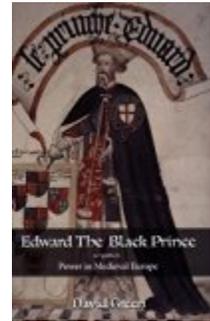


David Green. *Edward the Black Prince: Power in Medieval Europe*. Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007. 312 pp. \$28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-78481-9.

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## The Flower of English Chivalry

In the city square of Leeds in West Yorkshire, there is a magnificent statue of the Black Prince, erected in 1903 when the British Empire was at its height and patriotism was uncomplicated. Displaying an intense pride in his life and achievements, the inscription proclaims that the prince was “the victor of Crécy and Poitiers, the Flower of English Chivalry and the Upholder of the Rights of the People in the Good Parliament.” One would not expect a book published in 2007 to make the same grandiose claims, and David Green does not even intend his newest book *Edward the Black Prince* to be a conventional biography—he has written one of those already (*The Black Prince* [2001]). Instead, he openly states that he is concerned with themes, and not the person (p. 3). The common thread is contained in the subtitle—the exercise of power in medieval Europe.

The theme of power is certainly worth considering, since the Black Prince was not like the present Prince of Wales: he wielded real power in England, Wales (though he never visited there), and above all Aquitaine, which he ruled with his wife—the controversial Joan of Kent—for most of the 1360s. He never became king of England, but he was the sovereign ruler of a large part of France. The prince was a brilliant soldier and commander, but he was “not a political animal,” and there is a strong argument for saying that he won the war but lost the peace because of his misgovernment of Aquitaine (p. 153). In pursuing his chosen themes, Green deliberately plays down the fighting, at which the prince was very good, and concentrates on the politics, where the prince was either rather hopeless or simply uninterested. In

terms of religion and estate management, there is no real evidence that “the Flower of English Chivalry” was even personally involved.

Green’s account of the loss of Aquitaine in the 1370s is very good and convincing. I had not realized the extent of disaster of the prince’s government in Aquitaine. The typical picture from contemporary English sources is that the Treaty of Brétigny in 1360 was a triumph, sealing twenty years of military success in which “the victor of Crécy and of Poitiers” had played a major part. The English cause came to a sticky end when the perfidious French broke the terms of the treaty and invaded Aquitaine, when the prince was too ill to play a fully effective role. This was the view taken by his younger brother, Thomas of Gloucester, as recorded by the contemporary chronicler Jean Froissart. Green points to the superficiality of this view. The truth, according to Green, is that the prince did not know how to govern his new vassals in France. By involving France in a ruinous, though short and militarily successful, war in Spain, and then asking France to pay for it, he forfeited French loyalty and brought about the French intervention in Gascon affairs which Brétigny had been designed to avoid.

Green’s attempt (in chapters 2, 5, and 6) to relate his discussions about social, economic, political, and religious developments and events in England to the life of the prince is somewhat less convincing. Writing about the Black Death, Green admits “it is impossible to know what [the prince] thought of it” (p. 52). In the case of politics, the author certainly explodes the myth articu-

lated on the Leeds statue inscription that the prince was “the Upholder of the Rights of the People in the Good Parliament”—he was very ill at the time—but even so, Green leaves something of a vacuum in his discussion. The same can be said of religion. Green shows that links between the Lollards and Joan of Kent (or her court) existed once the prince died in 1376, but there is no sign of unorthodoxy on the prince’s part. After all, he was a lifelong devotee of Saint Thomas Becket, and that is why he is buried in Canterbury.

I feel that Green tends to assume too much at various points in his study. For example, he states that “chivalry, the identifying ethic of the aristocracy was under threat” (p. 71), and that “battlefields were becoming less chivalrous” (p. 76). These are arguable views; other historians (e.g. Maurice Keen in *Chivalry* (1984)), and certainly the Victorian burghers of Leeds, would have said that the late Middle Ages saw the flowering of chivalry, with the Black Prince as the finest bloom of all. It was certainly a period in which many treatises and biographies were written with chivalry as their focus, and when men (and women) took the idea very seriously. The thesis that chivalry was in some way in decline has been commonplace at least since Johan Huizinga’s *Waning of the Middle Ages* (1924), but it is certainly not the only view. Green indicates himself that “chivalry was *always* seen as being in a state of decay” (p. 78).

The most interesting parts of *Edward the Black Prince* are the personal details. For example, as a child the prince owned a tent and full suit of armor with a spare helmet, he played dice, and he had pets, since there was a page with responsibility for his hares (p. 11). The prince married for love. Joan of Kent was a highly unsuitable match in the eyes of his parents—at least compared to a foreign princess. Like Wallis Simpson in 1936, she already had been married twice and had a reputation for loose living as well as for beauty. Yet, the Black Prince married her in Windsor, where the present Prince of Wales celebrated his controversial second marriage.

Ideally, this book should be read as a companion to Green’s earlier biography. It is an excellent supplement—a typical product of the British academic establishment: learned, well written, properly documented, and, in this case, lavishly illustrated. The maps and tables are clear and helpful. Green is a reliable guide to the events of six hundred years ago, and he deals with many of the controversies that currently interest historians, such as whether Edward III and his son pursued battle-seeking strategies, rather than taking the Fabian approach recommended by the late Roman author Vegetius. But, this book does not stir the emotions—at least of this Englishman—as a more straightforward rendering of the Black Prince’s story might, and undoubtedly would have done in 1903. The easy pride that those English burghers of Leeds felt then has, alas, long since been dissipated.

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