

King Richard III, The last Plantagenet King, will once again be Laid to Rest

Loving Remains: Bone Worship and Richard III

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Global Research, March 27, 2015

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"But it's all vanity, all vanity. This is truly the theatre of the absurd." – Rev. David H. Clark, The Leicester Mercury, Mar 20, 2015

The things bones can do to people. In the case of Richard III, his remains have become an opportunity. Those liking pageantry got their show in Leicester cathedral on Thursday, a grand, somewhat bizarre spectacle to draw in audiences and the media ratings. Period attire was worn. The clergy got busy. Benedict Cumberbatch, a distant relative of the long deceased sovereign, read a poem by the poet laureate. The residents of Leicester – at least some of them – have decided that, "The world is watching. Let's put Leicester and our county on the map."

Such occasions dispel notions that the British are somehow shedding their monarchical mania, becoming the upright citizens of a modern state. Even in this era, enjoyment can be gained from such a burial, bathed as it is in tones of the governors and the governed. Be submissive. Be humble. The man was a king. This was an attempt at allegorised celebrity – reading a monarch's legacy of five hundred years through the narrowest prism of the twenty first century, Richard transformed into a pop phenomenon – absent those blighting references to child and wife butchery.

Tom Sykes, writing for *The Daily Beast*, suggested that, in burying Richard III a second time, the nation would be "doing it right" which seemed to suggest that monarchs need exceptional burials. He writes in the tone of true sovereign worship, with a suggestion that the divine right has somehow survived, a nostalgic binge and twinge. "More than 500 years after his death in August 1485, King Richard III, the last Plantagenet king, will once again be laid to rest on Thursday in the grandeur of Leicester Cathedral, surroundings undoubtedly more suited to a king than the unmarked and forgotten grave under which a municipal car park from which he was exhumed a little over two years ago." [1]

Not all have suffered that level of nostalgic bloom over a monarch who did receive the classic Tudor treatment of historical blackwashing. Polly Toynbee in *The Guardian* proved particularly savage. This sweet commemorative ceremony was nothing short of grotesque. "He may have been a child-murdering tyrant, but he was a king. So, in a nation where we still think like subjects, not citizens, thousands came to humble themselves before his 500-year-old bones." [2] His bones were effectively being sanctified, with his remains rendered holy in historical time. The quality of the monarch, let alone his character, was quite something else. Royalty as station is always forgiven.

Then there was the choice of venue and ritual – Richard was being given a curious

treatment at a location he would not have given a second thought to. York, for instance, has been deemed by some, especially those in York, to be far more fitting, with some measure gathered from e-petitions. Biographers have undertaken their own battle of the script, wondering where the ill-fated monarch would have hoped to be buried. Rosemary Horrox pitted for York Minster; Professor Mark Ormrod of York University thought otherwise. "It would certainly have been unusual in 1485 for a king of England to be buried in York." [3]

Having received the fatal battle blows at Bosworth Field, mused Alex Thompson of Channel 4, "logic suggests Leicester is about the last place he'd want to be laid to rest." [4] Then came the ceremonialism of "Anglicanism, all cooked up by the spooky Tudors because one of them couldn't get Rome to endorse regal domestic crime." The monarch would have been bemused, and perhaps even dismayed. It was John Ashdown-Hill, the discoverer of the remains, who suggested that a Catholic burial would be more fitting.

To hell, then, with the history and its tawdry accounts. The festivities were very much an attempt, as it has been historically, to worship bones and make some ruddy cash out of it. The Church bone industrial complex has proven to be an effective and enduring one, with Europe covered in pilgrimage arteries that feature the finger of a saint, the nose of another miracle worker, and, well, feet. All very Catholic of course, an irony that was evidently lost on the Anglican organisers.

In the case of King Richard, getting him to be buried in Leicester itself was a money point, a phenomenal wastage of council funds even as governments are supposedly tightening their belts before the austerity demon. No doubt the wish to see those funds recouped over time is very strong.

In the local paper, Anglican clergyman Rev. David H. Clark, thought it all rather silly, taking an old snipe at the misuse of religious resources, not least of all the use of £500,000 from the diocesan kitty. "This claim 'with dignity and honour' is a successful attempt to hook this pile of old bones into the religious establishment and has wasted thousands of ecclesiastical man-and-woman hours, which might have been better spent practicing and promoting Christianity." [5] That the bishop and the dean weighed in to support the royalist escape was beyond Clark. "It's all faintly idolatrous: as if Monarch's Bone Worship had come into fashion." As indeed it has.

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Notes

[1] <http://linkis.com/thedailybeast.com/oKtv6>

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/26/britain-king-richard-iii-tyrant>

[3] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/history/10331395/A-sordid-song-and-dance-over-Richard--IIIs-bones.html>

[4] <http://blogs.channel4.com/alex-thomsons-view/richard-iii-tourism-trade-leicester/9237>

[5] <http://www.leicesterm Mercury.co.uk/Person-Richard-III-circus-totally-absurd/story--26206464-detail/story.html>

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