Edward II:  
The Terrors of Kingship  
Christopher Given-Wilson  
London: Allen Lane, 2016  

Review by: Samuel Lane

There is no shortage of studies of Edward II. In the last generation alone, biographies of the king have been written by Seymour Philipps, Roy Martin Haines, and Kathryn Warner. These have been complemented by a rich series of articles, essays—notably those within Gwilym Dodd and Anthony Musson’s recent collection, The Reign of Edward II: New Perspectives—and lives of other leading figures of the period, such as Ian Mortimer’s study of Roger Mortimer. Yet, in contrast to the length of other works on Edward—Philipps’ runs for 679 pages, Haines’s 604, and Warner’s 319—Christopher Given-Wilson’s account is remarkably concise at just 128 pages.

The work takes the form of a narrative treatment of Edward’s life, from his birth in 1284 to his apparent death in 1327, with an additional final chapter entitled “Imaging Edward”, summarising Given-Wilson’s verdict of the king, and tracing his legacy in history, literature, film, and art. While less can be said about Edward’s 43 years in 128 pages than in lengthier treatments, Given-Wilson nonetheless ranges impressively, dealing with all the major events of the period, and touching on the evolving military, social, ecclesiastical, economic, political, and diplomatic backdrop. Although the first twenty-three years of Edward’s life before he ascended to the throne are dealt with in just nine pages, the reader does not feel short-changed, as these are filled with delightful anecdotes, such as Edward’s youthful talent for judging horses, as well as more substantive discussion about his early relations with Piers Gaveston, the legacy of his father’s rule, and the background of the Scottish Wars of Independence (5-13). Indeed, the issue of Scotland is given more prominence here than in many other studies, with a thorough treatment of the course of campaigns, raids, and ambassadorial manoeuvres; detailed narratives of particular moments, such as the decisive Battle of Bannockburn; and probing analysis of individual issues, like the usage of schiltrons—dense pike formations—by the Scottish forces (27-33). While this lacks the wealth of detail and comprehensiveness typical of longer biographies of Edward—and Seymour Philipps’ definitive work in particular—the scope of this work is nonetheless sufficient to provide a stimulating introduction and overview of Edward’s reign.

The same can be said of the arguments Given-Wilson puts forward, which are almost uniformly deft and even-handed. This is typified by his discussion of Edward’s relationship with his notorious favourite, Piers Gaveston, where he explores both the possibility that their union was homosexual, and that is was one of “brotherhood-in-arms”, before sensibly
concluding that “whether they were brothers, lovers or both, what mattered about their relationship was its political ramifications”, thereby steering his way around a historiographical quagmire that could have easily subsumed an enormous portion of his text (12-13). Similarly, in his examination of the causes of the Earl of Lancaster’s feud with Edward, he observes that Lancaster’s recruitment of a private army and repeated acts of private war inevitably meant that he bore some responsibility for declining relations, but reaches a judgment that Edward himself was “largely to blame for this” (35).

What is perhaps more impressive, considering the brevity of the work, is how Given-Wilson does not confine his analysis of causation to high-political factors. For instance, when discussing the challenges Edward’s government faced in the mid-1310s, he comments on the impact of the social crisis of 1315-7, which was marked by heavy rainfall, collapsing wool exports, soaring prices, famine, and widespread starvation (37). Limitations of space of course mean that this is not the place to find grand bouleversements of established theories and ideas about Edward’s reign— for instance, there is nothing akin to Philipps’ demolition of the notion of a “middle party”—but that does not prevent the work from making interesting and compelling judgements about the politics of the early fourteenth century.

These judgements are founded on Given-Wilson’s mastery of the sources of the period. Unsurprisingly for one of the great scholars of the late medieval chronicle tradition, his biography is illustrated and supported by a rich seam of quotations from the works of Ranulf Higden, Geoffrey le Baker, Sir Thomas Gray, Robert of Reading, and the Bridlington annalist, amongst many others. However, Given-Wilson’s familiarity with the secondary literature is also evident, as he draws on the work of Hilda Johnstone for Edward’s boyhood and upbringing; Pierre Chaplais for his relations with Piers Gaveston; and Seymour Philipps for the narrative of Isabella’s invasion and Edward’s deposition. This wealth of underlying scholarship is made accessible for the reader due to the inclusion of a full set of endnotes, a stand-out feature of the Penguin Monarchs series, meaning that the material cited can be easily identified and located. Of course, Given-Wilson’s work does not draw on as much evidence—financial, literary, administrative, diplomatic, and judicial—as Philipps’s study, but it is nevertheless fully grounded in the scholarly literature and amply furnished with primary sources.

Where Given-Wilson’s biography truly comes into its own, however, is in its exquisite style. This is apparent in his assessment of the early years of Edward’s reign: “soul-baring and humiliating for the king, they stripped him of his regal mystique and spread a poison through the arteries of the body politic that proved ineradicable as long as Edward occupied the throne” (25). Yet, the greatest stylistic joy in the work is Given-Wilson’s delightfully pithy
verdicts on individuals of note: Archbishop Winchelsey is “curmudgeonly”; Thomas, Earl of Lancaster is “violent, brooding and casuistic”; and Hugh Despenser the Younger is “handsome, haughty and inordinately greedy” (26, 35, 58). The result of this is that Given-Wilson wears his learning lightly, meaning that the work is not tiresome, but is instead a genuine pleasure to read.

In consequence, Christopher Given-Wilson’s work is not, and does not pretend to be a definitive biography of Edward. Correspondingly, it will not displace Seymour Philipps’s stellar 2010 life of the king from either our bibliographies or bookshelves. Instead, it complements Philipps’s work by providing a livelier and pacier introduction to Edward’s reign, which will be of interest to the historian and general reader alike. In so doing, it not only provides a concise distillation of the king’s reign, character, and legacy, but also an example par excellence of the short biography, which beautifully demonstrates why it is such a popular, enduring, and beguiling form.

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