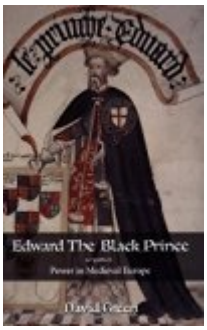
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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.



Reviewed by Kelly DeVries

Published on H-Albion (January, 2009)

Commissioned by Margaret McGlynn (University of Western Ontario)

No one on earth knows more about the Black Prince than David Green. It is likely that no one has ever known as much about the Black Prince as David Green. In fact, it is possible that the Black Prince did not know as much about himself as David Green does. Green has already authored two books on the Black Prince for a more popular audience, *The Black Prince* (2001) and *Poitiers, 1356* (2002), as well as several scholarly articles on more narrowly focused aspects of the Black Prince's life. Of special interest to this reviewer are his studies on the Black Prince's retinue, young noblemen who fought near him at the Battle of Crécy in 1346 and remained close friends and military adherents for the rest of their lives, which are a truly novel and insightful way of looking at the charisma and military leadership skills of a medieval general.

Edward, eldest son of King Edward III and Queen Philippa of Hainault, prince of Wales and expected heir to the throne of England, was born on June 15, 1330, nearly three and a half years after his father had ascended to that same throne by removing his own father, Edward II, largely at the behest of his mother, Isabella of France, and her lover, Roger Mortimer, whom Edward III would later execute for treason. In short, Prince Edward, who is known more by his sobriquet, the Black Prince (although it is not contemporary), was born into the ultimate dysfunctional family. Yet, he turned out not only to be quite normal but also quite heroic. Asked by his father to command one of the center lines of the English army at Crécy, when he was only sixteen years old, the Black Prince fought valiantly. At one time being "compelled to fight on his knees" by the heavy push of French troops, the victory gave him a military legitimacy to succeed his father, both as a general fighting in what would become the Hundred Years War and, it was hoped, eventually as king. [1] The latter did not happen though, as the Black Prince predeceased his father by a year, on June 8, 1376. So history cannot judge his abilities at royal leadership. But as a general he was equaled in the fourteenth century only by his father and,

perhaps, by Bertrand du Guesclin, a French adversary who faced him on numerous occasions.

In this book Green does not follow the life of the Black Prince chronologically. Rather he looks at it thematically. This will justifiably frustrate readers who are not well acquainted with the early history of the Hundred Years War or the reign of King Edward III, but it will help the reader who is researching more specific topics illuminated by the life of the Black Prince: his military history; the effect of the Black Death on England and Gascony; chivalry and nobility in the fourteenth century; the prince's retinue and household; the role of the parliament in English governance, and religion. (And, in all fairness, Green has written such an account in his more popular biography mentioned above.)

Green's purpose here is to depict a late medieval power-monger and power-broker. The Black Prince's life plays out like a Shakespearean historical drama. He was not just the heir to the throne of England, he was the son of one of the most powerful kings in English history, from whom he learned all the intricacies of rule, among other things how to deal with nobles, peasants, and everyone in between. He learned how to fight alongside and lead soldiers, perhaps from his father but certainly from long experience of fighting. He respected the Church leaders but knew also how to use them to legitimize his actions. He understood the need for heraldic and chivalric rituals and displays, participating in and sponsoring them. He almost always behaved in a way that would be perceived as "dutiful." Yet, unusually, he considered the dynastic requirements to marry for the sake of alliance or geographical expansion to be less important than marrying for love, to Joan, the Countess of Kent, a widow who was renowned for her beauty but offered little more to the prince or the royal family--she was also his cousin, which required papal absolution of his incest. Finally, he also anticipated his historical importance, allowing a chronicler/biographer close access to him; unfortunately, this man is known to us only by his title, the Herald of Sir John Chandos.

But, as with almost all histories of medieval English individuals, the question must be asked: can the biographer convince the reader that the person written about is important enough to serve as a pan-European archetype of the role proposed for him (her)? In this case, does David Green place the Black Prince in sufficient context and with sufficient historical detail to warrant his portrayal as an example of late medieval power? After all, during the Middle Ages England had a relatively small population, weak economy, and, with transportation and communication difficulties, was distanced from continental European politics and ecclesiastical leadership --whether in Rome or Avignon. Modern interest in medieval England has sometimes skewed the kingdom's actual importance. But not in Green's book. Here truly is a figure of importance throughout all of Europe, whose name and reputation were known from Iberia to the Byzantine Empire and from Scandinavia to Italy. In understanding the character of the Black Prince one answers, among other things, the very important question of how England, certainly smaller, poorer, and more distant from the centers of power, could time and time again have defeated the larger, richer, and more politically and ecclesiastically important France. This is an important and very well-done biography!

Note

[1]. Adam Murimuth, *Continuatio chronicarum*, ed. Edward Maunde Thompson (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1889), 246.

written

(Adam Murimuth, *Continuatio chronicarum*, ed. Edward Maunde Thompson (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1889), p. 246)

urposed

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion

Citation: Kelly DeVries. Review of Green, David. *Edward the Black Prince: Power in Medieval Europe.* H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2009.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=23692