

# THE ANTI-DUKES OF NORTHUMBERLAND\*

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When I was a small child, my formal education began with the hymn 'All Things Bright and Beautiful', which I was made to learn by heart; and when I was taken for walks in the Park or the Pastures, and passed the Barbican gate, the image of an immutable, divinely ordered society, as presented by that hymn – the rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate (Narrowgate, I assumed) – was vividly impressed on my mind. What a symbol of ancient continuity was here! North Northumberland seemed a wonderfully stable world, and here was the guarantee of its immemorial stability.

However, afterwards, when I came to study history, I had to revise this view. History, I then found, is continuous only in flux; one has to fight even to stand still. And this general rule applies even in Northumberland, even here.

For in the period of history with which I am most familiar – the 16th and 17th centuries – determined attempts were made to deprive the Percies of their position. For much of that time they were not only physically seldom in Alnwick but also politically almost always in the doghouse. Twice their earldom was extinguished, three times Dukes of Northumberland were created to overtrump or displace them. Only the accidents of mortality and the genetic toughness of Northumbrians enabled them to shake off these pretenders and create, in retrospect, that show of continuity which has been so effective a force in our history.

The story of these pretenders runs for nearly two centuries. It is a drama in two acts. The tone of the two acts is different. That of the first is indeed tragic; that of the second is lighter, with a touch of comedy; it ends, you may well say, in farce. The two acts are separated by an interlude. The first act is in Tudor times, from Henry VIII to Mary; the second in Stuart times, from James I to James II. The interlude is the reign of Elizabeth.

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So I begin with Act 1. But first a few words on the necessary stage machinery. In our well ordered and rational society, mature political parties rhythmically replace each other by orderly elections. In the reign of Henry VIII – and indeed afterwards – the machinery of change was different. Not political parties, but tribal groups alternated in power by exploiting two not entirely unrelated forces, religion and sex. Religion meant plumping for or against reform, or further reform, of the Church (with the understanding that privatisation of Church property was guaranteed anyway); sex meant supplying the royal demand – and keeping control of the goods supplied. Both operations were hazardous, but if the stakes were high the rewards were great, and for the losers (if they survived) there was generally a fall – back position: they could invest in what the 18th century would call ‘the reversionary interest’ – ie, the next heir to the throne – or as a last resort, in an alternative ruler, a pretender. While there was death there was hope.

In this continuing tribal struggle, the most persistent tribe was that of the Howards. For eighty years, from 1536, when they dangled their tempting niece Katherine before the roving eye of Henry VIII, till 1618, when (sexual tastes at the top having changed), they tried to halt their decline by pushing young Master Monson – his face daily washed with posset-curds – in front of James I, in spite of several bruising falls, they never gave up. But this last desperate operation failed; the archbishop of Canterbury’s young man romped home, and the Howards retired from politics to that last infirmity of noble minds, collecting pictures. In this game of what is now called ‘high politics’ the only family which consistently stood up to the Howards was the Dudleys and it was they who produced the heros (or anti-heros) of my story. It begins with the great political operator who has been described as ‘The ablest, most ruthless and ambitious man of the century’, John Dudley.

John Dudley is a somewhat mysterious figure. No adequate biography of him has ever been written. His father had served Henry VII not wisely but too well and had been executed by Henry VIII on his accession, as a sop to the taxpayer. But this accident did not stop the rise of his son. He became one of Thomas Cromwell’s young men and in the last months of Henry VIII, when

the Seymours, brothers of wife number three, challenged the Howards, uncle and cousin of wife number five, for control of the 11-year-old heir to throne, he plumped wisely for the Seymours. There is no reason to ascribe any particular religious views to him, but since the Howards were for conservative reaction (it was 'merry England', said the Duke of Norfolk 'before all this New Learning came in'), the Seymours, and Dudley with them, were for Protestant reform. The struggle was won by the Seymours; the Howards, father and son, were condemned to death; and the Seymours dominated the new reign – that is until John Dudley had put his act together, whereupon both Seymours in turn were found guilty of treason, executed and attainted, and Dudley became (in the name of Edward VI) absolute master of England. Since Edward Seymour, as Lord Protector of the Kingdom, had made himself (in due form of course) a Duke – Duke of Somerset – Dudley now did the same: he made himself (in due form of course) Duke of Northumberland.

Why Northumberland? Seymour had at least been a Somerset man, and Somerset had been a dukedom. There had never been Dukes of Northumberland, and Dudley had no lands in the North, no family connection there. But he had been there officially as the King's Lieutenant in the North, and could see the chance of a great take-over bid. The Percies were now well and truly in the dog-house. Their earldom was extinct. The late earl had died childless and since his two brothers had been attainted for joining the Northern revolt against Henry VIII, the Catholic 'Pilgrimage of Grace', he had thought it prudent to bequeath all his lands to the Crown. By 1551 the Crown was effectively John Dudley. So the lands, like the title, were his for the asking. He asked, and obtained a large slice of them for himself. His various offices which included the wardenship of all three Marches toward Scotland, gave him authority over the rest.

But why stop there? The greatest magnate in the North was not a layman but a bishop. The Bishop of Durham was a count palatine, a prince-bishop with ample estates, huge revenues and regal powers. As committed Protestants, Somerset, Dudley and their friends did not believe in rich clergy. Bishops, they thought, should be salaried officials, with modest salaries. That would leave surplus wealth for more rational distribution. Henry VIII had not intended, by his Reformation, to weaken the episcopal Church. He had meant

to strengthen it, using monastic wealth to endow new bishoprics. But Henry VIII was now dead and the new rulers had other ideas. Monastic lands having been sold, they would move on to episcopal lands. And not only lands. The Bishops, as peers of parliament, had very desirable London residences, or 'inns', mostly in the Strand, with gardens leading down to their water – gates on the Thames. Those too were now up for grabs. Somerset, having swiped the great abbey of Syon as his suburban villa, took over, and pulled down, two bishops' houses (as well as two churches) to build Somerset House as his metropolitan pad. When Dudley had liquidated Somerset, he took over Syon for himself. Then as Duke of Northumberland, he sharpened his knife for the Bishop of Durham.

The Bishop of Durham, Dr Tunstall, was a very important man: a scholar, a statesman, a privy councillor. But he was also vulnerable: rising eighty and a conservative. He was thus an easy prey. He was charged with high treason and deprived. Then Dudley turned to the vacant see. Durham House in the Strand had been leased as a residence to the King's sister Elizabeth, the future Queen. Dudley turned her out, vainly protesting, and took possession. Meanwhile he pushed through a docile Parliament a Bill to dissolve the Bishopric. There would now be two new bishoprics, Durham and Newcastle, but on the cheap: the new bishop of Durham could be the old Dean, who could then stay on in his deanery, thus liberating the castle. The bishop's castles and lands would then be shared between Dudley and the Crown – which, at the moment, were effectively the same. The Bishop's coalmines of Whickham and Gateshead, the richest coalmines in Europe, would be leased, at a price, to Dudley's allies, the merchant obligarchy of Newcastle.<sup>1</sup>

How fast Dudley moved! In less than two years he had set up a great new fief in the North, far greater than the Percy earldom – a ducal fief, reinforced by viceregal power, and durable too – with five sons his dynasty seemed secure – provided, of course (it was an essential proviso), that Edward VI survived. For if Edward should die childless, what then? How could the Princess Mary, daughter of wife number one, be kept out? And then – but that was a nightmare scenario, to be avoided at all costs.

As we know, King Edward did not survive and when Dudley saw him sicken, he staked all on a desperate gamble. The reversionary interest having been cornered by the Howards and their friends, the only hope of saving his dynasty, and with it the Reformation (though he may have cared less about that), was an alternative ruler, a pretender. So, after much coming and going between the neighbouring and now privatised abbeys of Syon and Sheen, the plot was cooked up. The young King, who had so tamely authorised the execution of his two uncles, now as tamely authorised the disinheritance of his two sisters. The innocent Lady Jane Grey was married – at Durham House – to Dudley’s youngest son; and when the king died, Dudley himself, as executor of his will, with the authority of the Council, given under the Great Seal, proclaimed her Queen. The House of Northumberland – the *new* Dudley House of Northumberland – was to replace not only the House of Percy in the North but also the House of Tudor on the throne.

Of course, as we know, the gamble failed. The reign of Queen Jane lasted only nine days. The forces of legitimacy and Catholicism struck back. Mary was carried to the throne. Duke Dudley, his brother, all five sons and the unfortunate Queen Jane were condemned to death. On the scaffold he declared himself a good Catholic. The Protestant enthusiasts who had supported his gamble fled abroad or were burnt. The Howards crept back. The Bishop of Durham was restored to his bishopric, the Percies to their earldom and their lands. End of the story? No: not quite, for there is Act 2 still to come. Brief and embryonic though it was, John Dudley’s dukedom of Northumberland was a reality: a real body, stifled indeed in infancy, but refusing to be forgotten. Its ghost would hover intermittently in the distance, seeking re – incarnation, for another century. But first there is the interlude, in which we may relax, look back, and reflect.

John Dudley, it must be admitted, was rather a cad. Most of those men were: revolutions breed cads. But he was also a remarkable man, the ablest of a group of men who changed the direction of English history. It was during his brief reign that Protestantism took root and that English overseas expansion began. Merchant adventurers, encouraged by him, penetrated Russia and West Africa.<sup>2</sup> The ruthless privatisation of Church lands launched a

minor industrial revolution. The great merchant banker Sir Thomas Gresham, the founder of the Royal Exchange, was his friend and *guru*. Intellectually too these men marked a change. They were sophisticated Renaissance men who, like their master Thomas Cromwell, looked to Italy, the Italy of Machiavelli. They were patrons of that 'New Learning' which the Howards so deplored. The great houses which they built on their secularised church lands – Somerset House, Syon, Longleat, Sudeley – were classical, not gothic.<sup>3</sup> They were italianised Englishmen. An Englishman italianate (it was said) is the devil incarnate. This phrase could certainly be applied to John Dudley. It would remain applicable to his heirs, who through the next century, would become progressively more Italian, though perhaps less diabolical.

They did not take long to emerge. For the reign of Mary lasted only five years, and when Elizabeth quietly succeeded her, it was all change again. The time-servers turned about: they had become supple with practice. The excluded politicians crept out of their holes, the Protestant exiles returned from abroad. It was the return of the Dudleians: Elizabeth started again where John Dudley had left off. And who are these two elegant young men who are so welcome at the new court? Who indeed but two sons of John Dudley, who, though condemned to death, have somehow survived: the only male survivors of the family. Queen Mary has pardoned them: perhaps she was not so bloody after all. And now Queen Elizabeth is devoted to them. Their attainders are reversed. To the elder, Ambrose, she will restore his father's earldom of Warwick. The younger, Robert, she will make Earl of Leicester. She will also restore to Somerset's son his earldom of Hertford. But she will not restore the dukedoms, either of Somerset or of Northumberland. She did not like dukes – any dukes: in all her reign she created none and she got rid of those whom she had inherited. In her last thirty years there would not be a single duke in England.

In her love life Queen Elizabeth was much more constant than her father. She was in love with Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester: in love with him all his life; and he knew it and hoped great things from it. If she ever married anyone, he told the Spanish ambassador, it would be him. She married no one, but in case she should change

her mind he took care to keep himself available: how conveniently his first wife Amy Robsart perished, found dead at the bottom of the stairs of Cumnor Place! Did she fall or was she pushed? We shall never know. Sometimes he goaded her too, making her jealous. But though she showered him with gifts, lands and offices she never surrendered, and in the end he gave up and married his mistress, Lettice Countess of Essex, whose young husband had died suddenly, and conveniently for the purpose: too conveniently it was said: for people always put the worst construction on such episodes. Leicester, it was noted had an Italian doctor, which was very sinister, and Italian tastes; he was too well read in 'the Florentine' – that is, Machiavelli; and Italian doctors were regarded as very skilful poisoners.

Like his father, Leicester was evidently rather a cad. Nevertheless, we have to admit that he encapsulates, as no other prominent politician did – certainly not the Howards, or even Lord Burghley, or the Queen herself – what we see as the essential character of the Elizabethan age: a forward policy in church and state, in Europe and overseas, navigation, exploration, commerce and industry. He was the head of the party that made the running, a party consisting of his nephew Sir Philip Sidney, his stepson the Earl of Essex, his kinsman Sir Francis Walsingham. He and his brother Ambrose were patrons of the great seamen – of Frobisher, Drake, Hawkins, Cavendish. Poets and scholars, radical Protestants, economic entrepreneurs were encouraged by him. He also continued – but more cautiously – some of his father's interests in the North, depriving the Percies of their mining rights at Keswick and the Bishop of Durham of those coalfields, which had been recovered under Mary but were now leased once again, for 99 years, to the Newcastle merchants. Many an ancient Northumbrian county family owes its distant rise to that hugely profitable act of privatisation.

When Leicester died in 1588, just after the defeat of the Armada, he was (said a foreign ambassador) deeply mourned by the Queen, but by no one else. Indeed, the Queen locked herself in her room and refused to speak to anyone till her privy councillors, in despair, broke down the door. Two years later his brother Ambrose died, childless. All their titles and claims died with them, for Leicester left only one son, the only surviving grandson in the male line of John Dudley, and he was, as his father himself insisted, illegitimate. This son, Robert Dudley, is the hero of Act 2 of my drama.<sup>4</sup>

Young Robert, like all Dudleys was well educated. He was sent to Oxford University, of which his father was chancellor – to Christ Church, an excellent college, then flourishing in all modern subjects: mathematics, natural science, navigation, cosmography. His cousin Philip Sidney had been there, and Richard Hakluyt, the publisher of the great Elizabethan voyages. Dudley became expert in all the sciences, not only theoretically but practically, From boyhood, he afterwards wrote, he had ‘a natural sympathy for the the sea’. He got to know sea – captains, shipwrights, cartographers and pilots, learned how to design, build and sail all kinds of ships, invented new instruments, new methods of calculation. At the same time he was a cultivated and sophisticated man of the world, ‘a complete gentleman in all suitable employments’ as he is described, ‘an exact seaman, a good navigator, an excellent architect, mathematician, physician, chymist and what not’: in short, an Elizabethan virtuoso who, like Sir Walter Raleigh, lived on – into a less sympathetic, post-Elizabethan age.

When he was seventeen, Robert Dudley financed a ship to sail, with the great seaman Thomas Cavendish, to ‘the South Seas, the Philippines and China’. He tried to go himself, but the Queen forbade him – which was just as well as the expedition was a disaster: Cavendish himself died on it. Undeterred, at nineteen Dudley decided to build a little fleet of his own. He wished to circumnavigate the globe like Drake and Cavendish; but again the Queen interposed her ban; so he set out instead, in a joint enterprise with Raleigh, to Guiana, that ever-beckoning mirage of the time. He got there first (which did not please Raleigh), planted the English flag on Trinidad, sailed up the Orinoco, named one of its tributaries Rio Dudliano and an island in it Dudleya, and then returned, challenging, fighting and pursuing Spanish ships wherever found on the way. In the following years he took part in the capture of Cadiz by his half – brother Essex and was knighted by him, and sent two ships to the Far East hoping to break into the closed empire of China: the still unrealised ambition of Columbus. This was another disaster: both his ships were lost off the Malay coast. Only one man lived to tell the tale. Having crossed the Indian ocean in a native canoe, he was found by Dutch sailors four years later on the uninhabited island of Mauritius, having kept alive, I suppose, on roast dodo: a sitting bird.



Meanwhile, in England, another great tribal contest was being fought. It was the usual scenario: the approaching end of a reign. Queen Elizabeth was now old; she had reigned 45 years; who would succeed her? Once again Howards and Percies stirred in the political wilderness in which they had spent the last thirty years. Both invested in King James, but not together; so they fared differently. Lord Henry Howard, a practised intriguer, joined forces with Sir Robert Cecil. That proved a very sound move: it would bring the Howards back to wealth and power. The Earl of Northumberland – the famous ‘Wizard Earl’ – allied himself with his friend Sir Walter Raleigh. That was a mistake. Soon he was compromised – no doubt unjustly – in the Gunpowder Plot. So back again to the dog-house. He was condemned to a huge fine and life-imprisonment in the Tower, where he would have leisure to study mathematics with his three *magi* and read the many books he had collected. They included *samizdat* texts of the forbidden works of Machiavelli, which perhaps he should have read more closely before involving himself in Jacobean politics.

That was in 1605 – 6. By chance, in that same year, Sir Robert Dudley was also on trial. He had discovered, or thought that he had discovered, an important fact: that he was not, after all, illegitimate; his parents had been married, secretly indeed, but legally, correctly, by an orthodox parson, before known witnesses; and so by a necessary consequence, their son was now Earl of Warwick, Earl of Leicester, and – if his grandfather’s attainder were reversed (and why not, now that the guilty generation had passed away and the Percies were again in trouble?) – Duke of Northumberland.

Could it be true? It seemed improbable. Why should Leicester have concealed his marriage and so bastardised his son, of whom he was clearly fond and to whom he would bequeath his estate? Of course, it could be answered, because at that time he was still hoping against hope to marry the elusive Queen Elizabeth; therefore any other marriage had to be disavowable at need. But why then did he continue to disavow it even when that hope had evaporated? Of course, it could be replied, because neither Robert Dudley’s mother, now Lady Stafford, nor Leicester’s own widow, the Countess Lettice, now Lady Blount, wished to find themselves involved in bigamy. If hard evidence of the secret marriage could

be produced, mere improbabilities could be explained away, resolved by the particular circumstances around them: the personalities of the parties and the complex relations between Leicester and the Queen.

Dudley produced hard evidence. He mobilised surviving witnesses of the marriage, persuaded his mother to break her silence, and sought a ruling, from a church court, that his parents had been legally married and his own birth legitimate. His wife's family seem to have been the driving force in this enterprise. They were the Leighs of Stoneleigh, a rich merchant family of plebeian origin, eager to rise in society, and it was at their country house at Stoneleigh, in Warwickshire, that the evidence was collected and the case prepared. But Dudley embraced the cause and defended it vigorously: perhaps he was convinced. However, strong forces were ranged against him, and more than titles was at stake: in particular, the manor and castle of Warwick, which would go with the title, if inherited. Leicester's nephew, Sir Robert Sidney, Philip Sidney's brother, had no wish to be cut out by a more direct heir. Leicester's widow was a formidable lady: if her husband had been a bigamist, her status would be affected. These parties were influential at court. They drew together and hired the greatest, and toughest, lawyer of the time, the attorney-general Sir Edward Coke. He contrived to turn the case round. Instead of a petitioner in a provincial church court, Dudley found himself a defendant charged with libel in the Star Chamber, a political court. And he lost. The judges in the Star Chamber decided that there had been no such marriage: Dudley's witnesses it was said, had been suborned; and therefore they were disqualified for life. The evidence was sealed up. The case was closed and could not be raised again.

Was Dudley really legitimate or not? The case has been argued, *pro* and *con.*, ever since. His biographers loyally insist that he was legitimate, that his father cynically denied it for his own machiavellian purposes, and that his opponents were animated entirely by self-interest. But strong arguments have been adduced on the other side and it must be admitted that the balance of probability is against his claim.<sup>5</sup> However, if we accept those arguments, we have to face the necessary consequence: that the hard and precise evidence on which Dudley relied was (as the Star Chamber judges decided) fabricated: that there had been a deliberate

conspiracy of forgery and fraud; and that the organisers of this conspiracy were most probably Lady Dudley and her family at Stoneleigh. Snobbish though they undoubtedly were, can we believe that they were capable of such fraud? On so serious a charge perhaps it is best to suspend judgment for a few minutes and meanwhile continue the narrative of fact.

Insulted (as he believed) in his honour, blocked in his hope of redress, Dudley quietly laid his plans. He applied for leave to travel abroad for three years. That being granted, he left England with the usual equipage: servants, horses, grooms and a page. On arrival in Calais, the page changed clothes and emerged as Dudley's cousin Elizabeth Southwell, the most beautiful and admired of the new Queen's maids of honour. This was scandal enough; it was made worse when both of them declared themselves Roman Catholics and, having obtained from the Pope a dispensation from the rules of consanguinity, were married at Lyon. When applying for this dispensation, Dudley prudently did not mention that he had left a wife and five infant daughters in England – a touch of the old Dudley caddishness here. When the Pope discovered this he was at first rather put out; but he soon found means to dispense with that little difficulty too. Leicester may or may not have been a bigamist; his son certainly was.

From Lyon, Dudley prepared his next move. Through an English Catholic renegade – 'the greatest scoundrel who existed, or who ever had existed in the world' in English eyes – he offered his services to the Grand Duke of Tuscany. As a bait, he promised to reveal a new technique in the manufacture of silk. Presumably he had engaged in some industrial espionage in Lyon, the centre of the French silk industry. Then, having received an encouraging reply, he set out for Italy. Meanwhile, on secret orders from him, a ship – his ship – left England for the Mediterranean. It was fully manned and gunned and carried expert shipwrights and valuable instruments. He was moving his whole naval establishment to Italy to place it, with himself, at the disposal of the Grand Duke.

He knew his man. Ferdinando de' Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany, was an enterprising ruler who was determined to make Tuscany a Mediterranean sea – power. Twenty years ago, he had contributed a galleon, fully equipped, to the Spanish Armada. Now he welcomed Dudley, put him in charge of his fleet and his

dockyards, and of the port and arsenal of Livorno. Dudley set to work at once. He enlarged and fortified the harbour, built a great Mole, drained the marshes between Livorno and Pisa, and persuaded the grand Duke to declare Livorno a free port, with spectacular results. From a provincial port it became 'one of the best harbours in Europe', the commercial centre of the Mediterranean, the main port of call for the English companies trading to the East. Meanwhile relays of sailors, carpenters, pilots, engineers, recruited in England, came to Livorno to work under him, building and sailing the ships that he designed: ships of a new kind, *gallizabras* he called them, well armed with fifty guns, but of light draught, longer and faster than any known before. Thanks to him, Tuscany became formidable at sea, able to fight and defeat the Turks and their allies, the Barbary corsairs. He tried to make it a colonial power too, organising an expedition, under an English captain, to Guiana – once again competing with Sir Walter Raleigh; but the mirage of that Eldorado would deceive all its pursuers.

When James I heard of these goings-on from his ambassador in Venice (the only English ambassador in Italy), he was not pleased. He sent Dudley a stiff letter – a 'Privy Seal', to be delivered by the ambassador – reminding him that his three years' leave had expired and ordering him to return to England. Dudley refused to receive the document as improperly addressed; for he had now assumed the titles of Earl of Warwick and Earl of Leicester: they were his by right, he maintained – he did not recognise the judgement of the Star Chamber – and were recognised by the Grand Duke and the Pope. James I responded by confiscating his property in England: his father's estate and castle of Kenilworth, which had been bequeathed to him.

However, Dudley did not, as yet, destroy his bridges with England. James I might be hostile, but there was always the 'reversionary interest'. Like Raleigh and other post-Elizabethans, he cultivated the Prince of Wales, Prince Henry. Like Raleigh, he wrote papers for the Prince, advocating a blue-water policy and offering to make England invincible at sea with a shock-force of his new fast long galleys. Even when the Prince died – a fatal blow to Raleigh and many others – he did not despair. He wrote a secret state-paper for King James making the same offer, and also going a little further. He suggested a series of new taxes, on the Tuscan

model, so that the Crown, by combining financial independence with a standing naval force, could 'bridle the impertinency of Parliaments'. James was having trouble with his parliament at that time, but he shrank from so provocative a remedy. Dudley's paper was buried; but as there are moles even in the best archives, it would afterwards be discovered and leaked to the opposition under Charles I. This caused a great scandal which would reverberate till the eve of the Civil War. This despotic streak in his character reminds us of his grandfather John Dudley. The episode would be long remembered: over a century later, Horace Walpole – a sound whig, though he admired Dudley – would write that 'considering how enterprising and dangerous a minister he might have made, and what variety of talents were called forth by his misfortunes, it was happy both for him and his country that he was unjustly deprived of the honour to which his birth gave him pretensions.' For Walpole did not doubt that he was legitimately born and even legitimate Duke of Northumberland.<sup>6</sup>

The final breach was provoked by James I. In 1618 – the same year in which he sent Raleigh to the block – James evidently decided to snub Dudley. He created, on the same day, four new earldoms, two of them calculated to mortify him: for they were the earldoms of Leicester and Warwick, precisely those which Dudley claimed and had assumed, and he bestowed them on Dudley's hated rivals: his cousin Robert Sidney and the son-in-law of his step – mother, the old Countess of Leicester. Thus provoked, Dudley struck back. He appealed to the Grand Duchess. She in turn, appealed to her brother the Emperor. The Emperor then promulgated a formal diploma recognising Dudley as rightful Duke of Northumberland. The Pope followed suit, and, to add a little body to an otherwise insubstantial title, authorised Dudley to recover 8 million ducats, as damages for his lost ducal property in England, by preying on English merchants, provided they were Protestants, 'wherever they may be found'. In short Dudley supplied, himself with papal 'letters of marque', implying a state of war against England. The Grand Duke did not like this idea of holy privateering: it was hardly the way to draw English traders to Livorno; and the letter of marque appears to have remained a dead letter.

We may note, in passing, that the Emperor made it clear, in his diploma that he was not creating a new imperial dukedom but recognising, in his dominions, the hereditary English dukedom conferred 'inconfiscabiliter', in recognition of his great virtues and services, on 'your paternal grandfather', John Dudley.<sup>7</sup> Since the Emperor was the champion of the Catholic cause in the Thirty Years War, now begun, this spontaneous tribute to the greatest villain in the rogues' gallery of the English Catholics is rather surprising. But perhaps the bureaucrats in Vienna were not well briefed in English history.

So Robert Dudley at last found himself Duke of Northumberland – at least on the Continent. He now signed himself 'Il Duca di Northumbria' and his eldest son, to whom he passed on his assumed earldom of Warwick, was 'Principe di Northumbria'. Not everyone was impressed by this new grandeur. The Tuscan envoy in London, whom the Grand Duke had instructed to serve Dudley's interests there, complained that 'this strange humour of calling himself Duke of Northumberland' did not help. I wonder what the real Earl of Northumberland – the Wizard Earl, still in the Tower – thought of the news. Probably not much. I would like to think that these two proud aristocratic intellectuals felt a certain mutual sympathy. Both were interested in mathematics, chemistry, fortification; both were out of tune with their time, indifferent to established orthodoxy, victims of a jealous government – one a prisoner, the other an exile. However, I fear that that is improbable. History had dug a gulf between those two families.

One person on whose reactions to the news we may speculate is Dudley's abandoned wife, now living as *femme seule* and Lady Bountiful to the clergy at Dudley House in London and in her family's house at Stoneleigh. With her aristocratic aspirations, it must have been mortifying for her to hear that her errant husband was a Duke in Europe but that the title of Duchess belonged only to his bigamous, not his legal wife. However, in due course she would find a remedy for this wound.

Dudley never returned to England. He lived altogether 43 years in Tuscany, the perfect Englishman italianate, with a house in Florence, in the via della Vigna Nuova, near the Palazzo Strozzi, and a villa in the country, near the Medici villa of Petraia: councillor and friend of three successive Grand Dukes, Grand Chamberlain

to three successive Grand Duchesses, the most important Englishman in Italy, in the tradition of Sir John Hawkwood, the 14th-century *condottiere* whose equestrian fresco adorns the Duomo of Florence, or Sir John Acton, the 18th-century prime minister of the kingdom of Naples. To visiting Englishmen, too, he was something of an institution, sought out and courted by the royalists and men of fashion who, increasingly, found a grand tour of Italy more agreeable than civil war at home.<sup>8</sup> And he could teach them a thing or two. He took out a patent for that new process in the manufacture of silk which he had floated before the Grand Duke Ferdinand. Medical men praised his *catholicon*, 'the Earl of Warwick's powder', which like Sir Walter Raleigh's cordial, was said to cure all fevers: he himself claimed 100% success in 600 cases, though it failed on the young son of the Earl of Pembroke, who died in his house. Sportsmen knew him as 'the first of all men who taught a dog to sit in order to catch partridges'. That at least would recommend him in Northumberland. And in the end, by a curious twist of fortune, without any move by him, indeed without his knowledge, his ghostly dukedom acquired, if not body, at least a little enlivening colour in England.

For in May 1644, if we can believe what we are told, in the middle of the Civil War, which he still hoped to win, Charles I took a remarkable step. Yielding to the petition of Dudley's deserted wife and her two surviving daughters, who, by now, had strategically placed husbands (one of them the king's solicitor), he re-opened the case which had been so emphatically closed forty years ago by the judges of the now abolished Star Chamber, caused the evidence to be re-examined, and coolly set aside the judgement. That judgement, he now decided, had been wrong: Dudley's parents had been legally married after all; his birth was therefore legitimate; and the 'great injustices' done to him ought to be redressed. However, when it came to the details of redress, logic, as so often in politics, yielded to compromise. In letters patent apparently put out under the Great Seal, the King declared himself unwilling to disturb the mistaken but no doubt well-intentioned grants of his father – that is, the grants of the earldoms of Warwick and Leicester to Dudley's rivals – and so, instead, he simply recognised in England, from its 'creation' in 1620, the dukedom granted to him by the Emperor. Dudley was declared

unambiguously a Duke and his abandoned wife, from the same date, a Duchess. She was to be known as Duchess Dudley; her daughters were to enjoy the style and precedence of a duke's daughters; and the Earl Marshal, Heralds and Officers of the College of Arms were ordered to take note of this award and register it in their offices 'as they do tender our displeasures and will answer the contempt thereof at their perils'. Those who drafted the Patent evidently thought that they were merely adopting a foreign 'creation' in England. If they had read the imperial diploma with which they pretended familiarity they would have found that they were going much further: implicitly the patent restored John Dudley's hereditary dukedom of Northumberland.<sup>9</sup>

Curiously, this public document, addressed to 'all Archbishops, Dukes, Marquesses, Earls, Barons, Bishops.... and all other our loving subjects', seems never to have been seen, in the next sixteen years, by anyone at all. It was not recorded in the Patent Office. It was not seen by the heralds who were so sternly ordered to record and execute it; not even by Sir William Dugdale, the great Warwickshire antiquary, a friend of the Dudley ladies, who at that moment, as Chester Herald, was residing at the court at Oxford. In the following years, when he was working on his *Antiquities of Warwickshire*, Dugdale was in regular contact with the Dudley ladies and was able to give, in that work, a full and sympathetic account of the unfortunate Star Chamber case of 1605, but strangely showed no knowledge of the Letters Patent of 1644, which so happily reversed it. It was not till 1660, eleven years after her husband's death that Lady Dudley, now rising eighty, produced the document from her *escritoire* and, with her daughters, petitioned the newly restored king to confirm it; which, after his initial suspicions had been exorcised by two judiciously bribed courtiers, he obligingly did, thus enabling, the ladies to glory in their ducal status for the rest of their lives – and indeed beyond that, in the funeral eloquence of their dependent clergy, the complacent-inscriptions on their fine tombs, and the ultimate seal of social grandeur-in Sir William Dugdale's *Baronage*, the *livre d'or* of the English nobility, the Debrett of the next century.<sup>10</sup>

Did the pious Duchess then forge the document? No biographer will even contemplate such a thought. 'Its genuiness', says the latest of them 'is beyond question'.<sup>11</sup> But alas, the conclusion is



inescapable. The document itself is an absurdity<sup>12</sup>. But once the King had approved it, the heralds had no option. Lady Dudley had got away with it. Frustrated in 1605 – for now surely we can make up our minds about that famous Star Chamber case – she had pulled it off at last. Just as John Dudley, in 1551, had made himself a Duke, so she, a century later, made herself a Duchess. And when she died, aged 90, her corpse was carried from Dudley House to her coroneted tomb at Stoneleigh with full ducal honours, escorted by Garter King of Arms and a troop of heralds, ‘in very great state’. And so Robert Dudley, posthumously and incidentally, as an adjunct to his abandoned wife, was legitimised and ennobled in his abandoned country.

Would he have cared? I think not. In 1644 – the date ascribed to the bogus patent – he was 70 years old; he had been Duke of Northumberland, in his own eyes, for quarter of a century; and now, in his old age, he was preparing a greater title to fame: he was writing a book.

The book was written in Italian and entitled *Dell’Arcano del Mare*, the Secret of the Sea. What a marvellous book it is! An encyclopedia into which he poured the sum of all his knowledge and experience of marine geography, cartography, ship – building, navigation, harbours, dockyards, fortification, naval strategy, all lavishly, illustrated with elegant engravings of ‘naval architecture’, nautical and astronomical instruments, battle formations, maps and ships: in particular, the designs of his own ships – his ‘galleys royal’ his ‘counter – galliasses’, his great flagship the *San Giovanni Battista*, ‘the Terror of the Turks’, with its 64 guns, and the famous *gallizabras* which, he believed, would make a prince absolute at home and invincible abroad. The work was dedicated to the reigning Grand Duke and published in Florence in 1646 – 7 in three volumes, the last of them a maritime atlas of the whole world, the first of its kind. It was this splendid work, which I first lit upon many years ago, in the library of this house, that first led me to study the extraordinary career of its author: hence my choice of topic on returning here. Twelve years after Dudley’s death – he died in 1649, a few months after the execution of Charles I – a second edition of the book was published, even grander than the first. This second edition was prefaced by a facsimile of the imperial diploma of 1620, recognising the author as legitimate, hereditary Duke of Northumberland.

That document had presumably been supplied by Dudley's eldest surviving son, Don Carlo di Northumbria, as public proof of the ducal title which he had inherited and was now using in Italy. And why not in England too? Already in 1657 he had applied for denization of his whole family in England – with what success, I do not know.<sup>13</sup> That was in the time of Oliver Cromwell. But by now Charles II had been restored: might he not feel some sympathy with a fellow exile whose father too had been deprived of his rights? The omens must have seemed good at that time. One of Charles II's first acts, after his restoration, had been to restore the dukedom of Somerset to the Seymour family; so why not that of Northumberland to the Dudleys? The two dukedoms stood on exactly the same footing. Of course there was still the Percy earldom; but that, as Carlo would point out, was not a real obstacle – there were good precedents – and anyway a few years later, in 1670, it was removed: the Percy earldom once again became extinct, this time from natural causes. So the way was cleared; and sure enough, in that year Carlo wrote to Charles II, signing himself as 'Duke Dudley of Northumberland' and setting out his claim to his English dukedom and his seat in the House of Lords.<sup>14</sup>

It was a reasoned and persuasive letter – if only it had come from someone else. For unfortunately, Carlo's past history was rather checkered. It included burglary, armed robbery, brigandage, and time spent in a Florentine prison. However, his letter was difficult to answer, and so Charles II as usual took the easy way out: he did not answer it. But Carlo did not give up. Seven years later he came to England, turned up at the House of Lords, and, in the presence of the King, demanded his seat. Some good-tempered badinage followed but 'the mad duke of Northumberland, as he calls himself' was not admitted.<sup>15</sup> He returned to Florence, where he would die, nine years later, once again in prison. By that time Charles II had acted. He had made his own illegitimate son Earl, and then Duke, of Northumberland. That blocked the Dudley claim, but at the risk for the Percies, of establishing a new dynasty of anti-dukes.

Early in the 18th century the Dudley claimants died out. But it would have been against their nature to die out quietly. Their last members exhibited, severally, the various characters of that remarkable family: ruthlessness, *panache*, amorous irregularity,

ducal aspirations. Duke Carlo's daughter was 'the famous adventuress' Cristina di Northumbria, whose erotic escapades scandalised and delighted the chattering classes of all Italy. Her daughter Adelaide ended as a genuine English Duchess – Duchess of Shrewsbury. Her son Ferdinando was hanged for murder at Tyburn – in a silken cord with gold threads, having driven to the gallows in proper style, as a nobleman, in his own armigerous coach.

Meanwhile the other threats to the Percy family had evaporated. Charles II's new Duke of Northumberland had conveniently died without heirs. So had the disreputable Jacobite Duke of Northumberland created by James II after his deposition. James Percy the trunkmaker, who had been giving trouble by his claims since the extinction of the earldom, had been finally crushed by the heavy hand of the House of Lords – condemned to stand in Westminster Hall with a label pinned to his breast describing him as 'the false and scandalous pretender to the earldom of Northumberland'.<sup>16</sup> That was in 1689, the year of the Glorious Revolution which made the world safe for aristocracy. Soon, while the Italianised dukes, in Tuscany as in England, were almost completely forgotten<sup>17</sup> a new line of Percies, their days in the dog-house over, having clung to most of their estates and seen off all their rivals, would return at last to their long abandoned and almost derelict castle of Alnwick, take advantage of the rising tide of gothic romanticism popularised by their chaplain Dr Thomas Percy (*né* Piercy from Bridgnorth), and assume their place, which they have kept ever since, as authentic and uncontested Dukes both of and in Northumberland.

## Notes

1. I have examined the case of John Dudley, the bishopric and the coal-mines in my article 'The Bishopric of Durham and the Capitalist Reformation', *Durham University Journal*, March 1946; reprinted *ibid.*, April 1967.
2. On this see J.A. Williamson, *Maritime Enterprise 1485 – 1558, 1913*.
3. See James Lees-Milne, *Tudor Renaissance*, 1951, ch. IV; John Summerson *Architecture in Britain*, 1953, ch.II; Maurice Howard, *The Early Tudor Country House*, 1987.
4. For the career of Robert Dudley, see (Vaughan Thomas) *The Italian Biography of Sir Robert Dudley*, 1856; J. Temple Leader, *The life of Sir Robert Dudley Earl of Warwick and Duke of Northumberland*, Florence 1895; Sir George Warner, *The Voyage of Sir Robert Dudley to the West Indies*, Hakluyt Society 1909; Arthur Gold Lee, *Son of Leicester*, 1964. 'A.M. Crinò, 'Il Duca di Northumbria in Toscana', *English Miscellany*, xvi, 28 – 29, Rome 1981, pp. 19 – 59.

5. The case against Dudley's claim is set out in Sir N.H. Nicolas, *Report of Proceedings in the claim to the Barony of de l'Isle* (1829); Warner *op. cit.*, Introduction; and summarised in G.E.C[okayne]. *Complete Peerage*, VIII, 550 – 1. *s.v.* Leicester, Earl of.

6. Horace Walpole, *A Catalogue of the Royal and Noble Authors of England* (1758).

7. The imperial diploma is printed in full in Vaughan Thomas, *op. cit.*, pp. 85 – 9, and J. Temple Leader, *op. cit.*, pp. 173 – 9.

8. Among those who reported personal visits to him are Lord Herbert of Cherbury (The Life of Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury, 1770, pp. 106 – 7); The Rev John Bargrave, (in *Pope Alexander VII and the College of Cardinals*, Camden Soc. 1867) and an unnamed friend of Sir William Dugdale, as reported by him in a letter among the Leveson MSS., p. 175. (Hist. MSS. Commission, *5th Report*, Duke of Sutherland's MSS., p. 175).

9. The alleged patent is printed in full in Sir W. Dugdale, *Baronage of England* (1676) ii, p. 225. from the original shown to him in 1670, after the 'Duchess's' death, by her only surviving daughter and sole executrix, Katherine Lady Leveson. It is reprinted by J. Leader Temple, *op. cit.*, pp. 173 – 7.

10. For the petition of Lady Dudley and her daughters, see *Cal.S.P. Dom.* 1660 – 1. For its reception by Charles II, see the confidential reports of Sir William Dugdale to Mr Langley, the agent of Sir Richard Leveson (the 'Duchess's' son-in-law) in HMC *5th Report*, pp. 177 – 8. The daughters, Dugdale reported, were 'highly pleased' with the success of the operation and took advice from him on ducal etiquette, but were disappointed that they were not entitled to coronets. For further details see W. Hamper (ed), *The Life, Diary and Correspondence of Sir William Dugdale* (1829), pp. 131, 386 – 7. The inscriptions on the tombs set up by the Duchess are given by Vaughan Thomas *op. cit.* Thomas was rector of Stoneleigh and dutifully commemorated the benefactions of the Duchess and her daughters; but even he was taken aback by their snobism: as he remarks of one of the daughters, 'it seems as if the desire of recording noble connection had got the better of all her right recollections' (p.104). See also the article of Horace Round, 'The True Story of The Somerset Patent', in *Academy*, 8 Dec 1883.

11. Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

12. It is absurdly unprofessional in form and also contains errors of fact unimaginable in a genuine patent of 1644. Not only is the imperial diploma materially misunderstood: in claiming that it has been 'perused by our late Earl Marshal and heralds' it ascribes to Charles I an anachronism. The only Earl Marshal who could have perused, before 1644, a document issued in 1620 was the Earl of Arundel. In 1644 he was not 'late': he was still alive (though in Italy) and still Earl Marshal. Charles I would have known that.

The fraudulency of the patent is further indicated by the fact that Sir Edward Walker (Garter King of Arms) and Sir Edward Nicholas (Secretary of State), who, for whatever reason, supported the petition to Charles II, could not persuade him that it was not, as he believed should 'a counterfeit'. Since both had been in Oxford, in those offices, in 1644, their authority would have been decisive. Clearly they were unable to back their present support with that authority, and the King yielded in the end to a different kind of persuasion.

The part played by Dugdale is somewhat enigmatic. He must have had his suspicions. But he was a friend of the family and was not directly involved with the petition. So he merely reported the progress of the case, in strict confidence and with dead-pan objectivity, to their agent. Of course, once the King had decided, the grant became valid, and as a herald Dugdale, dutifully recorded it in the Earl Marshal's Book in the College of Arms (see Sir N.H. Nicolas, *op. cit.*, pp. 171 - 2, 251 - 5).

13. *Cal. S.P. Dom* 1657 - 8, pp 59 - 60.

14. Carlo sent the letter to Lord Fauconberg, asking him to forward it to the King; which I presume that he did. (Hist. MSS., *Var.coll.*, ii, 142)

15. Hist. MSS. Comm. *Duke of Rutland's MSS*, ii, 42. Carlo apparently claimed his right also as 'a Plantagenet' How he would have justified this claim is not clear. John Dudley, Duke of Northumberland, was the stepson of Arthur Plantagenet, viscount Lisle, the illegitimate son of Edward IV. Perhaps Carlo's genealogical information was slightly confused.

16. *Lords' Journals*, xiv, 440. J.G. Nicholls, *Collectanea Topographica et Genealogica*, vi, pp. 266 - 83.

17. After the 17th-century notices by Dugdale, incidental to his *Antiquities of Warwickshire* (1656) and *Baronage of England* (1676), which are based on the evidence of 'Duchess' Dudley, and by Antony Wood, in his *Athenae Oxonienses* (iii, pp. 258 - 262) acquired from Dudley's son Don Carlo (which two works are the basis of the notices in *Biographia Britannica* and Horace Walpole's *Royal and Noble Authors*), nothing was added to the history of Robert Dudley until the Rev. Vaughan Thomas, rector of Stoneleigh, embarked on his researches, which were printed privately and posthumously in 1856. In Italy (as Thomas complained) Dudley was totally neglected; serious study there was begun by the expatriate Englishman J. Leader Temple, who pursued the subject in the Tuscan archives and published his documented work in 1895.