



Edward I

Michael Prestwich

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Edward I—one of the outstanding monarchs of the English Middle Ages—pioneered legal and parliamentary change in England, conquered Wales, and came close to conquering Scotland. A major player in European diplomacy and war, he acted as peacemaker during the 1280s but became involved in a bitter war with Philip IV a decade later. This book is the definitive account of a remarkable king and his long and significant reign. Widely praised when it was first published in 1988, it is now reissued with a new introduction and updated bibliographic guide.

Praise for the earlier edition:

"A masterly achievement. . . . A work of enduring value and one certain to remain the standard life for many years."—*Times Literary Supplement*

"A fine book: learned, judicious, carefully thought out and skillfully presented. It is as near comprehensive as any single volume could be."—*History Today*

"To have died more revered than any other English monarch was an outstanding achievement; and it is worthily commemorated by this outstanding addition to the . . . corpus of royal biographies."—*Times Education Supplement*

Edward I Details

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Anton Tomsinov says

This is a classical masterpiece of a renowned author, that stood the test of time. Well researched, clear and structured, it sets a high standard for many authors to come. It is also a solid case for the focus on war that is inevitable for a true understanding of the medieval politics, finances and administration.

Edward I is known as a legislator and a warrior king, but the details beneath the surface show a rather different picture. Edward is a good example of how even a despot was bound by the medieval political culture into compromises and agreements. Neither a brilliant general, nor a patron of learning, he was a man of great will and determination. His wars were won by an extremely efficient administration and mobilization of all available support and resources (interesting, that some administrative machinery was even better organized than that of the Edward III or the Tudors). The significant parliamentary development of his reign is due mostly to his aggression, as only the severe lack of funds for wars made him conciliatory. Selfish, prone to bad temper, show of force, and bullying, Edward still managed to achieve a lot. But it is also interesting that the result of his reign was close to disaster: a burden of debts, an impoverished nation, a breakdown of law and order, an unfinished war, a disgruntled nobility, and an incompetent successor...

Ton says

Very thorough and scholarly biography of Edward I. Not a quick and easy read, but it has everything you might want to know about Edward I.

Tim Adkins says

This book cannot be accused of a lack of thoroughness. It did at times read more like an administrative history of the Middle Ages. This is more a feature than a defect- even a Plantagenet king spent most of his reign looking over such details.

Ginger Heskett says

I registered a book at BookCrossing.com!
<http://www.BookCrossing.com/journal/14341351>

Jan-Maat says

A wide-ranging study that is rich in details, the barrels of pennies transported to pay soldiers, Hugo FitzHey who owed the knight service of himself a bow and an arrow, and the construction of castles in Wales striped or decorated with eagles to evoke Imperial Rome.

Prestwich brings out the changes during his reign in how King Edward I would deal with Wales and Scotland, the absolute personal obedience demanded from John Balliol, or the treatment of the noble Scots and Welsh captives hung in cages (albeit cages with toilet facilities) demonstrating a new and more savage attitude to rivals for political power than hitherto seen in the relations between English Kings and their British rivals.

The Three Edwards, also by Prestwich, is recommended for putting the military and governmental changes of Edward I's reign in a broader context.

Andrew Dockrill says

Fantastic!

Jeremy Perron says

Michael Preswich's Edward I is a great book with only one flaw. One the biggest questions, to me, about King Edward I is: exactly why is he called Edward 'the First' when there was not one, not two, but three Kings Edward before him. In addition to having multiple predecessors with his name, Edward Longshanks was also named after the previous King Edward, Edward the Confessor. Yet nowhere in this book does this subject even come up! When I first read this book back in college, I asked my professor, Phil Cole of the University of Southern Maine, if he knew why the Hammer of the Scots was labeled number one, and he confessed he had no idea. I assume that Edward is listed as the first of his name because of Norman Conquest; although I have never found any official statement to that fact. Apparently in England they only count the kings and queens that occurred after the Norman Conquest.

During his time as a prince, young Edward, had some sympathies with the reform movement amongst the barons of England, but he would ultimately side with his father King Henry III against the reformers led by Simon De Montfort. When England broke into civil war it looked for a while that the reformers might actually win. Edward himself was captured but he and his father would ultimately prevail and Montfort would be dead.

After helping to secure his father's throne Prince Edward left England and went on crusade. His crusade, like many of them, was a very overrated experience and although Edward was proud to have gone. The Prince was grateful for the prestige his crusade gave him and always wanted to go again, but his adventure in the East did not led any significant accomplishment. What I found most fascinating was the way children were regarded in the middle ages. Since college I have known that people in the past, emotionally, kept their young children at arm's length. This was due to the child mortality rate at the time. Nevertheless I was stuck by Edward when he found out he lost his first-born son he seemed not to care, but when he was told he had become King because his father had died he cried nonstop. When questioned by this behavior he declares that he can always have more sons but he only had one father. Some logic in that I guess but it is very cold.

As King, Edward is known for three things: the `model' parliament, the conquest of Wales and the near conquest of Scotland. All three of these things are very well covered by Prestwich. Prestwich is always fair giving Edward credit where he thinks the old king deserved it but at the same time making it clear that he was not quite the `English Justinian' that he was always made out to be.

In parliament, he did pass a great deal of important legislation such as the two Westminster Acts. However what he is most known for is the composition of parliament, making sure it was represented by all interests of the kingdom. However, Prestwich points out that the composition of parliament was something done for the King's convenience not anyone else's.

"Although there were no clear rules defining who was entitled to receive summons to parliament, it is obvious that the king was looking for men whose advice he valued, and whose local power and authority he could not ignore. There was something of a concentration of men who held estates on the borders near Wales and Scotland, a natural reflection of their military importance. If a man was sufficiently distinguished, he might be summoned even though he was not a tenant-in-chief, or particularly wealthy." (p.447)

Even though Prestwich dispels a lot of myths about this medieval king, he does not try to deny his importance to the British Constitution. It was Edward's actions that allowed the Parliament to form into what it did and history shows other actions could have sent it to a different direction.

"Although parliament had played a very significant part in the political struggles of the late 1250s and 1260s, it would have been possible in the 1270s and 1280s for it to become something much more like the French parlement. That body was a specialized legal tribunal, with its own expert, learned staff, attended only rarely by the king himself. It was far superior to the English parliament in terms of records that were kept, and the professionalism of its staff, but its importance was much less, for it could never stand for the community of the realm, as the English parliament could. Had Edward not chosen to summon large numbers of magnates to his parliaments, along with representatives on occasion; had he not chosen to receive petitions, often in considerable quantity, in parliaments; then there might have appeared in England a small, specialized parliament, little more than a legal committee of the royal council, along the French lines." (p.460)

King Edward's other far lasting contribution was the conquest of Wales. Kings of England since the days of William the Conqueror had been receiving homage from Welsh princes, although they never sought to rule Wales directly. Prestwich argues that the wars were largely provoked by the Prince of Wales himself, Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, for refusing Edward homage and openly aiding his enemies such as the allies of Simon de Montfort.

"Although it is possible to criticize much that Edward did in Wales, the fact remains that he was in the end thoroughly successful. Of course his resources were immeasurably greater than those of the Welsh, but the Welsh had succeeded in retaining a considerable degree of independence in the face of powerful English kings ever since the Norman Conquest. Edward had now taken a major step towards the eventual political unification of the British Isles, though in his later years he was to find that he could not repeat in Scotland what he had achieved in Wales." (p. 232)

Edward is probably most famous for his almost conquest of Scotland. This fame has increased since the 1990s because of Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*, which I acknowledge as the source of my interest in King Edward I. In that movie, Patrick McGoohan portrays King Edward and he does bring the character to life. However, it needs to be pointed out that the movie is not very historically accurate.

The war was primarily caused by Edward's bullying. Asked to oversee a succession dispute, King Edward picks the right candidate in John Balliol, but then proceeds to completely humiliate him to the point the new King cannot control his own country. Edward deposes the Scottish King John who turns out to be, unfortunately, more a loser than King Edward's grandfather the English King John*. Although it had seemed to Edward that he had conquered Scotland, he would find he would have to keep reconquering it to the point it would bankrupt his treasury, Edward would win only a Pyrrhic victory over William Wallace and Robert

the Bruce. Robert would go into to become King of Scotland while Wallace would suffer a terrible death.

"From Edward's point of view, there can have been no doubt whatsoever that Wallace was a traitor who deserved to die a traitor's death. The king may appear today to have been ungenerous in failing to recognize the obvious qualities of his victim, who had shown a great capacity for leadership. Yet Wallace had not conducted his campaigns according to the chivalric code of the day, and there is no reason why Edward should have treated him with compassion or respect." (p.503)

In the end this a great book about a fascinating individual. He was a giant among men both literally** and figuratively. Historians had been fascinated by him ever since, even to the point of opening his coffin in 1774. Michael Prestwich does a very good job separating the man and the legend.

*It is interesting to point out that neither England nor Scotland ever had another king named John.

**He was well over six feet in an age where that was rare.

Fred Dameron says

If you like history's of medieval accounting this is a five star book. If you want tournaments and Edwards battles not so much. The discussion of Edwards contributions to British law are great. My biggest take away from this one is: Beauty and the Beast is actually a metaphor for the British suzerainty of French lands specifically Gascony. Later to include all the British lands held in France from Norman princes by British Kings. All this diplomatic work was a fascinating read. Over all a decent read but way to much accounting.
