

Review Article

W. E. HAMPTON

THE BATTLE OF BOSWORTH. Michael Bennett. Alan Sutton Publishing, Gloucester, 1985, £11.95.

IN THIS QUINCENTENARY OF THE BATTLE OF BOSWORTH, Dr. Bennett joins the long list of those drawn to its study. He will assuredly not be the last, but he has produced an impressive book, conceived on a more than usually generous scale and pervaded by an obvious and attractive enthusiasm. He has conscientiously utilized the specialist researches of other enquirers, including — as he gracefully acknowledges — members of this Society. In addition to the vigorously argued and scrupulously — if sparingly — annotated text, the book contains three maps, and illustrations which are numerous, often unfamiliar, and on the whole well chosen. In a single and most valuable appendix are gathered extracts from almost all of the available domestic and foreign contemporary and near-contemporary accounts of the battle.

Not until the sixth of the book's eight chapters, is the battle described. In the opening chapter, entitled 'News from the Field', the author, whose first paragraphs dramatically conjure up the battle's dying moments and immediate aftermath, traces the spread of rumour and report, and examines the sources available. These last are, he warns, meagre, often composed long after the event, and 'subject to partisan distortion', and thus require close examination and cross-examination. He proposes, therefore, to draw upon a mass of evidence regarding 'the men of the hour', in order to reconstruct what happened at Bosworth. Nothing, one might suppose, could be more laudable than such intentions. Yet in the book's second sentence occurs the statement — echoing a single contemporary source, the *Continuation of the Croyland Chronicle* — that the royal army at Bosworth was 'the mightiest army assembled in England within memory'. Among the King's army were several who had fought at Towton, the greatest and bloodiest battle ever fought in England. The number of the slain at Towton may well have exceeded that of all of the forces present at Bosworth. This estimate of the size of the royal army is a string on which Dr. Bennett repeatedly harps.

In the second chapter, 'Civil War and Common Weal', is summarized the crown's struggle to maintain its authority in the face of aristocratic faction and civil strife, from the later years of Edward III to the beginning of 1483. In effect, the author adopts what he calls 'the Shakespearian perspective' — which he takes almost to the vanishing-point — and the

'Tudor vision' of the national experience. Having guided the reader along this somewhat well-trodden path, he concludes that Englishmen were, in the 1470s, looking to the future with new optimism, as political stability and economic strength increased. The next chapter, 'The Year of Three Kings', opens on this same note of optimism, the English counting among their 'chief blessings' their sovereign and his 'promising heir'. With a touch of hindsight, the author perceives that the wary and the superstitious — the latter alarmed by the prophetic warning that in one year England would see three kings — were aware that in the event of the death of their apparently robust King and the premature succession of his heir, the fragile ties of honour and interest which linked the great magnates behind the throne would snap. The extraordinary events of 1483 are competently rehearsed. With these we are perhaps becoming excessively familiar, and Dr. Bennett's version contains little that is new, although he does note the recently published contemporary chronicle evidence of Buckingham's responsibility for the deaths of the sons of Edward IV. However carefully pros and cons may be balanced in his interpretation, there are questionable assertions and doubtful conclusions. For example, we are told that as the premature news of the death of Edward IV reached York 'at the beginning of April' (in fact on the sixth, three days before that event), Gloucester was given 'extra time to consider his position'. This *may* have been the case, but Gloucester's whereabouts at that time are not known, and we can but guess at when or where he received that news. Although the 'courtly and pious Rivers' led from Ludlow an armed force *reduced* to two thousand men, 'any really sinister plot' is considered unlikely. On the other hand, the author fails to inform the reader that Gloucester left the north with a modest retinue of three hundred gentlemen, all in black, having instructed Buckingham to bring a similar number — little more than the normal retinue of a duke.

Chapter four, 'Kings, Pretenders and Powerbrokers', provides assessments of those who were to be the protagonists at Bosworth. That of Richard, as man and as King, is largely favourable, although such excellent qualities are seen to 'merely underline the magnitude of Richard III's failure'. Unlike Professor Ross, who finds Richard's conduct of government difficult to fault, the author sees Ricardian government being forced after the Buckingham rebellion into financial, political and moral bankruptcy, and resorting increasingly to arbitrary and desperate expedients. The King's attempts to raise loans from individuals are as misrepresented by Dr. Bennett as they were by the Croyland Chronicler. Forced loans they were not. From early in 1484 the regime is seen to have been crumbling. As fear grips the realm, enemies take heart. The King's 'charisma', we are told, 'haemorrhaged away'. Wretched and repudiated, the King heroically steels himself to his fate. The withdrawn and agonizing Richard of 1485 is similar to Professor Kendall's. Here, too, the author is at variance with Professor Ross.

The plural, 'Pretenders', refers of course to Henry Tudor, described as 'fretting in exile, waiting for his destiny to be fulfilled' — an occupational hazard. His lineage is given, the author considering it likely that the court of Henry VI would have regarded the Beauforts as favourites for the

succession in the event of the failure of the main Lancastrian line. In this he ignores the claims of the Holland family. The author takes us briskly through Henry's life and hard times. The growth of his rebel entourage is traced with reasonable accuracy, although minor errors appear. For example, James Blount, lieutenant of Hammes, and John Fortescue, gentleman porter of Calais, are mistakenly described as, respectively, captain and lieutenant of Hammes. We are treated to a speculative and imaginative account of the fluctuating morale within the Tudor camp.

Again, Dr. Bennett emphasizes Richard's apparent unassailability and (however bankrupt, one may note) the immensity of his resources. Examining support for the King among magnates and gentry, he rightly observes that the King's affinity was largely, but never altogether, northern. He ploughs lonely furrows when stating that Sir James Tyrell (in Richard's service by 1473) followed Catesby's suit in clambering onto 'the protector's bandwaggon', and that secretary Kendall was from Warwickshire. Not for the first time, one longs for more source references. Whence comes the information that 'a disaffected Lancashire gentleman who joined the protector's retinue came near to mortally wounding' Lord Stanley at the time of Stanley's arrest? Did some of the 'old Nevill connection' really believe Richard guilty of the murder of his Queen? So we are told, although the Croyland Chronicler's embittered comments do not constitute evidence. We are invited to believe that all west-country gentlemen prepared to 'collaborate' with Richard were men of dubious value. Are the four Ricardian Courtenays, and Lords Dinham and Zouche — all of whom, as Dr. A. J. Pollard has observed, worked for Richard — to be included, and pejoratively labelled, as is the 'pushy' Morgan Kidwelly? The great Ricardian 'power-brokers', Norfolk, Northumberland, and Stanley, are pronounced upon. The assessments of Norfolk and Northumberland are those now familiar. That of Stanley is remarkably tolerant. Incidentally, it is to be hoped that the infelicitous term 'power-broker', of which the author (its parent?) is abominably fond, does not become a vogue expression.

The fifth chapter, 'The Road to Bosworth', commences with the notion that between 1483 and 1485 all roads led to Bosworth. In the days before the battle, at least, all roads led to the respective commanders. The author muses speculatively about the area surrounding — 'a place to feel the pulse of the nation', and a 'cockpit', and decides that Richard selected Nottingham as his headquarters because the royal presence was crucial in what seemed the most unstable of all the regions. His arguments are less than convincing, in view of the significantly large number of Nottinghamshire gentry who subsequently fought for the King. Richard's defensive dispositions are briefly examined, the author again slipping in mention of 'forced loans'. Henry's search for support and his invasion preparations are scrutinized. The predominantly foreign composition of the pretender's army is admitted. Among the more experienced of the five hundred strong English contingent are included — on what evidence we can but guess — the Courtenay Bishop of Exeter and Richard Edgecombe, the former 'no mean warrior', the latter a 'talented soldier'. As for the assistance provided by Charles VIII, the substantial loan is not mentioned, and the number of

the French contingent is, predictably, set as low as 2,000, half that considered possible by Professor Ross. Bretons, and Scots — whose contingent John Major (see also Pitscottie) makes 1,000 strong out of 5,000 men supplied by the French king — are apparently included in Dr. Bennett's 2,000.

The description of Henry's march — the 'young adventurer . . . now entering his *inheritance* as Prince of Wales' — and the modest growth of Welsh and English support, differs little from such accounts as that of Ross. Surprisingly, Walter Herbert is included among those Welsh who abandoned the King. By 15 August, Henry's 'puny band' is a 'substantial army', demanding entrance into Shrewsbury. Incidentally, that town was delivered to Henry through the 'diligent labour' of one Richard Crompe, not as the author supposes, by Sir William Stanley or Gilbert Talbot. Noting the Stanleys' disquieting determination to retain command of their separate forces, the author has Sir William conducting 'joint exercises' with the rebels, before dashing off to join his brother.

Familiar enough is the account of Richard's movements, the gathering of the royal army, and the likely duplicity of Lord Stanley. Less familiar details include the killing of the sheriff of Warwickshire and Leicestershire, Richard Boughton, on 20 August. The author makes the thought-provoking suggestion that this might have occurred during an attack on Lord Stanley. But would Boughton have attacked Stanley on that date without orders from the King — who later summoned Stanley to his side? A clash could well have occurred between Boughton and Bouchier and Hungerford, who, having deserted Sir Robert Brakenbury, joined Henry at that time. It is heartening to note that the likelihood of such skirmishes 'on the road' is at last being considered.

Chapter six, 'Ordeal by Battle', begins with a highly imaginative, even romantic, evocation of the terrain over which the battle would be fought. Evidence of confusion in the royal camp leads Dr. Bennett to suggest that the King was caught on the wrong foot by the determination of Henry and his captains. The army which Richard marshals is of 'immense size', thus unwieldy. Yet after describing the deployment of the royal army the author concludes that 'all in all, the royal host must have comprised at least 10,000, and possibly over 15,000 men'. Henry's force is still only some 5,000 strong. Both armies were, it seems, remarkably 'elastic'. Ross' estimate of 8,000 (the number accepted by the sensible Col. Burne) to 10,000 for the royal army, and *circa* 5,000 for the rebels is surely sound — and defection by the Stanleys would perhaps have given the rebels numerical parity, perhaps superiority. What historians should take into account is the fact that the greater part of Henry's army, although largely foreign, and thus less 'homogenous' than Richard's, had been in being for several weeks. They shared a common cause, and the same terrible consequences of a possible defeat. They had also shared a long, but not forced, march. On the other hand, the royal host was hastily mustered, and even if horsed, men and beasts must have pressed hard to reach the King. Richard's army, with late contingents continually arriving, was not in existence — as a cohesive force — for more than two or three days. These were real disadvantages.

Like Professor Ross, the author — rightly — sets considerable store by the *Ballad of Bosworth Field*. In the previous chapter he admits its evidence that a large and distinguished company of peers and knights accompanied the King. In his description of the battle he makes great use of the Ballad, and of other ballad evidence. The actual — or, rather, conjectured — course of the battle differs little from several recent accounts. He parts company with Professors Ross and Kendall — and many others — however, in deciding that, although separate before the battle, the two Stanley forces were during the battle side by side, and to the south-east of the rebel force. This poses some problems. Whoever bore the King's 'ugly threats' to Lord Stanley would have to canter through the marsh — or make a circuitous detour to its west. And would the bearer have been sent by the King if the Stanleys — one a proclaimed traitor — were in company? Dr. Bennett is probably correct in assuming that Lord Stanley took no part in the fighting. Whether he sent 'brave young cavalrymen' to assist Henry is more doubtful. Many details of the actual fighting, taken from both ballad and more certainly reliable evidence, are given. Many more could have been added, but the author — doubtless mindful of the book's need for some popular appeal — frequently indulges in imaginative and speculative passages reminiscent of the late Professor Kendall. His prose, if not as 'empurpled' as Kendall's, is occasionally a pale heliotrope. It is always lively.

The King's last 'breakneck, blood-curdling charge' is vividly imagined. Although the King 'skewers' the rebel standard-bearer, Brandon, his overthrowing of the giant Cheney is omitted. The King's bravery is saluted. He dies at the hands — we are told — of Welsh pikemen. The 'honour' is not accorded to Welsh claimants Rhys Fawr ap Maredudd, and Rhys ap Thomas. Incidentally, although the pretender's youth is repeatedly emphasized, the author never mentions the fact that Richard was only four years his senior.

In the next chapter, 'The Tudor Triumph', the author lingers long over the earliest days of Henry's reign. The difficulties facing Henry are acknowledged to have been enormous. The executions after Bosworth are quickly passed over, and the King's clemency is emphasized. Henry's sharp practice in dating his reign from the day before the battle is less than sharply condemned, apparently because the number of attainders which this device permitted was 'remarkably small'. The opposition to Henry during the earliest months of the reign is omitted, although the evidence is plain enough. Among this evidence is the petition made by Robert Throckmorton, briefly appointed by Henry as sheriff of Warwickshire and Leicestershire. In this Throckmorton stated that during his 'sheriffwik' of little more than a month (somewhat longer, in fact), there was within the realm 'such rebellion and trouble' that his office could not be properly executed. Dr. Bennett turns this into 'disturbed conditions within the bailiwick'. According to the author, the 'blithe young man' (Henry) was soon disabused of any optimism, 'sections of the political nation, typically willing the ends of good government without accepting the means', being unwilling to allow the Tudor government the required power and resources. A cursory survey is given of the various rebellions during the reign. There are inaccuracies. We

are, for example, told that Thomas Metcalfe (one of Richard's councillors, and his chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster), 'apparently committed suicide,' not long after the Battle of Stoke Field.

In fact, Metcalfe was appointed to office within the Bishopric of Durham by Bishops Sherwood, Fox, and Severs. As late as 1503/4, he was appointed by Severs justice of assize and of pleas of the crown, of gaol delivery and of the peace, in the counties of Durham and Sadbergh. It is true that in 1490, a Thomas Metcalfe was believed to have killed himself, but in circumstances which make suicide unlikely.

Enough of criticism. However surprising it may be to find Henry described as a blithe young adventurer, so be it. As for Richard III, it is unlikely that this book will do much to alter his reputation. Dr. Bennett's assessment of Richard's government may be a trifle severe, but few historians have paid Richard the man handsomer tributes. His book will be welcome to all who are interested not only in the battle but in the period.