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Exhuming the Present to Reinter the Past

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Abstract:

In 2012, in a carpark in the city of Leicester, the skeletal remains of King Richard III of England, thought long lost, were found shortly after the identification of the site of the Grey Friars monastery where they were documented as having been buried after his defeat and death at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. The book *How to Bury a King* by Pete Hobson recounts how the manner of their reburial was decided, and in doing so provides a fascinating insight into the thoughts behind an event used for local and national identity building in the 21st century.

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Hobson, Pete: *How to Bury a King. The Reinternment of King Richard III*. Preston: Zaccmedia, 2016. 134 pages, 7,99 GBP. ISBN: 9781911211174.

Abstract:

In 2012, in a carpark in the city of Leicester, the skeletal remains of King Richard III of England, thought long lost, were found shortly after the identification of the site of the Grey Friars monastery where they were documented as having been buried after his defeat and death at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485. The book *How to Bury a King* by Pete Hobson recounts how the manner of their reburial was decided, and in doing so provides a fascinating insight into the thoughts behind an event used for local and national identity building in the 21st century.

Before embarking upon this review it is worth clarifying two things. Firstly, the subject text is not an academic one, though it is one that could not have existed without academic enquiry. Secondly it would help to explain the core controversy, the development of a response to which the book narrates.

Richard III is a divisive figure in English history. Killed in 1485 by the forces Henry Tudor and disposed of in the grounds of a humble monastery, Richard became the Machiavellian tyrant of the story of his own downfall in a play written by Shakespeare. This characterization of Richard has long had its opponents, and most prominent of these in our time is the Richard III Society, a relic of early-20th century romanticist counter-cultural scholarship. For these self-proclaimed Ricardians, Richard is the tragic victim of a usurper and a poisoned pen: the last true King of England.

The book *How to Bury a King* is about the decision-making process and controversies that engulfed life at Leicester Cathedral up until his reburial there in 2015. To cite the foreword by David Monteith, Dean of the Cathedral, it is “a very personal account” of the experiences of the Rev. Pete Hobson, into whose hands responsibility for answering a curious philosophical conundrum fell: namely, with what ceremony and procedure does one rebury the remains of a long dead king, an albeit deposed king, yet

still a predecessor of the current monarch – one crowned on the very same throne.

Since Richard's time the monarchy's power has become predominantly ceremonial; an institution at the center of a web of premises that form the constitutional heart of the English nation. Whenever anything considered to be of national import takes place, from the opening of a new parliamentary legislative period, to a sporting competition, museum or theatre, if not the Queen herself then usually at least one member or representative of the royal family is present front and center: to be or represent the highest seal of approval and give permission to carry on. Monarchy is tied to these events – gains its legitimacy from them – and links them at the same time to the living idea of the nation. The death of a monarch means a loss in some way for the body of that idea, and so a somber yet somehow festive and ultimately symbolic burial is expected to fill the gap and affirm the mystic side of the state's constitution before the successor ascends to the throne. To rebury the remains of one who once held the throne as though they were nothing, with neither ceremony nor pomp and circumstance is simply not an option. Indeed, to do so would rather challenge the metaphysical voodoo that is seen by many to vitally bind the UK together, both in its present and to the foundations of its past. Reading Pete Hobson's text one really gets an idea of the enormity of the task that he saw before him – to reconcile two eras, showing respect and decency towards what we in modern times think a medieval king might have expected of his burial whilst plugging the ceremonial gap required by the expectations of modern England and its associated notions of national identity.

The book begins with an account of how responsibility for the ceremony and monumental tomb came to Leicester Cathedral and follows through chronologically in short chapters, enlarging upon how permission to build a new tomb on a site covered by heavy historic building-conservation laws was granted. Hobson lays open the constellation of committees that decided upon the form of the monument and its symbolism. The story then takes a turn and the reburial in Leicester is put into doubt by a legal challenge mounted by a coalition of those claiming to be Richard's living family – their aim being a reburial in York, the old seat of power for his branch of the Plantagenet dynasty. After the case is decided in favor of Leicester, by Justices of the High Court in London no less, the planning progresses and three individual ceremonies are decided upon: the reception of the remains, the reburial itself, and the laying of the tombstone. A chapter deals with the ceremony team's approach to the question of who to invite, which dignitaries and members of the public (1800 people over the course of the three events). For the reburial it is decided that the theme should be a "reconciliatory note to history," marked by the invitation and mutual partaking in the ceremony by the so-called Bosworth peers, the living holders of the noble titles that were present and on opposing sides at Bosworth Field. It is remarkable that both the noble titles and the family names of the Bosworth peers remain joined after over five hundred years. The split from Rome after Richard's

death is resolved through the invitation of the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster Vincent Nicholls. Hobson then summarizes the flow of the ceremonies which involved the participation of local school children, an effort to bring in the diversity of modern England, and Benedict Cumberbatch reading a poem written for the occasion by the national Poet Laureate. A modern dance troupe choreographs the unveiling of the monumental tomb and the City of Leicester celebrates with a firework display. In the final chapters Hobson discusses the tourism factor for the city of Leicester. He remarks upon the staggering increase in the number of cathedral visitors and touches not just upon local and national identity as stakeholders in this event but also a sense of the spiritual in a brief yet poignant discussion intertwined with one of a church finding new purpose in the 21st century.

So, why buy or study this book? There is a principle that governs the study of funerary archaeology: that, as the dead do not bury themselves, their final burial rites, and consequently their identities in death, are most usually a construct of the mourners, a reflection not of who they were but of how they were seen to be by those remembering them: an imposed identity. To apply this to the case of the reburial of Richard III begs the question firstly of whom he was seen to be according to this ceremony and, more particularly (considering the self-acknowledged ideas of national importance given to it) what can be learned about the mourners from the peculiarities of the rites that they have chosen? In other words, what can be said of conceptions of modern English national identity and its relationship with the past through this ceremony? Though at times verging upon the Pythonesque, the national importance of Richard III's reburial is not exaggerated and the manner in which the event was televised, watched by millions, and praised across the media spectrum makes this strange and unprecedented ritual an excellent case study for examining 21st century notions of local and national identity in England, the process of their manufacture, and the role that history and the media can play. Should this be your bent, Pete Hobson's candid tale of how he and his team attempted to toe the line between what were felt to be the appropriate Christian rites whilst (mostly) avoiding the historicist kitsch suggested by interested parties along the way would make an excellent starting source.

German Abstract:

Das Gegenwärtige exhumieren um die Vergangenheit umzubetten

2012 fand man unter einem Parkhaus in Leicester die verschollen geglaubten Knochenreste des englischen Königs Richard III., kurz nachdem das Greyfriars Kloster – dokumentierter Ort seiner Beerdigung nach dem Tod in der Schlacht von Bosworth 1485 – an dieser Stelle lokalisiert wurde. Das Buch *How to Bury a King* von Pete Hobson legt dar, wie die Art der Wiederbeisetzung der königlichen Überreste entschieden worden ist; dadurch bietet es einen faszinierenden Einblick in die Hintergründe und Überlegungen zu einer Veranstaltung, die für regionale und nationale Identitätsentwürfe im 21. Jahrhundert benutzt worden ist.

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