North, South and Richard III¹

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Traditional accounts of Richard III have tended (among other things) to give too little attention to the regional divisions within England which characterised his short reign. Only recently have historians begun to draw attention to the King’s reliance on his trusted northern followers to rule a dissident south after the autumn risings of 1483. It is now apparent that much hostility was created by this plantation of men of the north.

The exact nature of Richard’s régime after Buckingham’s revolt is a topic currently being examined in detail elsewhere,² but an equally important aspect is the effect that the memory of it had on opinions of the King after his downfall. The King’s policy was not quickly forgotten by southerners: as late as 1594 an old Dorset man told of the time recalled by his father ‘when King Richard drove Cheyney out of the land’.³ But even before Richard’s reign southerners had feared and distrusted men from the north. It is likely that there was an undercurrent of regional animosity running beneath the political and dynastic conflicts of the late fifteenth century which came to the surface in the 1480s. Moreover, it is possible that this animosity, given dramatic focus by the events of 1483–85, has played an important part in shaping, and continuing to shape, attitudes towards the last Plantagenet. This paper explores that possibility.

That there was a strand of antagonistic feeling towards the north and northerners among southern opinion in the late fifteenth century can be readily demonstrated. Whether it pre-existed or was created by the infamous Lancastrian campaign of 1461 is neither here nor there. The fact is that Margaret of Anjou’s march south, with a large, and apparently poorly disciplined, army of northern and Scottish levies early in that year, inspired a fear and distrust of northerners which the inhabitants of the south-east of England long retained. There is a tone of hysteria in many contemporary and near-contemporary reports, the most quoted of which is the colourful passage composed by the Prior of Croyland in the late 1460s.⁴ It would seem that this was initially generated by a heady mixture of propaganda and rumour. The propaganda can be seen in the letters sent out from London by Warwick and the privy council rallying support before the second battle of St Albans; in this they laid on with a trowel the danger threatened by ‘the misruled and outrageous people in the north parties of this realm’ coming ‘towards these parties to the destruction thereof, of you, and subversion of all our land’. Warwick, of course, also drew much of his personal support from the north—presumably his followers were well-ruled and peace loving!

The rumour is to be seen at work in the letter sent by Clement Paston to his brother John on January 23, 1461: ‘the pepill in the northe robbe and styll and ben apoynted to pill all thys contre, and gyffie away mens goods and lufflods in all the southe country’.⁵ Such views were subsequently to be enshrined in the poem known as The Rose of Rouen which celebrated Edward IV’s triumph at Towton. It is worth quoting several verses:⁶
Be-twix Cristmas and Candelmas, a litel before the Lent,
All the lordes of the northe thei wrought by oon assent,
For to stroy the sowthe cuntre their did alle hur entent,
Had not the Rose of Rone be, al Englond had be shent.
The northen men made her best, whan thei had done that dede,
"We wol dwelle in the southe cuntry, and take al that we nede;
These wifes and hur doughters, our purpose shal thei spede".
Than seid the Rose of Rone, "Nay, that werk shal I for-bede".
The northen party made hem strong with spear and with sheld,
On Palme sonday, afl'ter the none, their met us in the felde,
Within an owre thei were right fain to fie, and eke to yele,
Twenty-six thousand the Rose kyld in the felde.
The Rose wan the victorye, the felde, and also the chace,
Now may the housband in the southe dwelle in his owne place,
His wif and eke his faire doughtre, and al the goode he has,
Suche menys hath the Rose made, by vertu and by grace.

An echo of the hysteria of 1461 is to be heard in 1483 in the alarm of University of Cambridge at the reported approach 'virorum borealium' on their way to London at the time of Richard III's coronation. A more pervasive influence is to be found in the memoirs of a Yorkist councillor known as the Second Continuation of the Croyland Chronicle. The author, whosoever he was, was a southerner who had experienced the 'great scare' of 1461 and had no love at all for the men of the north. There can be little doubt that these memoirs were written, as the author states, at Croyland during the last ten days of April 1486. At the time of writing he knew that a rebellion had occurred in Yorkshire against Henry VII, but he had not heard what the outcome was. It is easy for us, with our knowledge of the ultimate success of the Tudor dynasty, to dismiss this rising as of little significance. But to the author, in April 1486, the situation seemed critical and fraught with danger. And his apprehension is reflected in his work. Much emphasis is given to the role played in recent politics by the men of the north with whose support, he knew, Richard III had first seized and then held the throne, and who now threatened to overthrow the man who only six months ago had, in his view, rescued the kingdom from their tyranny. It is no wonder that in his anxiety he wrote the following comment as a postscript to the story which he had originally intended only to take up to the death of Richard III.

And although by these means (the marriage of Henry VII and Elizabeth of York) peace was graciously restored, still, the rage of some of the malignants was not averted, but immediately after Easter a sedition was set on foot by these ingrates in the north, whence every evil takes its rise, and this even although the king was staying in those parts.

This antagonism towards the north and northerners was taken up some twenty years later by Polydore Vergil. 'The folk of the north' were, he commented, 'savage and more eager than others for upheaval'. And from Vergil the antagonism ran into the mainstream of the Tudor tradition concerning Richard III.

The ill-will shown by the Croyland Continuator towards the north and northerners is perhaps, in part, a reflection of real regional differences. Compared with the south east the north was economically backward. It was less densely populated. At a very rough guess only 15 per cent. of the population lived in the
six northern counties of Cumberland, Northumberland, Westmorland, Durham, Lancashire and Yorkshire which made up a quarter of the area of the Kingdom. In both 1334 and the reign of Henry VIII, Lancashire, the North Riding and the West Riding were in terms of taxable wealth per square mile the poorest in the realm (the four most northerly counties were not taxed). One must not have the impression that the whole of the region was uniformly impoverished. Rather the region was characterised by marked contrasts between the densely populated and rich lowland areas—especially the vale of York and the East Riding—and the vast acres of open moorland and fell. Nevertheless there is evidence to suggest that the north was becoming poorer between the early fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries, both absolutely and relatively to the south east.

Current research suggests that early in the fourteenth century there was a marked decline in wealth in the upper reaches of the Yorkshire dales and along the north-eastern coast of the county. It would appear that there was a process of contraction to the more favoured and sheltered lands. This process of contraction would seem to be reflected in urban decline after 1377. Recent work in urban history has revealed a profound shift in the balance of urban wealth away from the north and east towards the south and west and, in particular, an absolute decline of towns sited on, or looking towards, the eastern sea-board north of the Wash—towns such as Beverley, Hull, Scarborough, and, above all, York. The decline of York, as Dr. Palliser has shown, was especially marked after 1450: ‘York,’ he concludes, ‘undoubtedly experienced a serious economic recession under the Yorkists and early Tudors’. The cumulative evidence now seems to be pointing to the conclusion that during the second half of the fifteenth century the contrast between the impoverished and declining north and the prosperous and growing south east was becoming ever more striking. One wonders whether an awareness of such an imbalance of wealth lay behind the ready credence given to the idea that northerners were itching for the chance to rob and pillage in the south.

If the distant north were poor and becoming relatively poorer, one might have expected that it would have played an insignificant and increasingly peripheral part in the politics of a kingdom which by the second half of the fifteenth century clearly had its centre of gravity in London. In fact the very reverse was the case; the north had a political significance out of all proportion to its wealth, and it played a central role in politics between 1450 and 1490. This, of course, was entirely due to the Scottish border, to the development of Anglo-Scottish relations from the reign of Edward I and to the measures adopted by successive English kings for the defence of the border while they pursued their ambitions in France.

The story of how the power of the great families of the north—the Percies and Nevilles especially—was built up, and of the development of the wardenships of the marches which they monopolised, has been told elsewhere and will not be repeated here. It may be that kings who felt impelled to fight in France had no choice but to develop such a system. Certainly it seems that the monarchs from Edward III to Henry V were aware of the inherent dangers in the policy and endeavoured, usually successfully, to pursue the time-honoured course of divide and rule in their relationships with the northern powers. But under the slack hand of Henry VI uncontrolled rivalry led directly to open conflict. There is no need to
reiterate that the feud between Percy and Neville was of central importance in the collapse of the Lancastrian dynasty. By the same token, the victory of Edward IV was also the victory of Neville over Percy. In the 1460s Edward had no option but to allow the north to be ruled by one man—Warwick, a circumstance all previous kings had managed to avoid. In 1470 he paid the price: he was run out of his kingdom by an overmighty subject who turned his northern power against the King.

It is perhaps characteristic of Edward IV that after he had fortuitously regained his throne and destroyed Warwick he should by his own choice repeat the mistake of placing the north in the hands of another, even mightier subject—his own brother. Of course it was Edward's policy to rule the kingdom through a select band of close friends and relations. It was a policy that worked as long as he lived, but proved disastrous as soon as he died. In 1483 Edward's son was disposed by an overmighty subject who, like Warwick before him, turned his northern power against his king. The concentration of northern power into the hands of Richard of Gloucester was the ultimate consequence of English royal policy towards Scotland and the north over two centuries. It was not inevitable that this should have happened; Edward IV need not have so favoured his brother—but that is what he did. Thus under Henry VI and Edward IV, for different reasons, the north became progressively more important in the politics of the kingdom until it reached its apogee in the brief reign of Richard III.

Richard III was a king from the north. It is not surprising that the disapproval of him expressed by southerners, such as the Croyland Continuator or the Londoners who discussed current events with Dominic Mancini in the summer of 1483, was matched by the approval expressed by one or two northerners. Bishop Langton came from Appleby in Westmorland and was in the process of benefiting from the King's patronage when he wrote in 1483 that 'God has sent him to us for the weal of us all'. This could perhaps be taken as an authoritative statement of northern opinion. Richard, as Duke of Gloucester, would appear to have successfully established himself with the leaders of northern society. His campaigns against Scotland, however much they offended the Croyland Continuator and apparently irked the king, would appear to have been popular with the northern aristocracy and gentry. A grand raid as far as Edinburgh and the recapture of Berwick in 1482 were significant achievements in the eyes of northern society. Richard had also willingly responded to the pleas for assistance from the citizens of York facing serious economic decline. It is quite understandable why in October 1485 the city council considered him to be 'the most famous prince of blessed memory'.

The high opinion in which Richard III was held in the north, for obvious reasons, found its way only as an aside into the early histories and the later sixteenth century interpretation of the man and his reign. But an echo of it is to be heard in the first systematic defence of Richard's reputation—Buck's History. Thanks to Dr. Kincaid's painstaking reconstruction of the original text we can now accord this work its proper place in the historiography of the subject. As the late Professor Myers observed it is 'a work of pietas to vindicate the memory of a king for whom his [the author's] great-grandfather had laid down his life'. But it was more than this. Buck came from a long line of Yorkshire gentry, who had served the house of York for at least three generations before 1485. There
are passages in the text which quite clearly connect Buck's pride in his northern ancestry with his desire to vindicate the memory of the king who was so closely associated with the north. Early in the first book there lies the following, not entirely accurate, digression on Gloucester and the north:22

But for the most part the employment of this Duke of Gloucester was in the north parts, where he much lived and did good service according to his charge and duty. For he was Lord Warden of all the marches, eastern, middle and western, and earl and governor, or captain (as they then said) of Carlisle. And he liked well to live in those parts of the north for sundry good causes. For besides that Yorkshire was his native country; and that is clear to every man, and most esteemed, for the birth in any place breedeth especial love and affection to the place, and that by a natural instinct, as the poet said well:

*Natale solum dulcedine cunctos mulcet.*

And for that they were the native country both of the duke his father and of the duchess his mother, and by whom he had most noble alliance and very many great friends, and much love in those parts. And certainly he was generally well beloved and honoured of all the northern people, his countrymen, not only for his greatness and alliance, but also (and chiefly) because he was a valiant, wise, and bountiful and liberal prince, and a good and magnificent housekeeper, and the which bringeth not the least love of the people, but rather the most and greatest good will, for they and all men love and admire liberality and good hospitality. And thirdly he liked best to live in these parts because his appanage and patrimony was there chiefly and he had besides goodly possessions and lordships by hereditary right of the duchess his wife in the north parts.

And for these many good causes, he was so much in the good liking of the north countries as that he desired only to finish his days there and in the condition of a subject and of a servant to the king. And his ambition and other worldly aims extended no further. And he governed very wisely and justly both in time of peace and of war and preserved the concord and amity between the Scots and English so much as he could.

Buck is expressing a line of argument used by apologists ever since, but he is also reflecting an opinion which stretches back to northern society in the late fifteenth century.

It is arguable, therefore, that both the opposing traditions concerning Richard III have their distinctive regional roots in the late fifteenth century. Certain southerners, those in particular who wrote, or supplied information for, histories, feared and disliked northerners. Since Richard III was a king who seized the throne with northern backing; who held it after the autumn risings of 1483 with the substantial aid of men drawn from his northern affinity; and who finally sought to save it with northern arms on the field of Bosworth in 1485, it is hardly surprising that in the mind of an influential early historian such as the Croyland Continuator the view of the King is coloured by an animosity felt towards all things northern. All that we know of northern opinion shows, on the other hand, that in his home country he was highly regarded. The significant point about the isolated favourable remarks concerning Richard is surely not that they were contemporary but that they were northern.

Nor should it be forgotten that all our principal narrative sources for the late fifteenth century are southern, indeed specifically south-eastern, in origin. In fact in one way or another they tend to lead back to London. Thus the 'official' history of Richard III is seen through metropolitan eyes. Alison Hanham has
argued with force that the dominant image of Richard III was created not simply as propaganda for the Tudor régime, but more sophisticatedly as a literary exercise—in effect what in late twentieth century jargon is called a ‘faction’. To this one might add that the dominant image also developed out of the specific perception of south-easterners. Richard the malignant monster is not so much Tudor propaganda as metropolitan ‘faction’. Thus there remain two Richards of tradition: a noble Richard and a monstrous Richard—a northern Richard and a southern Richard. Which of the two is correct is, of course, another question.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. This is a slightly revised version of a paper given at the Society's seminar at Trinity College, Oxford on April 4, 1981. I would like to record my thanks to the Society for inviting me to participate.


3. I am grateful to Pat Hairsine for permission to cite this information presented at the Trinity College seminar. This information was originally given to Mrs. Hairsine by Miss M. E. Holmes, County Archivist of Dorset, from the Pitt Rivers Papers at the Dorset Record Office: D396/L3.


8. See Pollard, Tyranny, p.149 and n.4.


12. I am grateful to Mr. R. D. Linacre for allowing me to cite the early results of his research on the distribution of wealth in the North Riding between 1301 and 1334.


18. Ingulph's Chronicles, p.481.


