

# Sir George Buck and Princess Elizabeth's Letter: A Problem in Detection

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IN SIR GEORGE BUCK'S rambling disquisition on the life and reign of Richard III much the most interesting item is his description of a letter in the possession of the Earl of Arundel and Surrey, written evidently in February 1485 by the Princess Elizabeth of York to the Earl's forbear, John Howard, Duke of Norfolk. As it is quoted in the published versions of Buck's work, this letter explicitly conveys Elizabeth's impatience that the Queen's lingering life is frustrating her own hoped-for marriage with her uncle.<sup>1</sup>

A document of such startling import — amazingly indiscreet and out of character, as many would think, with what is known of Elizabeth in later life — would demand critical examination from modern historians. Since it is apparently lost; since Buck is the only writer to mention it, and since Buck can be proved to have misrepresented his sources on occasion, recent historians have treated his account of the letter with great suspicion. Did it ever exist? If Buck was in fact once shown a paper of the right date, did he inadvertently mistake the identity of the writer, or misread her words? Charles Ross summed up the dilemma: if Buck's notice of the letter is authentic, it makes a

significant addition to the Ricardian story [in that] far from rejecting a match with her uncle, the young Elizabeth of York was willing and impatient for it to be accomplished . . . it is hard to brush aside this circumstantial statement. Yet, since the letter has not been seen since, it is equally difficult to accept it.<sup>2</sup>

I think we may take it that, as A. N. Kincaid argued, Buck had seen and handled a letter like the one he describes. He would never have risked destroying his credibility by claiming that his patron owned a non-existent manuscript. One way out of the difficulty that Ross expressed would be to postulate that, unknown to Buck, the letter was a forgery, put out by enemies of Elizabeth and meant for surreptitious circulation. Although Buck stated that the letter was in her own hand, it is not likely that he could really judge.

This is not, however, a theory I wish to pursue, because there is a much simpler explanation which rests entirely on the extant evidence.

First it will be necessary to look briefly at Buck's methods of working. He had an antiquarian's regard for documentary evidence, and where his sources can be checked it can be seen that he usually quoted with fair accuracy. With

one important qualification. He tampered with evidence when it seemed to contradict his presuppositions, for example in quoting the poem about the three King Richards in the *Second Continuation of the Crowland Chronicle* he apparently omitted two half-lines, removing a reference to the death of the princes and changing their supporters of 1483 into partisans of Henry Tudor.<sup>3</sup> Further, Buck sometimes misinterpreted a source, as when he reversed the meaning of Thomas More's comment on Morton's pride and sagacity.<sup>4</sup>

So Buck's desire to prove a case (or, as he saw it, to uphold the truth) sometimes led him into the cardinal sins of suppressing evidence and altering records. He often failed to read his chronicle sources carefully, or else wrote from a fallible memory of them. Thus he ignores or flatly contradicts a number of explicit statements in the *Crowland Chronicle*.<sup>5</sup>

The second point to be made is that, as Kincaid has ably demonstrated, Buck's text went through a number of recensions. Three of these appear in the fire-damaged British Library manuscript Cotton Tiberius E. X, which was Kincaid's primary source for his reconstruction of the text. With the alterations that represent the third state of this manuscript — those made by Buck's great-nephew for his shortened and pirated edition of 1646 — we have no concern. It is Sir George's first draft and the changes that he made at some subsequent date that are of interest. There is no doubt that these authorial alterations were made as an afterthought: they have been interlineated in a different ink.

In editing Sir George's work for publication, Kincaid adopted the policy of constructing a text which should be as close as possible to what Sir George would have regarded as his final version. That is, he incorporated Sir George's emendations and alterations without special notification. In a literary text, where the author's revisions represent his final intentions, this editorial procedure is right and proper. But for historians, will the most accurate account of a lost document come from the man who took notes when he had it before him, or the man who summarizes its contents from memory long afterwards? The answer is indisputable.

In the following reproduction of Sir George's report on the letter (BL. MS. Cotton Tiberius E. X fo.238v) I have silently adopted Kincaid's restoration of lost words, which he took from a derivative and rather unreliable manuscript, BL. MS. Egerton 2216 (c.1640). The interlineated matter was entered in the same fashion by Sir George in his revision of the Cotton Tiberius Manuscript.

[Elizabeth] thancked [Norfolk] for his many curtesies and freindly offices  
and then she prayed him <sup>as before</sup> to bee a mediator for her <sup>in the cause of</sup>  
the marriage <sup>to the king whoe as she wrote was her onely ioye and her</sup>  
maker in the worlde and that she was ~~in~~ his <sup>in</sup> harte in thoughts in body  
and <sup>in</sup> all and then she intimated that the better halfe of February was  
paste and that she feared the queene would neuer die and <sup>all</sup> these bee her  
own wordes <sup>written with her own hand</sup> and this is the summe of her letter.

It will be obvious that in Buck's original version of the letter there was no reference whatever to marriage. Buck himself added that gloss later. I suggest that he did so because he became convinced that this was what the writer implied. But did she? Not according to Buck's first, unembroidered, version.

Quite possibly Buck based this initial version on notes that he had made about the letter's contents when he was shown it. If so, the Princess was asking Norfolk to mediate between her and the King. In the circumstances of early 1485 Richard was indeed her best hope of worldly fortune ('her only joy and maker in [this] world'), since he controlled the provision of a suitable marriage such as had been agreed when Elizabeth's mother consented to leave sanctuary with her daughters. Describing someone as one's 'only joy' carried no necessary amatory connotations. The Princess was dealing in hard economic facts. Nor is it clear from Buck's account whether Elizabeth declared herself to be in heart and thought with Richard or with Norfolk. If she meant that she was at one with the King, why did she need Norfolk to intercede for her? Possibly she simply wanted Norfolk to assure the King of her wholehearted obedience to his wishes when her future was in the balance. On the other hand, these are phrases that might well occur in the valedictory clause of a fifteenth-century letter, directed to the recipient. If that was so, the reference to the Queen may have been a postscript. And Elizabeth could have benefited from her death in other ways than by marrying the widower. One possibility is that lands would be released in order to furnish her marriage portion.

Be that as it may, Buck's treatment of the famous letter well illustrates his strengths and defects as a scholarly writer. With the unique good fortune to see and report on this important historical document, he made a reasonably full note of its purport, using some of the writer's own words. (Alas, he did not think simply to copy the whole letter verbatim, as a modern researcher would do, but it would not be fair to blame him for that.) So far so good. Unfortunately, with his knowledge of Richard's alleged plans to remarry in the forefront of his mind, Buck assumed (either at first reading or on later consideration) that Elizabeth must be writing on the same subject, and he incorporated his interpretation into his revised version of the report. Dr. Kincaid then, unluckily, gave further currency to Buck's 'improved' text by his failure to differentiate between the initial draft and its later interpolations.

May we therefore assume that Buck said quite truthfully that he had seen a letter from Elizabeth to Norfolk? The letter did not, however, indicate that Elizabeth nourished a desire to marry her uncle.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Buck's summary of the letter appears without essential differences in his great-nephew's recension: George Buck, *History of the Life and Reign of Richard the Third* (1646), and in the edition of Sir George's own text by Arthur N. Kincaid, *History of King Richard the Third by Sir George Buck*. (Gloucester 1979), p.191.
2. C. Ross, *Richard III* (1981), p.xlix.
3. W. Fulman (ed.), *Rerum Anglicarum Scriptorum Veterum Tom. 1.* (Oxford 1684), p.575. The changes constitute more than Kincaid's 'slight softening' in Richard's favour (Kincaid, pp.xc-xciv, cxiv).
4. Kincaid, pp.86, 270.
5. For more detailed criticisms of Buck's work, see my review in *Moreana*, vol. 18 (June 1981), pp.73-6.
6. I am greatly indebted to Geoffrey Wheeler for verifying the accuracy of my original transcript of the passage from BL. Cott.Tiber. E. X.