THE QUESTIONABLE LEGEND OF HENRY WYATT

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From time to time the exploits of Sir Henry Wyatt (*c*.1460–1537) crop up in books, both fiction and non-fiction, for he was a fascinating character whose career encompassed espionage as well as military action and high office under the Tudors. Most writers, however, concern themselves mainly with grisly tales of imprisonment and torture in the cause of Henry VII, which grew to become Wyatt family legend. In recent years a flurry of interest was created by Hilary Mantel's characterization of Wyatt in her novel *Wolf Hall*, and a biography by Nicola Schulman of his son, the poet Sir Thomas Wyatt, has again rehearsed the same old legends. The true facts of Henry Wyatt's capture and incarceration may never be known, having been buried under an accretion of myths over the years, but this article addresses some versions of the story that we can certainly clarify, and some we can probably debunk.* Valuable background for all this can be found in Agnes Conway's *Henry VII's Relations with Scotland and Ireland, 1485–1498*.[1]

The different versions of Henry's story are too numerous to catalogue in all their glorious variety, but the most popular tales may be summarized thus:

1. He was imprisoned and tortured in the Tower of London for two years during the reign of Richard III, on account of his support for Henry Tudor. A particularly good story claims the two Henrys attended Eton College together! Languishing in his cell, he was saved from starvation by the generosity of a cat who brought him pigeons to eat.
2. His torture is usually described as one or more of the following: being racked; having horse-barnacles applied to his mouth; and being force-fed mustard and vinegar. Sometimes heated knives are mentioned. The barnacles were a hinged and toothed metal pinching instrument which seem to have been the equivalent of the modern twitch, a device used by farriers to curb a restive horse by gripping and squeezing its sensitive upper lip area.
3. He was supposedly interrogated by none other than Richard III, who personally oversaw his torture – a point which is of particular interest to this writer.

Some of these gaudy tales can actually be found in respectable books, even in a recent publication from The Royal Armouries.[2] There is no surviving account by Henry Wyatt himself, and – perhaps I should emphasize this – *there are only two versions that are authentically derived from the Wyatt family's own traditions, and they occur in the family's letters and papers*. This has been verified by reference to their descendants, the Earl and Countess of Romney, who confirmed that the entire collection of Wyatt family manuscripts known to them is held in the British Library. The MSS in which Henry's story occurs comprise a substantial assembly of miscellaneous documents and although several extracts have been separately published, there exists no complete transcription or publication of the collection as a whole.[3] Therefore, in relation to the Henry Wyatt legend, this article now publishes the most extensive transcription of the relevant sections that can be found anywhere today.

The most useful document, thanks to its impeccable provenance, is actually not found in the Wyatt family papers. This is a letter written in April 1538[4] by Henry Wyatt's son, Thomas the Elder, addressed to his own son Thomas the Younger who had recently married. It contains advice to the young bridegroom, in support of which the laudable example of the boy's grandfather, Henry, is extolled as a God-fearing man who earned the grace of God which 'preseruid him in prison from the handes of the tirant that could find in his hart to see him rakkid, from two yeres and more prisonment in Scotland in Irons and Stoks, from the danger of sodeyn changes and commotions diuers, till that ... he went to him that louid him …' etc.

The words here are ambiguous, and having been unable to inspect the letter itself, I cannot be certain whether this is the punctuation that appears in the original. That given here is taken from the two copies in later hands which are lodged in the British Library's collections,[5] although some published versions add an extra comma.[6] What the letter makes perfectly clear, as supported by other evidence, is that Henry's lengthy incarceration was not in the Tower of London but in Scotland. No suggestion of the Tower of London occurs in any Wyatt tradition until as late as 1702, and enquiries of the present Tower authorities have revealed no documentary record that he was ever there.[7] One would have expected to find some mention of a man who became such a celebrated Tudor figure, a leading courtier of Henry VII and Henry VIII, and one who was immortalized in old age by Hans Holbein the younger.

Less clear is the letter's opening phrase about preservation 'from the hands of the tyrant that could find in his heart to see him racked', which can be read in more than one way. Was he saved by God from being subjected to the rack at the hands of this unnamed tyrant, whose heart was sufficiently hard to have contemplated applying such extreme measures? Or was he racked and God permitted him to survive the ordeal? If the latter – which is what seems generally assumed – several questions must be answered. Most importantly, why is it that, among all the family records of torture by barnacles, vinegar, mustard, etc., no document but this letter ever mentions the rack, that most feared and potentially lethal instrument?

Additionally, how many 15th-century places of incarceration were actually equipped with a rack? The device was unknown in these islands until the 1440s when it was introduced to the Tower of London, and indeed torture was illegal under common law in England unless performed by royal prerogative. We know of several persons who were imprisoned under Richard III, in the Tower and elsewhere, but I have yet to find any confirmed record of torture sanctioned by him.

While making no particular claims of expertise in Tudor English, I have always found the *OED on Historical Principles* enlightening on archaic usage. Looking under the verb 'rack', one can find instances in the 1570s–80s where it referred not only to literal racking (a practice freely used under the Tudors), but had also passed into general use as a term for being otherwise afflicted by physical pain or even mental stress. We still speak of being 'racked' in this way. Might Thomas have been using the word in its metaphorical sense?

With reference to the 'tyrant' – and the assumption that it refers to Richard III – even more questions are raised by the fact that this king never set foot in Scotland during his reign. We know Wyatt was ransomed and released from his Scottish prison only upon Henry VII's accession in the autumn of 1485 (his earliest recorded grant of office was on 11 October);[8] so if he had been held there 'two years and more', when and where could he have fallen into the hands of Richard III? Can it have happened prior to his capture in Scotland in 1483?

Let us imagine that Wyatt was apprehended by the crown on a secret mission *before* that which took him to Scotland. Richard III assumed the throne on 26 June 1483, at which time Henry Tudor was in self-imposed exile in the custody of Duke Francis II of Brittany. Nothing is known of Wyatt's early career – he was at this time in his early twenties, and came from an undistinguished Yorkshire background – but something must have drawn him into Tudor's service. Perhaps he fell in with the faction that supported Edward V, the boy-king who was adjudged to be illegitimate and deposed, in place of whom Richard, as Protector, was petitioned to take the throne.

In the month of July, soon after his coronation, Richard began moving around the country on progress. Meanwhile Edward's family were doing their best to whip up support

for his restoration. A letter has survived from Richard III to his chancellor, written from Oxfordshire on 29 July, ordering a case to be tried in London which seems likely to have been an attempt to abduct Edward V and his brother from their royal lodgings in the Tower of London.[9] The perpetrators, who were executed, were said to have corresponded with the Tudor camp in Brittany – the first whiff of Henry Tudor's opposition to Richard III. It is possible, therefore, that Wyatt might have been involved in this or something similar, perhaps bearing messages, but was he important enough to be racked? And if so, why did they set him free to carry out more intrigues? At any rate it is on record that Richard III was nowhere near at the time.

Henry Wyatt was fond of a good story, and his dashing exploits must have provided plenty of them. If he did have a brush with the authorities in the summer of 1483, my guess is he was apprehended on suspicion and warned by Richard III's men, to frighten him off, that they would not hesitate to rack him if they thought he was fomenting rebellion. A lucky escape from the hands of the tyrant – and one that perhaps grew in the retelling – was a better tale than years spent rotting in a Scottish dungeon.

There seems no reason not to believe, however, that Henry was tortured with the barnacles, and the Wyatts made much of it in their family records and iconography. Possibly the instrument was employed to immobilize the poor man's mouth while noxious substances were forced down his throat.

Moving on to the Wyatt papers, of which the relevant parts were compiled in 1727-31, we already find overlays of assumption and embellishment acquired through years of retelling. Our main source for Henry's adventures lies in an individual document: 'Passages taken out of a Manuscript wrote by Thomas Scott of Egreston in Godmersham Esquire concerning the family of Wyatt of Alington'. These 'Passages' were copied by Richard Wyatt in 1731, as he notes in his own hand.[10]

Richard Wyatt was a great-great-great-great-grandson of the famous Henry, so he was in no position to judge whether the tales he was copying were true. The document's author, Thomas Scott, was Henry's great-great-grandson, and although nothing is known of its provenance, we may guess at its date of writing from an anecdote it contains which derives from a publication of 1655.[11] It therefore appears that a gap of some 170 years has elapsed by the time it is committed to paper. Within the story of the cat and pigeons is interjected the comment 'it was his own relation unto them from whom I had it', and it has been surmised, probably from this and from two later references to 'my grandfather' within the narration (see below), that the stories were recounted to Thomas Scott by his grandmother, Mrs George Wyatt. But even this is open to question: Thomas's grandmother should have referred to Henry as her (or her husband's) great-grandfather, not grandfather. It may seem a small point, but if people of that time were not in the habit of stipulating the requisite number of 'greats', it would be rash to assign any particular identity to the narrator. Certainly Henry was dead by the time George, and probably his wife, were born.

In the intervening 170 years the Wyatts had experienced the best and worst of fortunes. Henry himself, from what appears to have been a modest family in a Yorkshire village, had risen high and grown rich in the service of Henry VII, being a councillor and entrusted with many commissions including military work, diplomacy, and acting as the king's agent/spy throughout his reign, mainly in Scotland (he was also active in Ireland). Moving his home from Yorkshire to Kent, Wyatt purchased Allington Castle in 1492, where among his later visitors were Henry VII, Cardinal Wolsey and Henry VIII.

Under Henry VIII he enjoyed even higher office, was created Knight of the Bath at the coronation and knight-banneret at the Battle of the Spurs. In 1503 his son Thomas was

born, and it was this Thomas, the poet, usually identified as Thomas the Elder, who first brought the king's displeasure upon the family. Allington was a mere twenty miles from the home of the Boleyn family, and in 1536, at the time of Anne Boleyn's downfall, Thomas was thrown into the Tower of London prior to being called as a witness in the case against her. This (presumed) association with the luckless Anne continues to fire the pens of writers, among them Hilary Mantel.

Not only did Thomas endure another brief sojourn in the Tower in 1561, but his son, Thomas the Younger, in his turn landed there with more serious consequences, having rashly followed in his grandfather's footsteps by rebelling against his sovereign.[12] He was executed in 1554, and his attainder plunged the family into disgrace and poverty. This lasted until 1570 when they were restored in blood by Act of Parliament. His son George, obsessed with rebuilding the family's status, wrote copiously and was almost certainly responsible for commissioning several famous portraits of the Wyatts.

By now it will be clear that by the mid 17th century, when Thomas Scott set down the tales of his forebears, a tone of vindication and rehabilitation prevailed. Here are the relevant extracts (with occasional slight modernization of punctuation and spelling).

The account starts by relating Henry's virtues and Yorkshire ancestors, then continues: 'Of this Yorkshire house Sir Henry Wyatt was a younger brother, and in his young years did put himself into the service of Henry the Earl of Richmond, afterwards King Henry the 7th. Never any servant in this world was more faithful and constant to his master, or did or suffered more for him. The wit of Morton the Archbishop and others did that King, and the whole Kingdom, and the whole Island, and the whole Christian and Western World, it now appears, and it will appear, I doubt not, the whole World of Man inestimable service. But neither was Sir Henry Wyatt's council, nor his pains, adventures, courage and sufferance equalled by any.

'He was imprisoned often, once in a cold and narrow Tower, where he had neither bed to lye on, nor cloathes sufficient to warm him, nor meat for his mouth. He had starved there, had not God, who sent a crow to feed his prophet, sent this and his Country's martyr a cat both to feed and warm him. It was his own relation unto them from whom I had it. A cat came one day down into the dungeon unto him, and as it were offered herself unto him. He was glad of her, laid her in his bosom to warm him, and by making much of her won her love. After this she would come every day unto him divers times and, when she could get one, bring him a pigeon. He complained to his keeper of his cold and short fare. The answer was he durst not better it. But, said Sir Henry, if I can provide any, will you promise to dress it for me? I may well enough said he, you are safe for that matter; and being urged again, promised him and kept his promise, dressed for him from time to time such pigeons as his accator the cat provided for him. Sir Henry Wyatt in his prosperity for this would ever make much of cats, as other men will of their spaniels or hounds; and perhaps you shall not find his picture anywhere but, like Sir Christopher Hatton with his dog, with a cat beside him.'

There ensues a digression into the fidelity and service we receive from our animal friends, followed by examples of Henry's prowess as a raconteur with more family anecdotes, one of which concerns a heart-stopping encounter with a lion which is said to have delighted Henry VIII. Further interpolated matter refers to the family's heraldry, in which barnacles were introduced to replace the previous three boars' heads, then the manuscript continues with Henry's experiences as a prisoner. 'Besides his imprisonments he was divers times put into divers kinds of tortures, among others with an instrument made like the smith's barnacles. I know not what wrong they did unto him, that they might powre vinegar and mustard into his nostrils and head. In witness of this torment of Sir Henry Wyat in certain

carpets of his which I have seen caused his arms there the image of the barnacles to be wrought, and ever afterwards … the true arms of the Wyats was laid aside and the three barnacles chosen.

'One time after his torment, the Tyrant himself examined him, and joining flattery to furie, told him, saying Wyat why are thou such a foole? Thou servest for moonshine in the water. Thy master is a beggarly fugitive. Forsake him and become mine who can reward thee and, I swear unto thee, will. My grandfather's [*sic*] answer was, Sir, if I had first chosen you for my master, thus faithful would I have been to you if you should have needed it; but the earl, poor and unhappy though he be, is my master, and no discouragement or allurement shall ever drive or draw me from him, by God's grace. At this the Tyrant stood amazed, and turning to the Lords that stood about him, brake out into these words. Oh, how much more happy is that runaway Rogue in his extreme calamity than I in my greatest seeming prosperity. He hath a friend whom he may trust in his misery. I in this appearing happiness am unhappy only through the want of this happiness. Is there any one of you all, who will thus stick unto me, that is not already ready to leave me?

'The Earl of Richmond anon after he was crowned king entertained my grandfather [*sic*] then coming out of imprisonment and affliction in Scotland, first with most gracious words unto himself, and then with this speech unto the Lords. Both I and you must bid this gentleman heartily welcome, had not he above human strength or example also shewed himself our constant friend, neither had I enjoyed now the crown nor you that peace and prosperity and honour which you now possess.'

A list of Wyatt's outstanding qualities follows, and more anecdotes, all redounding to the credit of Henry and his family. Mistakenly, the writer assumes that Henry VII made him a knight-banneret (*recte* Henry VIII), 'which is a higher title honour,' he sniffs, 'than that of our new baronets'.[13]

A further interesting reference to Sir Henry occurs later in the papers. 'The most I can find relating to him,' writes Richard Wyatt, 'is on the monument in Boxley Church set up by my father.' So we now know who was responsible for that misleading stone tablet, dated 1702, which contains the earliest known statement to the effect that Henry Wyatt was imprisoned in the Tower of London, something never suggested in the Wyatt papers.[14] Evidently Richard's father, Edwin Wyatt, was less punctilious than his son in accurately preserving the family's early history. Of the story of the cat, Richard Wyatt says he can find 'no remains but his [Henry's] picture and another of a cat, seemingly in the same hand-painting, with a pigeon in her claws delivering it at the grates of the dungeon with certain words relating the story. The painting seems old, though we have no account by whose hand done'.

The pictures to which Richard Wyatt refers are probably those which eventually came into the possession of the Earls of Romney, Wyatt's descendants.[15] The picture of Henry (which is a copy of the Holbein portrait presently in the Louvre) was probably one of those family portraits estimated to have been commissioned by George Wyatt around 1600-1603.[16] The picture of the cat and pigeon was very likely painted about the same time. There is in existence, however, a third painting which Richard Wyatt does not mention and almost certainly never saw, although it has become rather well known. A combination of the two earlier pictures, it shows Henry in affluent old age, his elder-statesman figure as depicted by Holbein sitting incongruously against a background of dungeon and barred window while the caterer cat delivers his next meal. Underneath are the words relating the story, also reproduced in this third picture, which consist of two couplets, one in Latin and one in English.[17] The reason Richard Wyatt would not have seen this picture is because in the

opinion of Sir Roy Strong it was not executed until the eighteenth century – and probably late in that century.[18]

The role of the cat need not long detain us: it would be nice to think it was true. A curious parallel exists with another cat bringing comfort to another prisoner, Henry Wriothesley, Earl of Southampton. In a portrait commissioned on his release in 1603 she is depicted with him in the Tower of London. It is tempting to think the George Wyatt painting may have been influenced by this, as they are roughly contemporaneous – but on the other hand, how safe was it to emulate Wriothesley, only recently emerging from prison at the start of a new and unpredictable reign?

Coincidence or not, it was then only a short step to assume that Henry Wyatt's 'cold and narrow tower' was actually the Tower of London. Add the fact that Wyatt's son and grandson were imprisoned there – and that Wyatt himself committed treason by supporting a rebel against his king – then the association with England's most dread place of incarceration for traitors is complete. It had by now, of course, acquired its thoroughly horrid reputation under the Tudors.

The internet, as usual these days, has played a major part in disseminating the full gamut of Wyatt myths, in which connection it is disappointing to have to blame the *Dictionary of National Biography* whose 19th-century edition, currently available online, has him imprisoned in the Tower of London for two years by Richard III and 'racked in Richard's presence'.[19]

This much-quoted entry has been modified in the *Oxford DNB* of 2004, although too late to redress its widespread repetition which has reached, for example, the Wikipedia page for Henry Wyatt. This 2004 edition now interpolates a new element, stating that in 1483 'he probably participated in Buckingham's unsuccessful revolt against Richard III'. There is no corroboration for this. One can only regret that the writer failed to consult Agnes Conway, who has shed considerable light on Wyatt's activities on behalf of Henry VII in Scotland, and reveals a fascinating tale of espionage and intrigue which is well worth reading. She cites plenty of evidence relating to Wyatt's activities as Henry's agent, both before and after Bosworth. 'In later years,' she adds, 'Wyatt, as a trusted royal official, frequented the Border in times of danger and kept Henry VII informed of what was going on.'

As for his incarceration, 'It is possible,' she writes, 'that Wyatt, engaged on the Earl of Richmond's business, had fallen into the hands of some Scottish baron with Yorkist sympathies, only to be released when Henry VII was securely on the throne, after a period of cruel imprisonment, and on the promise of a huge ransom.' It is certainly true that a large ransom was paid: 'Thirty years later Henry VIII renewed his father's grant of £20 a year towards Wyatt's ransom from the cruel hands of the Scots, because he was convinced that he had not yet been able to pay off the sum.'[20]

The above makes perfect sense. But the dramatic scene with Richard III must, I am sure, be apocryphal. Given Richard's evil reputation, it is perhaps unsurprising that Henry Wyatt should have built a confrontation with 'the tyrant' into his exploits. Such a meeting was hardly likely in 1483, as we have seen, nor thereafter as Richard was never in Scotland. There is one last possibility – was Wyatt brought purposely from Scotland into his presence? The context, with Richard lamenting the infidelity of his supporters, belongs to the moralistic tradition, cultivated for dramatic effect by Shakespeare, that his dastardly deeds left him bereft, at the last, of friends and followers. But at the end of Richard's reign, a derelict Wyatt after two years in a Scottish dungeon would scarcely have possessed intelligence meriting examination by a king, let alone torture on the rack.

Still, who can blame Henry Wyatt, after enduring all those travails, for adding embroidery to the tale – simultaneously boosting his own heroic role, and favourably contrasting the loyalty of Tudor's followers with the perfidy of Richard's?

FOOTNOTES

*Considerable appreciation must be expressed to Geoffrey Wheeler for supplying much of the material that made this article possible.

1. Cambridge, 1932.
2. B A Harrison, *The Tower of London prisoner book: a complete chronology of the persons known to be detained at their majesties' pleasure, 1100-1941* (Leeds, 2004).
3. The longest extracts previously published, although abridged and redacted, were printed by John Bruce in *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Review*, June and September 1850.
4. The year is given as 1537 in some sources, but this seems unlikely since Thomas's letter contains two references to the death of his father, Henry, who died in November 1537.
5. BL Add 32379 and BL Egerton 2711.
6. Kenneth Muir, *Life and Letters of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, (Liverpool, 1963) pp. 38-41 – this publication adds a comma after the word 'Scotland' (acknowledgements to Dr Jason Powell, Saint Joseph's University, Philadelphia, for locating this letter and other material).
7. *Ex informatio* Dr S Dixon-Smith, Curator (Collections), Tower of London & Banqueting House, and B Clifford, Keeper of Collections (South) & Tower History.
8. CPR HVII vol 1, 1485-94, p. 74 (thanks to Marie Barnfield for this reference).
9. Annette Carson, *Richard III: The Maligned King* (Stroud, 2008, 2009- 2011), pp. 130-1, (2013) pp.153-4.
10. BL Add MSS 62135-62138. Relevant sections are in 62135 (2 vols), vol 2, ff. 359-369 and 456.
11. David Loades, ed., *The Papers of George Wyatt, Esquire* (London, 1968), p. 4.
12. Queen Mary Tudor and her Spanish marriage.
13. A baronetcy (with origins dating back to the 14th century) is the only hereditary honour which is not a peerage. It ranks above all knighthoods except for the Garter and the Thistle. However, this comment undoubtedly refers to the revival of the Order of Baronets in 1611 which James I erected primarily as a money-raising exercise.
14. The tablet, with the following inscription, appears on the north wall of the choir of Boxley church:

    To the Memory of Sr HENRY WIAT of ALINGTON CASTLE

    Knight Banneret descended of that Ancient family who was imprisoned and tortured in the TOWER in the reign of KING RICHARD the third kept in the Dungeon where fed and preserved by a Cat. He married ANN daughter of THOMAS SKINNER of SURREY Esqe was of the Privy Council to KING HENRY the Seventh and KING HENRY the Eighth and left one Son Sr THOMAS WIAT of ALINGTON CASTLE who was Esquire of the body to KING HENRY the Eighth and married ELIZABETH Daughter of THOMAS BROOKE Lord COBHAM and well known for Learning and Embasys in the reign of that KING

    Sr THOMAS WIAT of ALINGTON CASTLE his only Son married JANE younger Daughter of Sr WILLIAM HAWT of this COUNTY and was beheaded in the reign of QUEEN MARY Leaving GEORGE WIAT his only Son that Lived to Age who married JANE Daughter of Sr THOMAS FINCH of EASTWELL and KATHERINE his wife Restored in blood by act of Parliament of the 13th of QUEEN ELIZABETH
15. Sir Sidney Lee, ed., *Dictionary of National Biography* (1885-1900), vol. 63, *s.v.* Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder (1973 reprint p. 1098).
16. Sir Roy Strong, 'In search of Holbein's Thomas Wyatt the Younger', *Apollo* (March, 2006), p. 54.
17. *Hunc macrum, rigidum, maestum, fame, frigore, cura / Pavi, fovi, acui, carne, calorie, ioco*
    'This knight with hunger, cold and care, neere starv'd, parchid, pytid /
    Jollie Beast did feede, heale, cheere, with dyett, warmth and playe'.
18. Personal correspondence with Sir Roy Strong, 20 July 2011.
19. *DNB* (1885-1900, see note 15) and *ODNB* (2004), *s.v.* Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder.
20. Letters & Papers, Henry VIII, vol 2, 1515-18 (1864) pp. 227-388 (again thanks to Marie Barnfield).

17.2.2012.