



The Black Prince

Michael Jones

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The life and career of Edward the Black Prince, Edward III's eldest son, hero of Crécy and Poitiers, has long captured the imagination of historians. As a consequence, there already exists a plethora of excellent biographies on the Prince from which to choose.

Nevertheless, Michael Jones' vibrant account of the Prince's life is a most welcome addition. This is a biography in the truest sense of the word: throughout, the author is set on uncovering the man behind the myth of the Black Prince. It is an endeavour in which he largely succeeds, convincingly portraying the Prince as an exemplary military commander who is undeserving of the bad reputation he has received in the past for the violent raid across southern France in 1355 or the sack of Limoges in 1370, and who was pious, loyal, and generous. Indeed, Jones' ability to capture the human elements of the Prince's life, and the events of the period more broadly, serve to make this a far more readable book than most on medieval military history.

The book follows a chronological structure, with the first three chapters serving as a backdrop to the Prince's early life (until 1346). Though these chapters offer useful context for the Prince's upbringing, they attempt to cover too much ground and are not without fault. It is argued, for instance, that the Prince was given a "first taste of leadership and command" in 1337, when a regency council was established under the guidance of the earls of Huntingdon and Arundel and the Archbishop of Canterbury to make provision for defence of England while Edward III was abroad (65-6). This, according to Jones, is when the Prince began to learn about military administration, seemingly "co-ordinating the defence of England's capital." At the age of just seven, however, it seems unlikely that the Prince had any meaningful input into the workings of this council. There are also some inaccuracies and oversimplifications in these chapters. Jones talks, for example, of how Edward III's attentions turned immediately to Scotland following the Nottingham coup of 1330, ignoring the fact that between 1330 and 1332 his main preoccupation was with a campaign in Ireland (37-8). Likewise, the story of how Edward II was supposedly sodomised to death at Berkley castle is colourfully recounted, with little mention of the fact that it has long since been discredited (31-2).

The faults of these opening chapters, however, do little to detract from what is an excellent book once it reaches its discussion of the Prince's life from 1346 onwards. Of particular note are the excellent accounts of the pitched battles that provide the focal points of the Prince's career: Crécy, Poitiers, and Nájera. Jones' telling of the battle of Poitiers in 1355 is

particularly engaging. The unfolding of the battle is told through a series of vivid extracts drawn from a range of contemporary chronicles and letters, including those of individuals who were present, such as the Prince himself. It is particularly admirable to see the attention Jones has given to often neglected French chronicles of the fourteenth century here, such as the *Chronique des Quatre Premiers Valios*, which add a new dimension to his account of the battle. This is also true of the author's astute observation concerning the Anglo-Gascon tactics used at the battle. Indeed, Jones puts forward the compelling notion that the decision to dispatch a force of Gascon cavalry to attack the French from the rear, while the English cavalry charged them from the front, was inspired by similar tactics that the French had used during a skirmish against an English force at Limalonges in Poitou some seven years earlier. On both occasions, the English were led by the Black Prince and Jean de Grailly, the masterminds of the plan at Poitiers.

Jones' best work comes in his attempts to exonerate the Black Prince from a number of important decisions which have typically formed the basis of criticism levelled against him. There are two places in which this is most apparent. The first comes in relation to the decision to send an English army into Castile in 1367, to help Pedro of Castile regain his crown, having been ousted from his kingdom the previous year by his bastard half-brother, Henry of Trastamara. Traditionally, it has been argued that this decision stemmed from the Prince's desire to enhance his chivalric credentials across Europe. However, Jones argues that the Prince's deep-set piety and love of honour made him reluctant to support Pedro, who was known as 'the cruel' on account of his treatment of his family and subjects. Rather, according to Jones, this was a decision that was forced on the Prince by his father, Edward III, "who was prepared for reasons of state to overlook the Castilian king's terrible deeds" (295). If so, the Prince might be excused some of the blame for the dire financial situation he found himself in following the campaign. The second important revision comes in relation to the sack of Limoges in 1370 (404-8). The sack of the city has long been a blemish on the Prince's reputation as a result of the fact that he is accused by Jean Froissart of having ordered a bloody massacre of the city's population following its recapture from French forces, to whom the town had surrendered a few weeks prior. Here, Jones discredits this view by highlighting the unreliability of Froissart's information at this time. He also points out that Froissart's version of events is corroborated by no other contemporary sources (not even by those who were present), that a majority of the population of the city remained loyal to the Prince throughout the French occupation, and that the Prince was pursuing a wider policy of clemency towards other towns in the region that had similarly surrendered at this time. Consequently, Jones suggests that it was

the occupying French garrison that were to blame for the murder of civilians, a claim that was made by two merchants of Limoges at the *Parlement* of Paris in 1404.

Overall, this is not a book without its faults: the first few chapters in particular oversimplify a number of key moments from the first two decades of Edward III's reign. Yet, these are forgivable in a work that makes such a valuable contribution to our understanding of the Black Prince and his world, and which so vividly captures the key events of his life. This book will undoubtedly become the first port of call for anyone interested in the Black Prince for years to come.

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