

The War of the Roses

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January 27 - February 6, 2013

The War of the Roses constituted the logical conclusion of the Hundred Years War. As such it remains in memory as something romantic, a tale of Medieval chivalry and barbarity, on the border between myth and reality. The mind conjures up images of faceless armored cavalry and slender infantries of soldiers with long-bows, all made striking to the eye by colorful standards and gaudy dresses with the commanders decked out as jewels. What was the difference between a battle and a joust? All for show, but the former with blood and disembowelment as a consequence.

Two Royal dynasties intertwined by marriages and recklessly inbred. The Lancaster branch, headed by the ineffectual son Henry VI of the hero Henry V of Agincourt, as a child crowned the King of France and with a French Queen Margarete Anjou, was on the decline, the loss of French possessions (save the Calais and the Channel Islands) being attributed to their lucklustre stewardship¹. The head of the York branch, the Duke of York, was to see to the deposition of the Lancaster king, however, he was prematurely killed, so this task was accomplished by his son - Edward IV, who, for but one year of being ousted, while Henry VI was momentarily reinstated, served as the King for twenty years. He died, his issue was confiscated and destroyed (the legend of the two princes in the Tower) by his younger brother, who would seize the crown as Richard III, and whose ill gotten reign would only last for two years before he was killed at the battle of Bosworth by the emerging Henry VII whose step-father tipped the balance by eventually actively joining the inferior forces of his step-son. The battle of Bosworth marks the end of the civil strife, but only in the eyes of posterity, at the time, ultimate success was not assured but further challenges had to be fought. With the ascendancy of Henry VII, whose legitimacy ultimately stemmed from that pivotal John of Gaunt third son of Edward III, the Platagenet dynasty came to an end, to be replaced by the Tudor for the next hundred odd years. Richard III was the last English king to die in battle, and one of the very last to take part in one.

To understand the civil war one needs to understand the basis and legitimacy of power. The basis of power is ultimately might, but might is not just a question of physical superiority, it is also a question of being able to generate such, and here the appeal to a common held authority is crucial. The authority of legitimacy, i.e. that of the law, in particular the law of succession. It is based on a myth, but a surprisingly powerful one, namely the myth of Royal Blood and progeniture. Given the dynastic ties this can in principle be worked out, and adherence to its principles even to the point of tolerating the inept, enables a transcendent idea to be universally accepted and implemented and prevent

¹ The prosaic explanation being that the spectacular English advances were due to internal strife among the French, each faction enlisting the common enemy from overseas to further their tactical causes. But when the French united, the English advance was doomed.

continual warring, which in the long run will benefit no one. But of course at times, one needs to modify those principles, and the way to modify them is not always agreed on. The weakness of Henry VI clearly brought about such a crisis to its head.

Now in a factious country, there is usually no stable majority, so any course of action requires alliances and hence compromises. The former are tactical and contingent upon the unfolding of events and thus liable to be fluid and easily reversed. The raising of an army is central, and this is a matter of costs, particularly irksome to a regent, whose taste and need for it, easily outstrips that of his own private holdings. Thus he need to borrow money from the weel-heeled, which carries with it bonds of dependency or extort it by taxation, the ultimate authority being that of the parliament. Now a powerful king may not oppose a united one, but easily seduce individual members thereof, and in that way gain control. But basically each landowner owns people like cattle, people beholden to him and who he can reward by the spoils of successful ventures. However, unlike the case of the Hundred Years War on French soil, there was little ravaging during the war of the Roses, no scorched-earth-tactics, no burning of villages and plunder, although of course as always there were notable exceptions. In short, the people who suffered and died, apart from the unlucky on the battle-field, were usually the main players of the game, either honorably in the field, or through imprisonment and beheadings, sometimes followed by further indemnities, so typical of that colorful age.

I have briefly outlined the course of events which lasted for some thirty odd years. A fuller and more detailed survey would also include the main battles, in addition to the concluding one of Bosworth, as well as the main characters of the story, in addition to the kings. Some of those changed sides repeatedly, as the stakes were high and backing the losing side at best meant ruin, at worst loss of life and neck. Kings are usually figure heads, and this also goes for the various Dukes and Earls who play supporting roles, but there is always the need for capable men, administrators, advisors, and those are not seldom plucked from the stock of commoners, and thus not unseldom immune to the power-struggles of the upper echelons, competence being always in demand.

In order to give some continuity to the story, the author has decided to focus on five different personalities. One is the mother of the future Henry VII - Margaret Beaufort, who was married off at an early age, and widowed repeatedly, producing just one offspring, whose education brought about a long separation from her. Unlike most women at the time, she had power, and used it well. Then there is William Hastings, who rose to the ranks, acquired a lot of power and influence, but was eventually betrayed by his protector - Richard III, and executed. The Earl of Oxford, as one of those, whose military exploits are noteworthy, before he comes to grief. More interestingly perhaps a certain Dr Morton, a learned man who eventually becomes the Bishop of Ely, and finally Mrs Shore, a woman of easy virtue, daughter to one of the wealthiest eldermen of London. Most of those names appear in Shakespeare, tantalizingly also Mrs Shore, who does have a historical basis, which the author has done his best in establishing and fleshing out. The result is that instead of the narrative becoming a mere tedious catalog of events, a certain fictional element is introduced, something no doubt scorned by the professional historian but making the pill sweeter for the general reader.

The war lasting for over thirty years, but of course not continuously so, demands

quite a cast of characters, worthy of a long novel by a Tolstoy. Populations were smaller in those days, and the ruling elite even far more so, than it would be correspondingly now, still a huge cast is required, hard to keep in your mind, let alone all those relations holding between them, a task not eased by the fact that males are often referred to by name and title, none of which has any bearing upon the other, and titles being carried on by inheritance from one player to another, just as with the offices of kings. Thus as the story unfolds one is being required to remember who is who, and who has just died and no longer is listed under his old designation but replaced by somebody else. So there are the various Dukes of Buckingham, Exeter, Norfolk, Somerset, Suffolk, as well as the Earls of Essex, Lincoln, Northumberland, Oxford, Pembroke, Richmond, Rivers, Salisbury, Warwick and Worcester. Add to that lords and viscounts and marquesses, to say nothing about all the simple sirs and doctors. And you need continually to look up the register at the end, especially the genealogical tables of the Lancasters and the Yorks, tables that are crucial to the story.

Battles are important, and the reason why they are is not always obvious. Sometimes they are decisive, sometimes not, and the reasons why are not intrinsic to what happens on the field. The ultimate arbiter is physical might, although in practice the threat of its invocation is enough. To win or to lose a battle is not the same thing as winning or losing a war, and during the war of the Roses there were many battles lost and won on both sides. To have an army is to show muscle, the muscle has not to be flexed. To engage in battle is a way of calling bluffs, and an army shattered is a loss of prestige, which in particular in a civil war is crucial, because it signals which way to hedge your bets. If a country is overrun by an invading army, losing battles initially may not be so serious, because the cause is common to all defenders, while in a civil strife, especially one such as the one under consideration, allegiances, as noted, are fluid, and as with saddle points, small vertical changes may give rise to large horizontal displacements.

The actual fighting of a battle is of course a dramatic affair, with a precise location and of limited duration. Authors, and especially film-makers love to dwell on them. They often provide detailed narratives complete with maps and arrows, and one wonders how they are able to do so? A writer of a piece of fiction, or a director, may allow themselves a certain license; while the serious historian ought to be more careful. The commander of an army is given high prestige, as it is assumed that the success of an army, provided it is roughly numerically equivalent with its opposing force, rises or falls in tandem with the mastery of the commander. In practice, a commander has very little control of what goes on, he may have some as to the actual positioning and time of attack, but once the machinery is unleashed, it takes its own course. What results is chaos, especially as soldiers mostly are amateurs and have had little drill (experience may count for some, but then more in terms of psychology and endurance, than in actual tactical fighting). Armies which were pre-programmed came later in the history of warfare. One notable thing about battles of the past was the very active role played by the commanders, who did not shirk from getting into the fray, although it stands to reason that they were protected by their retinues. Typical is that so many of the leading figures of the strife died in battle, most notably, as already noted, Richard III himself.

So which were the battles? The Duke of York starts a rebellion in 1452 and during the

insanity of Henry VI (and the birth of his son) is appointed protector, and hence effective ruler. This is challenged and there is the first battle of St-Albans in 1455. An inconclusive battle follows and in 1460 the Yorkist wins at Northampton, only to be defeated at Wakefield a few months later. In that engagement the Duke of York is killed. But a few months later there is a Yorkish victory at Mortimers Cross, followed by a Lancastrian victory at the second battle at St-Albans. But by the overwhelming victory of The Yorkists at Towton the son of the Duke of York is ensconced on the throne as Edward IV. There are ineffectual attempts at rebellion by the Lancastrians but they are defeated more or less definitively at Hexham in 1464 and the following year Henry VI is captured. But in 1469 the Yorkists anyway suffers a defeat at Edgecote, Edward IV is temporarily in captivity. In 1471 there are battles and Yorkist victories at Barnet and more significantly at Tewkesbury, where the son of Henry VI succumbs. At the end of the year Henry VI is killed as well. The reign of Edward IV is strengthened allowing him adventures such as invasions of France. Those see little military actions, and are mostly waged in order to get strong negotiating positions and secure from the French king a pension. The French King is, however, far superior to the English in political and diplomatic astuteness. As a consequence the English reap no territorial advantages. In 1483 Edward IV dies a natural death, his brother Richard makes a succession of coups, getting rid of his nephews, the legitimate pretenders to the throne, and makes himself king as Richard III. Two years later he is dead at Bosworth, and Henry VII is able to successfully protect his reign from further attempts at rebellion. By marrying the daughter of Edward IV, he unites the white roses (York) with the red (Lancaster) and also confers some legitimacy to his own progeny. The subsequent reign of Henry VIII in 1509 would not be understandable without a knowledge of the background provided by the Civil War that brought the Tudors to the throne.

All of this is confusing. Like one Brownian motion, with one damned thing following another. Battles may seem to settle matters, only to be overturned by future events, and in the end everything blends into each other, and it takes a patient hand to disentangle the surviving mess.

As general remarks one may point out that politics during such times were indeed a very risky business. To lose all your property at least made it possible to recover, as fortunes were as easily given as removed by the for the moment powerful. To lose your head, on the other hand, was definitely more definitive, although it did not rule out the rise of your progeny in the future. The key was always to have powerful friends, but of course if you were king yourself, having to rely on even more powerful friends was a recipe for disaster.

Furthermore there was a large variation of wealth. The richest landowners netting incomes of the order of several thousand pounds, while commoners had less than a pound. Thus a rich landowner could support a large number of people, and have even more people dependent upon him, which was crucial as to raising men for local armies. The way to display your wealth, even if it was not astronomical, was in your ways of dress, which advertised money and power, especially among the commoners, who had no other ways of displaying and maintaining distinction.