

# Reviews in History

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## A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages

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The Blackwell Companions to British History enjoy a reputation for quality of scholarship, clarity of text and range. This 28-chapter volume is a worthy addition to the series, written by a distinguished group of specialists in the field (some well-established but also some younger scholars) who between them cover a rather broader chronological framework than is usually meant by 'later middle ages', namely 1100–1500. Indeed, as a minor point, these dates could usefully have been added to the title for the sake of an immediately clearer identity for the book. The volume is, like others in the series, directed at students, but has much to offer both the general reader in search of an overview and the teacher and scholar looking for a compact and authoritative survey of all the main themes of this remarkable period of British history.

The volume is divided into four sections, the various regions of the British Isles receiving separate treatment, though there is no avoiding the dominance of England in the story, 15 chapters focussing on this area, and four equally assigned to Scotland, Wales and Ireland, this last particularly valuable, given that the latter often suffers from very limited treatment in these kinds of works. The contents page lists the main chapters but gives no hint of the fact that they are all subdivided. A list of these headings would have been helpful to the general reader seeking to investigate particular themes, though in some cases the divisions are hardly warranted and sometimes rather break the flow of the chapter given their brevity, especially in part four. Each chapter has some footnotes, as well as a bibliography and advice on further reading. The light editorial control which was a deliberate decision, and not an entirely happy one, is apparent here. Contributors have been free to use the critical apparatus as they will and the resultant unevenness is somewhat unhelpful. Some authors have direct quotations in their texts which are not acknowledged at all and others refer to recent works but omit all details about the writers or their titles. Some chapters have footnotes, others do not. Some have bibliographies, some of which are divided into sections, others do not. Some have

further reading advice, others do not. The length of these elements varies enormously. There is in addition a final bibliography of secondary works, though some contributors have listed primary sources in their particular section which do not appear at the end.

Figures, plates and tables are included. There are essential genealogies, sensibly placed in the text where they are most relevant. The provision of maps of Scotland and Ireland is excellent, but there are only two for Wales and, most regrettably, only one for England. It seems curious, for example, to give valuable maps of the main ecclesiastical sites and basic structural organisation of the church in Wales, Scotland and Ireland but to omit these for England. This unevenness is most apparent and most unsatisfactory in the lively sections which make up part four which is entitled 'Education and Culture'. Naturally these twin themes vary across the regions but the freedom given to the contributors to do largely what they wanted has resulted in unwelcome gaps. Education hardly features in the chapter on Wales but is well covered for Ireland while in Scotland particular attention is given to the Scottish universities. By far the best single chapter in this section is that of Edel Bhreathnach and Ragnall Ó Floinn on Ireland. Despite the observation that this is a period which still suffers from scholarly neglect the authors have provided a real 'companion' here covering the historiography, the art and architecture, literature and education in a highly readable and accessible format with seven excellently chosen illustrations which are properly discussed. There is much about the craftsmen who remarkably are a far better known group than elsewhere in Britain in this period, the patrons and the influences that had a bearing on the artistic outpourings. Susan Aronstein, a literature specialist, makes it clear, however, that her chapter on Welsh culture will only cover the literary canon and while it contains much of interest the general reader will need to go elsewhere to obtain a broad view of Welsh culture in the period. There is not a single illustration to accompany the chapter though there quite clearly could have been based on what the author has highlighted. The same is true for Louise Fradenburg's view of Scottish culture where frustratingly she makes several references to beautiful buildings and manuscripts which could clearly have been used for illustrative purposes. All three chapters make it clear that there are distinctive Irish, Welsh and Scottish cultures. The question of English influence is surely a general question that hangs over the whole cultural picture but it is left to the authors to decide whether or not to raise it. Best tackled by Bhreathnach and Ó Floinn, a brief separate section on the theme is added by Fradenburg but the matter hardly features in Aronstein's work on Wales.

One chapter which perhaps offers the best starting point despite its place at the head of part two, is Séan Duffy's partly historiographical survey of 'The British Perspective'. Scholars need no reminding of the vital role played by the late Professor Sir Rees Davies who indeed spanned the whole of the period contained within these covers, in transforming the history of these islands from English history, with a nod north and west, into proper British History, though Duffy rightly reminds us that even this must be placed in the context of the history of the continental Europe, in whose orbit Britain was. This is a theme well covered in the material which examines the church, of course, but nowhere is this clearer than in those chapters of part four which consider English art, architecture and literature. The authors covering the cultural picture further afield similarly do not neglect this fact and are at pains to make the point that there were influences which affected the art and architecture of Scotland and Ireland from much further off.

Duffy points out that 'the fringe was larger than the fringed' (p. 165), but nevertheless states equally that England, by the virtues of providing a royal crown and of enjoying a very precocious development, was in many respects the most important part of this empire. Thus part one, which considers 'Economy and Society in Town and Country' requires five chapters on England. First the land and the population are clearly presented by Bruce Campbell who shows just how secure an economic foundation was laid in the early history of England and how crises were survived remarkably well. The family and village community which focuses upon the large agrarian

population and emphasises the great range encompassed by the 'peasantry' are explored by Philip Schofield and towns and trade are superbly presented by R. H. Britnell. Popular politics, including a detailed section on the revolt of 1381 are covered by Jane Whittle and Steve Rigby and include extremely useful discussion of the role of Marxist historians in the study of the lower ranks of society. Perhaps a better balance could have been struck between all the revolts of the period though important emphasis is given to the less dramatic but, in many ways more significant conflicts which arose in both town and country. Women receive separate attention from Judith Bennett. Scotland, Wales and Ireland are more uniformly treated in single chapters on economy and society, Nicholas Mayhew and A. D. Carr pointing to the need for more to be done in the cases of Scotland and Wales, respectively.

Turning to part two, in 'Politics, Government and Law' Duffy's advocacy and praise of British history is tempered by the recognition that each component part of the Isles warrants having its own story told. Although this is not in any sense a narrative history and is in many ways more a book for those with some grasp of the story, the chronology is firmly embedded in these chapters and emerges in subtle ways while the approach remains broadly thematic. It is at its most narrative in the stories of Scotland, Wales and Ireland where the reader can rapidly gain an understanding of the main events from Hector Macqueen, J. and L. Beverley Smith and James Lydon, respectively. Ralph Turner, Scott Waugh and Rosemary Horrox track the main political developments in three periods for England. Perhaps the most striking message from these three is the continuity which they all reveal while the reader is more aware of the transformations which take place in the stories of the 'fringe' territories. Kingship is thoroughly explored. The king's role was more demanding to be sure, due to the various expansions of the period but it was fundamentally unchanging. It was personal, dependant on personality and upon the maintenance of a good working relationship with most of the magnates most of the time. Every king had to balance authority with counsel, in the latter case with a widening but still hierarchical body. Law and order were in the last resort a matter for the king at all times, regardless of how much these aspects of government had developed. While all three engage with the nobility, a separate section on the aristocracy which compares the nobility and gentry is provided by Christine Carpenter and effectively draws together many of the points already made. It is the obvious chapter to read as a complement to the trilogy on kingship and the political community. Robert Palmer's overview of the law emphasises the immense changes in this period particularly the emergence of common law with all that this meant in terms of regulation and consistency and for the growth of the state. He shows how English law became rule bound and bureaucratic and how the legal system played a significant role in subjects' lives at all levels. This is a difficult chapter, however, for the author states at the outset that he is not intending to give an account of the changes and for the general reader this presumes much. Some explanation of terms, some contextualising, even some simple dating would make this easier to digest and therefore easier to follow. It would be hard even for 'upper level students' to grasp the proper workings of the law at this period.

Among the core legal issues discussed by Palmer, the rights of women and their use of the courts are well covered and indeed for the reader interested in the role of women in the later middle ages there is a lot of material buried in this volume. It is here that the absence of those subdivision headings makes this quite unobvious in the table of contents. The story of women of all classes in England is taken up first by Judith Bennett. The task is enormous for the lumping of all women together signals something which Bennett rightly points to, namely the many differences that fracture their experiences. While recognising that there were indeed cross-class similarities she outlines clearly how varied their lives were. This is a gallop, albeit a valuable one, through historiography but one cannot help but feel that this is mainly the token chapter on the subject showing, as Bennett argues, that more incorporation of women is needed in order to understand fully the whole story of the British Isles. It is, however, a sign of how gender has now naturally come

to be regarded as integral to a complete picture that a number of the authors have devoted time and attention to women in their chapters. Nicholas Mayhew highlights this as an area which is beginning to receive attention among historians of Scottish society, as does A. D. Carr in his chapter on Wales but Brian Graham refers to the problem of the 'singular lack of information on the role of women in medieval Irish society (p. 143). None of the authors writing about politics in any part of Britain really engages with the role of the queen or the influence of women on political life. Even though women could not hold public office their part nevertheless warrants attention. Biographies of medieval queens are a commonplace now, though you would not think so from the bibliography.(1) Beyond Palmer's examination of women and the law, Carpenter offers something on noble- and gentlewomen in her consideration of the aristocracy. In part three of the book there is much on women's roles in the life of the church. Matthew Groom argues, in his chapter on piety in England, that a distinction between women and men should not be too sharply drawn though the author tends to broad generalisations in some areas. There is no evidence for the claim that 'many of the households of wealthy aristocratic widows .... developed a precise set of regulated daily rounds of prayer and contemplation which drew inspiration from the spiritual disciplines of the religious orders (p. 392). In truth the question of what part such women played in religious life is an area still greatly neglected by historians and over dependent on the evidence of those whom this reviewer has recently dubbed 'the famous five', who can hardly be taken as representative of their comparatively well documented class.(2) Nunneries get surprisingly little attention in England though there is a good body of literature on the matter. Convents in Scotland and in Ireland are left out though Henry Jefferies concludes that in the latter case this is a story of historical neglect which is only now being addressed. There is, however, some material on the Welsh nunneries provided by Huw Pryce. Part four can be trawled for more material on women and their contribution to education and culture. Jo Ann H. Moran Cruz briefly discusses women in her chapter on education though seems unaware of the work of Caroline Barron and Sharon Michalove.(3) There is a tendency to take too little account of change over time in the case of changing levels of female literacy and the whole subject certainly warranted more space in general to reflect more fully recent historiography. Female patronage of art and architecture is not much commented upon by Veronica Sekules though she herself has written on the subject elsewhere and indeed this is a major development in the period and again one covered in recent work. It receives some very interesting consideration by Bhreathnach and O Floinn in the case of Ireland. Whilst Rigby considers misogyny in literature to a limited extent the question of female ownership of books and patronage of literature is ignored despite the existence of some very important work on this by Carol Meale.(4) In considering the cultural developments of Wales Aronstein also devotes some space to the part which women played.

The church in this period is covered by five authors. David Levine's exploration of the English church and clergy is a model of clarity and any student wishing to have an overview could hardly do better than to start with this. The structure and composition of the church are explored in depth, the problems of evidence and the historiography smoothly incorporated. The relationship with Rome is traced with care and convincingly assessed as one in which the popes enjoyed far less control over the church than they wished. The omission of Eamon Duffy's work from the bibliography is surprising, not least because it is so immediately cited by Matthew Groom in his consideration of piety, heresy and anti-clericalism. This too is a commendably clear exposition though full coverage of this area really needed more space in the volume. Groom of necessity limits himself, exploring guilds, women and heresy and dissent. Here the absence of any reference to Christopher Haigh's work, particularly on anti-clericalism, is a surprise.

There is no doubting just how ambitious this project has been or how comprehensive its coverage is and it deserves a place on any student bibliography. Its main weakness is that editorial control was so limited, the one stipulation apparently being that each contributor should 'locate current concerns and debates within a broader historiographical context' (p.xvii). Most authors followed

their brief, some more so than others, and it currently offers very good insight into the historical achievement of over a century of superb scholarship. The companion was first published in 2003, however, and the last six years have seen the publication of some major new and challenging works. It is a pity that in going into paperback the opportunity was not taken, firstly to supply those many titles and references which are missing, and secondly, as a minimum, to add to the bibliography at the end of the volume. Unless corrections and updates are undertaken the book will shortly become rather dated.

## Notes

1. None of the following mere sample is included in the bibliography. A. Kelly, *Eleanor of Aquitaine and the Four Kings* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950); D. D. R. Owen, *Eleanor of Aquitaine. Queen and Legend* (Oxford, 1993); M. Chibnall, *The Empress Matilda: Queen Consort, Queen Mother and Lady of the English* (Oxford, 1991); M. Howell, *Eleanor of Provence. Queenship in Thirteenth Century England* (Oxford, 1998); *Eleanor of Castile: Queen and Society in Thirteenth Century England*, ed. J.C. Parsons (New York, 1995); A. Duggan, *Queens and Queenship in Medieval Europe* (Woodbridge, 1997); Anne Crawford, 'The King's burden?: the consequences of royal marriage in fifteenth century England', in *Patronage, the Crown and the Provinces in Later Medieval England*, ed. in R. A. Griffiths (Stroud, 1981); *The Letters of the Queens of England, 1100-1547*, ed. Anne Crawford (Stroud, 1994). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Rowena E. Archer, 'Piety in question: noblewomen and religion in later medieval England', in *Women and Religion in Medieval England*, ed. Diana Wood (Oxford, 2003). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Caroline Barron, 'The education and training of girls in fifteenth century London', in *Courts, Counties and the Capital in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. Diana E. S. Dunn (Far Thrupp, 1996); S. Michalove, 'The education of aristocratic women in fifteenth century England', in *Estrangement, Enterprise and Education in Fifteenth Century England*, ed. S. Michalove and A. Compton Reeves (Stroud, 1998). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. L. L. Gee, *Women, Art and Patronage from Henry III to Edward III* (Woodbridge, 2002); *Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500*, ed. Carole Meale, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature, 17 (Cambridge, 1993). [Back to \(4\)](#)

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