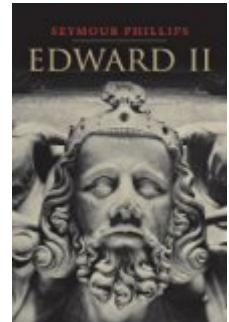


**Seymour Phillips.** *Edward II*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010. xvi + 679 pp. Illustrations \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-15657-7.



**Reviewed by** James Bothwell

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**Commissioned by** Margaret McGlynn (University of Western Ontario)

Arguably few people know more about Edward II than Seymour Phillips. Over forty years in the making, *Edward II* offers forth most everything one would ever want to know about this much-discussed, much-maligned king and then some. As with all the Yale English Monarchs series, this work will be a standard for years to come. It is the second full-scale biography of Edward II to come out in less than a decade, with Roy Martin Haines's thought-provoking McGill biography published in 2003.[1] This lacunae of modern biographical work on Edward until quite recently is in some ways surprising, considering both the controversial nature of the topic, and also taking into account the amount of detailed research done on aspects of the reign over the past century (from T. F. Tout and James Conway Davies to John Robert Maddicott, Natalie Fryde, Pierre Chaplais, and beyond).[2] Indeed, this is a book that could not have come about without real depth of research in the period, which is layered on years of dedicated detective work by Phillips himself. There is, in other words, little way one

can criticize either the focus or the evidence presented in this work. It will be a key reference point--sometimes in agreement with, sometimes in conflict with, Haines--with which anyone working on the reign will now have to start.

It is somewhat hard to summarize the content of a book so detailed and multifaceted. I suppose one of the most important points is that, as Phillips notes himself, he was trying to create a more balanced image of Edward II by both bringing in the full weight of the available research, as well as emphasizing the multiplicity of other factors. By doing this, one does get the sense of, if not a character we can sympathize with, at the very least one we can understand. There is, of course, the idea reinforced here that Edward II was not particularly "kingly" in his pursuits, which comes not only from *Lanercost*, but also a number of other sources--the standard accusations of rowing, driving carts, etc. all rear their heads.[3] That said, though he does touch some modern sensibilities with the "commonness" of his interests as a royal, he was not an energetic patron of the arts

as, say, Richard II was, and so does not encourage our respect as an “enlightened” king. More important, though, the factors playing on both the events of Edward II’s reign, and indeed Edward himself, come more firmly into view. While Edward may well have been problematic as an individual holding the highest office in England, it is also true that he was faced with many short-, mid-, and longer-term structural problems, not all of which were so present in previous or subsequent reigns. In terms of inheritance, Edward’s was a difficult one both from his father, Edward I—especially in terms of Scotland and even Wales—and in terms of more general economic and political trends, trends which are often brought forth as one of the excuses for the quality of his rule. But Phillips also brings out the tenaciousness of the king himself, especially in defense of his rights, a tenaciousness which he could use with “considerable skill when it came to dividing his enemies and wearing down opposition until he got his way” (p. 609). This is not the weak-willed maladroit of Christopher Marlowe’s play (1593) or Derek Jarman’s film (1991), but rather a monarch standing very much on his rights as king. And, though Phillips is unwise to cast all “favorites” in as negative light as he tends to do (there were, after all, useful, competent favorites, as Edward III would later find!), nonetheless he also notes the loyalty that the king obviously inspired in the likes of William Melton, John de Hothum, Walter Stapledon, and Walter Reynolds, intelligent and usually capable men who were holders of some of the most important offices in the kingdom for much of the reign, and only appear to have given up on the monarch in the run-up to Isabella’s invasion. A similar comment can be made concerning the loyalty which Edward II inspired in his household knights. That said, Phillips does not play down the problems which Edward also caused for himself. His relationship with both Piers Gaveston and the Despencers, as well as Hugh Audley, William Montagu, and Roger Amory, is given full vent, as is his inability to

mount effective campaigns against the Scots despite his personal bravery. Moreover his character, often mercurial and unstable, allowed him on occasion to snatch sea-changing defeat from the jaws of muddling but almost assured victory, most famously at Bannockburn in 1314. Indeed, while Edward II is often compared with Richard II, his great-grandson, in many ways his abilities and his character, even his inheritance and the effectiveness of his administration, mirror those of his great grandfather, John—the only real difference, in the image at least, is that while Edward had lost his crown by the time he died, John was only on his way to losing it.

The author’s approach is set out early on: “Somewhere a balance has to be struck between the extremes of the calamitous and incompetent Edward II on the one hand and the holy man on the other. What follows is an attempt to achieve such a balance” (p. 4). However, the danger with being so forthright in the introduction is that there is then always the sneaking suspicion that the historian has been out from the start to rehabilitate the image of individual under scrutiny. This, along with the fact that, due to the scarcity of sources for personal motivation in the Middle Ages, there is a more common tendency among historians to give the benefit of the doubt and rehabilitate, rather than denigrate, means that we risk coming out with a much more palatable picture of Edward II than might otherwise have been the case. This reviewer is not saying that this is what has happened—indeed the weight of evidence in the book tends to validate Phillips’s somewhat less harsh and more nuanced view of the king—merely that such a statement so early on makes the idea of a forced rehabilitation more plausible in the reader’s mind than it might otherwise have been. On the other hand, if the author is to take this “balanced” approach, we also need far more of a comparison with the English kings immediately before and after his reign, to make a truly informed judgement—Edward’s inheritance from Edward I is alluded to, and the rise of his

son, Edward III, foreshadowed but there is little sustained thought about the nature and practice of medieval kingship as a whole in this period and how Edward fits in it. And then there is the whole wider European issue concerning kingship in this period, both the expanse of theoretical literature (especially, far more from Walter of Milemete, William of Pagula, and William of Ockham is needed) and in the turbulent actuality of the continental monarchies of Philip IV and his sons, as well as Louis the Bavarian, all of which feed into both the image and the reality of medieval kingship at this time.[4] On a similarly broad canvas, there is also the need for more in-depth thought about the English economy and society—considering this is the period of the debate of an early fourteenth-century crisis, for a start the 1315 famine should not really be relegated to less than a page! Perhaps these issues would not matter so much if medieval biographies were indeed straight biographies, but they do almost always end up being studies of reigns in the round, and as such the topics which are discussed need to be set in wider context. As the author admits towards the end of his book, very rarely do we get a clear sense of Edward’s own character or his motivations from anything other than extrapolation from official and semi-official records and second-hand accounts by chroniclers. On the whole, then, even more than say Richard II or Edward IV in the same series, this feels like a study of the reign and the personnel, events, and processes in it, rather than the king himself. At times, indeed, it seems a bit like the recent film *I’m Not There* (2007), which tells the story of Bob Dylan mainly from the perspective of those around him. This sort of “hole in the center” is not uncommon when it comes to medieval biographies, but it is still worth highlighting.

More importantly, though, there is the issue of the style and presentation of this book, which is somewhat problematic at times. There can be no doubt that this book is well written. Almost without exception, all the topics in this work are

looked at in a fresh, invigorating way which keeps the reader stimulated and interested. However, there are a few issues which need to be addressed. First, the length of footnotes often overwhelms. In some ways this is understandable with a book which has been so long in the making. However, this reviewer at least found it easier to read the discursive footnotes after each chapter, rather than breaking every few sentences to move down the page and read the footnotes, which are nonetheless almost always worth examining. More important than this, though, is the extremely irritating “sectioning” of this book. Sections within chapters are very useful, but I think that this has been taken to extremes. Sometimes we have a section of only a page (or even less), which not only breaks the flow of the writing, but also potentially puts artificial limits—or at the very least, an artificial structure—on the discussion of some very important issues (e.g., Edward’s relationship with his father, the 1316 parliament, and the 1318 peace negotiations). Also, there are some very odd section titles, which I do not think will stand the test of time. Sometimes this feels like the author himself is not entirely committed to this setup, with rather glib headings such as “Edward is Wealthy,” “Edward All at Sea,” “Scotland Again,” and “D-Day, 24 September, 1326,” which would be more at home in a popular biography than what is meant to be, and indeed is, an academic standard for the reign. This form of presentation, along with the discursive nature of many of the footnotes, as noted above, at times makes for quite a jerky read. I suspect that this partitioning has not been the author’s choice, going from his other works, but rather forced on him by the publishers in an attempt to make the work more appealing to a wider audience. However, by making this study at times feel like a number of mini-essays on aspects of Edward II’s reign, though it may be more accessible for undergraduates in particular looking for literary “sound bites” for their essays, signposting every possible topic in this way is certainly not good for

their academic development. It is not something which Yale biographies have done before to this degree (see Michael Prestwich's *Edward I* and Nigel Saul's *Richard II*), and it should be discouraged in the future.[5] This is a scholarly biography, and trying to straddle the two chairs of academic and popular in presentation can leave the reader at time rather bemused--and, more seriously, threaten that the conclusions of such work will become blurred in the common mind with more sensational and speculative endeavors.

That said, this book has much to say, and presentational caveats aside, says it very well. It will be a very long time before Phillips's *Edward II* is superseded by another study of the reign of this ever so human king.

#### Notes

[1]. R. M. Haines, *King Edward II* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003).

[2]. T. F. Tout, *The Place of the Reign of Edward II in English History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1914); J. Conway Davies, *The Baronial Opposition to Edward II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918); J. R. Maddicott, *Thomas of Lancaster* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); N. Fryde, *The Tyranny and Fall of Edward II, 1321-1326* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); P. Chaplais, *Piers Gaveston: Edward II's Adoptive Brother* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

[3]. *Chronicon de Lanercost*, ed. J. Stevenson (Edinburgh, 1839).

[4]. *Political Thought in Early Fourteenth Century England: Treatises by Walter of Milemete, William of Pagula, and William of Ockham*, ed. and trans. C. J. Nederman (Tempe, AZ: Brepols, 2002).

[5]. M. Prestwich, *Edward I* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997); N. Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997).

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