Reviews in History

Published on *Reviews in History* (http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews)

Edward III

Review Number:
1229
Publish date:
Thursday, 29 March, 2012
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ISBN:
9780300119107
Date of Publication:
2011
Price:
£30.00
Pages:
644pp.
Publisher:
Yale University Press
Publisher url:
Place of Publication:
New Haven, CT
Reviewer:
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What is it about Edward III that makes his political personality so elusive? Is it the fact that Shakespeare?s play about him has sat unrecognised for so long and lies outside the canon? That would certainly help to explain why Edward?s mighty victory at Crécy is less well known than Henry V?s at Agincourt, despite, arguably, being of greater historical importance. Or is it perhaps that the reign is so long and so event-filled as to frustrate the making of broad, over-arching generalisations? Or is it something else again ? perhaps the drama of the king?s long, slow, decline into senility and his infatuation with the notorious Alice Perrers, episodes associated with his closing years which have both damaged his reputation and blinded us to his achievements? The case of Henry V?s reign shows how important it is for a ruler?s posthumous reputation to die young and at the height of his powers.

Whatever the reason may be, the achievements of Edward?s reign have left a distinctly fuzzy impression on the English historical imagination. It is striking how difficult scholars have found it to write a satisfactory academic life of the king. Mark Ormrod reminds us at the beginning of his book that the task of writing Edward?s biography for the Yale English Monarchs series has defeated two scholars before him. Over 40 years ago the contract for the book was awarded to the late John Le Patourel in recognition of his original and penetrating articles on Edward?s relations with France. Le Patourel, however, died in 1981, without

even beginning work, his interests having moved on and his commitment to the project having deserted him. On his death the late A. R. Myers was invited to take on the commission. Myers made a reasonable start on the job, sketching a narrative of the king?s life which he anticipated would form the first part of the book. He too, however, shrank from what lay ahead, and died before completing the task. Mark Ormrod himself was invited to take on the commission in the late 1980s and now, nearly a quarter of a century later, he has brought it to a triumphant conclusion. Ormrod?s book is the full and authoritative biography of the king that we have been waiting for, a magisterial achievement of over 700 pages. It is a book to linger over, to return to, and to enjoy. Above all, it is a book which presents a clear and convincing view of the king who is its subject. Edward emerges from Ormrod?s pages as bold, assertive, confident and masterful ? as ?Edward the Great? in the words of one of Ormrod?s chapter headings. For Ormrod, Edward is one of the outstanding kings of English history.

Ormrod develops his interpretation in a biography of some 20 carefully interwoven chapters, in which foreign and domestic themes alternate, and story-telling and analysis are blended in the form of a ?thickened narrative?. Ormrod begins his account by tracing Edward?s childhood and upbringing in the chaotic reign of his father, Edward II, suggesting that some of his later high ambition may have arisen from the need to overcome the insecurity of an unhappy youth (p. 25). Ormrod takes us through the episode of the king?s arrest of his mother, Isabella, and her lover, Mortimer, at Nottingham in 1330 and describes his later creation of a bold, purposeful monarchy, which brought a new stability to English life, healing the wounds in the body politic and laying the foundations for future military success. Ormrod goes on to trace the chequered opening stages of the Hundred Years War, showing how Edward?s political and military ambitions drained his exchequer of money and how he made enemies of his chief minister, Archbishop Stratford, and elements in the political class by insisting on fiscal exactions that were both unrealistic and unreasonable. In his central chapters Ormrod argues that Edward quickly recovered from the mistakes of these early years, and that in the later 1340s and 1350s he established an accord with the nobility and parliamentary Commons that provided the basis for a new political consensus. Rejecting any suggestion that, as the price to be paid for this, Edward simply negotiated away the powers of the prerogative, Ormrod maintains that Edward?s rule in the 1350s was bold, vigorous and exacting. He shows that in his conduct of foreign policy the king could be slippery, devious and manipulative, while nonetheless always keeping a clear end in view. Cherishing an exalted international role for the English monarchy, Edward sought the re-creation of something like the old Angevin empire in the west and north of France and the establishment of junior members of the English royal house in positions of rule in the British Isles. The author concedes that Edward was slow in adjusting to the problems raised by peacetime rule after the treaty of Bretigny in 1360, and from 1369 was prevented by infirmity from offering the kind of leadership called for by the reopening of war. However, in Ormrod?s estimation, he succeeded in establishing a paradigm of vigorous chivalric kingship which was to provide the benchmark of kingly rule for the rest of the Middle Ages.

As he narrates this story of kingly bravura and brilliance, Ormrod sweeps the reader up and carries him or her along by the sheer force of his prose. The tone is relentlessly upbeat throughout. Only occasionally does he allow the pace to slacken ? as, for example, when discussing the technicalities of feudal tenure in Aquitaine or the minutiae of English royal finance. Ormrod?s writing style, while firmly academic in character, is generally fluent and elegant. Lapses into cliché are few, although Americanisms creep in, such as ?upcoming? for ?forthcoming? and ?met with? for ?met?.

What, overall, are we to make of Ormrod?s scholarly achievement in this book? The task of writing a life of Edward III, as we have seen, is, to say the least, a challenging one. Ormrod sets out the difficulties that he faced along the way in an eloquent passage near the beginning. The events, environments and personalities of the king?s life, he writes, have come down to us as a series of snatched moments and impressionistic vignettes. Only tiny fragments remain of the buildings, fabrics and furnishings that provided the spatial contexts and ceremonial trappings of Edward?s court. The material that survives takes the form, for the most part, of the written word ? the chronicles and treatises of the monks and clerks, and the voluminous records assembled by the royal government. These texts and documents, however, generally represent the king at some remove, the English court lacking a house-historian like the Religieux de St-Denis who could write

about monarchy from close observation. Moreover, most of the records generated and accumulated by the crown were formulaic, their artificiality accentuated by the fact that the majority were written in academic Latin. All these problems, as Ormrod admits, make for major challenges of interpretation.

How successfully has Ormrod responded to the difficulties which he describes? It should be said right at the outset that what Ormrod has given us is an absolutely splendid book, wide-ranging, rich in insight, and built on extensive archival research. Ormrod has worked wonders with the mass of chronicles and unprinted archival material through which he has trawled. He draws on this ample resource not only to provide telling incidental detail but also to bring characters to life, and to shed light on human foibles and sensibilities. All this makes for a rich and vivid narrative.

Where Ormrod?s achievement may perhaps be called into question is in his handling of the tricky matter of agency. As Ormrod concedes, the great majority of government records in this period are, in his phrase, ?formulaic? ? that is to say, they are impersonal: the records of decisions made in the king?s name, but not necessarily made by him personally. The role actually played by the king in the process of political decision-making is unclear. As Ormrod remarks at another point, rulers in the Middle Ages were not expected to involve themselves deeply in the routine business of state: that was the work of their officers, ministers and clerks (p. 377). Moreover, as he adds, Edward was anyway not the kind of king to want to immerse himself in this sort of detail. There is consequently a danger that we may end up assigning to Edward the credit for achievements and decisions which were not actually his but those of the agents who served him. Ormrod glosses over this difficulty by saying, as he does later, that medieval commentators would hardly have recognised a distinction between a king and a kingly regime ? for them, the success or failure of the regime was always determined by the success or failure of the king himself (p. 598). In the case of a king as faithfully served by his ministers and nobles as Edward III was, it is obviously important to try to establish precisely where agency in decision-making lay. The assumption that Ormrod makes in this book is that it lay principally with the king himself: the achievements of his reign are essentially his. Can this assumption be sustained?

The matter can be approached by considering one of the most familiar episodes in the reign, the foundation of the Order of the Garter in 1348. Ormrod takes us ably through the chain of events that led to the emergence of the Order in its final form ? the king?s creation of a Round Table of 300 knights in 1344, his sudden abandonment of that idea a few months later, the creation instead of a small elite knightly Order, the curious selection as the Order?s symbol of an item of female clothing and, finally, the adoption of St George as patron saint of the Order and the establishment of St George?s Chapel, Windsor Castle, as the Order?s spiritual home. At no point in his discussion of the process of foundation does Ormrod ever explicitly address the matter of agency. The sequence of events unfolds naturally, and the assumption is made that the king was the prime mover. Ormrod maintains that the Order and Chapel together constitute ?the most enduring of Edward III?s foundations? (p. 308).

The story can be told in a slightly different way, however, by assigning to the king?s cousin, Henry of Grosmont, Duke of Lancaster, responsibility for many of the key ideas. Specifically, the initiative for replacing the earlier, more loosely organised Order with a small elite fellowship may well have been his. The reason for so believing is that in the early 1340s Duke Henry had fought in Castile where he would have learned about the elite knightly company recently founded by King Alfonso, the Order of the Band.(1) This Order supplied a model for the Garter in that it was a relatively small company, all of whose members were bound in close relation to the king, acting as a buttress to royal power. Significantly, the Order also made use of an item of personal attire as its device, in this case a sash worn over the shoulder. It may well have been the information which Duke Henry brought back from Castile which was instrumental in shaping Edward?s thoughts.

The further suggestion can be ventured that it was Duke Henry who proposed that St George be made patron of the Order. The essential clue here is provided by the saint?s appearance on a brass with which Duke Henry was associated, that of Sir Hugh Hastings at Elsing in Norfolk. In 1346 Edward had entrusted Hastings with the command of a force in Flanders whose task was to distract and divert the French while he

himself landed in Normandy. In the following year Hastings died after contracting dysentery at the siege of Calais and Duke Henry was one of the two executors who assumed the task of commissioning his memorial brass in Elsing church.(2) The brass, one of the finest of the age, is rich in chivalric reference, and what is striking is that the figure of St George, riding triumphant over a stricken dragon, is shown in the canopy. If the inclusion of the saint ? remarkable for this relatively early date ? is indicative of the duke?s interest in the cult, then quite possibly he could have been responsible for its encouragement at court. It is worth remembering in this connection that in 1344 the duke had visited Avignon, where he would almost certainly have seen Simone Martini?s frescoes of St George and the dragon in the porch of the cathedral there.

To make these observations is not to question Edward?s responsibility for the establishment of the Order of the Garter in its final form ? the king was after all sovereign of the Order ? but rather to suggest that he may have been responding to ideas and suggestions fed to him by others, and that the role of these other actors needs to be recognised.

A similar questioning approach can be taken to the evolution of the new military tactics which were to bear fruit in the great victories over the French at Crécy and Poitiers. Again, Ormrod identifies all the key elements involved ? in this case, the use by the English of mixed retinues of men-at-arms and archers, the deployment of a defensive formation in the field, the use of heavy longbow fire to mow down the advancing enemy cavalry and the unleashing of the dismounted men-at-arms in the melée. Nowhere, however, does he offer any detailed discussion of how or by whom these tactics were developed; they just happen. The story is presented as one of process ? in his words, one of ?the historical processes ... which reached their culmination in this period? (p. 596). Insofar as any agent is identified, that person or instrument is represented institutionally as ?the crown?, a formula which neatly sidesteps the need to consider any question of agency at all. It may well be possible, however, to identify one of the key thinkers involved in developing these new ideas, and that is the king?s companion-in-arms, William de Bohun, earl of Northampton. Northampton was present at virtually all of the key engagements of the period ? those in Scotland in the 1330s, in Brittany in the 1340s and finally at the battle of Crécy itself in 1346. It is particularly significant that Northampton was the commander in charge at Morlaix, a battle in which all the new elements were brought together. As a number of chroniclers indicate, the English fought defensively and dismounted, and they dug pits to act as man traps in front of them. Edward is known to have held Northampton in very high regard. Ormrod admits that Edward himself was a man of limited imagination and generally conventional outlook. It is unlikely, therefore, that he would have thought up all the bright, new ideas himself; other captains would have contributed from their experience. It is no criticism of Ormrod?s achievement to say that a lengthier discussion of agency would have made for a more inclusive account which could have recognised the role of some of the other actors involved.

The problem to which this discussion draws attention is one faced by virtually all who attempt to write the life of an English king active before the 15th century. Indeed, it can be said to be a problem faced by all scholars so bold as to attempt the biography of any political figure at all before that time. The difficulty, as Ormrod presents it, is that the sources, by their nature impersonal and formulaic, leave agency and authorship unclear. For some kings in the following century, Henry VI for example in his majority, we have sources such as letters issued under the signet, the king?s secret seal, which after a fashion, allow royal involvement in policy to be unpicked. No such sources survive for Edward III?s reign. Ormrod?s approach in his book is to take a maximalist view of Edward?s involvement in government: he assumes that the king was responsible for virtually all the main decisions that mattered. It is not altogether clear that this is a view which can be sustained on the evidence which he himself provides.

One other issue raised by the book is of a more specific nature, and that is Ormrod?s overall interpretation of Edward?s achievements as king. Throughout his account Ormrod takes an exceedingly favourable view of Edward and his activities; his approach is almost panegyric in tone. Ormrod presents Edward as a wholly positive force in English politics, a shrewd and beneficent king, vigorous and purposeful, expansive in his vision (?expansive? is one of Ormrod?s favourite words), and committed to the contemporary code of chivalry. While he recognises that Edward suffered undoubted intellectual limitations, Ormrod nonetheless emphasises his powers of leadership and his capacity to gather around him a body of men who both shared

his vision and were willing to help him achieve it on the terms that he laid down. In Salisbury and Northampton among the nobles, and Edington and Offord among the civil servant class, he found kindred spirits whose trust he inspired and whose counsel he respected.

This is a bold interpretation which takes us far from the old, today largely discredited, view that Edward III showed weakness in the face of magnate self-interest and was guilty of surrendering the crown?s long-term interests to secure fiscal and logistical support for the French war. It is nonetheless an interpretation consistent with the old orthodoxy in one significant respect: it still sees Edward as essentially collegiate and companionable, a seeker after consensus, and someone who worked with the grain of political society rather than against it.

At times, however, it is possible on the evidence which Ormrod himself presents to read Edward?s character in a rather different and less favourable light. In the abrasive treatment which he meted out to Archbishop Stratford in the crisis of 1340?1 he revealed himself as bullying, intolerant, aggressive and inflexible, unappreciative of the efforts of a faithful servant. In the 1340s and 1350s, when he insisted on the levying of public taxation at a time of widespread popular suffering he revealed himself to his subjects as callous and uncaring, contemptuous of their well-being. In the years after 1360 when, following the making of the treaty of Bretigny, he insisted on the levying of taxes while he nonetheless enjoyed a fat income on the side from ransoms, he showed himself devious, deceitful and manipulative. At times in his reign he showed no hesitation in trampling over those who had incurred his displeasure or for one reason or another had opposed his will. In 1355 he sentenced Bishop Lisle of Ely to the immediate confiscation of his temporalities for his crime of falling out with the king?s kinswoman, Blanche, Lady Wake. The king?s confidence in his rectitude and his unwillingness to admit error remind one of none so much as his grandfather, Edward I, in his last, unhappy years after 1297. To suggest this comparison is hardly to flatter the later Edward. Edward gives the impression at times of not so much directing his government consensually, in the way that Ormrod describes, as straining it to breaking point and placing quite impossible demands on his subjects. It is tempting to wonder if Edward might not have been storing up problems for his successor in much the same way that Edward I had done half a century before.

Ormrod has written a powerful, well informed biography of Edward III which presents a highly favourable view of his achievements as king. It is a book which is consistent in giving the king the benefit of almost every possible doubt and offering a sympathetic interpretation of his actions where perhaps a less charitable one might be possible. Ormrod defends his arguments with vigour, style and panache. Some readers may perhaps harken after the spirit of Cromwell?s instruction to Peter Lely: to be painted ?warts and all?. Whether or not that is the case, however, this is a book which all readers will find vivid, informative and rewarding. Ormrod?s sheer mastery of his sources informs every page of his text. Here we have the long-awaited authoritative biography of the king for our generation.

Notes

1. D?A.J.D. Boulton, *The Knights of the Crown. The Monarchical Orders of Knighthood in Later Medieval Europe, 1325-1520* (Woodbridge, 1987), p. 109.Back to (1)
2. Hastings, Sir Hugh?, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and B. Harrison (60 vols., Oxford, 2004), 25, pp. 764-5 (by A. Ayton).Back to (2)

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