

War Cruel and Sharp. English Strategy under Edward III, 1327-1360.

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It has been fashionable to downplay the importance of battles in medieval military history. 'Most campaigns did not end in battle largely because both commanders were reluctant to risk battle', was John Gillingham's verdict. He pointed out that Henry II never fought a battle, yet had a great military reputation. Richard I fought only one battle in the West, as did his rival Philip Augustus. Wars, in this interpretation, were fought with the intention of devastating territory, and capturing towns and castles, not of risking all in the field of battle. It would be possible to write a history of the many battles that did not happen, when armies faced each other but decided that prudence was the best course of action.

If battles are unpopular, so also is strategy when the concept is applied to the middle ages. In the new *Oxford Companion to Military History* (ed. R. Holmes, Oxford, 2001), it is suggested that because medieval armies were not permanent in character, and were capable of engaging in sustained combat for no more than a few hours, 'the strategic pursuit or "exploitation" necessary to capitalize on tactical success did not exist.' It would therefore 'be wrong to imagine that anything like "strategic planning" existed before the nineteenth century.'

Clifford Rogers in this study will have none of this. His is a very different approach. The aim of his book is simple. It is 'to re-establish Edward III's military reputation' and to demonstrate that his military strategy was intended to force his enemies to fight him in battle. As befits the subject, this is a combative book. He adopts a chronological approach, starting with the unsuccessful Weardale campaign of 1327, and concluding with the expedition of 1359-60 to Reims and beyond. Although the historical method is essentially that of narrative, he does not follow Jonathan Sumption's example and provide a full blow-by-blow account of the wars. The Brittany war of the early 1340s, for example, is dismissed in a sentence as 'opportunistic sniping'; attention is primarily given to the Scottish wars of the early part of Edward III's reign, to the strategy of the early years of the Hundred Years War, 1337-40, to the Crécy-Calais campaign of 1346-7, and to the

campaigns of 1355-6 and 1359-60. While questions about recruitment and supply are of course fully brought into the discussion, the book does not aim to analyse the logistics of fourteenth-century warfare.

One of the many strengths of the book is the use made of a wide range of chronicle material, and notably of several unprinted works. An unprinted Anglo-Norman Brut, for example, provides a fascinating speech allegedly made at the battle of Dupplin Moor. Throughout, the book is very solidly based on the sources, as the ample footnoting makes very clear. Unfortunately, there is all too little discussion of strategy in the surviving documents. There is nothing from this period similar to the advice on how to conduct a crusade addressed to Edward I, or like that of Pierre Dubois to Philip IV of France. Edward III had no Sir John Fastolf to write a memorandum like that of 1435 on the war. Contemporary letters about the war are of some help, but to a considerable extent it is necessary to deduce the strategy from the events. Did Edward intend from the first to invade Normandy in 1346, rather than relieve the siege of Aiguillon in Gascony? Rogers argues that he did, but while the case is a good one, it cannot be proven beyond doubt. It remains possible that he went to Normandy simply because many delays, in part caused by contrary winds, delayed the expedition so long that the Gascon plan had to be abandoned.

Of course royal propaganda made much of the king's desire for battle. There is a sense in which the challenges exchanged between Edward III and his rival Philip VI amounted to a game of chicken - which king would back down, and fail to engage? Rogers' view, and he is surely right, is that it was the French who were reluctant to fight. That was certainly the case in 1339 near Buironfosse. Philip VI of France had far more to lose than Edward, and it was a big risk to attack an army drawn up in a well-prepared position. Again, outside Calais in 1347, it made little sense for Philip to attack the English. The technique of besieging a town so as to compel opponents to risk battle in order to relieve it had worked at Berwick in 1333, but did not serve Edward III well subsequently.

Rogers' case is easier to make for some campaigns than for others. Not all of Edward's campaigns were battle-seeking. The infamous 'Burnt Candlemas', with the savage destruction of Lothian early in 1356, was intended to punish the Scots, rather than to bring them to battle. In Normandy in the same year, Henry of Lancaster avoided battle with the French, when he was at a severe disadvantage of numbers. Crucial to the argument, however, is the Black Prince's campaign that culminated in his victory at Poitiers. The traditional view is that the Prince was outmanoeuvred by the French as he was retreating towards Gascony, and forced to turn and fight. Rogers has to admit that the sources for this campaign are 'mutually contradictory'. His view is that the Black Prince was prepared to fight if he had to, and that the conventional analysis is not justified. In the negotiations before the battle the Prince was apparently prepared to accept humiliating terms: a massive indemnity to be paid, return of all prisoners, and a promise not to campaign against the French king for seven years. Rogers emphasises, however, the qualification that the agreement was to be subject to the English king's agreement, and further points out that it was not through fear of battle that the English offered terms. What they did not want was to be starved out by the French. The case is well argued. The Chandos herald is the one source to suggest that the Prince would have avoided battle if he could; the majority of chronicles are clear that he was eager to fight.

The diplomatic background to the campaign of 1359-60 is carefully analysed. French rejection of the second treaty of London gave Edward III no option other than to fight. The expedition itself had the siege and capture of the city of Reims as its immediate aim, but when the English army approached Paris in the spring of 1360, it is again clear that Edward III intended to draw the French into battle, forming up his army and sending heralds to invite them to fight. The ploy, however, failed on this occasion, for the French had too much to lose. For them, a battle-avoiding strategy was what made sense, particularly at this stage of the war.

One possible difficulty with the thesis that the English strategy was battle-seeking is, of course, that their tactics did not articulate well with this. Their well-proven and effective method of fighting relied on the strength of dismounted troops formed up in a well-established defensive position. Any enemy, Scots or French, would have to be goaded into attack, or deluded into thinking that they had an advantage. Edward III and his commanders could not fight whenever they chose. This does not contradict the central argument of the book; it helps, however, to explain why there were not more battles, when battle was what the English

sought.

There are, of course, detailed points on which it is possible to disagree with Professor Rogers. To take one minor one, he asserts that on the Stanhope campaign the Scots position when the English attempted to engage them in battle was on the north bank of the river Wear. That seems unlikely. If Jean le Bel, who was an eyewitness, was correct in saying that the English marched towards the south from Blanchland to engage the Scots, and found a river between them and their enemy, the Scots were surely on the south bank. The evidence of John Barbour, who wrote his book on Robert Bruce very much later, is surely far less reliable than that of Le Bel.

Professor Rogers has written an impressive and lively study, properly based on a close reading of the sources. The footnotes alone are full of riches. It remains to be seen how far his analysis will affect interpretations of other periods, but it should certainly help to make historians rethink some of the established assumptions about the nature of medieval warfare. Strategic planning was not a nineteenth-century invention.

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