

Right Royal Bastards by Peter Beauclerk-Dewar & Roger Powell [Burke's Peerage & Gentry, 2006.]

As Peter Beauclerk-Dewar, himself the descendant of a right royal bastard, points out in his introduction the stigma of bastardy, once keenly felt, has all but disappeared today. After all, nearly 50% of children in Britain are born outside marriage, and with no slur upon their honour. The word "bastard" is now little more than a vague term of abuse, certainly not the index of moral and genealogical turpitude, and I suspect that many young people are even unaware of its original meaning.

Essentially a work of reference – albeit easy to read and great fun to dip into – *Right Royal Bastards* explores the lives and claims of no fewer than 65 royal bastards over a period of nearly 550 years, from Arthur Plantagenet (1462/4-1542), Edward IV's son by Elizabeth Lucy, to Timothy Seely (b.1935), thought by some to be a bastard son of Edward VIII. The final section of the book "Royal Loose Ends" includes all those royal bastards for whom there is no clear evidence of royal lineage, or whose claim is contested, together with a handful that are now wholly disproved. The book incorporates much new research (both authors are genealogists), and news of some notable discoveries including the "y" chromosome unique to the Stuart Kings – an infallible test for all future claimants! The illegitimate offspring of medieval monarchs are excluded, as these have been covered in other works, yet it is confusing to have the children of two Plantagenet monarchs included in the section entitled "Tudor Bastards". As such, the headings could perhaps have been better defined. But this is to cavil over a work that is both scholarly and engaging, and the most comprehensive book on the subject ever to appear.

One thing this work illustrates for certain is that the royal bastard is not a type. The range of lives and characters depicted here is as broad as life itself, at least among the men (female royal bastards had fewer options and certainly less opportunity for political mischief-making). While some led obscure lives far from court, others lived in the limelight, and in the cases of the Dukes of Richmond (Henry VIII) and Monmouth (Charles II) were even spoken of as contenders for the throne.

Those that undoubtedly fared best were the offspring of our most prolific post-medieval king, Charles II, of whom Pepys wrote "cazzo dritto non vuolt consiglio" (viz."a man with an erection is in no mood for advice")! In the absence of legitimate offspring, Charles's brood were not only publicly acknowledged but treated with affection by their royal father, enjoying the sort of power and prestige that other bastards could only dream of. As a result, four of the twenty four surviving ducal houses descend from Charles's adulterous fruit: Richmond, Grafton, St. Albans, and Buccleuch. Only Charles II, one feels, could have made something fine and honourable out of his infidelity. More recent monarchs – Edward VII in particular – just end up looking sleazy.

By and large, however, it seems to have been an unenviable position to have found oneself in. Politically and socially alienated, royal bastards were often perceived as embarrassing or dangerous (or both) by their kingly progenitors. When Henry VII died in 1509, his son and successor Henry VIII was quick to dispatch his father's bastard Sir Roland de Velville to the wilds of North Wales to be Constable of Beaumaris Castle, the ancient seat of the Tudor family, where he lived out the remaining 26 years of his life. Monmouth too, once deprived of his father's indulgent presence, quickly fell from grace and was executed for treason by his uncle James II.

In addition to the tragic stories, there are tales of pathos, none more touching perhaps than that of Richard Plantagenet (1469-1550), supposed son of Richard III, who lived as a mason to mask his royal identity. During work breaks he would sit apart from his mates reading a book in Latin. Sir Thomas Moyle, intrigued by the white-bearded scholar, questioned him about his life, and discovering the story of his royal birth, had a small house built for him on the grounds of his estate at Eastwell in Kent. Then there are those altogether more sorry instances in which the subject eats of the insane root of the "what-if" drug, ruining his or her life with pernicious dreams of royal glory. One such case is that of Clarence Haddon, who believed himself to be the son of "Eddy", Duke of Clarence and Avondale, the wayward heir of the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII), who died mysteriously in 1892. Haddon wasted his whole life asserting his royal claims, and wrote letters to George V complaining of his "dirty" treatment at the hands of the royal family and threatening to expose its underhand methods. Having done a spell or two in jail, he died in 1940 a broken man.

Inevitably, there is much that is comical in these tales of royalty manqué, and a good deal of eccentricity in their heroes and heroines. Major George Seymour Crole (1799-1863), the bastard son of George IV by Elizabeth Fox, having quit the army at the age of 32, spent the last thirty years of his life at the Sun Hotel in Chatham, where he had gone for a single night! (It's not known what persuaded him to prolong his stay.) Crole was described by his mother as "quiet and unassuming"; the same could not be said for Sir John Perrott (c.1528-1592), a bluff, thrasonical giant, who claimed to be the son of Henry VIII. At his trial for treason, Sir John openly boasted of being the King's son and exclaimed of Elizabeth I, "God's death! Will the Queen suffer her brother to be offered up a sacrifice to the envy of his frisking adversary" (meaning Sir Christopher Hatton). In the end, Elizabeth never signed his death warrant.

In Faulconbridge, the illegitimate son of Richard Coeur-de-Lion and the hero of his *King John*, Shakespeare created a character of unforgettable vigour and audacity, whose pride in his royal ancestry out-tongues all considerations of baseness. "And I am I, howe'er I was begot!" he cries exultantly, having been created Sir Richard Plantagenet by his uncle John. Faulconbridge is Shakespeare's fiction – no such man existed – yet such is the poet's insight into the psychology of the royal bastard that some, including this reviewer, have speculated that he himself may have been the bastard son of Queen Elizabeth I. Certainly, there is much circumstantial evidence that the Virgin Queen was more of a political than a biological virgin and the authors might have done well to explore the claims, for instance, of Arthur Dudley, who declared himself the son of Queen Elizabeth by the Earl of Leicester. Grist, perhaps, for a second edition!

All in all, however, this is a delightful and thought-provoking book that provides an unorthodox perspective on the history of our kings and queens over the past 500 years, and one that I thoroughly recommend to both historian and layman alike.

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