

## THE SLANDERED WOMAN WHO FOUNDED THE TUDOR DYNASTY

Margaret Beaufort has been depicted in film and fiction as a tiger mother, maniacally plotting her son Henry Tudor's path to the throne, a religious fanatic and a child murderess. Yet, as we shall see the real Margaret was a true-life heroine whose story has been buried by religious prejudice and our still ambivalent attitudes to powerful women.

I am the author and historian Leanda de Lisle and this is Tudor and Stuarts uncovered – discovering the truth behind the myths.

There are no surviving images of the young Margaret, so we have to imagine her as her story began, when she was the victim of a child marriage, aged twelve. Her twenty-four year old husband, Edmund Tudor, was half brother of her cousin, the mentally ill Henry VI. The marriage did not last long. Edmund Tudor died of plague the following year, but he left his young widow, six months pregnant.

It was the beginning of the Wars of the Roses, a struggle between cousins, in which the 'white rose' House of York, fought for supremacy over the failing kingship of Henry VI, from the 'red rose' House of Lancaster. Margaret needed a protector and so she sought refuge with her brother-in-law, Jasper Tudor, at Pembroke castle.

There she delivered her baby, Henry Tudor in 1457. But the thirteen year old was so small her body would never recover, and she was left unable to have further children.

Jasper then arranged her second marriage – taking her to meet her future father in law only a month after the birth that had almost killed her. This marriage proved happy, nonetheless.

Again we have to imagine Margaret, who was described as easy to talk to, a woman who never forgot a kindness, who read extensively, and managed her estates efficiently. Her new life was shattered in 1461 when the eighteen-year old Edward IV of York overthrew the mad King Henry VI of Lancaster.

Margaret's five-year old son, Henry Tudor, was taken from her to be raised by a supporter of the House of York. The land and titles her son had inherited from his father were confiscated. But the hope was held out that these would be restored if the family proved loyal to King Edward. It was for his father's inheritance, not any ambitions for Henry Tudor to be king, that Margaret would fight long and hard for.

Margaret's task was made easier when King Edward married the beautiful commoner, Elizabeth Woodville.

The so-called 'White Queen' was related to Margaret's husband and King Edward now permitted her to see her son. Aged ten, Henry Tudor was a self-possessed boy of average height, with a slight cast to his blue eyes. His mother was relieved that peace – even a Yorkist peace - meant he was safe. But two years later Edward's cousin and once closest ally, the ambitious Warwick 'the Kingmaker', rebelled against him.

It was said of Margaret that she never let opportunities pass her by, and she tried to use the new political situation to get her son back. For a time she succeeded. When Warwick the Kingmaker defeated Edward IV in 1471 and restored Henry VI, her son came home for a few precious weeks. But the tide of war soon changed.

Warwick the Kingmaker, and Henry VI's son, were killed in two key battles in 1472. Edward IV then determined to finish off the House of Lancaster. Henry VI was murdered in the Tower, with Edward claiming the sick old man had died of grief for his son. Edward's next plan was to capture Henry VI's half-nephew, Henry Tudor.

Now aged fourteen, Henry fled England with Jasper Tudor. He was to spend the next twelve years exiled in Brittany, never seeing his mother, and living in the constant fear that one day the Duke of Brittany would hand him over to Edward IV and his death.

Margaret's beloved husband had died of battle wounds suffered in the recent conflicts, but she re-married quickly, to Thomas, Lord Stanley, a member of Edward's Council, hoping to regain the king's favour so that her son would be safe. This proved difficult for the name 'Lancaster' continued to pose a threat to Edward. The murdered Henry VI had come back to haunt him in the guise of a popular saint.

Ordinary people remembered the mentally ill Henry VI as an innocent, and believed his suffering in life gave him insight into their own problems now he was dead. They prayed to him and the cult of King Henry the Saint swept England, with miracles reported widely. The last thing Edward wanted was the return of Henry Tudor, the surviving relic of the House of Lancaster.

The turning point for Margaret came in April 1483. Edward had grown obese and sexually dissolute, and a cold caught out fishing killed him off, aged only forty. England was left with a child king – his twelve-year-old son Edward V.

Many assumed that the boy's royal uncle, Richard, would act as Protector, ruling until Edward V came of age. But the white Queen, Elizabeth Woodville, and her family were determined to keep exclusive control over her son.

Fearful of Woodville power, Richard fought back. Claims were made that Edward IV had married Elizabeth Woodville bigamously, and in June Edward V and his ten-year old brother were declared illegitimate. The children were locked in the Tower and Richard was crowned as Richard III. It was sometime that summer that the princes in the Tower vanished.

The question of what had happened to the princes remains today one of history's great murder mysteries. In the nearest contemporary accounts Richard is accused of ordering their deaths, with the boys suffocated, drowned, or their arteries cut. There were also theories that one or both of the princes escaped. In more modern times it

has been argued that Richard III had spirited his nephews abroad, or to a safe place nearer home, where he hoped they would live in obscurity.

For contemporaries the fact Edward V still had support as king gave Richard a strong motive for killing the princes. But if he did kill them why did he not display their bodies and claim they had died of natural causes, as his brother had done after the murder of Henry VI? The answer, I discovered as I researched my book 'Tudor', is not that the princes were alive, or that Richard was innocent, but that Richard was anxious to avoid a religious cult growing up around them as it had around Henry VI.

In England we have no equivalent today to the religious shrine at Lourdes in France, still visited by thousands looking for miracles. But we remember the crowds outside Buckingham Palace after the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. Imagine that enthusiasm and grief in pilgrims visiting the tombs of two young princes. It would have been extremely dangerous to Richard III, who had taken their throne.

'Disappearing' them meant there was no grave to become a focus for a cult, and no relics either.

Nevertheless Richard III needed Elizabeth Woodville to know the princes were dead to forestall plots against him, raised in their name. According to one account, when Elizabeth was told of her sons' murders, 'she wept, she cried out loud, and with lamentable shrieks made all the house ring'. She wanted vengeance and to get it she agreed to Margaret Beaufort's proposal that she marry her daughter, Elizabeth of York, to Henry Tudor. Supporters of the old House of Lancaster would then combine with the Edwardian Yorkists to bring Richard III down. For Margaret this was the only certain way to save Henry from Richard, who was as likely to kill him as Edward IV.

In August 1485 the twenty-eight year old Henry Tudor sailed from France and confronted Richard III at the battle of Bosworth.

We now know, following the excavation of Richard's body at Leicester, that Richard really did have the twisted spine dismissed for so long as Tudor propaganda. He stood as short as four foot eight. But Richard bravely hacked his way on foot towards Henry Tudor, like a furious human pretzel. At the last minute Margaret's brother-in-law, William Stanley, and his men galloped to save Henry – and Richard was killed.

Henry was crowned Henry VII, first king of the Tudor dynasty and married Elizabeth of York, combining the red rose and the white in a new 'union' badge now known as the 'Tudor' rose. The first person Henry VII then turned to for advice in ruling his kingdom was his mother. She was rewarded too with the right to manage her own affairs, something usually forbidden to married women.

Later Margaret separated amicably from Lord Stanley choosing to live independently, writing books and presiding over a regional court in the Midlands, wielding real power.

Known always as 'the King's Mother', she would sign herself Margaret R, which may have stood for her title, Countess of Richmond, but could also mean Regina or 'Queen'.

Meanwhile Elizabeth Woodville was retired to a monastery, and when she died in 1492 she was given a quiet funeral. David Starkey argues that Margaret resented her rival status. Others have suggested she was sent to the monastery after plotting against Henry. But the truth is that Henry VII merely wanted her out of sight and mind.

It was important to Henry that he be accepted as king in his own right, not one shared with his wife, and so he suppressed reminders of the past glories of the House of York. He had done nothing to find the bodies of the princes in the Tower, fearing a cult as much as Richard had. But Henry paid the price for failing to prove the children were dead when a pretender appeared in Europe, claiming to be the younger of the princes in the Tower and the rightful king of England.

Margaret turned to God to pray for her son as he faced rebellions and invasion attempts on behalf of the pretender. She believed God had shaped the extraordinary path of their lives, and would protect them now. In the end the pretender was captured and executed. Henry VII would die in his bed only after a long illness in 1509. Margaret was left to stage-manage the accession of her grandson, Henry VIII, which she managed brilliantly, before she died shortly afterwards

It was said at Margaret's funeral that all of England had reason to weep. She had been charitable to the poor, a great patron of the universities, and had loved her friends and family dearly. But in post Reformation Protestant England Margaret's Catholic spirituality was hated and her intelligence was regarded with equal suspicion. She was condemned as a 'politic and subtle lady' and accused of killing the princes in the Tower with sorcery to clear the way for her son.

Today the old slander that Margaret was responsible for the princes' deaths is becoming fashionable again. Perhaps because there are no portraits of the young Margaret, novelists and film-makers project the nun-like piety of her old age back into her youth.

But we should remember the thirteen year old who bore Henry Tudor. Here was a girl who took control of her destiny, a mother who saved her son, the founder of the Tudor dynasty, and a true heroine.