

Perkin Warbeck: who was he? Dr Ann Wroe. Richard III Society, Yorkshire Branch, Spring Lecture. 19th March 2005 at Leeds Arts Gallery.

Now, I like David Starkey. I wouldn't want him as a best pal, you understand, but I'm a sucker for an historian who isn't afraid to shout his views, and Dr Starkey could never be accused as being a shrinking violet. So when Dr Wroe started her lecture with the observation that without the defeat of Warbeck we'd not have had the Reformation, the Tudors and the estimable Starkey, I thought it was an interesting trade off. Bit of a blow if you happened to be a Yorkist, but then I'm from Kent so I am awkward by birth!

And if that gave you pause for thought, it was nothing to the fascinating lecture that followed. Perkin was no joke, no pathetic loser, but a real challenger to the fledgling Tudor dynasty and we were shown why.

First we nipped back to 1485 and Bosworth's aftermath. Henry wins the throne (stop booing at the back) despite his claim being suspect at best so he marries into the job and in so doing has to legitimise the sons of Edward IV as a by product of ensuring his new wife isn't considered a bastard. Not seen since 1483, no one admitted to knowing what had really happened to the boys or where they were and although there were plenty of suggestions they had been murdered, Henry had no idea and was worried by this. And this last fact is pivotal to the story. Whatever he claims, Henry hasn't a clue.

So when in the Autumn of 1491 an elegant chap appears in Cork declaring himself to be Richard, Duke of York, Henry isn't best pleased as the Yorkists in Ireland embrace the lad as a figurehead for the House of York's cause. To make matters worse Charles VIII of France treats him as a prince and he then moves onto Burgandy, once Charles had made peace with Henry, where Margaret introduces him to Maximilian, King of the Romans. By 1495 an invasion fleet is ready to go, but Richard of York never gets off the boat when the troops are mowed down on the shore. And with this defeat ends the conspiracy in England, which had even interested William Stanley, with the execution of the ringleaders.

Richard then moves on to Scotland (via Ireland) to James IV, who, always happy to irritate the English, doesn't just give the lad support and a pension, but marries him off to a high status wife. But the invasion in the Summer of 1496 with a contingent of German mercenaries, perhaps in an early attempt to be first with their towels on the sun beds, fails miserably after just two days. Richard bottles it at the sight of blood and hightails it back to Scotland from the battlefield in Northumberland.

Despite this further setback, and James kicking him out after 10 months, Richard tries once again (he was persistent if consistent in his failures), this time via Cornwall in 1497, using the Cornish complaints against Henry's taxes as a catalyst. They besiege Exeter but yet again Richard blows it and surrenders to Henry, confessing he was a pretender all along.

So having got the potted history of the lad in question it was time to ask not what he did or didn't do, but who was he?

In the middle of the 19th century James Gairdner declared Perkin a pretender and closed the argument. He proved the Warbeck family has existed and concluded that therefore Perkin was a pretender and thus the princes were dead. End of story. Case closed.

Not so fast, comes the cry. Doubts have been raised on both these conclusions (just as well, as this would have been a short lecture otherwise!).

Ann's view is that she feels the princes probably were dead, though she's not willing to commit herself irrevocably to that view. There are indeed documents to prove the Warbeck family did exist but that does not prove the confession, especially as that document was already largely written by 1494, just waiting for the boy to be captured and sign it. This confession has an English and French version, and gives two different accounts of his childhood. But the biggest error, in Dr Wroe's view, is that the father is made out to be an important man, the Controller of Tournai. Which is a bit of a blow, as no such position existed. Not only that, but the supposed father was actually a boatman and a bit of a thug. Which might be why Henry didn't want the family sent over – not quite his sort of person, presumably.

There's a letter Perkin was meant to have sent to his mother, but it's such an obvious fake it reads like bad propaganda. What son would send a letter to his mum where he gets his name, her name and her address wrong never mind that it sounds like a business letter? It was widely circulated around Europe but not in England.

The story that the boy had been kidnapped in Ireland to act as a figurehead is, in Dr Wroe's view, silly at best; so silly even Henry and his historians didn't believe it. Why would the Yorkists have done that when they had a selection of perfectly good figureheads, for example the De la Poles? Henry and his chums did think Perkin was an impostor but had been trained up by Margaret of Burgundy. So why do we have these other stories? What's going on? Was he really the Prince?

There is evidence to back the "it's really him, it's Richard" brigade. There is no doubt that he facially does look like Edward IV, although their build was nothing like the same. Edward was a big strapping chap, and Perkin was slight. Perkin's manners were certainly princely – in an age when acquiring the right manner was not easy, as would be the case now. His English, from the evidence of a letter we have, was excellent; so good that Henry's historians bent over backwards to explain this away. In one version he'd actually been brought up with the boys themselves. Whatever the explanation there is no doubt he spoke excellent English and even his writing was in the English style, at a time when you could tell the origins of the writer from his handwriting.

And then there's his very persistence to consider. If he was really a boatman's son the fact he was living the highlife would have had an appeal, but in truth far too often the going just wasn't that good. He kept this up for 6 years, even after his arrest, when it would have been far wiser to just give up.

We then looked at how he was treated by others. When Henry captured him, you'd have expected a boatman's boy who'd caused such trouble to be strung up without a second thought, but no. He keeps him at court and treats him as an equal. There are entries in the accounts that record payments to the Duke of York and Dr Wroe believed this is Richard, not the duke who was later to be Henry VIII. Even what to call him seems a problem, with ambassadors reverting to Duke of York after a brief fling with Perkin. And Henry, cautious as ever, isn't quite sure what he's dealing with so hedges his bets too while other European rulers carry on treating Warbeck as the Duke of York.

Not that this support didn't have its reasons. Maximillian was promised the throne on Perkin's death, Scotland wanted the money invested in him back, and Margaret not

only was promised Scarborough (maybe she wanted to be a seaside landlady!!) but was also after the cash she'd invested in the lad.

But once he'd confessed he was, you'd think, be useless, but they still don't drop him. In fact they try to get him released and diplomacy with Henry is held up as a result. In fact peace between Henry and Scotland was held up until 1502. Margaret, her dreams of bracing sea air walks in Scarborough presumably now dashed, continues to send priests to comfort the lad. In an age of heartless diplomacy, the European kings do seem to retain a soft spot for him, and this does seem to back the argument that he was, at least in their eyes, who he claimed to be.

So why doesn't Dr Wroe go down this road? Why isn't he the Duke of York? She feels there are still huge doubts.

The story of how he got out the Tower, that the murderer of his big brother took pity on him and helps him to escape is suspect at best, and an obviously tall tale and fabrication at worse. The people around him, his entourage, were pretty low class as well. None were of high birth at all, so if he was who he claimed to be, why didn't he get better support? He was high on charm but low on campaigning ability and retained his affection to the corrupt mercenaries and priests that surrounded him to the end.

He certainly didn't inherit his father's battlefield prowess! He ran away all three times he was tested in battle. Okay, the first time, when he never even got off the boat was a reasonable strategic withdrawal, and maybe the second time he'd just become a father and was affected by that, but there is no excuse for Cornwall, when he abandoned his men by all accounts. Okay, so running away from the sight of a bloody battle doesn't prove you're not a king, but it really doesn't look good. Did he run away from battles that he, in his heart, knew weren't his?

Now Ann looked at Perkin's confession on the scaffold. There he declared he wasn't related to royalty at all. You'd think he'd have nothing to lose at that point; time to clear your conscience and tell the truth. But even this confession proves nothing one way or the other. Was he saying what he was expected to say (the Spanish Ambassador was in the front row, so it was hardly a little local affair)? Just how much pressure was he under? He'd been condemned to a traitor's death and yet was just hung, so keeping to the party line was in his interests to avoid a very nasty death.

Whilst writing her book¹ Dr Wroe admitted she kept changing his mind who Perkin really was. Was he just being used by all the Rulers of Europe or was he who he claimed to be?

But Ann has a third possibility. Margaret of York was a key figure in the whole story; Henry believed she was behind it all. It was in the Brussels archive that records show the following story. The year after Charles the Bold died, Margaret took in a boy who'd been born in 1473, the same age as the Duke of York but also as a child she may have miscarried. He was brought up in court until 1485 when he disappears from the records. Could this all be linked? Dr Wroe believes it is. She believes that this boy becomes the Yorkist pretender. She can't prove it; the evidence is sketchy but it would explain why Perkin persists so long – he felt obliged to Margaret – and why his supporters stayed with him for so long.

¹ Perkin – A Story of Deception by Dr Ann Wroe, Jonathan Cape 2003

As to the truth? Dr Wroe urged us to consider the evidence and make up our own minds.

True to form, there was a lively question and answer session afterwards.

There is no evidence that Elizabeth of York ever met Perkin. Maybe that's because Henry didn't just not want to know the answer but didn't dare – he never asked his wife in case she answered that Perkin was her brother,

Warbeck could have been an illegitimate son, could even have been sent out to Margaret's court by Edward himself and there is some evidence to suggest this. He could even have been a bastard son of Clarence, who was Margaret's favourite brother.

Brampton's role also came up for discussion. He gets in with the lad in 1489 but drops him and becomes an informer in 1496. But Brampton's actions reflect not on who he thought was who, but what was best for him. He seems to decide that Henry is going to be the winner and, always to be the man to keep in with power, Brampton's actions are consistent. Here is a man who is very rich from the spice trade who had a monopoly in pepper. If he'd wanted to back Perkin he could have done but doesn't. Whether that means anything other than Brampton judging who was going to win correctly is for us to decide.

And finally the subject of the scaffold speech came up with another reason given as to why he did not retract his confession. If he'd claimed to be the Duke then his son would be the next pretender. The boy had been sent to Wales; could it be by Henry to keep him out of harm's way? An alternative to the unacceptable option of infanticide, this would keep him out of sight, out of mind. We do know that Henry never allowed Perkin and his wife to sleep together to avoid them creating a dynasty under his very roof and that the child grew up believing his father was a pretender, and maybe with Perkin claiming to the end that he was just that, the boy could be allowed to live.

And on that note it was time to leave; another fascinating lecture done.