



*Edward III,*  
W. Mark Ormrod  
(Yale: Yale University Press, 2013).

Review by: Charles Farris

*Edward III*. By W. Mark Ormrod. Yale: Yale University Press, 2013. ISBN: 978-0-3001-9408-1. xxv + 721 pp. £16.99.

The long-established English Monarchs Series (hereafter *EMS*) has done much to reinvigorate the reputation of biography as a medium of historical investigation. The series is widely respected for producing biographies which strive for definitiveness. The latest *EMS* volume completes the trio of biographies of the kings which have been frequently termed ‘The Three Edwards’. *Edward I*, by Michael Prestwich, was published in 1989 and reissued in 1997, and *Edward II*, by Seymour Philips, in 2010. Both of these works have been highly praised as outstanding sources of reference and, like their successor, are well in excess of 600 pages long. Current and future students of the reign of Edward III are extremely fortunate that ‘their’ biography has been completed by Mark Ormrod – a historian who seems effortlessly to translate his meticulous knowledge of primary sources into elegant prose. Ormrod has addressed his challenging topic with great vigour and the result is striking both in size and assiduity.

The task of creating a definitive account of such a long and complex reign is an unenviable one. Ormrod has met this challenge by diligently amassing a vast number of primary sources and subjecting them to close scrutiny throughout his account. The volume offers a broadly chronological narrative comprising of twenty-one chapters. Ormrod guides the reader through the well-known set-pieces of Edward’s reign, all the while introducing and exploring the circumstances which enabled, or at times hindered, the king’s actions. Relationships are at the centre of this story. Early in the volume the author asserts that medieval monarchy was a ‘social performance’ (p. 120) and Edward was skilled both in inspiring loyalty, and innovative in his willingness to show leniency to those who had wronged him – a deliberate effort to distance himself from the ‘terrors of 1322 and 1326-7’ (p. 95). Edward’s skill and energy in nurturing relationships allowed him to attain consent, and often enthusiasm, for his dynastic ambitions. However, skill and energy were only half the battle and, to Edward, as to many of his Plantagenet progenitors, insufficient finance presented a limiting factor. Ormrod explains that ‘the 1330s witnessed a very important series of experiments in royal finance. While not all the schemes were successful or enduring, it was out of this process of trial and error that Edward III formed the fiscal system that would sustain his successors for the rest of the Hundred Years War’ (p. 114). Perseverance and an ability to learn from his mistakes explain many of Edward’s successes. Ormrod describes that ‘a king less proud and determined than Edward III might well have felt in 1341 that the only way forward in relation to France was a negotiated settlement’ (p. 247). Against this statement

we can observe that just fifteen years later Edward had augmented a series of truly spectacular military victories and held both of his principle enemies, David II of Scotland and John II of France, in captivity. Despite facing considerable difficulties both in England and overseas, Edward III's resolute determination paid dividends.

One of the great triumphs of this work is Ormrod's ability to maintain pace when addressing the last fifteen years of Edward's reign - a period greatly overshadowed by the remarkable successes of the preceding period of military glory. The author details the difficulties the king faced when trying to adjust to the 'dynamics of peacetime politics' in the 1260s, but concludes that overall 'Edward III's domestic regime during the years of peace must be judged a significant success' (pp. 473, 496). Ormrod suggests that the defining factor in the decline in the monarch's rule was indeed the 'king's failing health and the crisis of leadership that resulted' (p. 549). Edward III, despite his faults, had held England together through some staggering highs and lows. Arguably, in terms of his reputation, Edward was cursed by not expiring at the height of his powers. Like Edward I, and indeed Henry II, he lived for too long to leave an unblemished record. However, Ormrod depicts the king's demise, on 21 June 1377, not as a relief for his subjects but as the end of an era. Although Edward had not been at the peak of his powers for some time he still provided a sense of cohesion and hope that was lost at his death: 'For fifty years, Edward had provided a focus of unity and a sense of permanence in a fickle and fast-changing world. Now, that certainty was lost' (p. 584).

The volume closes with a thoughtful analysis of Edward's changing reputation throughout history and amongst historians. The author's own deductions are positive but realistic, frankly identifying the king's strengths and weaknesses. He admits that Edward was flawed and lacked substantial intellect, but stresses his keen sense of honour and that he established a remarkable relationship with his people. Edward's subjects endured great hardship to accommodate his ambitions and yet, tellingly, he faced no hint of armed revolt during his long reign - 'an achievement unparalleled in historical memory, and not surpassed again for at least two centuries...' (p. 603). Ormrod is arguably consistent in his sympathies for Edward's plight. However, given the meticulousness of his research and the balance of his reasoning it is hard not to find this interpretation convincing. It is important to remember that fourteenth century England did not suffer poor kingship lightly and both Edward's predecessor and successor were deposed for their failures. Given the length of Edward's reign it must surely be concluded that he largely satisfied the expectations of his people.

Although this volume is successful, and indeed enjoyable, as an example of biographical literature, this readability is arguably not to be its principal

legacy. Its primary function will be as a source of reference to both undergraduate and postgraduate students and to both amateur and professional historians. In this respect, especially, it is an outstanding example of its genre. Ormrod's archival knowledge is exemplary - barely a page goes by without reference to an unprinted manuscript. Historians with an interest in a broad range of topics associated with Edward's reign will be guided by the primary sources and secondary literature referenced in this volume. The bibliography is generous yet concise. The index is comprehensive - as has come to be expected of the series. Ormrod has also provided a number of maps; family-trees; a description of Edward III's titles and seals (Appendix I); and an itinerary (Appendix II). Short of providing a time-line of key events the author could not have made the volume more user-friendly and indeed, interactive. This beautifully written, meticulous and, above all, generous study merits longevity and sets the bar very high for future biographers. This work champions, and perhaps even exemplifies, the aims of the *EMS*- a feat all the more admirable considering the many challenges presented by this topic. Readers of this journal will find much to celebrate in this volume, both as a vivid account of one of medieval England's most important kings, and as a first rate example of historical investigation.

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