



*Richard III:
The Self-Made King*

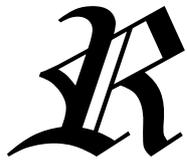
Michael Hicks

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Review by: Marina Gerzic



Richard III: The Self-Made King. By Michael Hicks. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-0-300-21429-1. xvi + 388 pp. \$35.00.



Richard III: The Self-Made King provides a thoroughly researched biography of one of England's most infamous kings, Richard III, at a time when interest in the historical Richard is at its zenith. Michael Hicks provides the reader with a detailed study of the world that Richard III was born into and lived in, and the political backdrop of a late medieval England dominated by the dynastic struggles of the Wars of the Roses. Hicks's work opens with an introduction that attempts to debunk the myths surrounding Richard's life and to tell his story as historical research reveals it to the reader. The spectres of Thomas More and Shakespeare emerge, and while Hicks attempts to dispel Tudor myths about Richard, he also finds some value in these Tudor sources and returns to them throughout his work. For example, he notes of More: "More's characterisation therefore cannot be accepted as it stands, but neither can it be rejected out of hand. It is not purely Tudor propaganda" (6). Hicks's introduction also looks at the more modern Ricardian reception and defence of Richard, highlighting the role of the Richard III Society in publishing sources critical to the study of Richard's life, and also funding the archaeological dig in a Leicester carpark where remains, which have since been identified as Richard III, were discovered. Hicks unhelpfully uses the term "alleged" numerous times in the introduction when referring to the remains of Richard, raising concerns about the DNA testing and radiocarbon dating performed on the remains, as well as the damage the skeleton received during the archaeological dig in Leicester. Hicks's opposition to this identification is ultimately not convincing, even to Hicks himself, who eventually concludes (somewhat disingenuously on his part) that his book "presumes the identification and builds on it, albeit with fingers firmly crossed" (21). Richard's death at Bosworth is returned to briefly in the final chapter, and Hicks's scepticism about the identification of Richard's remains returns, with Hicks positing that the remains may instead be the body of another soldier from the same battle.

Rather than dwell on Richard's death and afterlife, the majority of Hicks's work focuses on the thirty years of Richard III's life before he became king. The book traces Richard's youth, his time as Duke of Gloucester and President of the Council of the North, his victory in the Scottish War in the early 1480s, his road to the crown, and relatively short time as king, before concluding with his defeat, disaster, and death at the Battle of Bosworth. Richard, born at a time when England was bitterly divided, was only ten years old when his father and brother were murdered in a battle during the Wars of

the Roses. When the Yorkist branch of the Plantagenet dynasty emerged victorious, Richard returned from exile and was in the service of his brother Edward IV from his mid-teens. Hicks presents Richard as a man marked by the brutality of his childhood, subsequent loyal service to his brother and the crown, his successful military career, and his administrative and strategic shrewdness, peppered by occasional flashes of ruthlessness. By 1475, Richard controlled vast estates stretching into almost every county in England. When Edward IV took some properties away from him, Richard “bowed to the veiled threat, wisely recognising this as the price for the continued favour of his brother the king” (137). Richard, however, continued to extend his networks and regional power base in the north of England, and became a “true successor to Warwick the Kingmaker in that region of England” (139). Hicks argues that Richard’s career culminated in the Scottish War of 1480-1484. Richard was the King’s Lieutenant of the North, the commander in chief who had “royal authority over all the marches and in particular over the earl of Northumberland” (198).

Following Edward’s premature and unexpected death in April 1483, Richard’s career and life changed dramatically. The political elite was torn apart by factions, and Richard and the Duke of Buckingham seized an opportunity and apprehended Edward V as he made his way to London for his father’s funeral, declaring themselves “his advisers” (248). Richard’s ruthlessness and strategic acumen are expertly highlighted by Hicks, who demonstrates how Richard “constructed a new image for himself” (251) and destroyed the reputation of the Woodvilles, accusing them of treason, declaring Edward IV’s marriage to Elizabeth as invalid, and ruling their children (including Edward V) illegitimate. Richard as the sole male York heir thus made himself king. On the matter of the murder of Edward V and his young brother Richard, the infamous “Princes in the Tower,” Hicks declares there is “no mystery what befell the princes” (281). For Hicks, the questions of how, why, and where regarding the princes’ murder remain more difficult to answer, while the question of when is more certain, with Hicks arguing that the date of their final disappearance, autumn 1483, “is the key that unlocks their fate” (281). Hicks argues that the princes were a growing threat who would have become increasingly “dangerous as they grew up,” pointing to a plot to free them from the Tower while they were still alive (279). He therefore speculates that it was more than likely that Richard ordered them be killed. With their death, Hicks argues that Richard was sure his own succession was secure. However, due to insufficient and often fragmentary evidence, Hicks ultimately concludes that no concrete proof exists of Richard’s involvement in their death.

From a loyal, determined, organised, and dedicated Lord of the North, with the strategic insight and skill to make himself king, Hicks then leads the reader on the path to Richard's violent unmaking at the Battle of Bosworth. Hicks shows how Richard's short reign as king is marked by reform and planning that is cut short by dissenters, who he argues accepted Richard as Lord Protector, but rejected him as king ultimately due to "personality and trust" (294). Following the death of his only child Edward, Prince of Wales, the succession issue became unavoidable. The rebels backed the candidacy of Henry Tudor, and in 1485, Richard learned that Tudor was on his way to take the crown. Richard's reign famously came undone, and he was killed in battle on the fields of Bosworth. The strength of Hicks's *Richard III: The Self-Made King* is the sheer amount of (often conflicting) sources about all aspects of Richard's life he presents to the reader. This makes it easier for readers to form their own judgments, and the complex man behind the Tudor myth and propaganda emerges. What is a strength for expert scholars of Plantagenet and Ricardian history, however, may make this book challenging for the casual reader, who has to wade through passages of often dense prose, thoroughly referenced material and copious notes without more guidance by Hicks. This book will appeal to those with an interest in, and familiarity with, Richard III, the Wars of the Roses, and more generally with late medieval history. Ultimately (and unfortunately) at times this insightful biography reads too much like a textbook to be of interest to a more general readership inspired to find out more about Richard III after the discovery of his remains in Leicester.

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