

# REVIEWS



**Richard III: Brother, Protector, King**  
By Chris Skidmore  
Weidenfeld & Nicolson

Lord Lexden is impressed by Chris Skidmore's finely written examination of history's most famous murder suspect

**E**dwards Four, Five, Dick the Bad/Harrys Twain and Ned the Lad'. So runs part of the well-known rhyme through which the kings and queens of England are widely remembered. The lines cover the last medieval kings belonging to the House of York and the first rulers of the House of Tudor.

Just over 10 years ago, Chris Skidmore published a life of Ned the Lad, Edward VI, king in 1547 at the age of nine and dead at 15. It was during the brief reign of this brilliant, precocious youth that England became a distinctively Protestant country, completing the Reformation that his father Henry VIII had begun and doing so with such thoroughness that Ned's Catholic half-sister, Mary, was unable to reverse it. The Church of England was his lasting legacy, its glorious liturgy shaped by Cranmer during his reign. Skidmore wrote up the results of his thorough researches with skill and verve to produce a wonderfully vivid portrait of the boy king, entitled *Edward VI: The Lost King of England*.

Now a Tory MP in his thirties and recently a junior minister at the Cabinet Office (before being posted to Conservative headquarters in Mrs May's ill-received January reshuffle) he has devoted his fourth book to Ned's partner in the rhyming couplet, Dick the Bad, King Richard III, perhaps England's most notorious monarch. Seizing the throne in 1483 from another boy king, he reigned for just 788 days before being hacked to death at the age of 32 at Bosworth (a scene immortalised by Shakespeare),

his broken bones emerging from a Leicester car park over 520 years later.

No monarch in British history excites greater curiosity. There has always been intense interest in finding out the truth about his turbulent, bloody reign and about two young deaths in particular.

Ned and Dick had little in common. The former was a scholar and master of languages who loved theological disputes; it is hard to envisage him, had he survived to manhood, with sword and buckler. Richard III was a warrior-king, mighty in battle, his sword never sleeping in his hand. His was an age of incessant blood-letting as the Wars of the Roses made and unmade monarchs amidst piles of corpses.

Ruthlessness was the essential quality that successful men required and Richard possessed it in abundance. His feats of arms, pitilessly conducted, brought him his own statelet, a palatinate covering the north of England, under his elder brother, Edward IV. He governed from York, where he was held in high esteem, constantly raiding Scotland in the hope of adding it to his conquests.

His brother's sudden death (from natural causes) at the age of 41 brought

him to London as Protector of the young Edward V. No one was particularly surprised when he took the crown himself. Scrupulous respect for hereditary niceties was rarely a feature of the age, and the losers could not expect to keep their lives.

In a quieter era, he might well have developed a serious love of culture. Skidmore notes the happy hours he spent

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listening to discussions of metaphysics at Oxford. He spoke eloquently in Latin to an emissary from the Holy Roman Emperor. The latter recorded that at Richard's court “I heard the most delightful music that I heard in all my life”. He was a stylish dresser: “The king went to dinner and wore a collar of gold with many pearls the size of peas, and diamonds.”

There was never the slightest chance that Richard would secure a lasting peace. As soon as one plot against him had been bloodily put down, another sprang up.



He had in Henry Tudor, the first of the 'Harrys twain', an implacable foe who pursued him relentlessly and finally prevailed. In death he was spared no indignity “nought being left about him so much as would cover his privy member”, as one contemporary writer noted.

Did he or didn't he? The fate of the princes in the Tower—Edward V and his brother—exerts a morbid fascination that will never end. It was an era drenched in blood, and yet the murder of children was regarded with horror. Skidmore explains that “the very thought that Richard would have been prepared



to kill his own nephews would have been an anathema in medieval society: children were to be honoured, as innocents themselves, as representatives of Holy Innocents, the children slaughtered by Herod three days after the birth of Christ.”

It is never going to be possible to deliver a final verdict for or against Richard. He is destined to remain for ever history's most famous murder suspect. The surviving evidence, meticulously sifted by Skidmore, does not prove either the prosecution's case, or that for the defence, conclusively. An opinion poll in 1483, however, would have brought the suspect little comfort. “What cannot be doubted,” Skidmore writes, “is the overwhelming degree to which it was believed that Edward V and his brother were now dead, and that the responsibility for this lay with their uncle, their Protector, the nation's unexpected king.”

Chris Skidmore now finds himself in Mrs May's team rather than in the university history post to which his talents might equally well have taken him. This first-rate book of some 400 pages will be read with great profit and pleasure by fellow historians – and by all those who simply enjoy learning about dramatic episodes in the past from a fine writer. 🏰



**Alistair Lexden** is a Conservative peer and historian



**The Bramall Papers: Reflections in War and Peace**  
By Lord Bramall  
Pen & Sword Books Limited

Lord Ramsbotham finds Lord Bramall's collection of his papers an accessible, refreshing and pertinent read

**I**n his foreword to this 'wide ranging collection of the lectures, speeches, letters and other public utterances' of Field Marshal Lord Bramall – one of the most distinguished Army officers, and leading military thinkers, of modern times – Sir Anthony Seldon writes that “very few military figures have ever painted their lives on such a broad canvas”. Of immediate interest to readers of *The House* is that, for 26 years, until he retired in 2013, he was an active member of the House of Lords, making his maiden and valedictory speeches on the same subject – nuclear weapons – both of which are included in the collection.

The papers are divided into a number of books, each covering a particular theme, which makes it very easy to dip into. Books 1 and 3 may be felt to be of more interest to military than other readers, because they contain reflections on the Second World War, and a number of the campaigns since then. But that would be to undersell much of their content, which will interest many readers. Book 1, entitled *Total War and Man's Excessive Inhumanity to Man*, may spring from his personal experiences as a young officer, who landed with his regiment in Normandy on 7 June 1944, and fought with it during its advance through France, Belgium, Holland and North West Germany, during which time he was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry. But it includes reflections on the Holocaust and on Higher Command in war, on which subject he has always had firm views.

Book 3, the *Changing Face of Conflict*, contains his views on Limited and Revolutionary War, Insurgency, Terrorism and Peacekeeping, including the Falklands War (during which he was Chief of the General Staff), the Balkans, the Gulf Wars, Afghanistan, and some very pertinent comments on Northern Ireland.



Books 4 and 6 will be read with particular advantage by anyone who claims to be concerned about Britain's place in the world, or to aspire to any position of authority. Part of Book 4 is devoted to strategy including a discussion that he led on the military dimensions of foreign policy at All Souls' College Oxford. Depressingly few people seem to understand what the word strategy means, minor parts of a whole being described as a strategy, rather than it being recognised as an overarching thing, uniting a number of contributing parts into one purpose.

Leadership, which, all too often these days is superseded by the cult of managerialism – the belief that an order, or instruction, given on paper, in the name of the head of an organisation, is bound to be obeyed, without oversight – is covered in Book 6. If, as a fellow Greenjacket, I pick out *Leadership the Greenjacket Way*, written when he was commanding his battalion and still in use today, as being particularly valuable, it is because it contains so much practical advice for anyone leading in business, public service or a government department.

What is so refreshing about the book is that, far from being the traditional memoirs of an old soldier, it contains much wise advice, based on Field Marshal Bramall's innate ability to identify lessons from yesterday that apply to tomorrow. Not only military readers will learn much from his papers on the operational scenario for the twenty first century, and tactics in a modern operational scenario. Few people have had such wide experience. He commanded at every level from platoon to Army, as well as filling several key staff positions. In addition to his active participation in the House of Lords, he was Lord Lieutenant of London, and President of the MCC. . What a life – and what valuable and interesting papers. 🏰



**General the Lord Ramsbotham** is a Crossbench peer