts Richard as a royal Robin Hood, redressing the economic hardships of the poor, and feels that it doesn't matter who killed the princes in the Tower. (248) Charles Ross, the new traditionalist, does not discount More and Vergil, stating that they did not invent the Tudor myth but merely embellished upon views commonly accepted at the time. (250) Ross, too, shows little interest in the actual fate of the princes, believing that what was most significant was what their contemporaries believed happened. (252) This is a far cry from the sentimental depictions of Richard's nephews common in the nineteenth century.

Good King Richard? is organized into chapters, sometimes cleverly titled to reflect the content as with "More Myth-making," which details in depth the contribution of Sir Thomas More to the Ricardian legend, and "The Posthumous Hunchback," in which John Rous describes Richard's monstrous birth "two years in the womb and entry into the world long-haired and fully toothed." (136) While not footnoted, Potter provides a select bibliography of primary and secondary sources. The bibliography also includes a list of popular fiction about Richard III, including Josephine Tey's *The Daughter of Time* and Sharon Kay Penman's *The Sunne in Splendour*, both of which have spurred popular interest in the Ricardian controversy. A useful index includes adequate cross-indexing to the jumble of names and titles which could easily confuse those new to the subject.

Combining historiography, conjecture, and flashes of wit, *Good King Richard?* is both a commendable attempt to delineate the scope of the debate over Richard's reputation and a good read. In 1983, Charles Ross, a biographer of Richard, called it the "best of recent work." Potter

deftly avoids the pitfalls that open before most Ricardian apologists by depicting the king warts and all, at the same time slyly casting doubt onto the Tudor tradition. His prose shines in those chapters devoted to Thomas More and William Shakespeare. He is at his most amusing when he describes the typical member of the Richard III Society as a "young, intelligent, left-handed, female librarian." *Good King Richard?* is an excellent follow-up title for anyone whose interest has been piqued by books such as *Daughter of Time*, but it also has merit for the historian tracing Ricardian historiography.

Good King Richard? does not claim to break new ground in the Great Debate; it seeks only to place the Debate within a context. As a synthesis of Ricardian historiography, the book adeptly illustrates that historians generally have followed the Tudor tradition and that each generation of historians has been subject to the prejudices and morality of its time. Thus Polydore Vergil, believing that physical beauty reflected inner excellence, would naturally write that the usurper was both wicked and ugly. More, perhaps parodizing Vergil, embroidered on this theme and created very detailed deformities for Richard, including a hump -- details not noted by anyone, friend or foe, in the course of Richard's life. Victorian historians, writing in a sentimental and moralistic age, produced accounts either vilifying Richard as a venomous hunchback or glorifying him as an imperial statesman. Potter writes that "the views held by historians and non-historians alike are more revealing of their own characters and attitudes than [Richard's]" (271) and that "unreliable sources are combed and fragments of evidence eagerly seized upon or scornfully discarded according to theory or prejudice." (271) That one person, king for only two years, should attract so much obviously bent history is a tribute to the power of myth.

So who was Richard III? Was he a good king and able administrator, a murderer, or merely a bungler? We'll never know; Henry VII saw to that. Historical reductivism probably means that Richard will remain the Crouchback, the usurper, the murderous uncle -- just as Henry VII will continue to be thin-lipped and miserly and Mary will be bloody. Truth redefines itself with time and changing mores, especially when coupled with a deliberate attempt to erase the record. What is certain is that historians, both amateur and professional, will continue to engage in lively debate over Richard's character and actions, evincing, as Potter succinctly says, "a faith that even after all these centuries the truth is important." (260)



Links

Richard III Society

<http://www.richardiii.net>

The Richard III and Yorkist History Server

Sponsored by the Richard III Society, American Branch

<http://www.r3.org/intro.html>

Biography

Lea Ann Alexander is Special Collections Librarian at Huie Library. She received her MLS from Indiana University and has been a member of the Henderson faculty since 1988.

Disclaimer: Henderson State University and the Office of Computer and Communication Services assume no responsibility for any information or representations contained in the student/faculty/alumni web pages. These web pages and any opinions, information or representations contained therein are the creation of the particular individual or organization and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Henderson State University or its Office of Computer and Communication Services. All individuals publishing materials on the Henderson State University Web Server understand that the submission, installation, copying, distribution, and use of such materials in connection with the Web Server will not violate any other party's proprietary rights.