



*Political Power in Medieval  
Gwynedd: Governance and the Welsh  
Princes*, David Stephenson  
(Cardiff: University of Wales, 2014).

Review by:  
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*Political Power in Medieval Gwynedd: Governance and the Welsh Princes*. By David Stephenson. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2014. ISBN 978-1-783-160044. 320 pp. £24.99.

**D**avid Stephenson's book, *Political Power in Medieval Gwynedd*, builds on its first edition published in 1984, and expands on its content by updating the previous edition to reflect continuing and increasing interest in the subject matter and including more recent contributions to the historiography.

The fifth in the Studies in Welsh History series published by University of Wales Press, this expanded edition comes at a time of growing interest in the study of Medieval Wales and the Welsh March with several significant works appearing within the last five years. For example, Huw Pryce's *Acts of the Welsh Rulers 1120-1283* (2005) was edited and reprinted with corrections in 2010 with the assistance of Charles Insley. 2010 also saw the publication of *The Medieval March of Wales: The Creation and Perception of a Frontier, 1066-1283* by Max Lieberman, reprinted in January 2014 for the fourth series of Cambridge University Press's Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought. Cambridge's Texts and Studies in Medieval Welsh Law has also contributed to the sustained interest, with publications such as Paul Russell's *Welsh Law in Medieval Anglesey* (2001, reprinted 2011) adding to the historiography of the geopolitical bloc focused on here by Stephenson. Additionally, important research projects at Aberystwyth University (Seals of Medieval Wales, or SiMeW) and University of Trinity St David's in collaboration with the Universitat de Lleida (Monastic Wales) have culminated in article outputs and greater understanding of and interest in power networks and vehicles of its transmission in secular and ecclesiastic contexts. Even so, Stephenson remains one of the few scholars producing detailed studies on Gwynedd in recent years, and this reprinted edition remains the only monograph to date to fill this particular gap.

Stephenson's book is structured in five parts with seven appendices, each part being a self-contained study. It begins with an assessment of Gwynedd and its sources, and, in recognition of the continued interest in the field since its initial publication, a new introduction to the book which is a detailed consideration of the past three decades of research between the first and second edition's publication. This survey of the work produced between 1984 and 2015 is itself a fair and important discussion on the progression of the historiography. In parts, Stephenson's critical evaluation of works aids the understanding of the face of Welsh and Marcher Studies (one cannot be divorced from the other), particularly for those seeking a way into the topic, as well as providing a useful discussion for those already familiar with the historiography. Research projects and major contributions to the field are al-

and major contributions to the field are also comprehensively highlighted. This survey makes the new edition of this text an excellent place to begin for anyone with an interest in Welsh or Marcher studies, although—as will be discussed further—the text itself requires some working knowledge of Medieval Latin and Middle Welsh where passages and terms are left untranslated. Nevertheless, the new introduction is an important survey without major omissions, while the text itself follows is an uncritical reproduction of the original 1984 edition. This is largely due to the fact that Stephenson's original work is still very much an authority on Gwynedd, and little has been produced in the intervening decades to greatly alter the conclusions of his work.

The Structure of Governance, Part 1, presents the context of government in Gwynedd, looking at the prince and his council, officials of the prince's *curia*, the prince's clerks, and local officials. This section lays the groundwork for the remaining sections, laying out the flexible ministerial structure of the court and government, and highlighting the reliance on ecclesiastical centres in Gwynedd for their provision of secretarial and diplomatic assistance.

Part 2 discusses the prince's dues, beginning with a brief introduction that considers the problem of quantification. Stephenson discussed the sources at length in the initial introduction (i-xlii), and this brief preface to the second part sketches some evidence for cash renders being taken in kind, as well as reminding readers of the fragmentary state of the source material, justifying the impossibility of quantification. Indeed, the following chapters on demesne exploitation and renders and dues make good use of the available sources; while acknowledging their patchy nature makes quantitative analysis impossible, the range of the sources do provide a clearer picture of Llywelyn's activities and how he was able to achieve the extraction of annual payments, which had long puzzled Welsh historians—according to F. M. Powicke (*King Henry III and the Lord Edward*, 1966)—prior to Stephenson's initial 1984 study.

Part 3, The Personnel of Administration, retains the original 1984 text, providing a still-important prosopographical discussion on the court's personnel, tracking them through a range of sources including genealogies. Part 4, The Problems of Political Control, also retains its original text and lines of argument, considering not only the internal workings of the princes' governance but the external influences that were brought to bear on the princes' power and control. This includes discussions on the princes and their relationships with the lords of the princely house, the princes' use of bishops and abbots as administrators and mediators, and the impact of kinship groups. It is important to note that in the latter respect, this edition has not been updated to refer to the significant work of Thomas Charles-Edwards

(*Early Irish and Welsh Kinship*, 1993), although this book (one of several of Charles-Edwards's works between 1984 and 2014) is referenced in the historiographical survey which forms the second edition's new introduction. Finally, Part 5 critically assesses the conclusions of the previous four sections, and the implications of these overarching themes. This final assessment likewise preserves the original 1984 text. It is to be hoped that a revival in interest in this topic and the publication of this new edition will inspire future engagement with these conclusions, and further investigation into the themes discussed: there is certainly room to do so.

It is worth noting that, while the new introduction is an ideal review of the literature for those wanting to study Medieval Wales as well as for those already familiar with the historiography and topic in general, this work is not easily accessible to complete beginners to topic. Lack of a glossary is a potential issue, especially as some Welsh terms are not explicitly defined; someone with Middle Welsh or Modern Welsh may work it out from context or literally translate the terms, but not so for someone without the language basics. The same is true for the numerous untranslated Latin phrases and passages; for all its many strengths, this is a book that should be read in conjunction with other texts, and requires background knowledge both of the topic and of the two languages used. If, for example, the reader is new to Middle Welsh and unfamiliar with terminology and law codes or the names of offices in the Welsh ruler's court, a good accompaniment to this text for the sake of clarity and deeper understanding would be the ever-relevant R. R. Davies and his work *The Age of Conquest: Wales 1063–1415* (2001), the aforementioned Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh Kinship* (1993), and *Law of Hywel Dda: Law Texts of Medieval Wales*, ed. Dafydd Jenkins, (1986), purely to gain some overarching understanding of the subject and familiarise themselves with terminology. The reprinted edition could have expanded its audience to new students of the subject matter by including comprehensive translations and a glossary, which is also lacking in the original 1984 version of the book.

One notable omission in both the old and new editions is a detailed discussion on the role of the wife of a Welsh ruler, or of female roles within the court. Again, this is where the 1984 text could have been expanded upon to include more recent discussions of the active parts played by women within the court, particularly in the case of particularly in the case of Siwan/Joan, Llywelyn ap Gruffudd's wife, who operated within a tradition of noblewomen in Wales possessed of active political and diplomatic agency. Works which may accompany Stephenson's book to expand the reader's understanding may include, for example, Gwenyth Richards, *Welsh Noblewomen in the Thirteenth Century: A Historical Study of Medieval Welsh Law and Gender Roles* (2009).

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Nevertheless, for those undaunted by Middle Welsh legal terms and Medieval Latin passages, this is an important work which expands our understanding of Gwynedd's administration and of its rulers' court. The prosopographical study of officials and the revealing use of ecclesiastical personnel tap into important discussions about the secular duties performed by clergy in Wales, particularly challenging assumptions about the composition and sophistication of native Welsh courtly life and administration.

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