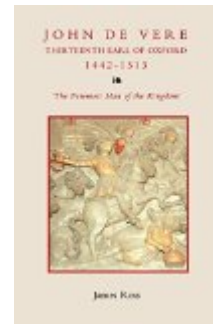


James Ross. *John de Vere, Thirteenth Earl of Oxford: "The Foremost Man of the Kingdom"*. Rochester: Boydell Press, 2011. 266 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84383-614-8.

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Published on H-War (January, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



A Thorough Look at "The Foremost Man of the Kingdom"

British National Archives medieval specialist James Ross gives us the first complete biography of "The Foremost Man of the Kingdom," John de Vere, the thirteenth Earl of Oxford (1442-1513). Oxford's life and work deserves exploration, in Ross's view, because he was "the last great medieval nobleman" who survived "no fewer than six kings of England during one of the most turbulent periods in English history," the Wars of the Roses. He lived through "many changes in fortune" during his lifetime, ranging from military defeat and imprisonment to a position of power second only to Henry VII (p. 1). Ross explores not only how he weathered these changes, but also the ways in which he exercised his power and authority. And, on the whole, despite some minor issues, it is a well-researched look at a historical actor who certainly deserves the attention.

In his introduction, Ross writes that he primarily focuses on Oxford's public life because medieval biography "cannot be a rounded assessment of an individual" due to limited source availability (p. 2). As such, his stated aims are to illuminate the political career of this important player during the Wars of the Roses, to explore the power and role of the aristocracy during Henry VII's reign, and to complete the political story of fifteenth-century East Anglia. In so doing, he attempts not only to complete a biography of a hitherto understudied historical actor, but also to add to the already substantial body of historiography of both the Wars of the Roses and the political character of Henry VII's reign. He thoroughly accomplishes these tasks in the text of his work, which is supplemented

by a brief conclusion, appendix, and index.

The core of the book is divided into two sections. In the first, shorter section, titled "The de Veres in Crisis, 1450-1485," Ross discusses Oxford's life chronologically from his birth in 1442, through the active years of the Wars of the Roses, ending with the ascension of Henry VII in 1485. Born a younger son of the twelfth Earl of Oxford, de Vere saw his father and brother as Lancastrian loyalists executed in 1462 for plotting against King Edward IV. Although he was allowed to succeed his father as an act of compromise, he was eventually placed in the Tower of London in 1468 for his own subversive machinations. Released and pardoned the following year, he fled to France in 1471 after joining another failed resistance movement against the king. While his lands were confiscated, he turned to privateering and attempted several ultimately unsuccessful invasions of England, not for purely political reasons but due to what Ross feels was a "personal vendetta" against the Yorkist Crown (p. 75). After being captured in 1475, he was held at Hammes Castle near Calais for ten years. He was eventually able to escape, however, going on to command "the bulk of troops" for Henry Tudor at the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 (p. 85).

Ross ends the first section with the death of Richard III and the acknowledgment that the Tudor victory in the battle changed Oxford's fate; as he states, "it turned him from a landless exile into one of the most important men of the kingdom" (p. 86). Specifically, the rewards and

titles that he earned for his service to Henry, when coupled with the hereditary lands that were immediately returned to him, aided him in solidifying his control of East Anglia (a helpful map of his holdings is provided on page 92). More important, Ross argues that due to these acquisitions, Oxford became, as the second section title indicates, “the principal personage in the kingdom.”

In this second, much longer section, Ross begins a thematic discussion of the remainder of Oxford’s life. Specifically, he deals with his estates and income; his affinities (to which the appendix pertains); his specific role and execution of authority in East Anglia; and what can be gleaned from the available sources regarding his interests, home life, and personality. Among other things, once Henry VII restored his rights and titles in the first Tudor parliament, Oxford was appointed as Constable to the Tower of London, he was made a member of the Privy Council, he officiated at the coronation of Henry VII and his wife Elizabeth of York, and he was invested with the Order of the Garter. Moreover, not only was he named godfather to Henry VII’s eldest son, Arthur, Prince of Wales, but he also continued his military service at the Battle of Stoke Field in 1492, which is often considered the final battle of the Wars of the Roses.

In general, Ross argues that instead of being a peer under the thumb of Henry VII, Oxford formed a symbiotic relationship with the first Tudor king. In an effort to solidify his at-first tenuous hold on the country, Henry used Oxford to assert his authority in a significant and sizeable area of the country. In return, Oxford was given not only a royal income but also further titles, favor, and in effect, political power and relative autonomy. He continued this position of preeminence under Henry VIII, and although he was imbued with what Ross feels was “a strong sense of his lineage and dynasty,” he produced no issue from either of his marriages (p. 6). As such, when he died at the age of seventy-one in March 1513, he was succeeded by the son of his younger and sole surviving brother George.

The shortcomings of this work are few and the first pertains to the book’s structure. The discussion of Oxford’s life switches from chronological in the first section to predominantly thematic in the second. Ross notes that this was necessary due to the complex nature of Oxford’s power and authority during the reign of Henry VII, and yet the change causes the first and second sections to appear more detached than is surely intended. This is a minor issue, however, and one that can be overlooked given

the in-depth analysis that Ross provides.

The second weakness stems from the inherent biases of the biography in general: by mere virtue of choosing a single subject to study, the biographer deems that individual historically significant. Oxford certainly is important, and yet Ross uses Oxford’s experience to postulate that when considered from the viewpoint of nobles in the counties rather than from Westminster, the character of Henry VII’s reign changes, in some ways, quite significantly. Ross acknowledges, however, that few peers from this time are subject to in-depth studies; he mentions Jasper Tudor, Duke of Bedford, and Thomas Stanley, Earl of Derby, as particularly influential members of Henry VII’s reign that have, as yet, escaped the biographer’s lens. As such, reshaping Henry VII’s political authority vis-à-vis his magnates based on one noble, especially the peer that Ross admits was second in power only to Henry himself, seems problematic. It does not automatically follow that Ross’s supposition is incorrect, but rather that the revision of such an important historical conclusion should wait until supplementary research has been completed on other important magnates from this period.

Ross soundly avoids what I feel is the largest pitfall of a biography. He considers an enormous body of primary sources to substantiate his claims (all noted in extensive and informative footnotes) while not taking generous liberties with Oxford’s potential thoughts and motivations. It is often tempting for a biographer to become a forensic psychologist and make unsubstantiated assumptions about a historical figure’s private ideas and inspirations. Ross, however, does not attempt to make judgments that he feels the sources themselves do not support. This is the mark of a good biography, and Ross’s work is certainly that.

Indeed, overall the book is a well-written, well-researched, and extremely engaging look at an influential player during a pivotal time in British history. It fills a notable gap in the historiography, given that it is the first full-length biography of the thirteenth Earl of Oxford, and it provides a substantial source base from which other historians can begin their own exploration of Oxford’s political role or other topics related to Oxford’s life and experiences. It is therefore a must read for any historian of the Wars of the Roses or the reign of Henry VII, and is an accessible biography for the nonhistorian who wishes to learn more about a historical actor who has, until now, remained hidden from view.

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Citation: Sarah Douglas. Review of Ross, James, *John de Vere, Thirteenth Earl of Oxford: "The Foremost Man of the Kingdom"*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.

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