THE KING'S HALF OF THE WILTON DIPTYCH

Photo, National Gallery

THE WILTON DIPTYCH RECONSIDERED

By JOAN EVANS

Few medieval pictures are better known or better loved than the Wilton Diptych; none has received more diverse interpretation. On the face of it the iconography is simple enough (Plate I): the young Richard II kneels before the Virgin and Child; the King is accompanied by three patron saints, Edmund the King with his arrow, Edward the Confessor with his ring, and John the Baptist holding his lamb. Eleven angels, wearing crowns of white roses, are grouped round the Virgin; they wear collars formed of broom pods and have the badge of a hart, lodged, gorged with a crown and chained, embroidered on their blue dresses. One of them holds a tall staff from which flies the banner of St. George, argent a cross gules. The Holy Child, on whose halo the crown of thorns[1] is incised, holds out his hands as if to take the banner and give it to Richard, whose hands are open ready to receive it. The King wears a collar of broom pods and an ouch shaped like the hart badge of the angels; his dress is brocaded with medallions of the hart lodged within a collar of broom pods. The back of the diptych is painted in a coarser style with the arms of Edward the Confessor impaling those of France and England quarterly, surmounted by a mantled helm with the royal lion, and with the hart badge against a grassy field.

The diptych's first interpreter, Sir George Scharf,[2] thought it connected with the crusade of 1382 proclaimed by Urban VI at Rome against Clement VII at Avignon, which Henry Despencer, Bishop of Norwich, was chosen to lead. His hypothesis held the field for a long time, until in 1927 Professor Borenius and Professor Tristram[3] suggested that it had been an offering made to Our Lady of Pewe at Westminster before riding out to face the rebels under Wat Tyler in 1381.

Professor W. G. Constable, writing two years later,[4] tended to favour a French origin in the atelier of Beauneveu. His article provoked a reply from Lord Conway[5] saying that the late Mr. Everard Greene had considered it to be an offering made to Our Lady of Pewe's altar at the time of Richard's coronation. Lord Conway expanded this view in a further article;[6] Edmund and Edward, he thought, pointed to the boy King as their successor; St. John the Baptist was there because Richard succeeded to the throne on his vigil and took him as his patron. Richard was in his eleventh year at the time, hence the number of the angels round the Virgin.

Then, in 1931, a new interpretation was propounded by the late Miss Maud Clarke[7] which has since held the field almost unchallenged. In her view the diptych

[1] M. Davies, *The Wilton Diptych*, p. 2, says that the nails of the Cross are also represented; I do not recognize them.

[2] *Observations on the Westminster Abbey Portrait and other representations of King Richard II* (1867).

[3] *English Mediaeval Painting* (1927), p. 27. Professor Borenius had already compared the Diptych with a manuscript illumination of the Duke of Berry, with his patron saint, kneeling before the Virgin and Child. *English Primitives*, British Academy Hertz Lecture, 1924, p. 11. (See Michel, *Histoire de l'Art*, III, pt. 1, p. 156.)

[4] The Date and Nationality of the Wilton Diptych in *Burl. Mag.*, lv (1929), p. 42. He compares it with an illustration in B.M. MS. Royal 2 A XVIII, which is not earlier than 1401.

[5] *Times*, June 26, 1929.

[6] The Wilton Diptych, in *Burl. Mag.*, lv (1929), p. 209.

[7] *Burlington Magazine*, June 1931; reprinted in M. V. Clarke, *Fourteenth Century Studies* (Oxford, 1937), p. 272.

was to be dated, on heraldic grounds, to the year 1395 or immediately after. The chief points of her argument are these. First, that the impaling of the shields of England and Edward the Confessor, as they appear on the back of the diptych, was made, according to the author of the *Annales Ricardi Secundi*, in 1397 or 1398; second, that the collars of broom pods worn by Richard and the angels attending the Virgin represent the collar of *l'Ordre de la Cosse de Geneste* presented to Richard by Charles VI in 1395 or 1396 as a wedding gift. Third, that the picture is in relation with 'Un Epistre au Roy Richard'[8] by 'un vieil solitaire des Celestins de Paris', a plea for crusade written by Philippe de Maizières and possibly given to Richard by his disciple Robert the Hermit, who acted as go-between for Richard and Charles of France between 1392 and 1396. The banner held by the angel in the picture is explained as the crusading banner of Maizières' Order of the Cross.

Miss Clarke freely admitted that the chief objection to her thesis lay in the youthful appearance of King Richard in the painting; he is represented as a beardless boy, whereas in 1396 he was twenty-nine. His bronze effigy, made in 1395, shows him with a mature countenance and a forked beard; even the Westminster portrait, which may date from 1385,[9] shows him appreciably older than he appears in the diptych.

The next contribution to the subject was by Mr. W. W. Shaw,[10] who attributed the diptych on stylistic grounds to the illuminator of certain manuscripts, including the Occleve with the well known portrait of Chaucer.[11]

More recently Professor Galbraith[12] has suggested that the diptych is a monument of the cult of Richard II that arose after his death in 1399: it is, he considers, a royalist memento, 'an icon to which the youthful innocence of the boy Richard was more appropriate than the mature features depicted in the "cunning-faced copper effigy".'

Finally, Professor Thomas Bodkin has admirably summarized the problem of the date of the picture and, on the whole, favours Miss Clarke's hypothesis.[13]

My respect for Miss Clarke, and a liking for Philippe de Maizières, that Don Quixote of French Knights, made it easy for me to accept her theory. Recently, however, renewed opportunities for studying the picture in the National Gallery have convinced me that there are other elements to be considered. A second objection to her theory, apart from the question of Richard's age, is that the banner carried by the angel does not bear the Lamb and Flag of St. John within a *compas* or quatrefoil, which was the distinguishing mark of the Order of the Passion. The only acceptable solution of the *crux* of the King's boyish appearance is that the diptych was painted in Paris, where Richard's adult appearance was unfamiliar, with some earlier portrait, perhaps an illumination, as a model. This, however, if it be true, makes the second objection yet more weighty, as an artist working in Paris under the supervision of Robert the Hermit would be extremely unlikely to misrepresent the banner of his Order.

The presence of St. John has more significance as the patron saint of the King

[8] B.M. Royal MS. 20 B VI, f. 2.

[9] Shaw, *loc. cit.*, p. 17.

[10] 'The Early English School of Portraiture,' in *Burl. Mag.*, lxv (1934), p. 171.

[11] B.M. Harl. MS., 4866.

[12] 'A New Life of Richard II,' in *History*, xxvi (March 1942), p. 237.

[13] *The Wilton Diptych*, Gallery Books, no. 16, n. d. (1947).

than as the saint of the order ; the inscription on his tomb reminds us of his link with the saint :

O clemens xpe
Cui devotus fuit iste :
votis Baptiste
Salues quem pretulit iste.

At this time, too, I venture to think that the St. George's flag of a plain red cross on a white ground had ceased in England to be regarded as a standard of Crusade and had come to be thought of as an ensign of sovereignty. Wat Tyler bore it in his rebellion of 1381 to show that he was not rebelling against the King, and the inventory of the King's property in the castle of Haverfordwest made after his deposition in 1399[14] includes ' VI penselx de Seint George '.

Moreover, I incline to the view that the two royal saints are there not only as patrons and defenders, but also as symbols of the young King's father and grandfather, *of whom they are idealized portraits.*[15] It is a commonplace of art history that Edward III set the model for the representation of kings in English art, and I was prepared to accept the Wilton Edward the Confessor as one of these ; but the more I examined the St. Edmund the more I was convinced that the type, with its knightly moustache and beard, high cheekbones, rather long nose and low forehead, was not a conventional saintly one but a portrait.[16] The effigy of the Black Prince (Plate II, *a*) has the head too much encased in armour for it to afford much evidence as to the beard, but shows the long nose and high cheekbones. Other representations of him[17] such as his figure as a weeper on the tomb of Edward III (Plate II, *b*)[18] show the rather high cheeked face, the moustache and the courtly beard of the St. Edmund. If this be so, the evidence in favour of the diptych's having been painted in England is greatly strengthened ; if that be granted, it may be assumed that the artist painted King Richard as a young man because he was a young man at the time. This sets limits to the possible date of the picture ; it was presumably painted after the King's accession in 1377 and before he was twenty-five, that is to say, before 1392. That there is no inherent artistic improbability in the diptych's being as early as this is proved by an entry in the Westminster inventory of 1388[19] : ' Tabule sunt due plicabiles ex dono N(icolai) L(itlington) Abbatis bene depicte quarum prima continet in se in una parte ymaginem crucifixi Marie et Johannis et Marie Magdalene. In altera vero parte continentur ymago beate virginis tenens filium suum in gremio et ymagines Johannis baptiste et Katerine.' The second diptych had the Salutation on one leaf and the Nativity on the other. Nicholas Litlington, the donor, was elected Abbot of Westminster in 1376, the year before Richard's accession.

The obvious objections to such a date are the heraldic facts which have been ably expounded by Miss Clarke. The white hart presents no particular difficulty ;

[14] Palgrave, *Kalendars and Inventories*, III, 359.

[15] The idea was not strange to the medieval mind ; contemporary statues of Saint Louis represent him in the guise of Charles V.

[16] In Henry V's chapel, for example, St. Edmund is represented as old and bearded.

[17] e.g. a metal plate in the British Museum which shows him kneeling before the Trinity : the identification is made certain by the Prince's shield of arms. See *Archaeologia*, xi, p. 141.

[18] I owe this photograph to the kindness of Mr. Arthur Gardner.

[19] J. Wickham Legg, On an inventory of the Vestry in Westminster Abbey, taken in 1388, in *Archaeologia*, lii (1888), p. 195.

it appears as a badge of the Fair Maid of Kent on his father's tomb in 1363[20] and Richard may have used it quite early in his reign. The impaling of the arms of Edward the Confessor is more difficult ; it seems certain that he did not officially use it before 1397 or 1398, but it is possible that he may have used it privately earlier. At the same time it must be admitted that it forms a serious objection. The only solution I can offer is that the exterior of the diptych (where alone it appears) was painted or repainted at the time of the Irish expedition in 1398, possibly even to make it ready to be taken on the expedition. The back is in any case clearly by another hand. The broom-pod collars present no less difficult a problem. There is no doubt about the collar presented to Richard by Charles VI, one of six for which the bill is included in the wedding expenses of 1396.[21] It was ' fait en façon de deux gros tuyaulx rons, et entre iceux tuyaux cosses de genestes doubles entretenant par les queux . . . et les dits tuyaux . . . pooinsonnex de branches, fleurs, et cosses de genestes '. The collar had nine clusters of pearls between the pods, with letters forming the King's motto JAMÈS hanging between, and had in front a large square balas ruby surrounded by eight pearls[22] and at the back two open broom-pods, one enamelled white and one green, each holding three pearls for seeds, and all engraved with branches, flowers and pods of broom.

If this is compared with the painted collar the general similarity is evident, assuming that it is worn with the large ruby hidden at the back of the neck and the pendant pods visible in front. The intervening clusters are represented as four pearls round a sapphire ; the gold letters of JAMÈS are not shown ; and the ' gros tuyaux ronds ' are not evident. These, however, may be taken to have been a constructional part of the collar only visible on the reverse side ; and the branches, flowers, and cods of broom may have been a delicate engraved decoration upon the gold. On the other hand a miniature of Louis d'Orléans painted about 1403[23] shows him wearing a collar with a similar pendant of two broom cods, though the collar is evidently made of two intertwining enamelled cordons : ' deux tuyaux ronds '.[24]

Richard II was, of course, as a Plantagenet, fully entitled to wear the broom pods on his own account ;[25] but we have no evidence to show that he ever himself had a collar made of them, though they appear among the powdering of his badges that adorn his dress on the Westminster effigy of 1395, made a few months before he received the collar from Charles VI.

The broom pods appear again on the dress of the King on the Wilton Diptych surrounding his own badge of the hart. This use supports the view that he here

[20] See C. J. P. Cave in *Archaeologia*, lxxxiv (1935), p. 81. In 1373 John of Gaunt gave the King a hanap with a white hart within a crown on the cover. S. Armytage Smith, *John of Gaunt's Register*, II, 193.

[21] Printed in full in Clarke, *Fourteenth Century Studies*, p. 281.

[22] This helps to identify the king's collar among the three in the royal treasury when Henry IV took possession of it in 1399. ' Itm. 1. coler dor du livere de Roi de Franceys ove. 1. bone baleys quarre perentre bones perles roundes ove VI autres bons perles einz deux cos de genestres.' The other two, which may have come to the King from his uncles, were alike described as ' un colare del livere de Roi de Fraunce contenant IX overages de genestres garnisez de III baleys III saphirs XXVII perles '. Palgrave, *Kalendars and Inventories*, III, 354.

[23] British Museum Harleian MS. 4431, fol. 178 : Works of Christine de Pisan.

[24] Similarly Menestrier, *Art du Blason*, p. 97, records a picture of Charles VI of France with a collar ' du genest de deux cordons, tortillez, l'un blanc et l'autre vert, d'ou pendent deux Cosses de genest, l'une blanche et l'autre vert '.

[25] The broom appears in the ornament of the tomb canopy of the second son of Edward III and Philippa of Hainault, who died in 1344.

(*a*) HEAD OF THE EFFIGY OF THE BLACK PRINCE, CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL

Photo, John Charlton, Cathedral Studio, Canterbury

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(*b*) FIGURE OF THE BLACK PRINCE, TOMB OF EDWARD III, WESTMINSTER ABBEY

Photo, courtesy of Arthur Gardner, Esq., F.S.A.

PLATE II

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MINIATURE FROM THE PSALTER OF RICHARD II, *c.* 1377
B.M. MS. Cott. Domitian A. XVII, fol. 75

bears the broom in his own right ; for the King of France used it quite differently in his own livery.[26]

Within the suggested limits of 1377 and 1392 it is not easy to fix the point at which the diptych may have been made. The absence of the arms of Anne of Bohemia, or of any other allusion to her, suggests a date before January 1382, when Richard married her, unless it celebrates some event in which she took no part. I am inclined to dismiss Sir George Scharf's suggestion that it was associated with the Crusade of 1382 ; the cross banner has not, in my view, any particular crusading significance, and Froissart tells us that Despencer bore on his Crusade ' la banniere de Saint Pierre de gueules à deux clefs d'argent en sautoir '.[27] Moreover, a Crusade is of necessity associated with the Sepulchre of Christ, and a crusading picture would more fitly have the Crucifixion, Entombment or Resurrection as its theme than a calm and gracious Madonna.

There is a great deal to be said for the Greene-Conway thesis that it is a Coronation piece : the presence of the King's ancestors ; the gestures of the Holy Child, who points to the banner, and of the King who prepares to take it in his hands, are peculiarly fitted to a moment when the King assumes the sovereignty, represented by the banner of St. George. It is in my view even more probable that the picture may commemorate the moment in 1389 when Richard assumed complete power by a kind of re-coronation in St. Stephen's Chapel, with a renewal of homage. The comparison with a miniature in King Richard's Psalter[28] (Plate III) painted at the time of his real coronation in 1377 seems to show a definite difference in age between the representation of him then and his portrait in the Diptych ; though different artists may see a child differently, the variation in apparent age seems too clearly marked to be easily explained away. I cannot accept the Borenius-Tristram theory that it was an offering made *before* riding out to face the rebels under Wat Tyler in 1381 ; it is not impossible that it was an offering made *after* the event in gratitude for its successful conclusion. Here again the banner would have meaning, for Wat Tyler, as I have said, bore the banner of St. George to show his loyalty to the King, and it was under this same banner that the King led back the band of pacified rebels. Finally, Professor Galbraith's thesis cannot be altogether excluded, though the iconographic scheme is not that usually adopted when representing a candidate for canonization, but that normally used when representing a living layman in adoration of the Divinity. The arms on the back, moreover, are in other medieval pictures a sign of ownership : and on the Wilton Diptych these are Richard's own. Our verdict on the picture's date, in fact, must still be one of not proven : though for my own part I should incline to an English origin in 1389.

[26] In 1387 Charles VI had two hunting cloaks and some thirty dresses embroidered with broom sprays two ells long going all round the dress over the shoulders. Douet d'Arcq, *Nouveau recueil des comptes de l'Argenterrie des rois de France*, p. 194.

[27] *Chroniques*, II, 270, 271.

[28] B.M. MS. Cotton Domitian A, xvii, fol. 75.