Review Article

Cambridge Views of Edward I


Cambridge University Press’s recent publication of two monographs on King Edward I of England marks a historiographical shift. Both Caroline Burt’s *Edward I and the Governance of England, 1272–1307* and Andrew Spencer’s *Nobility and Kingship in Medieval England: The Earls and Edward I, 1272–1307* are derived from theses supervised by the same Cambridge supervisor: Professor Christine Carpenter. They are also published in the same series: Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life & Thought (for which Carpenter is advisory editor). Both authors are now fellows of Cambridge colleges. It is tempting to view this as an intellectual and geographical repositioning of Edwardian historiography, because for over two decades historical scholarship on the reign of Edward I was dominated by Michael Prestwich and Robin Frame, both professors at Durham University. They, their students and others (notably Rees Davies) adopted a broad geographical perspective in their exploration of the reign. The result of their endeavour was to show that one could not partition historical inquiry along modern political borders and still hope to understand characters, such as Edward I and his nobility, who operated transnationally. For instance, it was argued that Edward’s domestic policies in England (and Ireland) were unintelligible without an understanding of his various military and administrative commitments in Wales, Scotland and France (and vice versa). This has resulted in a
nuanced evaluation of Edward’s kingship. Both books under review are therefore revisionist in their approach, and their authors have chosen to eschew this broad perspective in favour of a more narrow focus on Edward’s role in the making of England.

Caroline Burt challenges the received wisdom of Edward as the beneficiary, but not the architect, of his domestic policies. Burt’s monograph is a focused case study of local royal government in three English counties: Shropshire, Warwickshire and Kent. Its strength lies in her detailed and comparative analysis of these dissimilar counties, as well as her ability to situate the particular insights gained from that analysis in the context of Edwardian government in general. Burt’s success is derived, in part, from the book’s distinctive structure. As one might expect, the introduction explores the historiography of Edward’s reign. The first two chapters then provide the political and theoretical context for Edward’s governance, while the third profiles the counties to be analysed in the rest of the book. Chapter One, ‘Royal Government’, is quite short at seven pages, and seems to have been designed to get the non-expert up to speed on thirteenth-century English government. Chapter Two is also short at ten pages, but is actually a marginally longer version of Burt’s previously published article, ‘Political Ideas and Dialogue in England in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries’. In this chapter she profiles continental theories of rulership that, she argues, would have shaped the course of political dialogue in thirteenth-century England. Chapter Three is much longer, and utilises some rather splendid maps to introduce the internal politics and geography of Shropshire, Warwickshire and Kent. Having provided the context for her study, Burt tells the story of Edward’s royal governance over the course

---

of six chronological chapters. Her narrative is swift and through it we see Edward’s policy develop over time.

The picture that emerges in this study of Edward I is that of a great king, deeply concerned with, and closely involved in, the administration of his kingdom. It represents a reassessment of previous views of Edward’s participation in the governance of England. Historians such as Michael Prestwich have acknowledged Edward’s role in indicating the general direction of governmental policy, but have questioned the extent to which Edward participated in the drafting of the necessary statutes or ordinances. The result has been to credit Edward’s administrators with much of the work behind the great advances in Edwardian government rather than the king himself. Here Burt argues that Edward not only drew upon contemporary ideas of good kingship to determine the correct path for his administration to take in England, but also worked with his officials almost every step of the way. Her reassessment of Edward is reminiscent of W.L. Warren’s attempted rehabilitation of King John in 1961. In both instances, the king’s perceived administrative achievements have been used to ameliorate their less savoury characteristics. The concluding two lines of the book sum up Burt’s position: ‘Reigns, however, are judged in totality and, in that context, Edward’s beliefs and ability made him into one of England’s most innovative, conceptually creative, focused and successful rulers. He not only played the part of a good king well, he played it with aplomb.’ Whether the Welsh, Scots, Irish and Jews would have agreed is a moot point.

One group who certainly would have agreed with Burt’s conclusion, at least according to Andrew Spencer, were Edward’s earls. Spencer’s Nobility and Kingship in Medieval England is a more qualified, but no less revisionist, rehabilitation of Edward’s kingship as it pertained to his handling of the upper nobility. Whereas previous historians have
tended to follow K.B. McFarlane in viewing Edward as having dominated his nobility, Spencer argues that, on the whole, they formed a mutually beneficial partnership. Disputes were few and relatively minor. Nevertheless, Spencer recognises the importance of McFarlane in the historiography, and engages directly with his influential theories.

Spencer’s book is divided into three parts. Part I provides the political context for the study by detailing the relationship between the king and the community of the realm, which had become combative in the reign of Edward’s father, Henry III. Part II looks at the earls themselves, and poses questions about nobility and noble power in the late thirteenth century. After profiling his selection of earls (which, frustratingly for an Irish audience, does not include the earl of Ulster), Spencer investigates the roots of their power in the localities, including their tenurial base and their manipulation of local courts and administration. This focus allows some interesting comparisons with the so-called ‘bastard’ feudalism of later medieval England. Part III brings together the strands of thought from the first two parts to weave an integrated political history of the reign from the perspective of the earls. If Burt’s narrative of Edward’s reign was swift, this travels at breakneck speed. In just two (admittedly long) chapters, Spencer is able to tie all of his ideas and analysis together. This is quite an accomplishment.

Spencer concludes that thirteenth-century developments, beginning with Magna Carta in 1215, saw the nobility assume the right to restrain the king from unlawful excesses in his rule. Edward learned from the mistakes of his father, Henry III (who faced baronial rebellion under Simon de Montfort), and sought to harness his nobility to his own cause. The growth of the English parliament allowed Edward to forge common cause with the community of the realm, while also solving one of the major problems of his father’s reign: royal finance. Moreover, the devolution of governance to the localities, a strengthened relationship
with gentry, and a focus upon parliament laid the foundations for later medieval kingship. For their part, the nobility were more than willing to form a closer bond with Edward, since he was a king who had learned the lessons of baronial reform. Thus, Spencer sees a politically-astute Edward as laying the foundation for the ‘service nobility’ of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Over the course of a detailed study of Edward I’s earls, Spencer disagrees with McFarlane’s negative opinion of Edward, but agrees that developments leading to ‘bastard’ feudalism meant that Edward’s reign was a liminal stage between the high and later middle ages.

Both Burt and Spencer have produced works that stand as interesting contributions to the growing literature on the reign of Edward I. Spencer’s is perhaps the more ambitious and far-reaching study, but Burt’s fills a gap in our understanding of the reign. Perhaps unsurprisingly, each author clearly owes a great intellectual debt to the work of Christine Carpenter, which places their work within the historical framework of the ‘new’ constitutional history she champions. This reintroduces into the study of Edward the Anglo-centricity of pre-1980s historiography. The ‘old’ constitutional history of William Stubbs was the history of English central institutions. This meant the development of parliamentary democracy and the history of control over the king. According to Carpenter, ‘new’ constitutional history involves the study of ‘political and governmental structures and the beliefs of those who participate in them about how those systems should operate.’ It also seeks to analyse ‘how public transmission of power worked and how it interacted with private power structures, and the acknowledgement of the public element in the political morality of the ruling classes.’

other words, ‘new’ constitutional history attempts to understand the political philosophies which underlay the central (i.e. public) institutions of a given period. This approach is still characteristic of the later middle ages, and is overt in both of the works under review. However, the ‘new’ constitutional history is not without its critics. For instance, Peter Coss has argued that a quest for normative political ideas can 1) produce misleading monolithic depictions of political culture, 2) lend itself to a consensual view of medieval politics in which the perceived community of interest among the crown, nobility and gentry obscures structural conflicts, and 3) tend to prioritise idealism over the material concerns of the landed class.\(^3\) Anthony Gross has most tellingly declared that ‘wherever constitutional history, however redefined, enters, Whiggery will not be far behind’.\(^4\)

These warnings suggest some interesting questions. For instance, in prioritising continental theories over English royal custom, does Burt underplay the complexity of political culture in Edward’s England? Is Spencer’s picture of a mutually beneficial relationship between king and nobility the result of the ‘new’ constitutional history’s in-built trend towards a consensual view of medieval politics? Do both authors place too much reliance upon political philosophy, and not enough on their subjects’ more mundane or pragmatic concerns? At a more fundamental level, the decision to abandon the geographically-inclusive ‘new’ British history of Prestwich and Frame in favour of the ‘new’ constitutional history of Christine Carpenter signals a historiographical shift towards later-medieval Anglo-centricity in the study of Edward’s reign. At times, both authors seem more comfortable with the historiography of the


fifteenth century than with that of the thirteenth century. Spencer states unambiguously that ‘work on the thirteenth-century nobility thus far lacks the depth and range of that on their fifteenth-century counterparts’ (6), which perhaps says less about the state of the respective historiographies than about his familiarity with them. Burt, for her part, uses studies of fifteenth-century local government by Edward Powel, Helen Castor and Christine Carpenter to question the conclusions of Peter Coss, David Crouch and David Carpenter about the thirteenth century (9–11, 32–4).

Looking forward seems also to have distracted both authors from some useful twelfth- and thirteenth-century comparisons. For instance, Spencer is quite right to assert that ‘under a less skilful monarch than Edward I, the combination of a vigorous king with powerful ideas about the nature and scope of royal authority and nobles used to throwing their weight about and getting their own way could have been an explosive cocktail’ (259). In the 1270s, people would still have been well aware of King John, who was just such a monarch — wilful and self-assured, without the personality to handle his strong aristocracy. Magna Carta was brought forward to be a check on just such a king, and it is no accident that Edward had to reissue it in 1297. King John confronted his nobility; according to Spencer, Edward co-opted his. A direct comparison might have shown the extent to which Edward and his nobility had learned from their grandfathers’ mistakes. It might also have challenged Spencer’s contention that the medieval English trend towards deposition of the king owed its genesis to the authority with which Edward imbued the crown. Spencer claims that while England could cope with inadequate kings such as Stephen or Henry III, after Edward, kings such as Edward II, Richard II and Henry VI had to be removed because they could not be trusted ‘to exercise that mighty authority responsibly’ (261). The point is, of course, that far from being patiently endured, the
inadequate rule of (at least) King Stephen and King John prompted a significant proportion of the English aristocracy to push for their deposition. By constantly looking forward to Edward’s late-medieval successors, both authors represent Edward’s reign as a new departure in English constitutional history. One wonders whether a greater engagement with Edward’s twelfth- and early-thirteenth-century ancestors would have altered that interpretation.

Debate is the cornerstone of healthy historical inquiry, and the introduction of new historical perspectives is almost always to be welcomed. This is especially so when a perspective is backed by the level of scholarship on display in these studies. It is hoped that the books under review will help fuel even more vigorous discussion surrounding the direction of medieval English historiography, not to mention the reign of one of England’s most fascinating kings.

Colin Veach
Dept of History
University of Hull
c.veach@hull.ac.uk