



Douglas Biggs. *Three Armies in Britain: The Irish Campaign of Richard II and the Usurpation of Henry IV.* Leiden: Brill, 2006. xvi + 300 pp. \$137.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-15215-1.

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The Man Who Invented the Handkerchief

Douglas Biggs has not been well served by his editors. There are numerous simple typographical errors in this book. The illustrations are unexciting, and in one case (the photograph of Spurn Head from an altitude of 33,000 feet) the stated subject is invisible. The language is often clumsy, and this is more than just a matter of an Englishman objecting to American usage. There is no family tree, without which the Plantagenet dynasty becomes difficult, even for the specialist reader. Finally, I fail to understand why the appendices are spread throughout the book, rather than concentrated at the end in the normal manner.

However, the problem goes much deeper. The book's argument is very troubling. *Three Armies in Britain* is published as a volume in the History of Warfare series, but it has to be questioned whether this is really a contribution to military history at all. The book is really a revisionist view of certain events in English medieval political history, and specifically an anti-Lancastrian take on the revolution of 1399, when Henry Bolingbroke (formerly Earl of Derby and then Duke of Lancaster on the death of his father, John of Gaunt) usurped the throne of his cousin Richard II, to become Henry IV. Does this tell us much that is new, in military terms, about the three armies of the title? Sad to say, very little. The author places much emphasis on rates of march, which he has calculated very carefully; but the significance of them is lost on this reviewer. In any event, Richard II could not have made "a quick move up the west coast of Wales into Cheshire" (p. 215) because the mountains would get in

the way, as I think Biggs himself realizes (p. 229).

But let us turn to the main thesis. It turns out that we have all been the dupes of Lancastrian propaganda. For all these years, we have swallowed the myth that Richard was both lacking in martial qualities and petulant, that he acted arbitrarily in first exiling and then expropriating Bolingbroke, and that he picked on the wrong man, since Bolingbroke was the soldier that Richard was not. On the contrary, Douglas Biggs asks us to accept that Bolingbroke was a political nonentity, though a tremendous jousting, and Richard was simply unlucky.

This is pretty hard to take, in the light of the accounts of notable scholars ranging from Sir Richard Steele's pioneering studies to the modern works of Nigel Saul, May McKisack, and Eric Jacob. All of these have portrayed Richard as tyrannical by nature and arbitrary in his actions, without saying that he was positively mad; and no historian that I know of has previously argued that Bolingbroke was a nonentity. He was certainly accused of treachery, but never of ineffectiveness. The role-reversal beggars belief.

William Shakespeare was not a bad historian, though he takes great liberties with the facts. The picture we get in *Richard II* is not Mr Biggs's. It is surely not Henry who is the nonentity there. And if we are not content to take Shakespeare as a witness of truth, what about Jean Froissart, who knew the king personally? The chronicler has a story from the last days of Richard's regime, about a great tournament sponsored by the king. Frois-

sart tells us that the majority of the knights and squires of England were disgusted with the king because of his treatment of Bolingbroke (at that point driven into exile by the king) as well as the injuries he was doing to Bolingbroke's children, the judicial murder of the Duke of Gloucester, and a range of other developments. None of the kindred of these lords came to the feast, which was of course poorly attended. In this brief account of the failure of a tournament, we can see why men rallied to Bolingbroke and, conversely, why they deserted Richard in droves. He could not command the loyalty of the military class. If Richard underestimated Bolingbroke, he was naive, as well as incompetent.

Was Richard unlucky? The subtitle of this book refers to Richard's Irish campaign of 1399, usually seen as a disaster, at least for him. The conventional wisdom is that it was the king's absence in Ireland which enabled Henry to land in England unopposed, and that Richard was incompetent in failing to return quickly; landing in Wales rather than Bristol when he did come back; failing to rally the considerable forces he had at his disposal; and meekly surrendering himself to Henry in Cheshire once it was clear that he lacked support.

Biggs will have none of this. He tells us that Richard's Irish campaign was quite successful; that it was not necessarily wrong to come back via Milford Haven rather than Bristol, that there was no reason for Richard not to trust Bolingbroke, and so on. Yet he presents us with all

the evidence we need to demolish his own thesis. For example, he tells us not only that the evidence for Richard's success in Ireland is very limited, but that (as we would expect) those Irish who resisted English rule avoided battle when the royal forces were in the field, only to re-emerge later. He is also well aware of the difficulties the Welsh mountains created for marching. Furthermore, he signally fails to explain why it is that hardly anyone in England—not even his own uncle Edmund of Langley, whom he had left as custodian of the realm—was prepared to fight for their king in 1399, when the chips were down.

Biggs seems to follow Jonathan Sumption in relying on administrative records, in preference to the chroniclers; but perhaps this is a mistake, for it leaves motivation out of account, and fails to explain the importance of loyalty in an intensely masculine and militaristic society. Was it a coincidence that Richard was the king who not only wanted to make peace with the French, but also invented the pocket handkerchief?

Despite everything, I enjoyed this book. The author has researched the whole subject thoroughly and it is fully documented, and the treatment is much fuller than a brief review can suggest. Nothing in it, however, made me question the more traditional accounts of the usurpation. The fact that the Lancastrians may have doctored the record does not mean that Richard was in the right, or even deserving of this degree of sympathy.

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