

The Ballad of Bosworth Field

An introduction to the text

Bennett, Michael. *The Battle of Bosworth*. St. Martin's Press, 1985, rev. 1993. This excerpt, pp. 170-175, is reproduced with the kind permission of the author.

DATE: Earliest surviving copy mid-17th century, but prose summary of earlier version late 16th century; form and content indicate initial composition within living memory of battle. AUTHOR: Anonymous member of Stanley entourage, probably eye-witness. TEXT : B.L., Additional MS. 27,879, fos. 434-43; *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript. Ballads and Romances*, ed. J.W. Hales and F.J. Furnivall, 3 vols. (London, 1868), III, pp. 233-59; B.L. Harleian MS. 542, f.34 (prose summary). English; spelling modernised; readings from prose summary marked #.)

The ballad begins with an appreciation of the wondrous transformation achieved through the accession of Henry VII, and an appeal to Christ to keep England in 'peace and tranquillity'. The exile of Henry Tudor, his return to claim his heritage, his landing at Milford Haven, his appeal to the Stanleys are all recounted. The scene shifts to the court of Richard III, where the king is being counselled to destroy the overmighty Stanleys. Summoned to court, Lord Stanley falls ill at Manchester, and sends in his place Lord Strange, who on arrival is thrown in prison. Hearing of the king's treachery and Henry Tudor's landing, Lord Stanley and Sir William Stanley repudiate their allegiance: the latter promises to make his former lord 'such a breakfast upon a day as never made knight any king in Christendom.' The king replies that whoever opposes him, be it the Great Turk, Prester John or the Sultan of Syria, he will remain king, and threatens to leave no knight or squire alive between Lancaster and Shrewsbury, and to turn into a park the land between Holyhead and St. David's.

Then the king sends messengers to every nobleman and knight in the realm, and assembles a company of unprecedented size:

*Thither came the duke of Norfolk upon a day,
and the earl of Surrey that was his heir;*

*The earl of Kent was not away,
The earl of Shrewsbury brown as bear.*

The ballad continues in similar fashion to list the nobles who swore to support the king; the earls of Lincoln, Northumberland and Westmorland, Lords Zouche, Maltravers, Welles, Grey of Codnor, 'Bowes' [Grey of Powys?]. Audley, Berkeley [earl of Nottingham?], Ferrers of Chartley, Lovell#, Fitzhugh, Scrope of Masham, Scrope of Bolton, Dacre, Ogle#, Lumley, and Greystoke. There follows a list of other knights who were in attendance, including the following clearly identifiable persons: Ralph Harbottle, Henry Horsey#, Henry Percy, John Grey, Thomas Montgomery, Robert Brackenbury, Richard Charlton, Thomas Markenfield#, Christopher Ward#, Robert Plumpton#, William Gascoigne#, Marmaduke Constable, Martin of the Sea#, John Melton, Gervase Clifton, Henry Pierpoint, John Babington, Humphrey Stafford, Robert Rither, Brian Stapleton, Richard Radcliffe, John Norton#, Thomas Mauleverer, Christopher Moresby, Thomas Broughton, Richard Tempest, Ralph Ashton, Robert Middleton, John Neville, Roger Heron, James Harrington, Robert Harrington and Thomas Pilkington. A number of hypothetical reconstructions can be made from the two garbled renderings of the same name: Henry Bodrugan alias Bodringham ['Bowdrye', 'Landringham'#], Robert Rither ['Ryder', 'Rydyssh'#], Robert Ughtred ['Utridge', 'Owtrege'#], Alexander Baynham ['Fawne', 'Haymor'#], John Huddleston ['Hurlstean', 'Adlyngton'#].

Against the armed might of all England two shires alone (Lancaster and Cheshire) stand for Henry Tudor. On Monday Lord Stanley leads the Lancashire men from Lathom to Newcastle. Sir William Stanley with troops from Cheshire and North Wales moves first from Holt to Nantwich, then on Tuesday to Stone, whence he rides across to meet Henry Tudor at Stafford. The narrative leaps several days to describe the triumphal entry of the pretender and the younger Stanley into Lichfield on the Saturday morning, but the latter abruptly leaves in the direction of Tamworth, where it is reported that Lord Stanley is about to be attacked by the king. The Stanleys are in position near a place called 'Hattersey'; Lord Stanley has the vanguard, and Sir William's company comes in as the rearguard. They remain in defensive formation through Sunday, expecting the royal advance, but Henry Tudor arrives first and finally meets Lord Stanley. Early the next morning the battle begins. Henry Tudor desires the vanguard, and Lord Stanley seeing the small size of his company lends him four of his chief knights, Robert Turnstall, John Savage, Hugh Pershal and Humphrey Stanley:

*The Lord Stanley both stern and stout,
Two 'battles' that day had he
Of hardy men, withouten doubt
Better were not in Christenty. Sir William, wise and worthy,
Was hindmost at the outsetting;
Men said that day that did him see,
He came betime unto our King.*

Then Lord Stanley withdraws to a hill top whence he sees the enemy troops massing. In a highly condensed and confused verse the two sides angle themselves for combat:

*The duke of Norfolk advanced his banner bright,
So did the young earl of Shrewsbury,
To the sun and wind right speedily dight,
So did Oxford, that earl, in company.*

The king's ordnance is described: seven score serpentines chained together in a row, a similar number of bombards that blew 'like blasts of thunder', and ten thousand pikes and harquebusiers.

Meanwhile, Richard III seeing Lord Stanley's banner on the hill orders the execution of Lord Strange. The young lord prepares for death and sends a message to his lady to leave the country with their child. With the vanguards engaged, the king is persuaded to delay the execution until after the battle. The fighting proceeds. Henry Tudor, Oxford, Savage, Talbot and Pershal all fight stoutly, but the king has superior forces:

*King Richard did in his army [in a marsh] stand,
He was numbered to forty [twenty] thousand and three
Of hardy men of heart and hand,
That under his banner there did be. Sir William Stanley wise and worthy
Remembered the breakfast he promised to him;
Down at a back [or 'bank'] then cometh he,
And shortly set upon the King.*

*Then they 'countered together sad and sore;
Archers they let sharp arrows fly,
They shot guns both fell and far,
Bows of yews bended did be,*

*Springals sped them speedily,
Harquebusiers' pellets throughly did thring;
So many banners began to sway
That was on Richard's party, their king.*

*Then our archers let their shooting be,
With joined weapons were grounded full right,
Brands rang on basinets high,
Battle-axes fast on helms did light.*

*There died many a doughty knight,
There under foot can they thring;
Thus they fought with main and might
That was Henry's part, our King.*

*Then to King Richard there came a knight,
And said, 'I hold it time for to flee;
For yonder Stanleys' dints they be so wight,
Against them no man may dree.*

*'Here is thy horse at thy hand ready;
Another day thou may worship win,
And for to reign with royalty,
To wear the crown, and be our King.'*

*He said, 'Give me my battle-axe in my hand,
Set the crown of England on my head so high!
For by Him that shope both sea and land,
King of England this day will I die!*

*One foot will I never flee
Whist the breath is my breast within!
As he said it, so did it be;
If he lost his life, if he were King.*

*About his standard can they light,
The crown of gold they hewed him fro,
With doleful dints his death they dight,
The duke of Norfolk that day they slew.*

The ballad then records the deaths of Lord Ferrers, the 'noble' Sir Richard Radcliffe, a close counsellor of the king, the 'wight' Sir William Conyers, the 'full doughty' Sir Robert Brackenbury, the 'good' Sir Richard Charlton, all on Richard's side. It commends in particular the valour of the respective standard-bearers: William Brandon, the only notable casualty on Henry Tudor's side, and Sir Percival Thirwall who did not let fall the royal standard even when his legs were hewn from under him.

*Then they moved to a mountain on height,
With a loud voice they cried 'King Henry!';
The crown of gold that was bright, To the Lord Stanley delivered it be.
Anon to King Henry delivered it he,
The crown that was so delivered to him.
And said, 'Methink ye are best worthy
To wear the crown and be our King.'*

The ballad continues with the victors riding to Leicester 'that night' and laying the late king's naked corpse in the Newarke for all to see. After commenting on the wondrousness of Fortune, it concludes with a prayer that the house of Stanley remain safe, illustrious and influential at the court of James I.