Sir Ralph Bigod: A Loyal Servant to King Richard III

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In 1554 Henry Parker, Lord Morley presented his ‘Account of Miracles performed by the Holy Eucharist’ to Queen Mary. This manuscript, now Additional Ms. 12,060 at the British Library, contains a series of stories about the efficacy of the Eucharist. In the last two episodes, Morley made reference to the deaths of Lady Margaret, Countess of Richmond, the paternal great-grandmother of Queen Mary and of her maternal great-great uncle, Richard III. Important in the last hours on earth of both of these illustrious royal ancestors was the role of the Eucharist. In the case of the Countess of Richmond, the last thing she saw, according to Morley who was present at her death in 1509, was the host as it was being elevated by her confessor, Bishop John Fisher, in his celebration of mass. The counterpart to this story, emphasizing the religiosity of his former mistress, was the one Morley told about Richard III. Although Morley, born in 1478, had not been old enough to be present at Bosworth Field in August 1485, he was able to quote a certain Bygoff, a member of that King’s household who had vivid memories of that day. Bygoff’s recollection was that the King’s harried chaplains at the royal camp were unable to get everything prepared in time to say mass before the beginning of the battle: When they had ‘one thing ready, evermore they wanted another, when they had wyne they lacked breade, and ever one thing was myssing.’ This story is a dramatic foil to the one about the Countess of Richmond, who was able to see the body of Christ as she lay dying, and Morley utilized it to suggest that Richard’s defeat was divine retribution for the horrible offence he had committed against his brother’s children.

While Lord Morley’s own father, Sir William Parker, had fought for the Yorkists at Bosworth Field, the son’s laudatory statements about the Countess of Richmond are not surprising since he had joined her household at least as early as 1491. What is surprising is that Morley, who was not raised to the peerage until 1523, remembered Bygoff, also a member of her household, as a loyal subject to Richard III. Because Morley left evidence that Bygoff had remained loyal to the memory of his former royal lord even...
after the succession of Henry Tudor, it is of interest and of importance for Ricardian scholars to have biographical information about him.3

Besides relating the story that Bygoff often told about Richard’s chaplains on the day of Bosworth Field, Morley remembered that Bygoff, even as a member of the Countess of Richmond’s household, had refused to permit anyone in his presence to defame the honour and name of the last Yorkist King, his sworn lord and master. This behaviour had been tolerated and even praised by the Countess of Richmond, the mother of Henry VII, because she admired the loyalty of a servant to his lord, especially when that former master had been the crowned King of England. A stickler for preserving social hierarchies and for recognizing the importance of the reciprocal duties and responsibilities of good lordship, it was not her custom to encourage servants even when they were members of the aristocracy to criticize the actions of their former lords. Bygoff had not just been the King’s subject; he had been a sworn member of his household and had enjoyed a special relationship with him.4

Morley left some evidence in the manuscript of the identity of Bygoff. He tells us that this loyal servant to Richard had first been a carver in Queen Anne’s household and after her death had joined that of the King. At Bosworth Field Bygoff had suffered injury while fighting for Richard, and according to Morley, had Bygoff been caught in the heat of that battle, he might have been slain. Some time after the succession of Henry VII, Bygoff was permitted to join the household of the new King’s mother, the Countess of Richmond, as her carver. Although this office may have been little more than a sinecure, requiring attendance upon her only on special occasions, evidence of his service for her can be found in the privy purse accounts of Queen Elizabeth of York, who in 1503 gave over sixty shillings to a man named Bygot, servant to the Countess, for bringing to her a New Year’s gift.5

From this evidence it is possible to suggest that although Morley did not identify Bygoff as a knight, he was probably Sir Ralph Bigod of Settrington, Yorkshire. The name Bigod had a number of spellings, including Bygot, Bigot, and apparently even Bygoff. This identification seems likely because Sir Ralph’s mother, Elizabeth took as her third husband, Sir Oliver St. John, the uterine half-brother of the Countess of Richmond. The life of Sir Ralph has been briefly told in two modern works, one by Charles Moor in 1936 and one by A. G. Dickens in 1959, neither of whom was aware that Bigod probably served in the households of Queen Anne and of the Countess of Richmond. Utilizing their information as well as evidence in some primary sources on which they did not rely, a biographical sketch will be assembled here.6

Born in 1457 to Sir John Bigod of Settrington and Elizabeth, daughter of Henry, fourth Lord Scrope, Sir Ralph succeeded his grandfather, his namesake, in the family estates. Both his father and his grandfather had been killed fighting for the Yorkists in 1461 at the battle of Towton. Theirs was a wealthy, prosperous line that could trace its ancestry back to the younger brother of the last Bigod Earl of Norfolk, who had died in 1306. Successive Bigods had married into the nobility, Sir Ralph’s great-grandfather having wed an heiress to the de Mauley fortune. The Bigods, whose most valuable
estate was the manor of Settrington, located in the northwest corner of the East Riding about three miles from Malton, owned extensive property, mainly situated in this Riding.

Only about four years old when his father and grandfather died, Ralph was placed in the wardship of his mother’s brother, John, who had succeeded as Lord Scrope of Bolton in 1459. Some time after 1479 when he attained his majority, Ralph joined the household of Richard, then the Duke of Gloucester, serving with him in the Scottish war and earning his knighthood at the Duke’s hands in 1482. According to Morley, he also served as carver to Queen Anne after Richard’s succession. In 1482 he won appointment as the sheriff of Yorkshire, following his grandfather and other direct ancestors in that office. During his reign, Richard placed Sir Ralph on a variety of commissions, including the commission of the peace for the East Riding, two commissions of array, and a commission in December 1483 to inquire about persons who had committed treasons in the city of York. Bigod was also appointed as Richard’s master of the ordinance.

Sir Ralph must have submitted to Henry VII very soon after the battle at Bosworth Field, since he began to hold royal office in the north of England as early as 1486. In that year it was noted in the Patent Rolls that Henry VII had granted Ralph Bigod, knight for the King’s body, the positions of constable and porter of the castle of Sheriff Hutton, of bailiff of the town and of the keeping of the park there. In the next year he was one of several knights in York who received warning from the King to prepare against the approach of his enemies. One year later he was appointed to a subsidy commission and in the next decade was placed on the commission of peace for both the East and North Ridings of Yorkshire. He also held positions on commissions of array and of concealed lands. In 1492 he was asked to serve in the invasion of France and in 1503 was appointed to accompany Princess Margaret into Scotland on her journey there to marry King James IV. During the reign of Henry VIII, he continued to hold offices similar to these. Among his duties was the grant in August 1513 to seize the Yorkshire property of the King of Scotland, who was then at war with England.

By his first wife, Margaret, daughter to Sir Robert Constable of Flamborough, Sir Ralph had five children, two boys, Sir John, his elder son, and Ralph, and three daughters, Agnes, wife to Guy Wilstrop, Elizabeth, and Anne, wife to Sir Ralph Bulmer. He also had two illegitimate sons for whom he provided in his will, dated 22 January 1515. Besides Margaret Constable, he was married to a woman named Alice, whose maiden name is not known, and to Agnes, daughter to a Constable of Dromondbye, whose first name also is not known. When he died of natural causes early in 1515 (his will is proved in May of that year), Sir Ralph’s heir was not his elder son, Sir John, a victim of the Scottish War of 1513, but that son’s elder child, Francis, then only seven years old, who became a ward of Thomas, Cardinal Wolsey.

Two outstanding characteristics of Sir Ralph were that he had been a devoted and conventional son of the Church and that he had remained loyal to his sworn lord. To his faith he testified in his will, requesting to be buried before the image of ‘our Blyssed Lady’ at the south end of the high altar in his parish church and arranging for a conventional and elaborate funeral. He
provided that masses be sung for his soul for seven years after his death and that seven tapers be burnt upon his hearse to honour the Trinity and the 'blyssed woundes of our Savour.' After these tapers were burned during the funeral service, they were to remain on his hearse for a whole year, being relighted on special holy days. He also gave many gifts to members of the church, including the Observantines.

Of his loyalty to Richard III, to the Countess of Richmond, and to her son and grandson, evidence has already been presented here. Even though Richard’s northern retainers, according to A. J. Pollard, were ‘responsible’ for the disorders in the years following the battle of Bosworth Field, partly because of their loyalty to Richard’s consort, Anne, the heiress of the Earl of Warwick, Sir Ralph remained loyal to the new monarch, Henry VII. Unlike his uncle, Lord Scape of Bolton, he was not involved in the Lambert Simnel conspiracy against the King.

His loyalty to the Tudors becomes even more noteworthy when the actors in the subsequent rebellions against Henry VIII’s Reformation policies are identified. Many of them were his relatives: Robert Aske, his cousin, was a moving light in the Pilgrimage of Grace of 1536, Sir John Bulmer, his former son-in-law, was executed for implication in that rebellion; Sir Robert Constable, a relative of his first wife, and Thomas, Lord Darcy, a distant cousin of his, were also involved. For Sir Ralph, the most important rebel would have been his own grandson and heir, Sir Francis Bigod, who led a futile rebellion against the government in 1537. Despite having been born the grandson of a man who remained loyal to his own sworn lords, Sir Francis chose to challenge Henry VIII’s authority in the north and lost. His life and his estates were the price that he paid for this gamble. With his conviction and execution in 1537, the manor of Settrington passed to the crown and ultimately the Bigod name in the senior line died out, for the family’s heir became Francis’ grandson by his daughter, Dorothy, the wife of Roger Radcliffe.”

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. For other references to this manuscript, see Retha M. Warnicke, The Lady Margaret, Countess of Richmond (d. 1509), as seen by Bishop Fisher and Lord Morley, Moreau, no. 19 (1982), pp.45-55; and Lord Morley’s Statements about Richard III, Albion, no. 15 (1983), pp.173-8.

2. British Library, Add. Ms. 12,060, f. 19h.

3. Ibid., Retha M. Warnicke, The Lady Margaret, pp.45-55.


13. Letters and Papers. Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII, for example, vol. 1 part i. no. 1365 (3) and p.1547, and vol. 1 part ii. no. 2222.


**Corrections**

In *The Ricardian*, no. 83, December 1983, in Notices of Books on page 280, the publishers of the first book on that page 'Hambleton Press' should have read 'Hambledon Press', and on page 281 of the same issue 'Robert S. Gottfried', author of the second book on that page should have read, 'Robert S. Gottfried.' We wish to apologise for these errors.