

Articles

A Biography of Richard III

Richard Plantagenet (or Richard III) has been branded a villain as a result of William Shakespeare's play. Whether he deserves that reputation or not is the source of endless debate among historians. He was born on October 2, 1452. He was the eighth child and the youngest son of the 3rd Duke of York and Cicely Neville. There is no question that he was tough, ruthless, and ambitious. He was also extremely loyal to his older brother, Edward, and to his own supporters and followers. He was short and lean with dark hair. Contrary to Shakespearian legend, he was not a hunchback but did have a slight deformity in one of his shoulders. His reign over England lasted just over two years.

Richard III was a pivotal figure at the end of the War of the Roses in England. The "War" was actually a series of civil wars between the royal houses of York and Lancaster for 32 years, from 1455 to 1487. The house of York was represented by a white rose and the house of Lancaster by a red one. The number of casualties and the extent of disorder caused by this conflict is a source of debate. However, it is acknowledged that the conflict had little impact on the general population of England with a few minor exceptions. For the most part, the battles between these two royal houses were short, intense, and lasted less than a day.

There were three distinct phases of the War of the Roses. The first phase occurred between 1455 to 1464. During this phase, Edward IV of the house of York took control of England during the reign of Henry VI. Henry was a weak King who was easily manipulated and had periodic bouts of insanity. He lost most of the English territories in France which had been won by Henry V, his father. The beginnings of these losses had been fueled by a young French woman who had rekindled French national pride. She would later be known as Joan of Arc. At the end of this first phase, Henry VI became a prisoner of Edward IV and the House of York.

The second phase of the War occurred from 1469 to 1471. During this phase, Edward IV became an embattled King who faced rebellion. With French aid, the house of Lancaster led an invasion of England and briefly restored Henry VI to the throne. Edward IV and Richard were forced to flee the country. They ultimately returned and defeated the forces of the Earl of Warwick (at the Battle of Barnet on April 14, 1471) and those of Margaret of Anjou, Henry VI's wife (at the Battle of Tewkesbury on May 4, 1471). Edward, the



17 year old heir of the house of Lancaster, was killed at Tewkesbury. The last phase of this conflict was conducted from 1483 to 1487 and began with Richard III's accession to the throne of England.

Richard III was nine years old when he became Duke of Gloucester following the coronation of his older brother. At age 19, he fought for his brother at the Battle of Barnet and Tewkesbury. By all accounts, he fought bravely and well. After those battles, Henry VI was imprisoned in the Tower of London. There is evidence that Richard killed Henry at the orders of his brother. Richard was the Constable of England and had access, motive and opportunity. At age 20, Richard married Ann Neville, the 15 year old daughter of the Earl of Warwick. They had a single child in early 1476. Richard III gained considerable lands through his marriage. He continued to consolidate his holdings in northern England. In fact, he essentially controlled northern England just prior to his brother's death. He conducted several campaigns against the Scots on behalf of his brother. His successes made him the subject of envy and hatred among the southern English nobles. These nobles controlled London and held most of the governmental posts. Edward IV ruled England from 1471 to 1483. He died on April 9, 1483.

Edward's death made Richard the Lord High Protector of the Realm for his nephew, Edward V, the older of the two sons of Edward IV. Edward V was only 12 years old. Richard, Edward's younger brother, was next in line for the throne. By May 2, 1483, Richard had sent the young Princes to his northern strongholds for safekeeping. They were moved into the royal apartments in the Tower of London between May 10, 1483 to May 19, 1483. Richard had moved quickly in order to prevent possible retaliation at the orders of Queen Elizabeth Wydeville, his brother's widow. Elizabeth Wydeville's supporters were hungry for power and lands. Richard had both and was not favored by the nobles of southern England. Elizabeth's sons would forever be known as the ill-fated "Princes of the Tower". Their subsequent disappearances and deaths would remain a mystery for years.

The Bishop of Bath publically questioned the validity of Edward IV's marriage to Elizabeth Wydeville shortly before young Edward's coronation. The issue was whether the children were the results of a bigamous marriage. Edward's notorious reputation among women made this allegation very easy to believe. The allegation was likely at the prompting of Richard in an effort to continue to retain his lands and holdings. Richard himself had several illegitimate children before his marriage to Ann Neville. While the allegation may have been a complete fabrication, Parliament declared the marriage invalid and all of the children illegitimate. With the removal of the legal claims of his nephews, Richard moved quickly to become the King of England. He then made sure he would have no rivals to the throne. By September of 1483, the two Princes had disappeared from public sight. Rather than strengthen Richard's position, their disappearances weakened his hold on the throne. Even among nobles hardened by ambition, treachery and civil war, the possible murder of children was unacceptable. The most recent historical research points to Sir James Tyrell as the killer. Sir James was one of Richard's bodyguards and later became the Master of the King's Horse. The evidence

also indicates that the Princes were smothered in the sleep at the orders of their Uncle. The bones of two children were later found beneath a staircase in the Tower in 1674. The skeletal remains match the ages and heights of the "Princes of the Tower."

The wide spread belief that Richard had murdered his nephews fueled an abortive rebellion lead by the Duke of Buckingham, one of Richard's former supporters, and Elizabeth Wydville. The rebellion was successfully suppressed. However, publish opinion forced Richard to take no action against Elizabeth or her family for their part in the rebellion. Many of the noble families were already hostile to Richard because he had filled the royal offices with nobles from northern England who had demonstrated their loyalty and earned Richard's trust. He couldn't afford to further alienate his nobles by retaliation against Elizabeth or her family.



Several events happened which further weakened Richard's reign. His only son passed away in April of 1484. With no legal heir and increasing hostility by the nobles, Richard desperately tried to secure his crown. He entered into negotiations with Elizabeth Wydville for the hand of Elisabeth of York, his niece. Many nobles still regarded Elizabeth as the rightful Queen and the mother of two murdered Princes. Under medieval law, a marriage between an uncle and a niece was legal provided that a dispensation was obtained beforehand. If these negotiations had been successful, Richard's reign would likely have been secure. The fact that Elizabeth was willing to enter into these negotiations strongly illustrated her lust for power. How far the relationship progressed between Edward and his niece is another matter of debate among historians. Elizabeth of York was ambitious. Ann, Edward's wife, was dying. She finally passed away in March of 1485. However, the negotiations became an "open" secret and there was increasing doubt as to whether Richard aided in his wife's death. The marriage between Richard and Elizabeth of York would never take place. With Richard's support eroding among both the nobles and the general population, Elizabeth soon became a willing conspirator against her uncle. The conspirators now rallied behind Henry Tudor.

Henry Tudor sailed to England with an army on April 1, 1485. He gathered supporters as he made his way through southern England. Richard marched to Leicester to fight this latest threat to his Kingship. The final battle of the Roses was fought at Bosworth Field on August 22, 1485. During the course of the battle, Lord Stanley and 7,000 of his men deserted Richard and went over to Henry Tudor. Richard had two horses killed underneath him but continued to fight. The battle lasted only two hours. Richard died

attempting to fight his way to kill Henry Tudor and to capture his standard. Even his enemies noted that he had died bravely. Richard III's body was taken off of the field and buried in an unmarked grave at the Collegiate Church of St. Mary in Leicester, England. He was thirty-three years old.

The remaining House of Lancaster put Henry VII upon the throne of England. Henry married Elizabeth of York, Edward IV's daughter and Richard's niece. Their marriage sealed the breach between the royal houses of Lancaster and York. The age of the Tudors began in England. The grand-daughter of this marriage would be regarded as one of the greatest Queens of England. Her name was Elizabeth I.

Sources: Mike Ashley, *A Brief History of British Kings and Queens* (Carroll & Graf, 2002); Norman Cantor, General Editor, *The Encyclopedia of the Middle Ages* (Viking, 1999), Alison Weir, *The Wars of the Roses* (Ballantine Books, 1995); Alison Weir, *The Princes in the Tower* (Ballantine Books, 1992).

Lord Sir Paul de Marseilles

