

Richard II

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British History
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11/20/2008

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November 11, 2008
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Richard the Second was ruler of England from 1377-1399. He came to power as a young boy at the age of 10, after his father Edward the Black Prince (1330-1376) had passed away.¹ The sources used for this report largely come from the works of M.H. Keen, Anthony Steel, and Nigel Saul. These three authors give very good detailed second hand accounts of the events that took place before and during Richard's reign. The primary source for this paper, *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, had documents that gave accounts of each day of Richard's reign and was useful for comparing what the major secondary sources said to what actually happened. Another author that could have been used more, had his book been found sooner, would have been David Hume. Like the three major authors used, he gives very good detailed second hand accounts of Richard II. The rest of the sources helped to aid the major sources in giving more supporting evidence and clarity to what was found throughout the main secondary sources. In order to understand all that was happening during Richard II's reign, and to understand the feelings society had regarding his policies, one has to look at the years before Richard came to power. Once the past is understood then it becomes easier to see how Richard was influenced and why he passed the policies that he did and the manner in which he ruled England. This paper will give a background context to Richard II's reign and then explain how that related to his manner of rule and the policies he installed and the affect those had on English society.

¹Saul, Nigel. *BBC*. July 1, 2001. http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/richardii_crisis_01.shtml (accessed September 22, 2008).

At the time of Richard's grandfather's reign, Edward III (r.1327-1377) in England, the country was involved in what is known as the Hundred Years War. In 1369, England entered a period of "military disaster and economic exhaustion."² The war being the cause of this. The commons had a great say in what went on in government. The commons played an important part in granting taxation. The commons, their representative body was parliament, understood the advantage they and parliament had when it came down to bargaining with the King. There was growing discontent among the commons because of continued misconduct of the war in November 1372.³ The war continued to go badly even with a change in ministers and a new character in the story comes into play, John of Gaunt (b.1340). He was the second surviving son of Edward III, and after the mismanagement of the war by his father became very interested in politics. It can be said that he was anxious to dominate English politics. In order to gain some political clout Gaunt made a coalition with members of powerful northern lords, a half dozen magnates and bishops from the south, and lawyers with a small amount of anti-clerics which included Wyclif (d.1384). This coalition lay in Wyclif's theories of civil and divine dominion. This marriage of the two parties was bad for both. Wyclif lost support among commoners and Londoners and neither party gained any new alliances. The Good Parliament met to discuss the rumors of corruption that had been brought against the government. One of Gaunt's alliances, Alice Perrers, was convicted of drawing revenue away from the king which was found out by a joint committee of the parliament. These grievances were brought before King Edward who suggested two new people to be put on the committee. The committee brought forward the final names to the king who appointed the council they had suggested leaving the option open for the crown to choose future councilors at will. This idea of a

² Steel, Anthony. *Richard II*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1962. Pg. 9

³ Steel. Pg. 18

continual council took root and would flourish during the reign of Richard II.⁴ The commons created a petition saying that all the great officers should be appointed by parliament during the king's minority. The nine councilors were appointed and the great officers were named by their peers.⁵ This is cited in Steel's book as well saying, "The commons insisted that during Richard's minority the continual council, the five principle ministers, and the chief justices and other important officials should be appointed by parliament."⁶ The council, John of Gaunt was sitting representative for the King, took charge of the ruling duties for Richard. Gaunt was actually invited to sit in on one of the joint committee meetings and played a part in reducing the number of member on the continual council from twelve to eight. The parliament was generous in their money grants from 1377-1381. In the spring of 1377, parliament, granted a poll tax on the whole male population of the land between the ages of twelve and sixty. Again, in 1380 another tax was passed and applied to the entire male population but it was now three times more than it was in 1377. Because of economic hardships in England, this led to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.⁷

Richard's minority ended in 1380 when the last of the 'continual councils,' which had been in charge since 1377, was dismissed. They were dismissed by the commons because their services were no longer needed and the officers could run the administration at less expense (Keen 1973. Pg. 266). There were nineteen more years left to Richard's reign and they proved to be stormy and unhappy years. The first conflict that Richard had to deal with in his official reign was the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. On June 7th the peasants chose their leader, Wat Tyler. Richard was only 14 at this point in his reign. On June 15th Richard called the rebels to meet him at Smithfield to discuss their demands. Tyler wanted the abolition of slavery, limited rents, and

⁴ Keen, M.H. *England in the Later Middle Ages*. London: Methuen & Co. LTD, 1973. Pg. 274

⁵ Hume, David. *The History of England*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1879. Pg.281

⁶ Steel, Anthony. *Richard II*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1962. Pg. 45

⁷ Keen, M.H. *England in the Later Middle Ages*. London: Methuen & Co. LTD, 1973. Pg. 266

that there should be no lordship except that of the king, and for the disendowment of the church's temporalities and their partition among the people.⁸ This revolt was simply political they demanded the suppression of the poll-tax and better government. Their aim was to slay the nobles and wealthy clergy, take the King into their own hands, and pass laws which should seem good to the commons of the realm.⁹ The revolt was more to make a point to the newly installed king and parliament. The frustration caused by the tax was heard loud and clear by Richard, and like a good king he was quick to reconcile the situation. In the aftermath of this revolt money was harder to raise and Richard's advisers were wanting to get more involved in the war with France. He did finally lead a royal army to war, but to Scotland not France. He went to Scotland where hostilities had been resumed after the arrival of French troops.¹⁰

The next conflict Richard had to deal with was the impeachment of his chancellor Michael de la Pole. Pole was accused of bribery and his promotion by Richard to Earl of Suffolk was resented by much of the older aristocracy.¹¹ The whole incident seemed to have been staged as an excuse to get rid of an unpopular minister appointed by the king.¹² Pole was considered one of the "favorites" of Richard and much of the displeasure within the government had to do with Richard's favorite five. Since 1386 Richard had been criticized for his choices of advisers and he refused to dismiss any of them at the request of parliament.¹³ Richard's close circle was composed of Robert de Vere, Nicholas Brembre, Pole, Archbishop Neville, and Sir Robert Tressilian. The charge brought against them was that their influence over the king was

⁸ Keen, M.H. *England in the Later Middle Ages*. London: Methuen & Co. LTD, 1973. Pg. 274

⁹ Green, John Richard. *History of the English People*. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1900. Pg. 480

¹⁰ Keen. Pg. 275

¹¹ Keen. Pg. 278

¹² Steel. Pg. 123

¹³ Saul, Nigel. *BBC*. July 1, 2001. http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/richardii_crisis_01.shtml (accessed September 22, 2008).

‘accreaching royal power.’¹⁴ This event ended in what became known as the Merciless Parliament in 1388. There were five appellant lords, who were a group of the nobility the ones who brought the charges against Richard’s five friends, the duke of Gloucester, the earl of Arundel, and the earl of Warwick, Henry Bolingbroke (Richard’s cousin), and Thomas Mowbray Duke of Norfolk. Richard’s mother was increasingly suspicious of Henry Bolingbroke, which she had good reason to be because he would eventually dethrone Richard. So to keep the opportunities to accomplish what Henry wanted, Richard and his mother kept them out of direct line to the throne by appointing the adviser Richard did. These five appellants became angry and referred to the advisers as Richard’s favorites.¹⁵ These five appellant lords created a commission that was in charge of overseeing the King’s activities. It should be noted here that in the mid-1380’s Richard began to take a much more prominent role when it came to ruling, in effect his style of rule became strongly authoritarian.¹⁶ He was considered arrogant and self-obsessed by this point in his reign, and any insult was often held as a grudge and avenged at a later time.¹⁷ All of Richard’s advisers were convicted of treason, with Brembre and Tressilian being executed. The vengefulness of Richard was seen when John of Gaunt returned from Spain, he had gone there to make a bid for the Castilian throne, Richard was forced in 1392 to promise the council that ‘he would do no harm to any lord or other his liege on account of things done in time past...nor would he seek to restore any of those who were condemned in full parliament in his kingdom’.¹⁸ Two events happened to alter the political situation in the 1390s. Richard made a trip to Ireland in 1394 because his chief justice in Dublin barely had control in the coastal towns

¹⁴ Keen. Pg 282

¹⁵ Abbott, Jacob. *History of King Richard the Second of England*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1858. Pg. 290-291.

¹⁶ Saul, Nigel. *BBC*. July 1, 2001. http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/richardii_crisis_01.shtml (accessed September 22, 2008).

¹⁷ *BBC*. http://www.bbc.co.uk/shropshire/history/2003/02/battle_of_shrewsbury/who_was_who_01.shtml (accessed September 22, 2008)

¹⁸ Keen. Pg. 287

of the Pale. Richard led an army there himself and had great success which gave him some clout as a military leader. The army he raised was commonly referred to as yeomen, and he was very generous in the distribution of rewards to those who served him. This excessive generosity was one of the charges brought against him at his deposition.¹⁹ The place this is located is item one in Richard's deposition.²⁰ The next factor that changed English politics was the movement toward rapprochement with France. The two sides were unable to come to an agreement and the final outcome was not a peace at all. Instead, it was a truce that would last for twenty-eight years, which was long enough for Richard to not have to worry about raising money to go to war.²¹ Hume puts this truce at twenty-five years (Hume 1879. Pg. 298).

In 1397 parliament presented a petition by Thomas Haxey which said, 'that the great and excessive charge of the king's household be amended and diminished'.²² This was the third and final event that help shape the reign of Richard II. Remember that Richard was easily insulted and did not like to have power taken away from him. He now rightly was able to be upset over something like this because he had grown accustomed on how to rule properly and had even proven himself a capable military leader with his expedition to Ireland in 1394. When parliament proposes this petition once again, it had been brought to Richard in 1386 during the time when his minister de la Pole was being charged, and it had thrown him into anger then. Now Richard's kingship suddenly changed its character. The king's behavior became more tyrannical and in mid-July the three senior appellants, Gloucester, Warwick, and Arundel, were arrested, and two months later put on trial. A new practice was born and it was to address the

¹⁹ Gillespie, James L. "Richard II's Yeomen of the Chamber." *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, Winter 1978: 319-329.

²⁰ Holinshed, Raphael. *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. London: AMS Press Inc., 1965.

²¹ Keen. Pg. 289

²² Keen. Pg. 290

king directly, being referred to as 'highness' or 'majesty'.²³ The land of the three who were tried was forfeited and divided up among Henry Bolingbroke who was made duke of Hereford, Mowbray of Nottingham Duke of Norfolk, John and Thomas Holland dukes of Exeter and Surrey respectively, John Beaufort became Marquis of Dorset and Thomas Despenser, Thomas Percy, Ralph Neville and William Scrope became earls of Gloucester, Worcester, Westmoreland and Wiltshire. There were five total appellants and the other two, Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray would be dealt with later. That time came when the two became entangled in a quarrel and brought it forward to Richard to resolve the conflict. This was Richard's opportunity to get the revenge he had long hoped for. A committee was appointed to examine the claims of both men against the other. "Bolingbroke's proofs were insufficient and Mowbray denied the charges, so it was decided that the matter should be decided by a judicial duel. The combatants met at Coventry, and as soon as they appeared ready for combat Richard threw down his baton, and ordered them to disarm. He had decided that instead of shedding blood he would take the quarrel into his own hands. He then sentenced the two lords into banishment from the realm. Mowbray for life and Henry for ten years."²⁴ In February of 1399 Richard's uncle John of Gaunt died and the question was raised whether Bolingbroke should be allowed to inherit his father's estate. Since Richard and Bolingbroke had a bitter relationship, Richard and his advisers did not want to permit to do so. The way in which they prohibited him was through some alterations to the parliament roll of 1398. The original terms of appointment of the committee were to 'examine and answer petitions still outstanding,' they added the words 'and to terminate all matters moved in the presence of the king'.²⁵ With this new authority the committee revoked the grant of letters of attorney of October 1397 as 'inadvertent' and extended Bolingbroke's

²³ Saul, Nigel. "Richard II and the Vocabulary of Kingship." *The English Historical Review*, September 1995: 854-877.

²⁴ Keen. Pg. 293-294

²⁵ Keen. Pg. 294

sentence of banishment to life. So what the act did was it allowed Richard to seize all Lancastrian estates, which were owned by Bolingbroke. Richard then called for the mobilizations of his yeomen for his second expedition to Ireland. He was going back to Ireland because ten months before Art MacMurrough had killed his lieutenant. In order to keep English authority alive in Ireland, intervention by force was needed. This decision to leave for Ireland was not the wisest decision Richard could have made. The reason being because too many people in the realm were already upset with his decision to seize the Lancastrian estates, making it clear to them that no man or family was secure in its rights of inheritance. His departure gave Bolingbroke the opportunity he needed to retrieve his fortunes.²⁶ It was also thought that Richard never meant to return to rule England despotically as a military monarchy based on Cheshire, Wales and Ireland, and that no man's property was safe from him.²⁷ Henry, who was in Paris, set sail for England at the end of June with archbishop Arundel. Henry went around London and the boroughs trying to rouse up support for his cause. He was going around saying that Richard meant to abrogate all municipal privileges and extort unheard-of taxes with foreign aid. The result of Henry's efforts was that so many flocked to join him that some had to be sent home because they didn't have the means to feed all of them.²⁸ Richard sent back from Ireland half of his troops he had taken with him. He instructed that they raise more troops in Wales and Richard would soon follow.²⁹ The emergency created a big problem. The royal army, in Ireland, equipped and ready for battle, might confidently have taken on any forces assembled by Bolingbroke and his supporters, but the mobilization, provisioning and transport of an army by

²⁶ Keen. Pg. 294-495

²⁷ Steel. Pg. 264

²⁸ Steel. Pg. 264

²⁹ Keen. Pg. 298

sea could not be completed quickly.³⁰ The sudden reduction in the lordship's defenses and the withdrawal of the knights and officers upon whom the royal policies depended decisively ended Richard's last efforts to settle the problem of Ireland.³¹ Richard was taken, back in England, as a prisoner and offered a deputation. The terms of the deputation were that he should restore the Lancastrian inheritance to its rightful lord and surrender five unnamed members of his council to trial in parliament. He is said to have remarked, "there are some of them whom I shall flay alive." He agreed to the terms and swore an oath with all parties involved.³² The parliament began on the 13th day of September, in which it made heinous points of misgovernance and injurious dealings in the administration of his kingly office, were laid to the charge of this noble prince king Richard, the which (to the end of the commons might be persuaded that he was an unprofitable prince to the common-wealth, and worthy of depose) were engrossed up in 33 solemn articles.³³ The end of it was that Richard was forced to abdicate the crown. He soon saw that it was only by doing so that he could save his life. A written deed of abdication was written up and signed with all necessary formalities, after which Henry came forward and claimed the crown as Richard's rightful successor.³⁴

On September 30th, 1399 Richard abdicated the throne. "Estates" and "people" severally accepted Richard's abdication but requested that his "insufficiency" be made clearer by reading aloud certain articles of accusation. Thirty-three articles have been reproduced and analyzed. They simply represent any unanswered speech for the prosecution of Richard, which takes the form of a naturally one sided resume of the events of the past twelve years. There is continued

³⁰ Johnston, Dorothy. "Richard II's Departure from Ireland, July 1399." *The English Historical Review*, October 1983: 785-805.

³¹ Johnston, Dorothy. "Richard II's Departure from Ireland, July 1399." *The English Historical Review*, October 1983: 785-805.

³² Steel. Pg. 268

³³ Holinshed. Pg. 859

³⁴ Abbott, Jacob. *History of King Richard the Second of England*. New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1858.

insistence that Richard had broken his coronation oath, he is charged eight times with having violated his official promises to keep the peace toward the clergy and people, to do justice in mercy and truth and to maintain the laws, and not having obtained and followed the good advice.³⁵ His loss of the throne came partly through weakness and treachery of men that Richard trusted but also through his own folly. Contrary to popular believe Richard did not and could not seek to impose autocracy on his own and unaided. His councilors were not a band of irresponsible upstarts. They were men of wealth and influence, and of wide and varied experience. His advisers might have acquiesced in decisions that we can see to have been imprudent, but they were not the sort of men who could be browbeaten into submission by a half-mad ruler.³⁶ The object of his policy was to strengthen the power and authority of the crown. There were inconsistencies and paradoxes in his program. On the one hand, the king cultivated an image of remoteness and shunned the company of his subjects while, on the other, he was happy to have his Cheshire archers sleeping with him. The fines, blank charters, forced loans, and conditional pardons that Richard used to blackmail his subjects into obedience proved to be self-defeating.³⁷

The events leading up to Richard's reign are clear. There was continual objection to how the war was being run and governmental impositions on the people were also abhorred. Richard, being of arrogant character, dismissed the "continual council" which had started to come into its own. Richard longed for the spot light and he did not want to share it with anyone else. His experiment with absolutism was a disastrous failure because his basic principle of absolutism was not founded on popular respect, but on fear. He bound men to take unfamiliar oaths, and the breach of such oaths would automatically be construed as treason. These really did frighten

³⁵ Steel. Pg. 281-283

³⁶ Keen. Pg. 298-299

³⁷ Saul, Nigel. "Richard II and the Vocabulary of Kingship." *The English Historical Review*, September 1995: 854-877.

people, not only individuals, but whole communities felt their security threatened. Richard's character flaws, specifically this arrogance, vengefulness, willfulness and treachery all attributed themselves to how he conducted his reign and policies. His policies did more to frighten the society he ruled rather than anything else. The only specific act that really upset the people was the poll tax of 1380, which a young Richard settled, but it was ultimately done through repression.³⁸ Richard's attempt at autocracy should have never been made really because in 1215 the Magna Carta had firmly placed English kingship under the law, his deposition ensured that this principle in England would stand firm. It was all well to exalt the kingship but it had to be done under the law, the principle of the Magna Carta is why England has a limited monarchy today.³⁹ Richard's chief legacy to England in the next generation were ones that worked not for the glorification of monarchy which was Richard's dream, but to weaken it. It created a profound popular distrust of royal autocracy, and a line of kings with a questionable title to the throne.⁴⁰

³⁸ Keen. Pg. 300

³⁹ Saul, Nigel. *BBC*. July 1, 2001. http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/middle_ages/richardii_crisis_01.shtml (accessed September 22, 2008).

⁴⁰ Keen. Pg. 301

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