

Talk for Richard III Society Conference 2007. Topic Richard in Fiction

You may be wondering at my topic, and why we, as a Society, should be concerned about the presentation of Richard in fiction. The answer is that some of you may have been brought to the Society as a result of reading Josephine Tey's *Daughter of Time*, or Sharon Penman's magnificent work *Sunne in Splendour*. **Quick show of hands** My own interest was triggered by reading something out of my school library as a teenager, but I have been unable to identify which book. Our American colleagues have been interested in the presentation of Richard in fiction for a while, to the point that an issue of the US Branch's magazine was devoted to Richardian fiction in Winter 1997-8.

This is an update of a presentation I originally prepared for the South Australian branch about 15 years ago, I have added to the list of novels, but did not have the time to re-read many of the original group. My original notes on the individual novels had also disappeared, so I am unable to identify which novel contained some of the comments that follow. Gathering and reading the books for this presentation originally took over a year. Once deciding to revise the paper I had only 3 months available. There is a surprising amount of fiction written about Richard, or people connected with him. As I wished to cover all novels possible with a presentation of Richard, even stories about people as far removed as Perkin Warbeck were relevant. From the stories covering 1485 or later I was looking for a statement about Richard's presumed guilt or innocence. From those set earlier I am looking for positive comments on Richard to that point.

Roxane Murph, from the U.S. Branch of the Society, has published several articles and 2 bibliographies on the topic of fiction set around the Wars of the Roses. In her work *The Wars of the Roses in Fiction : an annotated bibliography 1440-1994*, she lists 364 entries in the section on novels and short stories. Some of these can be excluded as either very early in the Wars of the Roses, or set on the continent and having only very peripheral coverage of Richard. Even so, this work is now 13 years old and the numbers have increased considerably again.

The presentation of Richard in the fiction literature is not always as complementary as in Tey or Penman. Even in some fairly recent novels there is evidence of the writers not having researched seriously beyond Shakespeare, and this is where we do need to be concerned.

Historical fiction is an important literary form in its own right. In it the writer can ascribe motives to the characters, and generally use all the tricks of writing that bring the characters alive. For this reason the impressions left by the writer can be far stronger and longer lasting than the memories gained from a dry biography or history. It is interesting to note at this point, that a well published historian we have had reason to greatly criticize has now turned her hand to writing what she acknowledges as fiction. I am referring to Alison Weir and her recent novel on Lady Jane Grey titled *Innocent traitor*.

In preparing a work of fiction, the writer is not restricted to observing the historical facts, and only the facts. Poetic license is used extensively in most of the novels. From my perspective only a few authors and I include here Sharon Penman and Valerie Anand manage to avoid historical inaccuracies at some level. However, as many people learn their history from such novels, it is important to keep the basic stories accurate. Most writers claim to have extensively researched their work, but in many cases the bibliographies, if a bibliography exists at all, were limited to secondary and tertiary sources and the limits of the research was highly evident in the work.

The best (or worse) example of this is Philippa Wiat's the *Kingmaker's Daughter*, about Anne Neville. Despite claiming that this was carefully researched, it had a bibliography of only 9 items, all second and third hand sources.

This writer has Anne loving Edward of Lancaster, and pregnant by him. She has Richard killing Edward of Lancaster with his own dagger, and has Catherine and John, Richard's illegitimate children born after his legitimate son Edward. There are many more similar inaccuracies in this work that indicate a severe lack of real research. In another case, a bodice ripper style romance, Kathryn Meyer-Griffith's *The heart of the rose* there was no bibliography but indications of some careful research into the relationships between Warwick, Edward IV and Richard. However this was ruined by the author's elementary mistake of having the working class fictional heroine sitting down to drink cups of tea.

Perhaps the most, important aspect of the historical fiction medium is the ability to build empathy in the reader, for the characters and for what life and living in that time was like. Many writers successfully did this, particularly the ones favorable to Richard, in presenting his mental state in the months leading up to Bosworth. The writers using fictional main characters were also able to indulge themselves more freely in describing what living in England of the late 15th Century would have been like, by covering not only the lives that the rich and well-born would have led, but those of the working classes.

The listing that I am giving out is by no means comprehensive. I have managed to cover less than one hundred of Murph's about 360. However I have been able to cover the more readily available titles. Some novels I covered from notes in an earlier work of Murph's, being unable to "beg borrow or steal" a copy from a source within Australia. One or two new ones I analyzed from information on Amazon.com. Categorizing the books for the list by type was difficult, and I am sure that some of you will disagree with the categories I have assigned some of the titles to.

The mystery surrounding the disappearance of the Princes means that standard historical fiction is not the only type of novel written about Richard. Since Josephine Tey's book there have been a number of other investigative/detective type novels written, with both modern and medieval settings.

The only short story, Elizabeth George's 'I Richard' from the compilation *The evidence exposed* is another detective story, while her regular character, Inspector Lynley is a fan of Richard and there is invariably one of two good comments about Richard from him in her novels.

The most unusual novel was that by John M. Ford, titled the *Dragon waiting*. This is a science fiction/fantasy novel full of vampires and black and white magic, with much of it set in England from the time of the death of Clarence until Bosworth. Since this novel a few other fantasy novels using the wars of the roses have been published including R. Garcia y Robertson's *White rose*. This is a mixture of witchcraft and history, with the prime character – a white witch - moving between the 1460s and 2001, pregnant and in love with Edward IV and starting to battle Elizabeth Woodville for him. This is the latest of a set, and it will be interesting to see if this author takes the characters any further. Richard so far is presented as the loyal younger brother. Another type of fantasy novel is Mollie Hardwick's *I remember love*. This has a pair of lovers meeting first during the Wars of the Roses and again at a couple more points through history. Two other fantasy novels caught my attention, but did not fit the criteria for analysis. They are *Language of stones* and *Giant's dance* by Robert Carter. Both are a fascinating mix of fantasy, Arthurian legend and early Wars of the Roses history. Unfortunately while a Richard of Ebor is mentioned, it is our Richard's father.

There is also some fiction aimed at teenagers or advanced child readers. Ann Rabinowitz's *Knight on horseback* is a good example in this genre.

Presentations of Richard in these novels ranged from a few really negative presentations to some that were almost ridiculously pro-Richard.

This quote from the Goldsmith's wife p26-27 is perhaps the most negative.

But if Clarence was perfidious, he was not half so dangerous as his brother, the dark deceitful Gloucester. Clarence had not the talent to conceal his designs, but Gloucester who was equally treacherous, was a deep dissembler. Though the throne seemed completely shut out from him, he seemed determined to mount it, and nothing turned him from his purpose. To look at that bold crafty visage, in every line of which cunning was written; to feel the effect of that black searching eye, caused those who came near him to comprehend that they were in the presence of a master spirit Gloucester would have been of average height has not his crooked back diminished his stature by several inches. In other respects he was well proportioned and strongly built. His features were decidedly handsome, though the expression was sinister ... Not only did Gloucester possess the wisdom of the serpent, but the venom.

In the context of this society I don't really feel it necessary to contrast this with an overly pro Richard quote, however this is typical of the positive descriptions of Richard

BEATRIX OF CLARE p.23-4

Richard sat alone, in heavy meditation. The pale clean-shaven, youthful face, with its beautiful mouth and straight Norman nose and the short, slender figure in its mantle and doublet would have been almost effeminate but for the massively majestic forehead and the fierce black eyes – brilliant, compelling, stern, proud – that flashed forth the might soul within. Although he had just passed his thirtieth year, yet his fame was as wide as the domain of chivalry, and his name was something to conjure with in England. Born in an age when almost as children men of rank and station were called upon to take their sires' place, Richard was famed for his wisdom and statecraft before the years when the period of youth is now presumed to begin ... more feared than the slight boy who swept with inconceivable fury through the Lancastrian line, carrying death on his lance-point and making the Boar of Gloucester forever famous in English heraldry. ... While his royal brother was dallying in a life of indulgence The brave and resolute Richard was leading his armies, administering his governments and preserving order on the Marches of the Border.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of these 2 quotes is that they are both from some of the earliest novels about Richard. The copy of *Goldsmith's wife* I used being published in the early years of this century, but according to Murph written earlier, and *Beatrix of Clare* was published in 1908.

On my reading and notes, the balance is approx, 63 of the total of 85 novels being positive or "white" legend.

I have chosen as my criteria here, whether or not the writer has Richard guilty of the death of the Princes, as well as the general presentation.

Of these the fate of the Princes was about evenly split between Buckingham being the guilty party and the Princes being hidden away in the North of England. There were a few with unusual twists such as the elder boy stabbing the younger, and then himself. Another had 2 bites at the cherry, in Buckingham killing a couple of impostors in the Tower while the real boys were hidden away. Others including Robin Maxwell's *To the Tower born* had Margaret Beaufort the instigator behind Buckingham, One blamed Henry Tudor for the death of the boys.

There were 11 ambivalent, or 'Grey' legend novels. These made Richard guilty of the death of the Princes, but gave an otherwise reasonable portrayal. Patrick Carleton's *Under the hog* is an interesting member of this group. Originally published in 1938, it was republished by the American Branch of the Society in the 1990s. This gives a very sympathetic and believable portrayal of Richard, but does have him guilty of the murder of the Princes in order to end the bloodshed of the civil wars.

The 11 negative or "Black" legend novels need no definition. One point that I found interesting was that only one of the novels based on Henry Tudor fits into this group, although one would have expected all of them to be in this group. Of course the one based on Margaret Beaufort had to outline the black legend.

Novels presenting Richard date from the 1700s, but the earliest I was able to assess was from 1843 with the novel about Warwick. From there on there has been a fairly steady flow of material. Richard has attracted the interest of at least one of the great writers of English literature (other than Shakespeare) in Robert Louis Stevenson. Unfortunately Stevenson's novel, *Black arrow*, gives the standard Shakespearian presentation of Richard, where it mentions him.

This dedication from Carol Wensby—Scott's book *Lion Invincible* reflects my attitude. "To the memory of Richard Plantagenet, King of England: neither Saint nor devil, but merely human." To me it is the writers that portray Richard as a balanced person of his time that succeed. Those that attempt to overly bias the account in either direction lose a lot in the attempt. In most cases they are ignoring the advantages that the fiction medium can give them. Sandra Worth's recent trilogy *Rose of York*, for which she has won a series of awards is a good example. This portrays a very realistic, human Richard and Anne in the first of the novels which is all I have been able to access as yet.

The majority of the positive portrayals of Richard have been written in fairly recent times. It is a chicken and egg guess as to whether the work of the Society has led authors to write more positively about Richard, or if Richardians have decided to fill a niche in the literature. Certainly in recent years there have been a number of Richardians writing novels and in some cases declaring their interest in the notes. Meredith Whitford's book *Treason* is an example – she is or was a member of the South Australian branch, but there are a number of others including Ollie's. It is hard tell if this has biased my own collection, but I have not avoided negative presentations where I found them.

Apart from the characterization, the quality of the writing varied enormously, as one would expect from such a large and diverse group of authors. I do not wish to say too much about the quality of the actual writing in these novels as it is very subjective topic, and one that I do not feel qualified to tackle. There are only a few writers with more than one novel, and in many cases those are sequels or continuations, rather than actual separate novels.

The techniques used in the writing also varied greatly, and ran the full gamut of techniques possible. Certainly having the main character tell the story was the most common, but dramatic dialogue techniques were also used, as well as a type of narrator.

I spoke earlier about fictional license used in regard to the historical facts. Of course a large part of fiction writing is creation of probable meetings, stories, events and incidents to flesh out the bare bones of a (hopefully) historically accurate story.

Many writers have chosen to use a fictional main character or characters to make this task easier. In others the story of an actual main character is told through the eyes of a fictional servant or friend, again to give the author some room to play with

One of the most imaginative ideas used in creating fictional characters to work with is in Cherry Calvert Jones book *Proud Cis*. This is not, as one would expect about Cicely Neville, but an elaborate fictional creation. The story opens with Eleanor Butler and Edward IV. They marry, and Eleanor has twins, a boy and a girl. However Eleanor does not realize who Edward is, and Edward is told by Hastings that Eleanor died in childbirth.

The twins grow up quietly in the country but their identity is gradually discovered when they go looking for their Grandmother Cicely. The story develops from this, with a few twists of the historical facts to allow for these true heirs of Edward

If only the authors wishing to portray a negative picture of Richard had the same level of imagination. One author used the standard More/Shakespeare description of the death of the Princes twice - once for Clarence and then again for the Princes!

In summary, there is a growing amount of fictional literature about Richard, much of it positive and well written. I feel Richardians have done well in this medium. In fact fiction has been used to illustrate at least one point in the mystery that would otherwise not seem so important.

Valerie Anand, in her book *Crown of Roses*, uses as a major character Bishop Alcock, the Princes tutor for a number of years. He holds a bishopric and with the protection of that office could have safely departed Richard's court at any time during Richard's reign. However he chooses to become Richard's Chancellor and to stay with Richard to the end. Spoken like this it does not seem important, however placed in context, with the empathy that fiction creates, it is a very telling point in Richard's favor.

Finally I will finish with a quote from the introduction to Jeremy Potter's book. Trail of blood. "All I claim for my version of events is that it is at least as plausible as the one circulated by three earlier practitioners of the art of crime fiction; H Tudor, T. More and W. Shakespeare."