The New Criterion

Dispatch May 27, 2020 11:46 am

Planting the Plantagenets

by Paul du Quenoy

If it were unclear that Yale University does not much care at present for white males, especially dead ones, the University's gutting of its celebrated introductory course in art history would be proof enough. Nevertheless, Yale University Press's English Monarchs series, which has covered most of the male individuals who have ruled that sceptered isle (along with Mary I and Anne, though not yet Victoria, either Elizabeth, or the other Mary), continues to run strong. Michael Hicks's new and densely detailed biography of Richard III, whose violent twenty-six-month reign in 1483–85 proved an unexpected coda to the Plantagenet era, advances the series further by revisiting one of its earlier subjects.

Much has changed in Ricardian studies (as they are known) since Charles Ross's entry in the English Monarchs series on Richard III in 1981. After lengthy sleuthing sponsored by a century-old society dedicated to restoring Richard III's tarnished reputation, archaeologists traced his remains to Leicester's long-disappeared Greyfriars Church, the ruined foundations of which are now buried under a parking lot. In 2012, these researchers discovered there a skeleton that genetic testing has determined with 99.999 percent accuracy to be the remains of the king, who fell in battle against his kinsman and rival Henry Tudor. In 2015, after some legal challenges from collateral descendants who advocated a loftier resting place, Richard was given a belated state funeral at nearby Leicester Cathedral, graced by the present Duke of Gloucester representing the Royal Family.

Hicks dampens the excitement by raising some pedantic objections to the precise identification of the bones, but he mostly accepts their authenticity before launching into a laudable, if at times excessively detailed, empirical study that does much to dispel the Shakespearean cloud around this enigmatic monarch. Richard's legacy as a bloodthirsty tyrant has made him an archetype of political villainy. Shakespeare's *Richard III* is among the most popular of his histories. The character's duplicitous scheming and Machiavellian machinations make him a hero to the ruthlessly ambitious, a horrifying forerunner of totalitarianism to the conscience-laden, and, at the very least, a captivating stage presence to everyone else.

Dedicating about two-thirds of the book to the thirty years of Richard's life before he became king, Hicks sketches a more human figure. Richard was born in the middle of the Wars of the Roses, a dynastic struggle during which life was indeed nasty, brutish, and short. By the time he was ten, his father and one elder brother had been killed in battle in a war that his Yorkist branch of the Plantagenet dynasty nevertheless won. Returning from exile, Richard approached that tenth birthday as a royal duke and admiral of England. In service to his eldest brother Edward IV from his mid-teens, Richard stood out for his loyalty and his administrative and strategic acumen. Flashes of ruthlessness led him to exceed instructions from time to time, but nothing suggested that he was plotting a bold ascent to the throne. Instead, he used his loyal service to build an impressive power base in the north of England, where he became the realm's second most powerful man, having built a legacy he hoped to pass down to his heirs.

Most of Richard's alleged excesses, familiar from Shakespeare and Tudor historians who blackened his name, have little basis in fact. The Richard of history did not frame his older brother the Duke of Clarence for treason, but rather aided King Edward IV and other loyalists in uncovering a legitimately treasonous plot. Richard neither caused his ruling brother's death nor dispatched his own wife in a depraved plot to marry his niece: Edward IV and Queen Anne both died naturally; marrying the niece was merely a passing notion, quickly abandoned in favor of a prospective Spanish or Portuguese match. Richard's piety was not for show but deeply felt and even led to what turned out to be strategic errors. He allowed mortal enemies to survive by claiming sanctuary on holy ground, sometimes just steps from where he reigned. In 1484—his only complete calendar year as king—he pardoned no fewer than 963 men who had rebelled against him just weeks after he came to the throne. Some were undoubtedly grateful; others helped destroy him the next year, or at least failed to act to prevent his destruction.

Rising to the throne probably did not enter Richard's mind until nearly the moment it became possible. Here, Hicks reasons that the most famous charge against Richard—that he ordered the murder of his young nephews by Edward IV after having them declared bastards on shaky grounds—is almost certainly true. The plain facts remain that the princes were consigned to his care, placed in the Tower of London, and never seen again. Even at the time, they were widely believed to have been murdered at Richard's behest. There is no smoking gun—for such foul acts, there rarely are—but the sheer audacity imputed to Richard emerged as one of the most persuasive arguments for his deposition. Previous English kings had been killed by competing successors, yet these victims were adults rather than children and had generally compromised the realm through unbearable weakness or unreliability. Killing children who merely stood in the way smacked unforgivably of Herodian depravity.

Perhaps Richard's most fascinating characteristic was what appears now to be his thoroughly modern psyche. Although he ultimately lost both the propaganda and military wars to an energized opponent, he showed an uncannily realistic understanding of his contemporaries and their motivations, as well as a sensitivity to the rising importance of commerce and trade and to the sensibilities of at least urban commoners. Richard went beyond the traditional royal councils and ecclesiastical authorities to justify himself to guilds and city administrations. He was the first king

to deliver his coronation oath in English. His attention to spectacle and sumptuousness cemented his claims to power and majesty. And, Hicks believes, he was the first monarch to employ character assassination as a political weapon against opponents, exerting influence over a public that was becoming more literate and easier to reach in print. Once he opened that Pandora's Box, he quickly fell victim to it himself, but this may be the aspect of his legacy most pertinent to our own troubled times.

Paul du Quenoy is President of the Palm Beach Freedom Institute. He holds a Ph.d. in History from Georgetown University.