

## Two Controversial Monarchs

Fotheringay Castle is now little more than a low mound rising out of the Fenland a few miles from Peterborough, but it has intimate links with perhaps the most controversial rulers of England and Scotland respectively. Richard III was born there on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1452, and Mary Queen of Scots tried and beheaded there 135 years later, on 8<sup>th</sup> February 1587. Besides this coincidence, and their ties of blood – Mary was Richard’s great-great-great-niece – the two share a further link, both being the subject of recent novels by Reay Tannahill.

Knowing that Ms Tannahill is not only the author of several well-received historical novels, plus a non-fiction work on *Food in History*, which I long ago read and enjoyed, and another entitled *Sex in History* that I have yet to read, and being myself engaged on a novel about Richard III, I was alarmed to discover that she too had chosen this perennially fascinating subject for her latest book. To make matters worse, *The Seventh Son* (Headline 2001) merited a respectful review in the *Sunday Telegraph*. Should I abandon my endeavours and concentrate on the day job? Or continue on the basis that with so many novels already published about Richard, of every standard from the excellent to the truly dreadful, one more wasn’t going to make much difference? I opted for the latter, but decided to find out as quickly as possible what I was up against.

As it turned out, I need not have sacrificed my fingernails while waiting for the book to arrive from amazon.com (I know I should really be supporting small independent booksellers, but it’s just so convenient being able to order online). Reading *The Seventh Son*, I had the distinct impression that the author’s heart wasn’t really in it, that she had chosen her subject matter on the basis that her publisher saw a gap in the market - ‘No one’s done Richard III recently, darling, so why don’t you?’ There is no sense that this was a subject Reay Tannahill was burning to write about; she is very much going through the motions. That she chooses to write entirely in modern English doesn’t help matters. I get impatient with writers whose characters “speak forsoothly”, to borrow Josephine Tey’s splendid phrase, but too much of the dialogue is better suited to sun-dried-tomato-eating denizens of Islington than fifteenth-century man. The same is true of family relationships. Shortly after the death of Edward IV, for example, we see Anne Neville, Duchess of Gloucester, and her seven-year-old son, Edward, who complains that his father is neglecting him. [The ...s are in the original.]

“Why won’t he play with me?” little Ned demanded. “Have I annoyed him? He looks at me as if I’m not here.”

“Your father is very sad because his brother has died...”

“He hasn’t any brothers left any more. Wish I had some brothers.”

“Yes, but...”

“He was sad when my uncle of Clarence died, but he wasn’t nasty to me then.”

“You were very little, and, anyway, that was different.”

“Why?”

“Oh, because – because – he and your uncle of Clarence had been boys together, so he was sad remembering how they had been friends, but much more sad because your other uncle, King Edward, had had to order your uncle of Clarence to be executed.”

“Uncle Clarence must have been *awfully* wicked.”

“No, but very foolish. Oh dear, how can I explain this to you? You’re too young to understand.”

“I’m not. I’m *not*.”

“Don’t stamp your foot at me.”

And so on.

Essentially, there are two ways of depicting history in fictional form. One is to stick closely to the historical record, and to make the major personages and their actions the focus of the book. The other is to concentrate on the lives and experiences of fictional characters, using them in a sense as a mirror and microcosm of the age. Both can work extremely well, but the former can all too easily produce what is nothing more than a history book with dialogue, and not very good dialogue at that. Ms Tannahill has chosen that course, and although she has managed to avoid the depths plumbed by that 1950s film *King Richard and the Crusaders*, in which Virginia Mayo, as Berengaria of Navarre, is required to declare angrily to the bellicose monarch, “War, war, war! That’s all you think about, Dick Plantagenet!” what she has actually produced is a sex-and-shopping saga transplanted back five hundred years. The sex is somewhat toned-down, so anyone looking for some good four-poster-bed scenes should look elsewhere. But the research shows through rather too obviously in places, so that it is all too possible to work out which books the author has relied on most heavily (in the latter stages Louise Gill’s *Richard III and Buckingham’s Rebellion*). The author is a culinary historian, but she manages to keep her enthusiasm for cooking within bounds, so that lampreys and swan’s wings make only a couple of appearances, on the entirely proper occasions of Richard and Anne’s wedding reception (along with venison with frumenty, roast beef, a custard with dates and prunes, a soup of chicken in almond milk, roast pig, roast rabbit, chicken glazed golden with egg yolks, spiced fish pie, and some light and fragile little pastry fritters filled with raisins of Corinth), and at the coronation banquet. The same cannot be said of cloth of gold, nor of ermine and velvet, since, as is all too frequently the case with historical novels by female authors, the characters are preoccupied with their clothes, so much so that vital discussions tend to take place on Anne Neville’s return from a

silk merchant's warehouse, and when her favourite lady in waiting tries to distract Anne from doubts over Richard's seizure of the throne she suggests they look at the bolts of cloth of gold which have just arrived in time for the coronation. (I must confess to reacting against this sort of thing, so that though in my rival work Anne's fictitious bastard half-brother is entirely capable of turning out resplendent in Garter robes when appropriate he is happiest in an old leather jerkin around the stables).

The central defect in *The Seventh Son* is that Ms Tannahill neither engages with her characters, who appear as pieces being moved about on a chess board, fulfilling the roles recorded for them in history but never developing any life of their own, nor with the era of which she writes. Human nature is unchanging, but the mindset of the fifteenth century was quite different from that of today. This difference is most obvious in the sphere of religion, which then permeated every aspect of life in a way that it does not today. The Crowland Chronicler, who wrote early in 1486 and is generally hostile to Richard III, records that on the morning of the Battle of Bosworth, 'the chaplains were not ready to say Mass for King Richard, nor was any breakfast ready with which to revive the king's flagging spirit'. This reference has been eagerly seized upon by many novelists since. One Tudor partisan had the chaplains fleeing in terror in the night, another the chaplains being sent away by Richard himself. How did Ms Tannahill deal with this? The chaplains, she concluded, were running around trying to find the chests containing their missals, vestments and chalices.

The idea that none of the clergy was sufficiently organised to say Mass on the morning of a major battle is inherently an unlikely one. Even in today's secular society the British Army is careful to ensure that its soldiers have access to the services of chaplains if they wish, particularly when on operations, and actively encourages them to make use of them, whether in the spiritual sphere or in more general welfare matters. In the fifteenth century, where eternal damnation was the fate of anyone who died unshriven, and all but the most irreligious were probably accustomed to hearing Mass daily, confession to a priest and then attendance at Mass must have been central elements in preparation for battle. Realistically, the chaplains with Richard's army probably spent much of the night before Bosworth hearing confessions. In those days, when it was largely unquestioned that the bread and wine did indeed become the very Body and Blood of Christ at the moment of consecration, no priest would treat his Mass vessels in so cavalier a fashion as not to keep them close by him, and if he were too busy hearing confessions to unpack them in good time for Mass, someone would do it for him, if not on his own initiative then on the instructions of the commander of the contingent to which the priest belonged. As to the king's breakfast, if there is any credence to be placed on Crowland's word, it is more likely that Richard, like many another man in similar circumstances, was simply too strung-up to eat anything, and the tale was garbled in the transmission. In any case, the story told by Crowland has a strong air of the morality tale with portents of doom typical of writings of the day. He goes on to say that the king

so it was reported, had seen that night, in a terrible dream, a multitude of demons apparently surrounding him, just as he attested in the morning when he presented a countenance which was always drawn but was then even more pale and deathly, and affirmed that the outcome of the day's battle, to whichever side victory was granted, would totally destroy the kingdom of England.

In a similar way, Ms Tannahill fails to take note that the child-rearing practices of the fifteenth century were not those of today. At the age of seven, far from being fussed over by his mother and nurse, Richard's son would have been removed from their care and put exclusively under the tutelage of men to begin his training as a knight. What little is known of the young Edward – even the year of his birth is unknown and he may have been as old as ten when he died in April 1484 – strongly implies that he was sickly, so that his entry into knightly training may have been delayed. But even if this were the case, there would be concern on the part of his father and male relations at least that by staying among women he was in grave danger of growing up to be a milksop.

*Fatal Majesty*, Reay Tannahill's novel about Mary Queen of Scots, begins quite promisingly, with a nicely-drawn depiction of Mary's arriving at Leith from France unheralded and with much of her baggage delayed in transit, and a lot of dashing around to get things organised so that she can make her entry into Edinburgh in a style befitting a queen. We also get an impression of much intriguing and jockeying for power, and a sense that all is decidedly not black and white. Indeed, on his first appearance, the Earl of Bothwell seems a rather interesting figure; far from being an unprincipled thug he is intelligent and well educated as well as masculine, and might easily intrigue a romantically-minded young woman like Mary, who had, after all, had no sort of intimacy with anyone other than the sickly and stunted Francis II of France, but who had had as the nearest thing to a father-figure the virile and imposing Henry II.

But this early promise does not last. The book is in need of a good edit, to sharpen it up and make sure it hangs together properly. Ms Tannahill, you see, does not really know what she is trying to achieve. She cannot decide whether any of her leading characters is basically good, basically bad, basically good gone to the bad, or what – this is particularly noticeable in her portrayal of William Maitland of Lethington, a key figure in events – and is therefore inconsistent in her depictions. Like many another woman writer, she is reluctant to attempt to portray violent action – her Battle of Bosworth lasts no more than half a dozen pages, and most of them are composed of dialogue and distant prospects rather than the blood, pain and unimaginable terror which must have been the reality of hand-to-hand fighting. This is not the case with all women writers. Rosemary Sutcliff, for example, wrote excellent battle scenes, and had the very rare gift of putting the reader right in the centre of them

– when the hero of *The Mark of the Horse Lord*, to my mind her best book, leads his chariots into the enemy lines, the reader is there with him, and you smell the horses' sweat and know the fear and exultation of the moment. *Fatal Majesty*, however, like *The Seventh Son*, proceeds as a series of conversation pieces, some in small and intimate settings, such as solars and privy chambers, others in vast echoing halls, and there is little sense that what is happening is as momentous as all that. When the murder of Darnley\* is first mooted, for example, I have the sense that that figure as portrayed by Ms Tannahill is so insignificant – no more than a petulant youth – as not to be worth the trouble of murdering, and that sense does not change even as Darnley settles into Kirk o' field and the plot progresses.

But what Ms Tannahill has achieved, and this is truly remarkable, is to make the melodramatic events of Mary's reign in Scotland over the five years from 1562 boring. Like Richard III, Mary is a historical figure who arouses strong emotions – my feelings vis-à-vis her are increasingly ones of exasperation as her career progresses and she over and over again climbs out of the frying pan only to fall into the fire. But they are powerful feelings nonetheless, and if I tend to think that many of her difficulties were of her own making I nevertheless have some sympathy for her, caught as she was in an increasingly impossible position. However, I found the book becoming steadily more difficult to get through, and by the time Mary fled to England I was no longer interested in what happened to her, something which can only stem from a fatal flaw in the writing. Perhaps Ms Tannahill would be better advised to concentrate on writing about food; there is, after all, a large market out there these days.

Ann Lyon  
30th June 2002

\* Editor's note — Although the reviewer follows the author in referring to Queen Mary's first Scottish husband as Darnley, regular Baronage readers will be aware that this was the name given to him by the English, following the English custom of giving an earl's eldest son the earl's second title (the Scottish Earl of Lennox being also Lord Darnley). In Scotland Darnley was the Master of Lennox (until Mary made him successively Earl of Ross and Duke of Albany), and was never "Lord Darnley". As he was killed during his father's lifetime, he thus never succeeded as Earl of Lennox.