

The Wars of the Roses: Who Fought and Why?

Despite the obvious interest aroused by battle, murder and sudden death, the Wars of the Roses have been astonishingly neglected by modern historians, and even by the more recent historical novelists. Medieval History ebbs with the Hundred Years War, and Modern History begins with the Tudors, while, between the two, the tide of interest leaves the wars of Lancaster and York high and rather dry.

The growing concern with social history has merely accentuated this neglect: the Wars of the Roses may be mentioned incidentally in a chapter dealing with the general lawlessness of the times, but they are regarded principally as a matter for the political or military historian, to whom, on the other hand, they often seem little more than a “glorified tournament.”

The reason for this unfortunate state of affairs probably lies in the kind of material available to the historian, and in this respect a comparison with the English Civil War of the seventeenth century is useful: the great attraction there springs from the comparative ease with which one may analyse the motives of combatant and non-combatant alike, from the King and Cromwell downward.

No such detailed analysis is possible in the fifteenth century, since the evidence is not available before 1485. That is why 1485 is such an important date in the history books—not because it heralded any sudden change in social conditions or political thought, but because it marks the beginning in England of political propaganda. The Tudors allowed their motives, or what they wished to be thought their motives, to be widely known; whereas the supporters of neither York nor Lancaster were effective as political propagandists.

The events of the Wars do not themselves suggest the motives of the participants. On examination, they present a picture of inconsequence upon inconsequence; there is no coherent plan of campaign on either side; there appears to be a succession of sporadic battles fought without plan, calculation or apparent aim. In the words of Sir Winston Churchill, “Historians have shrunk from the Wars of the Roses, and most of those who have catalogued their events have left us only a melancholy and disjointed picture.”

On the other hand, the historians who have not shrunk from the Wars of the Roses have tended to see them from the point of view of the century in which they wrote, and have thus largely ignored the motives of the participants. In Shakespeare’s time, interest in monarchs and dynasties led the historians, and Shakespeare himself, to treat the Wars simply as a struggle between two dynasties: the House of York’s greater right was tainted by the evil of Richard III, and the Lancastrian possession corrupted by the usurpation of Henry IV.

It was a very tidy and satisfactory explanation, particularly as the Tudors, and James I, while representing both York and Lancaster, were “untainted”—being descendants of neither Henry IV nor Richard III. Likewise, the Victorians tended to see all history in terms of the emergence of Parliament, and the Wars of the Roses as the result of the failure of “the great Lancastrian experiment”—which was interpreted to be an elective kingship, governing through Parliament, and forming a natural stage of development between Magna Carta and the Reform Acts of the nineteenth century. Yet there can be little doubt that, of those concerned in the Wars, few were interested in the genealogy of the ruling family, and fewer still in the principles of parliamentary democracy.

The only explanation of the Wars of the Roses lies in the motives of those who fought in the battles. If nobody had had any reason to fight, there could have been no battles and no Wars. The political principles of later centuries are hardly relevant at all. Who, then, were these men who fought? And why did they resort to arms?

The prevalent view has been that the battles were a series of encounters among the nobility, large-scale jousts and tournaments, in which gallant knights on horseback, displaying their brightly coloured banners, fought each other for possession of the realm—a fight, as it were, between the lion and the unicorn in which the people at large were merely spectators.

Thus, Kenneth H. Vickers:¹ “The struggle of York and Lancaster was a ‘barons’ war’ and did not concern the

commonalty. It was regarded by participators as a somewhat serious sport for kings and noblemen—a sort of glorified tournament, with the Crown and revenues of England for a prize, and with Parliament as a much terrorized Queen of Beauty to award it”

“During the days of Lancaster and York the blare of martial trumpets and the turbulence of liveried retainers compelled the average citizen to stand aside and watch the unprincipled quarrels of the great.” Though later historians have been more cautious, and non-committal, this Romantic view is still widely held; yet it seems to fly in the face of the plainest evidence, and to be largely coloured by the prose of Malory and Sir Walter Scott.

The sixteenth-century horror at the prospect of civil war arising from a disputed succession indicates more than a “glorified tournament” as the underlying cause. Tudor governments could contemplate foreign wars, with France, or Scotland, or Spain, comparatively calmly; but the mere suggestion of civil commotion produced the most violent reaction; the greatest and most powerful had but to make a feint at the crown to lose their heads, the Duke of Buckingham, the Earl of Surrey, the Countess of Salisbury, the Earl of Essex, among many others.

Shakespeare’s history plays, a century and a half afterwards, exemplify the lingering memory of the horror; in them the wars in France are presented as a “glorified tournament,” but the Wars of the Roses are dominated by the pitiful spectacle of “a son that has killed his father” and “a father that has killed his son.” Wars that were the exclusive concern of the barons and their liveried retainers could have engendered no such horror—or the foreign wars would have had a comparable effect. The barons may, indeed, have conducted the Wars, but the common people were the ones who as a result suffered, and who fought, and died.

It is, of course, impossible to gain any accurate idea of how many people were involved in the Wars of the Roses. No records were kept, and the population of the country as a whole can only be surmised. The accounts of the various battles, however, do give inklings from which certain conclusions may be drawn. The battles may be grouped, for convenience, into five fairly clearly defined periods: the first, a mere curtain-raiser, was the preliminary skirmish known as the first battle of St. Albans (1455); the main fighting took place in six battles between 1459 and 1461; a further outbreak in 1464 (two battles) was followed by a lull; the fourth period, 1469-71, contained four battles; the fifth period forms an epilogue, including Bosworth (1485) and the various further outbreaks during the reign of Henry VII.

In the early stages, there can be no doubt that the numbers involved were small, and consisted mainly of the nobles and their retainers, at least on the Lancastrian side. The first battle of St. Albans was a small and impromptu affair, involving armies of no more than two or three thousand men, many of whom may have been veterans of the French wars. The King’s force, containing several Dukes, Earls and Barons, was thoroughly defeated by the Yorkists, who were more numerous.

The battles fought during the nineteen months from September 1459 to March 1461 show the development of a very different state of affairs. The effect is rather like that of a rolling snowball: the numbers involved grew rapidly as the frequency of the battles increased, until at Towton, it has been estimated, some 75,000 combatants were involved out of a total population for the whole country of three and a half millions.²

This is a proportion of more than two per cent of the population, men, women and children—a much higher percentage of the available fighting men and boys; an equivalent proportion of the present-day population would comprise more than a million men, more than twice as many as were in the British army at any one time during the period of the Korean War. It is not surprising that after the battle of Towton, where the total casualties may well have amounted to more than a third of those involved in the fighting, there were no more major battles for three years.

It was during this comparatively short period of nineteen months that the greatest effort was made and the largest number of people was involved in the fighting. Later outbreaks were never on the same scale. The effort made then established the House of York on the throne. The course of the fighting is interesting and revealing. Six major battles were fought:

- Blore Heath (Staffordshire) 1459 (September)
- Northampton 1460 (July)

- Wakefield (Yorkshire) 1460 (December)
- Mortimer's Cross (Herefordshire) 1461 (February)
- Second St. Albans (Hertfordshire) 1461 (February)
- Towton (Yorkshire) 1461 (March)

The most curious feature is the distribution of the battles about the country, particularly of the last four, which were all fought within a period of ninety days. One imagines armies rushing about the countryside, appearing on the scene all over the place, though moving in a generally anti-clockwise direction. A closer study reveals more oddities. Of the six battles only two, Wakefield and Second St. Albans, were Lancastrian victories; both were resounding victories, and yet the latter was followed by a Yorkist occupation of London and a full-scale Lancastrian retreat to the north.

The historical atlas gives a clue to the enigma. Most of the battles in the Wars of the Roses took place on the edge of territory controlled by one or other of the leading contestants. Blore Heath, Northampton, Towton and Wakefield are all on the edge of the great northern block of royal (Lancastrian) estates, centring on the Duchy of Lancaster; while Mortimer's Cross lies near the perimeter of the Mortimer inheritance, which had descended with the earldom of March to the Duke of York. The suggestion is that, in each battle, one side at least was a predominantly local force, especially raised from the neighbouring lands with a view to fighting that particular battle. Such evidence as there is strongly supports this view.

At Blore Heath, the Lancastrian force was a local one, raised by Lord Audley from the men of Shropshire and Cheshire. The numbers involved were comparatively small, but one report of casualties mentions two thousand Lancastrian dead; and this implies that, for two fairly small counties, not containing a big centre of population, quite a large proportion of the available local manpower must have been engaged.

The battle of Northampton was a small affair, and lasted only half an hour, but at the time the Lancastrians seem again to have been raising a force in the neighbourhood.

The last four battles are explained by the fact that they involved two different Lancastrian and three different Yorkist armies. The battle of Wakefield was fought near the Duke of York's own castle of Sandal, where he had retired to muster an army. His eldest son, the Earl of March (later Edward IV), had been engaged in the same occupation in the West. His victory at Mortimer's Cross was gained over another local force under Sir Owen Tudor and his son, Jasper.

Meanwhile, the main Lancastrian army, predominantly northern, was marching southwards to meet a force raised by the Earl of Warwick in London and Kent. Though defeated, Warwick was able to join with Edward's force, and to occupy London. The Lancastrian retreat northwards was obviously made with the intention of raising reinforcements before encountering the combined Yorkist army of Edward and Warwick.

As a result, the armies that met at Towton were no longer small local armies. Large numbers were involved. The fighting lasted for ten hours, without quarter on either side; and the dead may have numbered more than twenty-five thousand.

That the men who formed these armies, whether local or national, were not merely the nobles and their hangers-on the numbers can testify. There is, however, further evidence. The bills of attainder, issued by the Lancastrian government after Blore Heath and Wakefield, and by the Yorkists after Towton, list not only noblemen and knights but esquires, gentlemen and even yeomen: if men of lesser rank were ignored, it was not because they did not fight, but because they were not deemed worthy of attention in a bill of attainder.

In the list of Yorkists attainted after the battle of Wakefield, all those of lesser rank—including a tailor and a mason—were residents of the county of York. After Towton, however, where the larger armies were more national in character, the attainted Lancastrians came from farther afield; although the majority of the untitled were northerners, there were those who came from as far away as Dorset and Hertfordshire.

In all this turmoil, the effect on the general landowner and peasant, and on the rural economy of the country, must

have been widespread and disastrous. Marching armies alone were responsible for much misery. The Lancastrian army was especially notorious, and Queen Margaret's forces, on their southward march to St. Albans in February 1461, are said to have left a trail of devastation thirty miles wide. Typical English contempt for the foreigner was no unknown then; and it was noted that the army of this former French princess included contingents of French and Scottish mercenaries, who were blamed for the depredations.

It is perhaps significant that only one battle, Blore Heath, was fought in the autumn, when the men would be needed for the gathering in of crops. But the effect on the economy of the great numbers slain is incalculable. Examination of the remains in the numerous grave pits around Towton indicated that the majority of the dead were persons who were either young or in the prime of life.

During the whole of the period covered by the Wars of the Roses, the general tendency to lawlessness throughout England and Wales is well attested, whether by private letters, such as those of the Pastons, or by the official records. Various reasons have been given to account for this—weak and inefficient government, discontented soldiery returned from France, over-mighty barons, incipient revolutions in the social and economic systems—but, whether the Wars arose from the general lawlessness, or the lawlessness from the Wars, it seems clear that the two were inter-related and inter-dependent.

In 1453, before the outbreak of fighting between the partisans of Lancaster and York, the wedding party of Sir Thomas Neville, returning home after his marriage, was involved in an affray—according to some accounts, a pitched battle—at Stamford Bridge, where they encountered a company led by Lord Egremont and Sir Richard Percy, sons of the Earl of Northumberland. The cause seems to have been a family feud, but it is significant, in the sequel, that Sir Thomas Neville was a brother of the Earl of Warwick, the Kingmaker, and that the Percies were a prominent Lancastrian family.

To remedy the general lawlessness of the times was one of the avowed objectives of the House of York. Edward IV's coronation proclamation refers to the "oppression of the people, the manslaughter, extortion, perjury and robbery among them, the very decay of merchandise wherein rested the prosperity of the subjects," and promised to "remove and set apart the said mischiefs."

Edward's proclamation gives a clue to the general attitude of the townsfolk, whose interest was mainly in the "decay"—or otherwise—"of merchandise wherein rested the prosperity of the subjects." In so far as the Yorkist government was better for trade than the Lancastrian, the citizens of London were generally Yorkist in sympathy, although, paradoxically, the northern capital, York, tended to be a stronghold of the House of Lancaster. In general, however, the towns tried to hold aloof, apart from giving occasional financial aid to one side or the other, voluntarily or not.

There was no siege warfare, and no town was ever defended against a standing army. Perhaps this was to a large extent fortuitous. There were not many towns, and comparatively few of them lay on the perimeters of the great estates where recruiting seems to have been most active. Moreover, corporations independent of the control of any feudal magnate had no need to be committed to either side. Nevertheless, the towns must have shared in any common economic misfortunes due to the Wars, and some were less fortunate than others. St. Albans, an open town, unable to keep out intruders, was the scene of two pitched battles.

At Ludlow in 1459, the Lancastrians, deprived by the withdrawal of the Yorkist army of the chance of a battle, sacked the town, breaking open hogsheads so that "men went wet-shod in wine, and then they robbed the town, and bare away bedding, cloth and other stuff, and defouled many women." The lists of those attainted after the battles of Wakefield and Towton suggest that the city of York supplied recruits to both sides: this is hardly surprising, for York was doubly unfortunate, lying not only between the Lancastrian crown property and the duchy of York but also near territory of the Yorkist Nevilles and the Lancastrian Percies.

The numbers involved in the later battles of the Wars of the Roses were considerably fewer than those believed to have taken part at Towton. This was because, as in the earlier cases, apart from a few of the principal nobles who were the leaders on each side, most of the combatants were recruited more or less locally for each individual campaign.

The leaders and their retainers, with on some occasions small numbers of foreign mercenaries, formed a nucleus that gave some semblance of direction and continuity to the Wars; and this fact has tended to give the impression that only they were participants or interested parties.

No doubt the nobles were the chief actors in the Wars, and the most influential. Moreover, their liveried retainers doubtless formed a substantial part of their following, together with those tenants who considered it expedient to support their lord, and the lesser gentry who likewise supported the local magnate.

Nevertheless, the various campaigns of the Wars of the Roses were preceded by recruiting drives. Before the battle of Blore Heath in 1459, Queen Margaret was in Cheshire distributing badges of the White Swan³—far more a Lancastrian badge than the Red Rose ever was before Tudor times—to all who would receive it.

Again, when Edward IV returned from exile in 1471, he was at first unable to recruit many men to his banner and, until his forces were strong enough, had to pretend he came merely to claim his duchy of York; indeed, in York itself, he threw up his cap and called for cheers for King Henry VI and the Prince of Wales. It seems that part of the army with which he eventually dislodged the Lancastrians had been recruited in King Henry's name. What, then, prompted men to join these armies? They seem to have had some freedom of action, even though there was an attempt, in 1459, to impose compulsory universal military service.

The motives of the lower classes are readily assessable. They were not concerned with the rights and wrongs of Lancaster or York. The peasantry had been restive for a hundred years, since before the days of John Ball, Wat Tyler and the Peasants' Revolt. Not only was there the unrest caused by changing social conditions, newly acquired freedom from feudal servitude and discontent with newly imposed taxes; but also, in a period of weak government, the prevailing lawlessness tended to press most harshly on the poorest, who naturally became still more resentful.

The feeling of unrest affected not only the lowest, but "the commons" in general, and in 1450 broke out in a series of rebellions most generally known by the name of the Kentish leader, Jack Cade. It is significant that Cade—or whatever his real name was—chose to adopt the name of Mortimer, and to associate his demands for political and economic reform with the possible claim to the throne of the Duke of York. The discontented commons of the fifteenth century turned to the Yorkists as the discontented commons in some countries in the twentieth century turn to the Communists or Fascists, not because they supported the Duke of York, who then had made no claim to the throne, but because they wanted a change and the bloodier the better.

Similarly, after he had quarrelled with Edward, Warwick was able in 1469 to utilize for his own purposes against the House of York various popular discontents. The northern rebellions of Robin of Redesdale and Robin of Holderness show that popular unrest was limited neither to the South nor to the opponents of Lancaster.

The position of the landowners, from the country squires to the great nobles, is more difficult to assess. Some blindly followed the local magnate; others took advantage of the general lawlessness to gain such pickings as were to be had, or to carry on some local feud. The one generalization that can be made about them is that their interest in any cause was negligible—unless the cause were self-interest. Individuals changed sides with an astonishing alacrity.

The original political quarrel that set the Wars in motion had been between the Duke of York and the Duke of Somerset in the 1450's. It might be thought that at least the immediate families of those dukes would form the hard core of each party, but they did not. Somerset's eldest son, the real leader of the Lancastrians after the Queen, deserted to the Yorkists and became King Edward's bosom friend: the fact that he later deserted Edward and returned to his original allegiance merely emphasizes his perfidy.

Edward's brother, George, Duke of Clarence, performed similar political somersaults. The idea of "false, fleeting, perjured Clarence" is a sixteenth-century conception; in the fifteenth century, few would condemn for so common a fault, when King Edward could cheer for King Henry, and Warwick could be received as ally by Queen Margaret, whose son he had spurned as a bastard.

Among the greatest in the realm, instances could be multiplied: the feud between Lord Bonville and the Earl of

Devon was so fierce that they always took opposite sides: when one changed parties, so did the other. But inconstancy was not the prerogative of the titled nobles. After the battle of Hexham (1464), King Henry was concealed for over twelve months in various houses of the lesser gentry in the Lake District, Westmorland, Lancashire and Yorkshire. Eventually the Yorkist government got wind of his hiding place, which was in the region of Bolton-by-Bowland, near Clitheroe.

Thereupon, his protectors, Sir John Tempest of Bracewell and the Talbots of Bashall and Salesbury, betrayed him to the authorities, and were liberally rewarded. Sir Ralph Percy, one of the few who prated of principle—he talked of having “saved the bird in my bosom,” by which he seems to have meant his conscience—did so only after having changed sides twice.

In general, loyalty or allegiance to one side or the other cannot have been a very strong motive among the nobility and gentry; it can have influenced the behaviour of very few. Why then did they fight? If the two sides were not severely divided in matters of principle, neither was there any sharp cleavage among the social classes. Self-interest and self-aggrandisement seem to have been the dominant motives. The French wars had developed in the nobles a rough indifference to the sufferings of those who had nothing to gain from warfare.

They fought because they had been brought up to fight, and it was the only life they knew. If the carnage of battle shocked them it shocked them as the carnage of our modern roads shocks us; it was terrible, but it was accepted as part of the risk to be run in living. Likewise, their changes of side may be compared to the transfer of a modern footballer from one team to another. It seems likely that, from the point of view of the fifteenth-century nobleman, the Wars of the Roses were indeed seen as a series of magnificent tournaments.

From a twentieth-century point of view these noblemen may seem little better than a pack of robber barons, who obeyed the impulse to fight in a way dictated by their own best advantage. Individuals, however, were less to blame than the spirit of the age in which they lived; they are not to be condemned because they lacked sensibilities proper to another age, and unknown or largely forgotten in theirs.

A few men of principle there were. The saintly King, Henry VI, stands out as a pitiful misfit in his position and in his age. Richard, Duke of York, whose claim to the throne is generally supposed to have been responsible for the Wars, was interested solely in the establishment of sound government, and forbore to press his claim until it seemed the only alternative to anarchy; had he been interested in the claim for its own sake, it could have been put forward long before the formal claim was laid in 1460—it could have been made thirty years before.

The rival party claims of Lancaster and York were merely a match, laid to the dry tinder of plebeian discontent and patrician lawlessness. The resulting conflagration taught noble and commoner alike such a lesson as was not forgotten for a hundred and fifty years, and enabled a little-known Welsh adventurer to set up a government more sound than that of any Plantagenet. If the fighting was purely local, and confined to limited areas, within those areas it was disastrous; and the general lawlessness, of which the warfare was at once a symptom and a cause, was widespread over the land.

“England hath long been mad, and scarred herself;

The brother blindly shed the brother’s blood;

The father rashly slaughtered his own son;

The son, compelled, been butcher to the sire;

All this divided York and Lancaster,

Divided in their dire division.”

(Richard III, Act v, Sc. v.)

¹ England in the Later Middle Ages (Methuen, 1913), pp. 439, 494.

² These figures are given, with evidence and reasons, by Lt.-Col. A. H. Burne in *Battlefields of England*, pp. 104-5. He reckons that 75,000 constituted fifteen per cent of the potential soldiers available—"a vast effort, but we are assured that a vast effort was in fact made by both sides."

³ The white Swan was derived from the badge of the Bohun family, through the mother of King Henry V. The use of the two Roses presents something of a problem. The Red Rose was a badge of the House of Lancaster, and had been so since the time of the first Earl. It seems to owe its prominence, however, to Henry Tudor, who found it very convenient, for propaganda purposes, to combine it with the White Rose of York. Besides the White Rose, the Yorkists made great use of their badge of the Sun in Splendour.