

**A SHORT  
HISTORY  
OF**

**I.B. TAURIS**

# THE WARS OF THE ROSES

David Grummitt



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‘You get two for the price of one with David Grummitt’s *Short History of the Wars of the Roses*. You get an accessible narrative of the Wars, seen by him to have originated in the Lancastrian usurpation of 1399 that skilfully steers the reader through the complexities and controversies of the story. Grummitt knows his subject well and writes with considerable insight. But you also get, in the book’s concluding chapters, a revaluation of these civil wars. The author gives renewed emphasis to their scale and the involvement of the whole population in them. He also highlights significant changes in the corresponding political culture. His reassessment in these pages of the pivotal importance of the later fifteenth century in English history will put a cat amongst some Tudor pigeons.’

A J Pollard,  
*Emeritus Professor of History, Teesside University*

‘David Grummitt has succeeded triumphantly in writing a refreshing and multi-layered book. It will engage the general reader (and the writer of fiction and non-fiction too!), the student who needs a clear, up-to-date and informative guide, as well as those already acquainted with the Wars of the Roses – including Dr Grummitt’s fellow historians. In comparing the campaigns of 1459–64, 1469–71 and 1483–7 between Lancaster and York, David Grummitt offers vivid and often fresh judgments on the characters and failings of kings, most notably Henry VI, Edward IV and Richard III, and those nobles – Richard of York, Warwick the Kingmaker and the Duke of Buckingham – whose intrigues promoted the struggles. He deftly weaves the results of recent research (some of it his own) into the discussion. In a particularly elegant chapter, he takes the story beyond ‘high politics’ to locate the commons of shire and town within the ‘political nation’ and with a shared responsibility for the ‘commonweal’. As a notable historian of fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century England, Dr Grummitt writes with mature confidence and a pellucid style. He is robust and challenging without being opinionated: he values the opinions of other historians and likes a controversy, thereby helping his readers to come to their own conclusions. To this end, the book is thoughtfully structured: its substantial *Dramatis Personae*, three royal and noble Family Trees and an authoritative Bibliography linked to each chapter make this book a valuable work of reference as well as a compelling and stimulating read.’

Ralph A Griffiths,  
*OBE, Emeritus Professor of Medieval History, Swansea University*

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# Contents

	Preface	ix
Introduction:	The Wars in History	xii
	Dramatis Personae	xxvii
	Timeline	xxxvi
	Family Trees	xl

## Part 1: Causes

Chapter 1:	The Lancastrian Legacy: England 1399–1449	3
Chapter 2:	The Prelude to War: 1449–55	23

## Part 2: Course

Chapter 3:	First Blood: The Battle of St Albans 1455 and its Aftermath	43
Chapter 4:	The Triumph of York: The First War 1459–64	60
Chapter 5:	Rebellion and Readeption: The Second War 1469–71	83
Chapter 6:	Fortune's Wheel: The Third War 1483–87	103



### **Part 3: Consequences**

Chapter 7:	War and Society: The Impact of the Wars	133
Chapter 8:	War and Political Culture	156
	Epilogue	182
	Notes	186
	Bibliography	195
	Index	206

# Preface

The Wars of the Roses, once an integral part of ‘Our Island Story’, now occupy a rather curious position in the British historical memory.<sup>1</sup> Despite a recent plethora of popular and academic titles on the subject, the Wars, their causes, course and consequences, remain more contested than ever. For a generation of youngsters they are a bit of a mystery, sandwiched between the mud and disease of the ‘Measly Middle Ages’ and the blood and fire of the ‘Terrible Tudors’. Although the last fifty years has seen an explosion in detailed academic research into the fifteenth century, it remains, to some extent, the ‘Dark Century’ of English medieval history, too complex to be incorporated into the new, integrated history of the British Isles. In part this is the inevitable consequence of the efforts of generations of professional historians who have played down the impact of the Wars and obscured the historical wood by their very detailed description of the trees. The trend to diminish the Wars’ importance has only intensified in recent years and the most authoritative recent survey sees English society and government as essentially unchanged between the Black Death and the Reformation.<sup>2</sup>

But it is only part of the historian’s task to identify continuities; he or she must also account for change. English society underwent a significant transformation in the fifteenth century, not least because of the series of violent, political confrontations we know as the Wars

of the Roses. The English had to cope with disease, defeat in foreign war, the deposition and murder of their kings, as well as a deep crisis in the domestic and international economy. This encouraged the development of new ways to think about politics, the relationship between princes and their subjects, and the structure of government and society. England was also transformed because of the impact of broader cultural, economic and social changes. It happened at a time when the Renaissance and the spread of Humanism heralded a new era of introspection and the challenging of old orthodoxies, and further opened new possibilities in what was considered politic and moral behaviour. Towards the end of the fifteenth century the printing press meant a proliferation of texts and a widening engagement with new ideas, but it also offered the possibility of new means of wielding power and proscribing debate.

This short history of the Wars of the Roses attempts three things. First, it provides an accessible introduction to both the Wars themselves and historical writing about them. Second, it sets the Wars in the context of individual experiences and responses and to assess their impact both individually and communally. Finally, it considers the ways in which the experience of civil war shaped English culture, politics and society in the years after 1450. It is divided into three parts: the causes of war from 1399 until 1459; the course of events during the three periods of open conflict from 1459–64, 1469–71, and 1483–87; and, finally, their consequences.

Such a broad synthesis must inevitably rely heavily on the work of others. First and foremost is the debt owed to my former colleagues at the History of Parliament Trust: Linda Clark, Hannes Kleineke, Charles Moreton and Simon Payling. Their combined knowledge and understanding of the fifteenth century is unsurpassed and I feel extremely privileged to have shared it with them for more than a decade now. Thanks are also due to the Trustees of the History of Parliament Trust for permission to draw on research ahead of its publication. I am also indebted to the work of John Watts and his support and encouragement have meant a great deal. Similarly, I have benefitted immensely from the friendship of Michael K. Jones, who understands the fifteenth century as well as anyone. Thanks are also

## *Preface*

due to Caroline Barron, Jim Bolton, Christine Carpenter, Paul Cavill, Sean Cunningham, Peter Fleming, Ralph Griffiths, Steven Gunn, Michael Hicks, Malcolm Mercer, Cath Nall, Tony Pollard, James Ross, David Starkey and Anne Sutton whose published work, seminar papers and conversation has informed my own understanding of the period. My Special Subject students at Kent discussed my ideas and corrected my more outlandish claims. Finally, thanks are due to my family: my mother-in-law who cast the expert gaze of an A-level history teacher (who had herself been taught the Wars of the Roses by none other than Ralph Griffiths) over the entire manuscript; my daughter, Emma, whose inquiring mind has, I hope, enjoyed journeying through the Wars; and, finally, my wife Hil, a fellow historian, who continues to provide love and support in everything I do.

# Introduction

## THE WARS IN HISTORY

### WHY THE 'WARS OF THE ROSES'?

The phrase 'the Wars of the Roses' is what the philosopher of history, W.H. Walsh, dubbed a 'colligatory term'. That is to say, like the 'Industrial Revolution', 'the Scientific Revolution' or even 'the Cold War', it is a term invented by historians to make sense of and order an otherwise confused and chaotic series of events. 'The Wars of the Roses' therefore provides a context for episodes such as Cade's Rebellion in 1450 or the usurpation of Richard III in 1483. It gives both historians and students a framework within which they can order their narratives, write their essays, and seek to understand the past.<sup>1</sup> In an age of professional historical scepticism, the term and its 'usefulness' can be dissected, the beginning and end of the Wars endlessly debated, new examples found to challenge academic orthodoxies, and even the very existence of the Wars themselves called into question. The Wars of the Roses, we are told, was a concept 'invented' by Sir Walter Scott in his 1829 novel *Anne of Geierstein* and was a phrase unknown to fifteenth-century minds. Indeed, such was the limited nature of conflict in the mid-fifteenth century that most Englishmen and women were not even aware that they were living through a civil war.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, we should not despair of the 'Wars of the Roses'. As Margaret Aston pointed out over forty years ago, the term does have

a near contemporary relevance. In simple terms, the White Rose was one of the many badges or devices adopted by the House of York (from the Mortimer earls of March). Equally, the Red Rose was one of an even larger collection of badges used by the dukes and later by the royal House of Lancaster. Elizabeth of York, daughter of Edward IV, appears to have adopted the White Rose as her personal badge before 1485 and Henry Tudor seized upon the opportunities presented by the Red Rose immediately following his victory at Bosworth. Contemporaries were certainly aware of this imagery and the symbolism of the roses as badges of ancient royal lines. The chronicler of the Lincolnshire abbey of Crowland, one of the most astute commentators of the time, wrote shortly after the Battle of Bosworth that in Tudor's victory 'the tusks of the boar (Richard III) were blunted and the red rose (Tudor), the avenger of the white (the murdered sons of Edward IV), shines upon us'.<sup>3</sup> Within a year Henry had adopted the familiar Tudor Rose, the White Rose of York superimposed upon the red one of Lancaster, and this badge was to adorn royal palaces, greet the king on progress, and decorate the houses of his servants and courtiers. Thus, by the end of the fifteenth century the recent civil wars were being portrayed as a long struggle between the two warring factions of the same royal line, represented by the two roses, and the happy reunion symbolised by the marriage of Henry and Elizabeth and the intermixing of the two. The image of the warring roses, an unnatural struggle between two branches of the same family and a bloody century of civil war ended by the accession of Henry VII and confirmed in the person of Henry VIII, the physical embodiment of the union of the two houses of Lancaster and York, was a compelling one. It remained the dominant narrative of the fifteenth century for some five hundred years.

## **EARLY HISTORIANS OF THE WARS OF THE ROSES**

Already by the third quarter of the fifteenth century there were efforts to analyse and explain the bloody conflicts that had dominated English politics in recent years. A number of chronicle accounts, mainly but not solely arising from a London vernacular tradition, presented a

broadly similar version of events. They identified various low-born counsellors of Henry VI whose ambition and greed had led to the loss of the crown's French possessions, the murder of the king's uncle, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, and the outbreak of popular rebellion. This had led to a noble revolt, led by the Duke of York, against the king and his 'evil councillors'. The deposition of Henry VI in 1461 was followed by an uneasy decade of Yorkist rule. In 1471 the death of both Henry and his son, Edward, Prince of Wales, had offered the prospect of lasting peace but civil war had ensued again with Richard of Gloucester's usurpation in 1483 only to be ended at Bosworth Field two years later. Both Yorkist partisans, such as the author of *An English Chronicle*, and those with Lancastrian sympathies, such as the author of the short chronicle of the years 1431 to 1471 found in John Vale's commonplace book, could agree on the fundamentals of this narrative (at least up to 1471). Whether they regarded Henry VI as a hopeless case who, in the words of one Yorkist writer, had 'helde ne householde nor meyntheyned ne werres'<sup>4</sup> or as a king unlawfully deposed by an ambitious usurper, they could agree that the tensions inherent in English political society had come to a head with defeat in the Hundred Years War and the events of 1450 and that they had been largely healed by the symbolic union between Henry Tudor and Elizabeth of York in 1485.

This narrative formed the basis of the most influential of the late-fifteenth century chronicles, that written by the London draper, Robert Fabyan. His chronicle, covering the period from 1223 until 1485 (with a continuation to 1509) was printed by the king's printer, William Pynson, in 1516. The London chronicles also formed the basis of Polydore Vergil's history, written at the behest of Henry VII but first published in 1534. Vergil combined elements of both the Lancastrian version (the saintly Henry VI and the ambitious Duke of York) and Yorkist account (the evil Duke of Suffolk and 'Good Duke Humphrey' of Gloucester) accounts into a new Tudor narrative which portrayed the fifteenth century as an extended crisis, created by the deposition of Richard II in 1399 and ended by the restoration of legitimate kingship in 1485. Much has been made of the fact that Vergil, along with his contemporary Sir Thomas More whose *History*

of *King Richard III* was written around 1513 but only published in 1543, represented a new kind of analytical history inspired by the Humanist learning and the Italian Renaissance. They stressed the long term causes of the civil wars and exaggerated their destructive effects, moralising and developing the notion that the wars were somehow a divine punishment for the sin of 1399. This analysis, however, did not rely on the genius of Vergil and More for its novelty. It was in fact the argument made in Edward IV's first parliament in 1461, repeated by Richard III in 1483 and explicit in the papal bull of 1486 permitting the marriage of Henry Tudor and Elizabeth of York.

The Tudor narrative of the Wars of the Roses developed further in 1548 with the publication of Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York*. Hall also begun his narrative in 1399, but his analysis of the fifteenth century was more nuanced and critical than that of either Vergil or More. Hall agreed that the usurpation of 1399 had led to nearly a century of civil war, but it was not a divine punishment. Richard II's deposition had been both lawful and justified and Hall stressed the parliamentary approbation of Henry IV's title. The problems arose from ambitious and self-serving noblemen: Edmund Mortimer, Earl of March, and Richard, Earl of Cambridge (uncle and father respectively of Richard, Duke of York) because these men 'were with these doynge neither pleased nor contente'.<sup>5</sup> Later Tudor commentators, such as Sir Thomas Smith writing in 1561, saw dynastic uncertainty as the chief malaise of the fifteenth century. This encouraged the ambition of noblemen and undermined law and order: 'No man sure of his Prince, no man of his goods, no man of his life'. In a wonderful piece of Tudor hyperbole Smith claimed that 'almost half England by civil war slain, and they which remained not sure, but in moats and castles, or lying in routs and heaps together'.<sup>6</sup>

William Shakespeare, in his two historical tetralogies, is often considered to have fixed the 'Tudor Myth' of the Wars of the Roses in the national consciousness. The narrative of a century of civil war and discord stemming from the unlawful deposition of Richard II in 1399, halted only by the triumph of Henry VII and the union of the Houses of Lancaster and York represented in the marriage between



Henry and Elizabeth of York, is the thread that runs through 1, 2 and 3 *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, and *Richard II*, 1 and 2 *Henry IV* and *Henry V*. Shakespeare's histories, like Hall's chronicle, presented a much more subtle and complex version of the Wars. Shakespeare certainly saw Henry VI as a pious, if lethargic, king whose inability to offer effective rule fatally compromised the Lancastrian regime, but he also drew attention to the ambition and cunning of leading noblemen, most notably Richard, Duke of Gloucester (later Richard III), but also Gloucester's father, Richard, Duke of York. The ideal king emerges only at the end of the first tetralogy in the person of Henry Tudor. The second tetralogy is more complex still, presenting a developing notion of kingship. Richard II is certainly a flawed individual and king and the political nation is faced with a dilemma whether to depose or endure a tyrannical ruler for the sake of the commonwealth. This analysis probably owed more to the contested politics of later Elizabethan England than to the historical reality of 1399. Bolingbroke, later Henry IV, emerges, like Richard III, as a rather Machiavellian figure, as indeed does Henry V who, once crowned king, unceremoniously dumps his old drinking companion and mentor, Falstaff. Other later Tudor commentators, such as Samuel Daniel whose epic poem *The Civil Wars* appeared in several editions between 1595 and 1609, revealed equally ambiguous accounts of the Wars of Roses, even referencing opposing views of the same events and allowing readers to determine the truth for themselves. Far from presenting a homogenous 'Tudor Myth' these sixteenth-century historians recognised the complexity of the Wars of the Roses and offered a variety of explanations for the traumatic fifteenth century.

## THE WARS OF THE ROSES AND PROFESSIONAL HISTORY

A profound change in the way in which history was written and taught occurred in the mid-nineteenth century. From the 1820s the German historian, Leopold von Ranke, popularised a new 'professional' style of history, located in the universities and based upon the critical interpretation of archival, usually governmental, records. This new history was discussed in seminars and its practitioners, publishing in multi-

## Introduction

volume works or in the newly emerging professional historical journals, sought to establish powerful grand narratives of national development. The most influential admirer of von Ranke's methods in England was William Stubbs, Bishop of Oxford (1825–1901), appointed Regius Professor of Modern History at the University of Oxford in 1866. Stubbs made two important contributions to our understanding of medieval history in general and the Wars of the Roses in particular. First, as a champion of the publication of original records he began the tradition that led to the scholarly editing of vast numbers of manuscript sources relating to the fifteenth century. Second, his monumental three-volume work, *The Constitutional History of England in its Origins and Development*, offered a comprehensive framework for understanding English history in its broadest terms and stressed the importance of the fifteenth century within this sweeping narrative.

Stubbs and his disciples offered what Shakespeare and the Tudor historians had failed to do: a simple and all-encompassing explanation of the causes, course and consequences of the Wars of the Roses. Derided in the twentieth century as 'the Whig interpretation of history', their account was brilliant in its simplicity and audacious in its scope. Stubbs placed the fifteenth century within a continuum of English constitutional development which had begun with the forest-dwelling Germanic tribes of Roman times and crystallised in the mature, constitutional monarchy of mid-Victorian Britain. Like Von Ranke, Stubbs believed in a national destiny, ordained by some divine order, in which individuals and events were subsumed in a grander narrative: medieval history, he wrote, was 'not then the collection of a multitude of facts and views, but the piecing of the links of a perfect chain.'<sup>7</sup> Stubbs argued that the successful late-medieval kings were those who, like Edward I, recognised that their power lay in gaining the approbation of the political nation embodied in parliament. He saw the origins of the Wars of the Roses in the compromises and mistakes made by Edward III. Edward, in his need for money to fight the Hundred Years War, had sacrificed the power of the crown in large part to the ambitions of his nobility by allowing them to raise armies by contract. He had weakened the crown further by having

too many sons and dividing the royal patrimony between them. In itself this was not fatal and kings who ruled with their parliaments, as Henry IV did with his 'Lancastrian Constitutional Experiment', could mitigate these inherent weaknesses in royal government. Nevertheless, weak kings, most notably Henry VI, could not control the destructive forces at the heart of the polity and civil war became inevitable. Equally, the Yorkist kings attempted to arrest this decline not by resorting to the constitution (and parliament) but by Machiavellian politics and violence. It needed, Stubbs argued, the despotism of the Tudors to rescue England from its late-medieval nadir and to create the preconditions for parliamentary liberty to again flourish in the seventeenth century: 'the nation needed rest and renewal, discipline and reformation, before it could enter into the enjoyment of its birthright.'<sup>8</sup>

This abject picture of the fifteenth century as an interlude in the nation's progress, a period beset by weak, irresolute monarchs and violent, ambitious nobles, proved an enduring one. It found its fullest expression in the work of another Oxford historian, Charles Plummer, whose 1885 edition of Sir John Fortescue's *Governance of England*, refined the analysis of royal collapse under Henry VI. In his assessment the Wars of the Roses were due to the poverty of the crown, the presence of 'overmighty subjects' financially and politically more powerful than the king, and the general lawlessness caused by bands of armed retainers. Plummer coined the phrase 'Bastard Feudalism' to characterise the impermanent relationships between the lords and their followers which were based upon cash payments rather than, as in feudalism proper, the tenure of land. Plummer, a student of the Rankean school of historical scholarship, used contemporary sources, such as the Paston Letters, to illustrate the parlous state of fifteenth-century England. William Denton, a Church of England clergyman and another Oxford graduate, published a widely read history of the fifteenth century, which almost caricatured this view, blending it with the more hysterical accounts of Tudor writers like Sir Thomas Smith. For Denton the troubles began with the deposition of Richard II but then spiralled out of control due to the violent designs of a morally degenerate nobility (a degeneracy caused, not least, by their practice

of indulging in sexual relations by the age of fourteen!) By the turn of the twentieth century the general view of the Wars of the Roses and the fifteenth century, established by Stubbs but dramatised by Plummer and Denton, was a negative one, summed up in the 1911 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as a ‘name given to a series of civil wars in England during the reign of Henry VI, Edward IV and Richard III . . . matched by a ferocity and brutality which are practically unknown in the history of English wars before and since’.<sup>9</sup>

The Stubbsian (or Whig) view of the fifteenth century continued to dominate historical interpretations until well into the twentieth century. There were a few dissenters, but they did not seriously undermine the dominant narrative. Another clergyman, John Richard Green (1837–83), a contemporary of Stubbs and a political radical, published his enormously popular *Short History of the English People* in 1874. Green’s account of the fifteenth century introduced two important new concepts. The first was that of the ‘New Monarchy’ of Edward IV and Henry VII in which the crown’s fortunes and the nation’s stability was restored by administrative innovation and fiscal retrenchment. The second was that Green questioned the destructiveness of the wars. Green’s political sympathies persuaded him to look at the experience of ordinary men and women, rather than kings and nobles, and in so doing he questioned the gloomy view of the fifteenth century advanced by Denton and Plummer. While the aristocracy murdered each other on the battlefields of Towton, Tewkesbury and Bosworth ‘for the most part the trading and agricultural classes’, Green argued, ‘stood wholly apart’.<sup>10</sup> Green, who disdained archival research and wrote for a popular audience, never made much impact upon his more academic contemporaries in England (although his picture of Henry VII particularly was important for American historians, in particular Frederick Dietz and Walter Richardson), but his arguments in some ways prefigured those of one of the most influential early twentieth-century historians of the Wars, Charles Lethbridge Kingsford (1852–1926). Kingsford also largely ignored governmental records and pointed to the richness of literary sources, particularly the vernacular chronicles and private letters for the mid-fifteenth century. For Kingsford (whose 1923 Oxford Ford

lectures were published two years later as *Prejudice and Promise in Fifteenth Century England*) Tudor historians had ‘prejudiced’ their successors against the fifteenth century. Instead he highlighted the cultural and intellectual spirit of an age in which Lollardy flourished as a forerunner of later Protestantism, vernacular writing foreshadowed Elizabethan literature, and the lawlessness of much of the West Country presaged the spirit of adventure that found its fullest expression in Tudor explorers like Drake and Raleigh.<sup>11</sup>

### **K.B. MCFARLANE AND THE WARS OF THE ROSES**

In the mid-twentieth century another Oxford academic established a new orthodoxy for researching and writing on the fifteenth century. K.B. McFarlane (1903–66), through his teaching if not through the bulk of his published work, influenced generations of historians and transformed the way in which we understand the Wars of the Roses.<sup>12</sup> McFarlane questioned both Stubbs’s teleological approach to the fifteenth century, seen in terms of the development of the English constitution, and the administrative and institutional approach that had grown out of the Manchester school of historians led by T.F. Tout. Instead, McFarlane concentrated on the public careers and private networks of the nobility and land-owning classes. His teaching and writing had three important consequences for the way in which historians approach the Wars of the Roses. First, and most importantly, he challenged Plummer’s notion of ‘Bastard Feudalism’ and the characterisation of the late-medieval nobility as degenerate, ill-educated and innately violent. Rather than sweeping generalisations McFarlane offered detailed portraits of individual noblemen. This was based on research in their private archives (estate papers and, in a few cases, letters) as well as governmental records and chronicle accounts. Related to this he gave a new awareness of the homogeneity on the one hand, yet individualism on the other, of the landowning classes. As a whole, the nobility (defined as the parliamentary peerage) and the gentry formed a landowning aristocracy whose cultural values were broadly similar, based on notions of chivalry and gentility, a respect for the king and the principle of lord-

## *Introduction*

ship, and a belief in the sanctity of landownership. Within this framework, however, individual landowners enjoyed relative freedom to choose whether or not to support their lord in times of political crisis, while their individual fortunes were constrained by their ability, by illness or some other incapacity, by their economic circumstances, or, most commonly, simply by their inability to produce male offspring.

This emphasis on individual agency led McFarlane to develop the second of his basic assumptions about the mid-fifteenth century. Fundamentally, he argued, there was nothing structurally wrong with the English polity. Its structures and institutions were robust and survived virtually unscathed throughout the fifteenth century and, indeed, for most of the sixteenth too. These included not only its administrative, fiscal and judicial institutions but also, crucially, its social institutions. Thus McFarlane removed the pejorative overtones of 'Bastard Feudalism'. Rather than being a system which undermined social stability and lordship, the system of cash payments and the distribution of livery compensated for the multiplication of tenures and the weakening of traditional ties based on homage and knight service. He later drew attention to the fact that indentures were not only a means of recruiting armies and defining military service but that they also regulated service in peacetime in the lord's household, on his estates and in his legal council. The social and political system based upon reciprocal notions of good lordship that lay at the heart of English political society was not a corruption of 'pure' feudalism but a necessary adaptation to the changing circumstances of the later middle ages. The problem that lay at the heart of the Wars of the Roses, therefore, was not structural but revolved around the effectiveness of kingship and, in particular, the inadequacies of Henry VI. McFarlane thus dismissed the notion that Edward III's provisions for his offspring had fundamentally weakened the fiscal, political and military base of the crown, leaving it defenceless at the mercy of its greater subjects who were wealthier and more powerful than it. He scorned the very idea of the 'Overmighty Subject' (and thus a powerful Whiggish narrative that saw the Tudor subjection of the nobility as an essential precursor to modern forms of government). McFarlane brilliantly summed up this position in his 1964 lecture to

the British Academy: 'But in fact only an undermighty ruler had anything to fear from overmighty subjects, and if he was undermighty his personal lack of fitness was the cause, not the weakness of his office and its resources'.<sup>13</sup> In a nutshell, then, the origins of the Wars of the Roses should be sought in the personal inadequacies of Henry VI, while the renewal of the wars in 1469–71 and 1483–87 were to be found in the ill-judged decisions of Edward IV (in marrying Elizabeth Woodville) and Richard, Duke of Gloucester (in usurping the throne from his nephew, Edward V).

Finally, McFarlane revised the abject picture of the fifteenth century that had first emerged from the pens of the Tudor writers and had been dramatised by Plummer, Denton and others. Instead, while he recognised the bloody nature of some battles and the relatively high casualty rate among the nobility and their servants, McFarlane stressed that involvement in the wars and the suffering this caused was patchy, both in terms of chronology and geographically. The slide to war was not inevitable; the political nation was on the whole slow and reluctant to take up arms. Again, McFarlane's research stressed the individuality of experience and the freedom that even those at the top of the social hierarchy had to determine their own fate. Sir Henry Vernon, a retainer of the Earl of Warwick, felt able to ignore his master's summons before the Battle of Barnet in 1471, and he cited many other examples of men who refused to commit themselves unequivocally to one lord. If anything this trend intensified during the second half of the fifteenth century testifying to a growing reluctance among the landowning class to become embroiled in the struggles of those who would be king.

Despite a relatively limited output in terms of published work, McFarlane's legacy and his impact on fifteenth-century history is huge. His students at Oxford (and eventually their students and their students' students) dominated the resurgence of research and writing on the Wars of the Roses from the 1970s. His successor at Magdalen College, Oxford, Gerald Harriss, supervised an influential group of historians who have come to dominate writing on the period into the present day. The concerns of these historians were very much driven by the McFarlane agenda. Indeed, many of his

## *Introduction*

arguments about the nature of fifteenth-century society (such as the relationship between the king and his greater subjects and the location of dynamic forces within the English polity) are axiomatic in their published work. The most enduring part of McFarlane's legacy must be the now almost universal acceptance of the notion that the late-medieval English polity was a robust one that adapted itself successfully to both social and economic crises (such as the Black Death or the Great Bullion Famine of the mid-fifteenth century), internal political conflict, and the demands of foreign war. This was made possible through the nature of its established institutions (above all the Common Law courts and, from the mid-fourteenth century, parliament) and an essentially common outlook shared by the king, his nobles and the majority of the political nation. England rode out successive crises, and its essential structure as a 'mixed monarchy' remained unchanged from the beginning of the fourteenth century until the Personal Rule of Charles I began in 1629. It achieved this through a mutually supportive partnership of crown and landowners in the government of the realm and the broad acceptance of a 'continuum of wealth, status, and authority which incorporated as twin concepts both hierarchy and common good.'<sup>14</sup> The Wars of the Roses were therefore something of an anomaly caused primarily by the 'grisly reality' of the absolute failure of Henry VI to provide effective royal leadership in three key areas: first, his failure to provide leadership in war; second, his failure to rise above the affairs of his nobility and to act as the ultimate, independent arbiter in their quarrels; and, finally, his failure to respond properly, and to be seen to respond properly, to the advice of his counsellors. It was not until 1471 that Edward IV restored stability by eliminating Henry VI and other potential rivals to his throne, working properly with his nobility, and fulfilling contemporary expectations of what constituted effective kingship. Nevertheless, the long crisis of kingship that had characterised Henry VI's reign returned to haunt the polity on the accession of the young Edward V in 1483. If the wars of the 1450s and 1460s had any real significance it was to weaken the bonds of obedience that made possible, even probable, renewed conflict in the mid-1480s.



One slightly paradoxical aspect of McFarlane's thinking on the Wars was his conviction, influenced by Marxist historiography, that the actions of the political elite were driven, above all, by their material condition. Thus politicians sought not to change the system but to maximise the power and rewards they gained from it. Equally, the interest of the English aristocracy in the Hundred Years War was directly proportional to the profit they made out of it. Therefore patronage, the ability of the king to reward the nobility and they in turn to return their gentry servants and so on, was the 'essential lubricant of government' and the thing that kept the polity functioning. When this system failed, when the crown or the nobility was too poor or patronage began to be dispensed according to favouritism and partiality, then political crisis ensued. Equally, the outbreak and course of the Wars were directly related to wider economic conditions. The middle decades of the fifteenth century saw an acute economic crisis in Europe. This was manifested in a serious shortage in the amount of available bullion affecting both royal revenue and private incomes, and intensifying the struggle for patronage. This reading of the fifteenth century, of course, presupposes that men were driven, consciously or unconsciously, by essentially selfish ends and as such owes as much to sixteenth-century writers, like Vergil, as it does to McFarlane. Nevertheless, it remains an influential argument. The most recent scholarly synthesis of the Wars ties the chronology of conflict directly into the ebbs and flows of the European economy, arguing that the slow return to stability after 1487 owed much to the 'feel-good factor' that accompanied economic recovery.<sup>15</sup>

## AFTER MCFARLANE

So where do we stand now in our understanding of the Wars of the Roses and the broader panorama of fifteenth-century English history? Most current thinking continues to take place within what we might term a 'McFarlanite Paradigm', but it differs in one fundamental way: recent scholarship has stressed the importance of political ideas, principles and the 'constitution'. In recent years, two related intellectual movements, with profound consequences for the writing of history

in general, have made their impact felt on studies of the Wars of the Roses. The first of these is a move away from the study of politics towards the study of political culture. This, at first, might seem a change in semantics and little else, but it is an immensely important distinction. The difference between politics and political culture has been defined as 'the difference between political action and the codes of conduct, formal and informal, governing those actions. A history of the former treats the players of the game, a history of the latter, what the players assume the nature and limits of their game to be. If the reconstruction of lost political 'realities' comprehends the recovery of political cultures, the challenge for the historian lies in discovering the relevant cultural context'.<sup>16</sup> It is precisely this, the identification of the proper context for explaining what people did during the Wars of the Roses, that has driven the best research in the past twenty years or so.

The second intellectual shift that has had an impact on the historiography of the Wars of the Roses is the so-called 'linguistic turn'. This has its roots in the philosophy of language but, as far as the historian is concerned, can usefully be summarised as a notion that language does not merely reflect social reality, but is in itself constitutive of it. Thus historical documents are texts, intrinsically no different to any other text (say a poem, a chronicle or a romance) and written in language that both represented and shaped the cultural practices of that age. Language and the precise meaning of words and concepts at particular times (and the ways in which those meanings shift, are contested and are rewritten) have emerged as the dominant concern of historians and other scholars working on the fifteenth century.

Initially at least this interest in language and concepts was not couched in overtly theoretical terms. Maurice Keen, Michael K. Jones and Simon Walker examined the importance of chivalry as an ordering concept that determined political allegiances and actions. Christine Carpenter and Ted Powell considered the 'unspoken assumptions' that conditioned landowners and their involvement with and attitude towards the Common Law, while John Watts explored the expectations of kingship and the notions of hierarchy and authority that were