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Edward I: New Interpretations

Andy King and Andrew M. Spencer (eds.)

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Edward I: New Interpretations. Edited by Andy King and Andrew M. Spencer. Woodbridge: York Medieval Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-903153-72-7. x + 192 pp. £60.00.

Edward I is probably one of few British medieval rulers who members of the public could securely identify. Hollywood is the reason for this, rather than avid historical interest. What Mel Gibson's 1995 film *Braveheart* lacked in accuracy, it made up for in dramatic story-telling and memorable set-pieces. One scene from the film does much to cement Edward's socialized identity as "Longshanks" and the "Hammer of the Scots." As the English army prepares to engage the forces of William Wallace in battle, the King, played theatrically by Patrick McGoohan, orders his archers to fire. Informed that the arrows could hit the front lines of his troops, Edward, steely-eyed and chillingly cool, responds, "the losses are acceptable."

Even for medievalists, Edward, as man and monarch, has proved difficult to discern. A *New Interpretations* volume that follows those on King John and King Stephen, similarly complex and controversial medieval rulers, is therefore welcome. Helpfully in a book of nine chapters, which cover aspects as disparate as Edward's daughters, his personal devotions and discourse through letters, the editors identify five unifying themes in their introduction: Edward as a man, Edward as an administrator king, Edward and justice, Edward's interactions with his nobility, and Edward's personal agency. The first and fifth themes probably offer the most unique insights into Edward's reign, for these areas have tended to be neglected in (British) medieval scholarship for all rulers.

Louise Wilkinson's chapter on Edward's daughters reveals how the King's politicking did not prevent him from being protective. The strong bonds that existed between father and children are evidenced by the gifts they gave to him (103), as much as, perhaps, the "mutually supportive letters" the siblings shared among themselves when father and son quarrelled in 1305 (103). It is the dominance of Edward's mother, Eleanor of Provence, however, that is particularly striking. Eleanor appears to have scrutinized John of Brabant before his marriage to Edward's daughter Margaret (92), and persuaded her son that his daughter Mary should enter a priory in Amesbury, rather than Fontevraud Abbey (95).

The book's chapters also offer new insights into the relationship between Edward and his father, Henry III. The political style and capabilities of these monarchs are conventionally viewed as a series of opposites. If the son was steadfast, strict, and respected, his father dithered, forgave, and let enemies multiply. The book's chapters suggest that father and son cared for one another and developed an effective political relationship as Edward came of age. Rod Billaud shows that Henry rarely intervened in his son's judicial affairs, presumably because of a belief in his son's judicial competency (18). Charles Farris argues that Henry was instrumental in encouraging his son's devotion to the Blessed Virgin, which lasted throughout his life (126). It is also tempting to speculate on the extent to which Edward learned political lessons directly from his father. In her chapter on the King's letters, Kathleen Neal remarks that Edward "often returned" to the phrase "the debtor in justice" (155). Neal does not connect this phrase to Henry III, but it does

appear in his letters. Andy King's chapter on the non-existent civil war of 1297 certainly makes it clear that Edward was aware of "perils of the past" (173), but it is tempting to speculate that Edward's lessons in kingship owed more to his father's direct input than has previously been thought. Some chapters, notably that by Lars Kjær, offer new evidence of Henry III's political resolve when dealing with his earls, so there is more than wishful thinking to this thought experiment (82–83).

For a King loaded with soubriquets, contemporary and posthumous, the book's chapters are insightful in showing how Edward appears to have worked to distance himself from criticisms of his youthful character, when he was likened to a leopard, "changing his word and promise" (141). Compelling evidence, particularly from legal records, shows he was frequently fair, firm, and objective, with a notable exception being the "rigid approach" he adopted towards his Scottish magnates, as discussed by Michael Brown (123). However, the extent to which the King's administrative and legal reforms truly reveal his agency is difficult to gauge. Huscroft's chapter shows that Edward continued to rely on great ministers, and granted them considerable autonomy. Careful reading of government records and letters, particularly in chapters by Billaud, Burt, Kjær and Neal, reveal an interested, energetic and adaptive monarch, but the insights offered nevertheless serve as reminder—and caution—that some aspects of thirteenth and fourteenth century history are not easily recoverable because of how long ago they occurred, and because of the formulaic nature of the evidence that survives.

The unique insights this book offers into Edward's character and kingship are due to two factors. First, the new study of, or re-engagement with, royal records. At the core of most chapters is a penetrative analysis of little-studied or long-sidelined documents from The National Archives, Kew, and regional archives. The records of the royal wardrobe and the series of Special Correspondence prove particularly revealing. Chapters by Huscroft and Burt reveal the insights that documents long available in print can provide when seen with fresh eyes. Second, and connected to this point, the book is deliberately conceived to "showcase the talent of a new and diverse generation of historians" (6). Aside from the interpretative revelations that this decision facilitates, an enjoyable stylistic consequence—at least for this reviewer—is a series of very readable chapters in which authors offer something of their characters. For example, Burt acknowledges the "(painful!) personal experience" of working with medieval legal records (50); Huscroft includes a brief story of a charter of liberties eaten by a pig (33), and King concludes his account of the anti-climactic crisis of 1297 with a pun, which the reviewer will not spoil in advance (183). By demonstrating that the writing and conveyance of history can be creative and engaging, the book's contributors are doing much to enthuse and inspire students to follow their lead. This is especially important for medieval history, which will always require hard-won documentary and language skills.

In sum, the book is effective in complicating the socialized view of Edward's greatness, judicial impartiality, and stinginess. Nevertheless, and perhaps inevitably, the shadow of existing scholarship, and luminaries, looms large. Most of the chapters are framed by an acceptance of Edward's competency, regardless of the criticisms they raise.

The cast of the historiographical shadow is most apparent in the book's Englishness. For a King who went on crusade, negotiated several continental European marriages for his daughters (certainly more than his immediate predecessors), and remained overseas between 1286 and 1289—the longest period that a reigning English monarch had been absentee since the reign of Richard I—the book provides few new interpretations about Edward's kingship in a wider geographical perspective. If the book therefore allows "new talent" to shine, it also demonstrates that new methodologies are simultaneously required to enable these voices on Edward's reign—or of the medieval period more broadly—to reach widely and to be accepted.

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