

A Great and Terrible King: Edward I and the Forging of Britain

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In October 1283, Edward I stood in a unique position. He had achieved a goal which had eluded his predecessors back to the time of the Conquest: the subjection of Wales. His military campaigns to assert his overlordship had begun six years previously, but now his dominance was final. This in itself was unique, but the episode had a more significant aspect. The take-over was sealed by the capture of the Welsh prince Dafydd ap Gruffudd and his imprisonment in London. Then followed his trial for treason, after which he was sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered; this brutal punishment was exacted for the first time in the nation's history, a sign that no traitor's life was worthy to be spared, noble or not. This was a break with the past for England and for Edward. Such was the measure of the man. Edward I was, in the title of Marc Morris's book, 'a mighty and terrible king'.

The latest biography of Edward I is a welcome one, though it is more likely to embellish the bookshelves of the public library than the studies of academics. Still, it is none the worse for that, for the subject of this biography has not enjoyed the same superstar status as, for instance, Henry VIII or Elizabeth I. Anything that brings the extraordinary achievements of this king to better notice is worthy to be praised. It is an interesting indictment of this lack of awareness of Edward I and his age that previous reviews of this book have shown a shocking historical ignorance. To quote but one example, an article which appeared in the *Daily Telegraph* described the king's father, Henry III, as 'pious but incompetent', an outrageous statement even if it contains a grain of truth; this reviewer then wrongly claimed that Morris' book was the first full biography of Edward for a century, and obsessed about his Scottish campaigns to the near-exclusion of his domestic achievements. Sadly, such views are not unique to this writer.

Edward I has for some time been considered a king lacking in personality, so far as modern audiences are

concerned. Fifty years ago, Sir Maurice Powicke wrote that ‘King Edward I stands apart in our history. We remember him, but not as a living man who stirs the imagination ... we think of him in terms of his works. He is the English Justinian and the Hammer of the Scots’.⁽¹⁾ This view of him is still fundamentally true today. L. F. Salzman in his narrative and popular biography of the king sought to address the issue, and self-consciously asserted that ‘in this study of one of our greatest kings I have tried to bring out his personality’.⁽²⁾ This contribution to the historical literature, unreferenced as it was, added more to the public knowledge of Edward than it enhanced academic wisdom. Nonetheless, his life did not receive another comprehensive treatment for another 20 years, when Michael Prestwich’s *Edward I* (1988) first appeared. Prestwich must be considered the living authority on Edward I, and his biography, since reprinted, represents his scholarly apotheosis. Indeed, the author of the current book humbly acknowledges his debt to Prestwich’s work in his preface.

For the scholar’s viewpoint, this work adds little to Prestwich’s work, but if Morris has achieved anything it is in fulfilling Powicke’s wish – he has brought the king to life. The indulgent biographer has always been prone to pardoning the faults of his subject and magnifying their admirable qualities to cover any shortcomings. Morris, however, has managed to restrain himself: he is no hagiographer. The public perception of Edward evokes images of a sober lawgiver or a courageous military leader. Morris allows us to see that he could also be uncompromising, self-interested, and duplicitous. Above all, he was a man of violent passions. At the battle of Evesham, where the rebel barons opposing his father’s rule were finally put to the sword, we learn that Edward suspended the normal conventions of chivalric combat. Knights and peers, normally only victims of kidnap and ransom, were to be given no quarter but to be slain as commoners. Such a command was militarily effective, if appalling to the medieval mind. As a result the confrontation was christened ‘the murder of Evesham’.

Morris also tells us of Edward’s youthful delinquencies and his desire for power. We hear how his youthful arrogance and self-confidence led him to reject the authority of his parents in order for him to gain some part in governance. Only age would bring the strict attitude to royal authority which characterised his later reign.

Edward was a formidable character, even by the standards of his time. He appears not to have feared anyone. His desire to obtain finances for his Scottish wars precipitated a constitutional crisis when he was unwilling to offer any political concessions in return. Nevertheless, when cornered, his response was typically bullish. Going on the attack was always his natural approach to defence. On one occasion the king accused his barons directly:

‘Do you think I am a child, or a deceiver?’ asked Edward angrily when ... his critics not only asked him to confirm the Charters [Magna Carta and the Forest Charter] but also required that their own seals be applied to the documents for greater security (p. 322).

The author has harnessed another formidable source, a weapon wielded – not always successfully – by many modern authors: the power of anecdote. Stephen Langton, archbishop of Canterbury (1207–28), remarked that ‘an illustrative anecdote [*exemplum*] is very often more effective than a polished, subtle phrase’. Drawn from a variety of chronicle sources, Morris recalls a number of these distinguishing stories. We hear of his miraculous escapes from death by lightning, poisoning in the Holy Land and Scottish snipers at the siege of Stirling. Similarly the stories of his compensating an esquire whom he attacked with a stick without provocation, and the cost of repairing one of his daughter’s coronets which he had thrown into the fire, illustrate his ready anger.

Morris has organised his material in chronological order, a self-conscious antidote to the thematic treatment of other authors. In addition to the appeal to a broader readership that this entails, the author notes that ‘the task of putting the events of Edward’s life in their correct order has led me to question existing orthodoxies more frequently than I had imagined might be necessary’ (p. xiii). Clearly the king’s wars in Wales and Scotland figure largely and give the book its subtitle, ‘the forging of Britain’. Still, the domestic

achievements of Edward in the administration of justice and the development of parliament can be easily seen.

This approach has also enabled the author to pay greater attention to the king's itinerary than other recent authors have been able to. An appreciation of Edward's movements and the reasons that underlie them are a key to understanding his actions. Here the explanation of how pilgrimages and parliaments, hunting and campaigning formed part of an ongoing series of progresses. In contrast to later rulers, who spent many months continuously at the same location, Edward was a restless and energetic king – a monarch on the move. His average rate of travel, indeed, was 20 miles a day, an impressive achievement considering the poor state of the roads and difficulty of transport.

In 1278 the king began an assault on financial fraud – in particular the clipping of coins in order to melt the shavings into new silver illegally. The Jewish community came under special scrutiny and as a result 'Edward executed half of the adult males in a minority population. Almost incidentally, he had committed the single biggest massacre of Jews in British history' (p. 171). The implication of genocidal tendencies on the part of Edward I must be regarded as hyperbole. While it is a fact that this number of Jews died as a result of his policies, this cannot be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to exterminate his non-Christian population. His later expulsion of the Jews from England reflect an anti-Semitism common to his age, but he had no murderous agenda, just a severe approach to justice. It is here that Morris over-indulges himself in overinterpreting the evidence, and fitting it to a sensationalist analysis.

Small details let down the book which should have been ironed out before publication. The number of typographical and spelling areas is questionable by such a large and well-respected publisher; it is unfortunate that the author has been poorly served in this respect, as it diminishes the professionalism of his work. Other issues are more directly his responsibilities, for instance his attitude towards dating. The medieval scholar will be keenly aware that the modern calendar year was not the main contemporary yardstick. The sacred year began with Advent, while the legal and economic year commenced on Lady Day (25 March). Yet Morris, after noting Edward's issue of writs in December 1299, summoning a parliament, talks of him 'having seen in the new century at Berwick' (p. 322); a slip of the mind, no doubt, but still a significant one. Far worse, and potential misleading to the reader, is the confusion of dates in the ecclesiastical calendar. Recalling Edward's escape from a near-fatal accident, when the floor of the room he was in collapsed, Morris observes that

the fact that it happened on Easter Sunday – the day of Christ's passion – must by itself have been seen as significant. Edward had been expressing his willingness to go on crusade – that is, to recover Jerusalem, the site of Christ's passion – for more than three years by this point (p. 209).

For a medieval historian to express such an ignorance of the feasts of the Church's year is shocking. Good Friday is of course the date of Christ's passion, Easter Sunday marking his *resurrection*. The ubiquitous appearance of ecclesiastical dating is found throughout medieval material and as such a recognition of the significance of religious festivals is a fundamental skill for a writer on this period.

A mistake prevalent amongst modern historians, of judging the past by the standards of the present, meets with indulgent treatment here. In 1278, Edward made a trip to Glastonbury, the site of King Arthur's burial. Here he viewed the ceremonial reinterment of the legendary monarch and his queen in a new tomb in a spectacle undoubtedly laid on for his benefit. Unfortunately, Morris spends an undue amount of time debunking the Arthurian episode. A total of seven pages is dedicated to his investigation of the issue, in which he is convinced that Arthur's historical existence was 'nonsense' and the reburial in Edward's presence was a cynical 'exercise in propaganda directed squarely at the Welsh' (p. 166). Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1100–c.1150) comes in for heavy criticism for having embellished and perpetuated the Arthurian legends, which is unnecessary and excessive in the context of Edward's life. However, in this case

the emphasis should not be placed on what is generally accepted about Arthur – that there is little if any concrete evidence for his historical existence – but what was believed in the past. There is a significant body of evidence to suggest that there was a widespread enthusiasm and belief in the real Arthur during the Middle Ages, and that Monmouth's contemporary critics, such as William of Newburgh, were untypical voices in a world in which the distinctions between myth and history were blurred to a far greater extent than the modern mind finds comfortable.

Morris has positioned his book well in the history market, no doubt due to the advice of his agent and publishers. For, while being clearly aimed at the intelligent general reader, the clear and thorough referencing raises it above the level of much popular biography. The notes occupy 37 pages and the bibliography a further 13. However, it is here that the scholar is likely to meet with disappointment. For, while it is clear that the author has consulted a commendable number of primary sources, there is no mention of any that are unpublished. Whether manuscript sources were consulted is unclear, but they are an important consideration when dealing with Edward I. While many of the record sources for the reign of Henry III are now in print, a great many governmental rolls for his son still await this treatment. The Liberate Rolls and the Memoranda Rolls, key financial sources, remain unpublished and deserve the detailed attention that Morris's models – Prestwich especially – have already given them. Most of the contemporary chronicles, at least, are available in published form. His list of secondary sources also exhibits certain deficiencies. He has clearly consulted a wide range of biographies, analytical works and articles up to 2007. There is, however, a noticeable lack of any unpublished academic work. It is to be hoped that the industry of scholars compiling dissertations and theses for higher degrees are not destined solely for university libraries. There is a good deal of new research being produced in this way, and it is unfortunate that this is not recognised by the author here.

Whether this book makes a lasting contribution to the historiography of the 13th century remains to be seen. Morris has certainly advanced the cause of Edward I and presented him to a new audience. He has also done excellent service in the rehabilitation of the Middle Ages; the conception of a mud-covered world of ignorance is finally being dispelled, and this book will do much to aid this process. The general audience will here discover a work to entertain as well as educate and even the historian will find a ready reference for the life of the king.

Notes

1. M. Powicke, *The Thirteenth Century, 1216-1307* (2nd edn., Oxford, 1962), p. 227.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. L. F. Salzman, *Edward I* (London, 1968), preface.[Back to \(2\)](#)

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