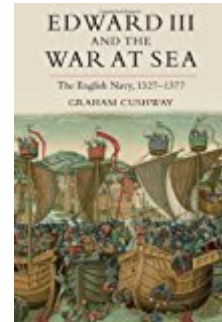


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Graham Cushway. *Edward III and the War at Sea: The English Navy, 1327-1377*. Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2011. Illustrations. 264 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84383-621-6.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



This book is superbly produced. The color illustrations are sumptuous. The footnotes (which I much prefer to endnotes) reflect the author's prodigious research. Graham Cushway offers a great deal of fascinating detail. For example, he writes: "If English sailors decided that their current lodesman did not have quite the qualifications he claimed, they were entitled to use the ship's windlass to pull his head off" (p. 55). We certainly learn all about the ships (see the detailed list in appendix 2, as well as chapters 3, 6, 9, 11, 17, and 19). His impeccable research must be the product of many hours of hard work in the National Archives (TNA) at Kew, in London (though, intriguingly, we learn in the preface that he wrote much of the book in Baghdad). However, the author did face a problem, which was how to combine a description of this Stakhanovite research with a readable narrative of events. He was fully aware of this predicament, as noted in this preface, but the question is whether he found a solution.

For those interested in the history of medieval England and France, the story of the "first half" of the Hundred Years' War, in the reign of Edward III, is a familiar one. The chronicler Jean Froissart described all the great battles, both on land and at sea. The naval history of the period has been less intensively studied than the military history, but even here, N. A. M. Rodger published a very convincing account (*The Safeguard of the Sea* [1997]). Rodger called Edward III's own claim to be the "Sovereign of the Seas" into question, showing that there was no Royal Navy to speak of before the reign of Henry V (1413-22); and that for much of the fourteenth century, the French had the upper hand, though the English "got lucky" at Sluys in 1340 and, to a lesser extent, off Winchelsea in 1350.

Does Cushway's narrative substantially change the picture painted by Rodger? Probably not, or not much, but it is difficult to give a clear answer, because the messages contained in the narrative chapters of this book are a little unclear. On the one hand, the author gives credit to Edward III for founding a Royal Navy: we are told that between 1327 and 1377 he had one hundred "King's ships" available to him (p. 20). On the other hand, he tells us that "the *Clos des Galées* [in Rouen] was far in advance of anything the English possessed" (p. 52). It could be possible to reconcile these two statements. Cushway might have said that the English enjoyed better leadership during the early years of Edward III's reign, or at any rate during the 1340s and 1350s, while the French had the better leaders during the reign of Charles V (1364-80), but he does not mention that. He states that "one argument is that the generation which achieved the great English victories of the 1330s to 1350s had passed away," without indicating whether he accepts that argument (p. 186).

While the research chapters are outstanding, the narrative chapters are less impressive. Some of his evidence is weak. For example, Cushway notes that Vegetius's "De Re Militari" was "the most influential textbook on war in the fourteenth century" (p. 3). While we know that there were many editions, we do not know that this work was influential. We lack the evidence to show that anyone in charge of naval operations ever read it. Cushway also describes an incident that preceded the Battle of Winchelsea in 1350, when Sir John Chandos performed a German dance, as ordered by the king. I have often pondered what was happening here. Our only source is by Froissart, who did not write much about this event. Cushway describes the scene in terms of a drunken party. Well, they may well have been drunk, but we do not know

definitively that they were. So, in the narrative sections, all his careful research only takes the writer so far. He is compelled, like the rest of us, to indulge in a certain amount of speculation.

At other moments, he does not move his analysis far enough. For example, Cushway writes that when Chandos went to France in 1361, he “had orders to restore to Edward’s allegiance the various rogue English castellans, bandits operating from captured French castles, in Normandy, by force” (pp. 176-177). This is true, but it is also misleading, because Chandos had a much wider brief. He had been appointed the king’s lieutenant in France, and he was charged with accepting homages in all the vast territories that the French had agreed to surrender

to the English by the Treaty of Brétigny of 1360. The duties mentioned by Cushway were only a small part of the story.

Ultimately, this book is a somewhat uneven combination of research and narrative. The research chapters will be of considerable interest to specialists and academics, who may also be interested in the narrative, in so far as it modifies some traditional thinking, but the author has not made the book as a whole more readable, from the point of view of the layman, by choosing to sandwich research and narrative as he has. In his preface, he recognizes that some of his chapters are “less adrenalin-charged” than others, and I am afraid that this remains the case (p. x).

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