

Nobility and Kingship in Medieval England: The Earls and Edward I, 1272-1307

Review Number: 1638

Publish date: Thursday, 7 August, 2014

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ISBN: 9781107026759

Date of Publication: 2013

Price: £65.00

Pages: 317pp.

Publisher: Cambridge University Press

Publisher url: <http://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/history/british-history-1066-1450/nobility-and-kingship/medieval-england-earls-and-edward-i-12721307>

Place of Publication: Cambridge

Reviewer: James Bothwell

Despite the substantial historiography of Edward I's reign, this is the first real attempt to examine in depth the relations between this king and his earls at a crucial time in the development of both monarchy and nobility. Edward I is a king now remembered mainly for his 'masterfulness' when dealing with the English nobility, a term with which Spencer takes some issue. The author offers a more subtle and thoughtful but also wider-based assessment of the relationship than those offered by T. F. Tout and K. B. McFarlane – still after so many years the key players in the discussion. Spencer's Edward I was both an 'authoritarian' and an 'enabler' when it came to relations with the nobility who pursued his 'big idea ... with a characteristic ruthless single-mindedness but also with a good deal more subtlety than has usually been appreciated' (p. 36). In many ways, then, Spencer takes an expanded middle ground between Tout and McFarlane, developing a more nuanced perspective on Edward I's relationship with his earls through both engaging more fully with the unpublished evidence and attempting to understand larger forces at work, in particular the developments in lord/retainer relationships. His earls, in turn, are not the 'anaemic, helpless' group of men of McFarlane but 'fully rounded and fleshed-out nobles with their own collective and individual traits and interests' (p. 12). Indeed, if Edward I's relations with his titled nobility are at the core of this book – a relationship quite often, though not always, based on mutual benefit – so too are those between titled nobility and those below them, and this study offers important insights into the many and varied interpretations of bastard feudalism in the later Middle Ages.

This is a lively, thoughtful book with many useful points, and it is hard to summarise all it has to offer in so short a review. After an examination of the historiography, and a discussion of the nature and development of the estates of the nobility during Edward's reign, the author divides his book into three sections: 'The king and the earls', 'The earls in local society', and 'Politics and the earls'. The section on the king and the earls has an interesting and generally successful structure, starting where the king and his earls had the potential to get along well (e.g. 'natural companions, advisers and governmental aides' (p. 36)), before tackling the 'potentially more divisive issues' (p. 36) of war, patronage and justice. Looking at the individuals involved and focussing in on the charter witness lists, Spencer examines how Edward I used his nobles to control the country, and in doing so, the image of a more subtle, tailored method of political

management emerges. The section looks at how justice was dispensed, both to the earls and barons, and through them to the kingdom as a whole, as well as focussing in on the thorny issue of franchises, especially in connection with the much discussed *quo warranto* proceedings. The author finishes with Edward I's use of his earls in war – which he notes, while 'conventional' (p. 80), tended to suffer from the quality of the military leadership among the earls – and the issue of reward, which was in effect more based on past service than future expectation. Overall, Edward I was a king who made his patronage both 'judicious and targeted' (p. 93).

The second section of the book narrows down to look at the role of the earls in local society, how they gained and used power in the localities, especially taking into consideration an increasingly ambitious gentry and a monarchy determined to restate its authority both in the centre and the localities after the problems of Henry III's reign. Spencer details how the following of an earl in Edward I's reign was created and sustained. Focusing primarily on three earldoms – those of Lancaster, Lincoln and Cornwall – Spencer finds that there are 'definite similarities in the way thirteenth-century comital followings were treated to those of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries but significant differences as well' (p. 134). They were, in particular, using not just feudal tenants for service, but also individuals connected through a number of other means (cash, temporary forms of grant, royal blood, family tradition, etc.). However, Spencer also emphasises the lack of need for 'complete penetration' (p. 135) of one's retainers into local society – which to a degree compensated for the limited size of comital followings in some cases. Likewise, the general dearth of magnate links with royal officialdom in the localities, links which are one of the hallmarks of the later bastard feudal relationship, comes to the fore. The exercise of this comital power itself is examined through the earl of Lincoln's holdings in South Yorkshire and the Earl Warenne's presence in Sussex. These mini-studies emphasise that the earls were able to be their own men in their localities, and only had problems with royal authority when the king himself became involved. In other words, in the situation which existed for most of Edward I's relations with his earls, 'the techniques of late medieval "bastard feudalism" were neither effective nor necessary' (p. 144). That said, though for most of the period there was little necessity for any substantial manifestation of a bastard feudal relationship between earls and men, by the end of the reign – especially given the growing power of the royal government – this was no longer the case, and more use by the nobility of such relationships seemed increasingly necessary. As Spencer states, 'if the nobility were to continue to exercise extensive power at a local level, then they needed to reinvent themselves as the bridge between the centre and the localities', (p. 172) especially in the form of a new, more vibrant relationship with the ever more important gentry. In this way, then, as the author himself notes, Edward I's later reign 'marks a significant stage in the emergence of a "bastard feudal" society' (p. 173).

The final section of this book, therefore, takes the author's conclusions concerning the nature and development of the title and following of the earl in the first two sections, and applies the findings to the politics of Edward I's reign. Spencer divides Edward's reign into two parts, 'The making of Edwardian power, 1265–86' and 'The testing ground, 1286–1307', breaking the former down further into subsections 'Evesham to coronation, 1265–1274' and 'Making his mark, 1274–1286', and the latter 'There and back again, 1286–1294', 'War and crisis, 1294–1301' and 'An old man in a hurry, 1301–1307'. Overall, this final section emphasises how the Edwardian settlement after the 1260s was applied in practice, but also how the drive for both compromise and reform started to fade late in his reign, especially by the mid 1290s and the growing financial and recruitment crises connected with the war in France. It is here that the authority and the subtle handling of Edward's relationship with his earls on both a political and personal level comes to the fore, and the problems which arose when the increasingly aged king was no longer able to balance such issues, instead reverting to the overwhelming use of authority often called 'masterfulness'. On the whole this is an effective structure, and though with such a setup there is bound to be some overlap, the author does his best to minimise this. At the end of the book there are three appendices calendaring the contents of the *acta* of the Earls of Lancaster, Lincoln and Cornwall.

The starting point of this study is the author entering the debate on the nature of Edward I's relations with his earls, and questioning the idea that there was little clear political programme beyond that of a determined 'masterfulness'. It is at its best when dealing with Edward I and his relations with his nobility – Spencer has

done his homework, and gives a thoughtful discussion of both the king's and the nobility's point of view. However, it does become a bit less convincing when it tries to span the 13th to 15th centuries to 'break down the barrier' (p. 6), especially, though not only, in its discussion of ideas of the development of royal council, justice, and bastard feudalism. There is a sense that the author is less assured when dealing with the 14th-century material in particular and is, indeed, often jumping from the 13th to the 15th centuries without any firm sense of the developments in between, using the two centuries rather as 'point a' and 'point b' from which to compare. To understand how the 15th century relates back to the 13th century, surely one needs to take further into account the developments of the 14th century, even if they end up being dead ends – after all even dead ends can tell the historian something about what came before. Perhaps as a result, the implications of his detailed work on Edward I's relationships with his earls in the first section do not always make it effectively enough through part two, especially when looking at the earls in local society and the question of the reality of bastard feudal relationships in the later middle ages, to be applied to the politics of the reign itself in the final section. This is not to say a strong, coherent argument does not emerge in section three. Nevertheless, the impact of the author's argument is slightly diluted as a result of the primarily comparative, rather than developmental, discussion of bastard feudalism in particular in the intervening pages.

The use of the evidence is generally effective, though it could be a little more considered in a couple of places. Firstly, while the charter witness lists may well be a mainly accurate representation of those present when the charter is sealed in Edward I's reign, as in Edward II and III's reign (1), there is the further issue of what charter witness lists actually tell us. After all, individuals may well have been present, but that does not necessarily mean anything more, especially when dealing with the deferential world around the royal court. Most of us have been in meetings where we are merely bodies, and expected to behave as such. In such situations, presence in situations can simply mean presence (voluntary or otherwise), rather than acquiescence, let alone acceptance, of what is done. Earls, as others, could be at or near the royal court for any number of reasons, and that did not always necessarily mean agreement with the king's policies, whether taken singly or as a whole, as sometimes seems to be quietly implied in discussions (and not just Spencer's) of charter witness evidence. It would have been helpful to get a sense of if and when the earls were at court, and yet did not witness such charters. In this light, perhaps Langtoft's often quoted comment 'the people standing round in his [the king's] chamber' during the events of 1297 (p. 60) can be viewed in a slightly different light, as a more passive, or even static, participation at the centre at times. Considering its importance to the author's argument as a whole, the limitations, and dangers, of such evidence could have been drawn out more. Similarly, though less crucial, a little more thought could be paid to the use of inquisitions post mortem at times (pp. 13ff), both concerning his own use and those other historians who have worked from them. Spencer does realise that any income worked out from inquisitions returns is probably a minimum, but could have engaged more with Hunnisett through to Hicks (2); even a discussion around the 15th-century IPMs (inquisitions post mortem) might have been useful – on the reasons why figures, or even identities of properties, derived from such material can still, at times, be problematic. Finally, perhaps the Common Pleas rolls, though still in their infancy in Edward I's reign, could have been used more in understanding relations between the nobles in the reign, and thereby between the nobles and the king. The author states that 'the influence of feed justices may also help explain why the earls appear so infrequently in royal legal records' (pp. 149ff). Yet, if one looks at the Common Pleas rolls for Edward III's reign at least, this does not stop earls' interests being attacked by others in civil suits, and somewhat more commonly than in front of the King's Bench.

Similarly, there are other issues which the author might think about further. The place of the emerging parliamentary peerage, and parliament as a whole, feels somewhat underplayed here. If nothing else, how does the idea and reality of the earl here coincide with what is later articulated in the *Modus Tenendi Parliamentum* of the 1320s? In a similar mode, *Quia Emptores* and *De Donis*, as well as the beginnings of the emergence of the enfeoffment-to-use, get relatively little space and yet will become increasingly crucial for understanding relations between royals and nobles, and between nobles. The author admits he is omitting the 'intimate details' (p. 11) of the Edwardian statutes, but one surely does need to give some further

attention to these developments, especially considering how important they were to the nobility in the later middle ages? And perhaps he should give a little less emphasis when discussing that relationship to the “‘this estate is my right by this rusty sword (i.e. conquest)’” story of Earl Warenne (pp. 73, 82, 259), which, true or not, appears only in one chronicle? More generally, were aristocratic women merely the ciphers that they mainly appear here, usually acting as ways to tie comital families to the crown by marriage, or is there something more to their presence, especially in understanding royal/noble relations? Alice de Lacy, for one, seems to have been quite a spirited character throughout her life, and had her own impact on the nature of the estates which came to her hands. The issues of grand ceremonial and ideas of chivalry and nobility could likewise be examined further in connection with the Round Tables, tourneying, and so forth, perhaps comparing them in more depth with Edward III’s relations with his nobility through the Order of the Garter. Finally, Spencer’s belief in medieval society as primarily tripartite (those who work, those who fight, those who pray) (e.g. p. 76) is somewhat misleading by this period, both in its depiction in the arts and literature, and in reality. If nothing else, the image of medieval society as fundamentally interconnected, rather than reflecting a unitary yet internally divided entity, starts to appear repeatedly in texts and illuminations by the end of the high middle ages. Images of medieval society as a human body, with the head as the king, heart as the Church, arms as the knights, and variants thereon, perhaps work better for Spencer’s book than the less structurally cohesive, three section, version of the medieval world – especially considering the subtlety of the relationship the king was trying to create with his upper nobility in particular. And, of course, the growing impact of the towns and the urban elites on the contours of the political and economic landscape is given little space here. Such issues may seem to be going beyond the author’s remit, but they do nonetheless play their part in how the earls reacted to problems at the centre and in their own spheres.

Finally, some aspects of the presentation of this book could be tightened up. The standard criticism of ‘the mechanics of the thesis remaining in the book’ is present at times. While once the chapters get going these tend to disappear, there is still a hint of the ‘What this part aims to do is ...’ (e.g. p. 35) mentality present. There are also a number of throw away lines which sound like they should be exam or essay questions rather than statements of fact: ‘In its crudest form, power consists of the amount of physical violence that can be brought to bear on a given situation’ (p. 114). Discuss. ‘The instinct of human beings to copy the life choices of their parents was not something created by feudalism, nor likely eradicated by the waning of feudal ties’ (p. 133). Discuss, and then discuss again. Lines like ‘Edward I was a practical man, not a deep thinker’ (p. 36) jar slightly – can one not be both? Perhaps Edward I was, and therein lay his real strength? And it would be useful to know what a ‘full suit of patronage’ (p. 14) meant in the 13th century – it always seemed to be a rather open ended concept, at least for Edward III’s reign, bringing in both the material and the intangible. Such occasional slips into inexactitude – as well as the use of clichés such as ‘very small beer indeed’ (p. 75), ‘Ferrers’ card was marked’ and ‘not had a good war’ (pp. 182–3) – would be better left out.

Such quibbles aside, this is a generally well-crafted and thoughtful book offering a balanced new interpretation not only of Edward I’s relations with his titled nobility, but also of the early development of bastard feudalism, bringing interesting adjustments to the recent interpretations of Coss, Crouch et al. Perhaps, as noted above, the text could have done with a little more polish and attention to detail at times, and a little less selective engagement with the wider later medieval historiographical landscape. Nonetheless, Spencer’s *Nobility and Kingship* is an important book, and works well as a companion volume to Caroline Burt’s *Edward I and the Governance of England*.⁽³⁾ Together they should lay the groundwork for significant new interpretations of Edward I’s reign and beyond.

Notes

1. C. Given-Wilson, ‘Royal charter witness lists, 1327-1399’, *Medieval Prosopography* 12, 2 (1991), 35–94; J. Hamilton, ‘Charter witness lists for the reign of Edward II’, *Fourteenth Century England I* (Woodbridge, 2000), pp. 1-20.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. R. F. Hunnisett, ‘The reliability of inquisitions as historical evidence’, in *The Study of Medieval Records: Essays in Honour of Kathleen Major*, ed. D. A. Bullough and R. L. Storey (Oxford, 1971), pp. 206-35; *The Fifteenth-Century Inquisitions Post Mortem : A Companion*, ed. M. A. Hicks

(Woodbridge, 2012).[Back to \(2\)](#)

3. Caroline Burt, *Edward I and the Governance of England, 1272–1307* (Cambridge, 2012).[Back to \(3\)](#)
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