



*Gerald of Wales,
Instruction for a Ruler /
De Principis Instructione*

Robert Bartlett (ed. and trans.)
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018

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Gerald of Wales, *Instruction for a Ruler / De Principis Instructione*. Edited and translated by Robert Bartlett. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. ISBN 978-0-19-873862-6. lxx + 801 pp. £125.

Gerald of Wales—or Gerald de Barri, as John Gillingham prefers to style him—remains popular as a writer with a spiky character from England in the High Middle Ages. Despite this, his original works have not been well served in their presentations to a modern readership. He is best known for his *Journey Through Wales* (1191), *Description of Wales* (1194), and *The History and Topography of Ireland* (1187) through their availability in translation in the Penguin classics series. A fine, scholarly parallel text edition of *The Conquest of Ireland* (1189), edited and translated by A.B. Scott and F.X. Martin, appeared in 1978. Until the volume under review was published, *On the Instruction of Princes* reached its widest audience through the mid-nineteenth-century translation by Joseph Stevenson, the unannotated facsimile of which was published by Felin Fach in 1991. But the Stevenson translation covers less than one half of the original work, comprising only the second and third of the full three books that Gerald composed. That has now been fully rectified by Robert Bartlett’s massive labour of love and research into this comprehensive and definitive edition: a complete Latin and English parallel text with a full academic apparatus present. Few would contest the fact that Bartlett is the historian for the job, having spent a life-time in Gerald’s literary presence, and being the first major biographer of Gerald with his *Gerald of Wales: A Voice of the Middle Ages* in 1982 (revised in 2006). The result is an invaluable and hugely impressive work of deep and enduring scholarship.

Over a long lifetime (c.1146–c.1223), Gerald was a prolific writer of both brief and hefty works; *Instruction for a Ruler* quite clearly falls into the latter category. Hagiography, ecclesiastical history, and a form of geographic ethno-sociology of the western Celtic fringe were the main areas of interest, as witnessed in the ten printed volumes of his *oeuvre*, but the *Instruction* offers something different. Bartlett argues that it was first composed by 1191, but only fully issued, revised, in 1216 or 1217. This is convincing given the political situation of that later time, when it looked as if the ruling Angevin dynasty was about to be supplanted by the Capetians, thus allowing for Gerald’s unreserved hostility towards the Angevin rule that was being challenged—rightly, as he saw it (see below). Although the importance of the *Instruction* is widely recognised today, its use by writers following Gerald was limited to that by the fourteenth-century Ranulph Higden; but since Higden’s *Polychronicon* “was well known and was borrowed from by such later writers as Knighton and Brompton, some parts of the *De principis instructione* received a

wider dissemination in this way than the very limited evidence of actual manuscripts of the text would suggest” (lix).

The first book (or division or distinction) is a regular “education for princes” manual, unsurprisingly extolling the monarchical virtues of Arthur, Edward the Confessor, and, for contemporary inspiration, Louis VII of France (Gerald was an ardent Francophile). Steeped almost relentlessly in biblical and classical learning amidst its guidance to rulers and exemplars of model kingship it is, as indicated above, longer than the following two books combined. Books two and three are more akin to a traditional chronicle, but with added editorial opinions and vivid character sketches that makes Gerald so often entertaining; this account of Henry II’s reign (1154–1189) and his international affairs will be of greater interest to scholars of Angevin England, while book one’s attraction is more for medievalists focused on intellectual and cultural history.

Bartlett eschews much in the way of Gerald’s biographical details (having covered this elsewhere) but aspects of this anyway percolates the writing. Gerald’s credentials for writing such a work as the *Instruction* are clear; it is true to say that he certainly never lacked in self-belief or confidence when sharing his wisdom. The youngest son of William de Barri, Lord of Manorbier in Pembrokeshire in Wales, Gerald’s ecclesiastical career began with education in Gloucester and Paris. He entered the service of Henry II around 1184, becoming the residing expert on Wales and Ireland; one of his tasks was accompanying Prince John to Ireland in 1185. As a leading clerk at the Angevin court—with “its deceits, tricks, and traps” (7)—he was well-informed, well-educated, and well-placed; in short, a serious voice of his times. Ambitious and self-confident, his pride took a blow when he narrowly failed to succeed his uncle as Bishop of St. David’s, with the subsequent resentment adding agreeable colour and vim to his writings.

In the modern Goodhartian sense, Gerald recognises himself as someone from anywhere rather than somewhere: “People judged me to be a stranger, not one of their own” (5). His two extended studying sojourns in France fostered in him a bias for all things French, especially for monarchy; Gerald ultimately favoured the Capetians over the tyrannical Plantagenets, a highly partisan view given full and animated vent in the *Instruction*, in which Gerald colourfully portrays the blood-thirsty Angevin dynasty in contrast to the serene and saintly French way of ruling which he hoped to see imported into England: when Prince Louis of France invaded England in 1216 in a quest for the throne, he was welcomed by a fawning poem from Gerald.

Books two and three are less densely packed with the classical and biblical allusions of book one, but they can still be heavy going at times, with Gerald’s literary style often becoming a little convoluted and less than lucid,

but they are further alleviated by Gerald's gift for anecdote, which can occasionally offer welcome interruptions to the immediate flow of the text. One of the most famous is that of the painting in Henry's palace at Winchester which depicts four eagle chicks cannibalising their parent, representing the king being set upon by his infamously rebellious four sons.

What the reader should not expect from Gerald is consistency: he was an inveterate and restless reviser of his work. This adds to the value of his writings, as it allows us to chart his changing perspectives and concerns over a longer period. A flavour of this inconsistency—and of the venom with which Gerald spits at the Angevins—can be demonstrated in his treatment of King John. At one stage, he prays God will preserve John “for the tranquil peace of the people and ecclesiastical liberty” (701), and later condemns him for “being worse” than his elder brothers “in bitter emotions and wicked deeds, [he] strove not only to surpass them in evil but to surpass all vicious people in the enormity of his vices and ... to outdo all the tyrants ... with the detestable deeds of his wicked tyranny” (703). He certainly spoke his mind, and forefront in it was his loathing of the Angevins.

My only minor quibble (apart from the price, of course, which will deprive many readers from the huge benefits of owning a copy) is the change of the familiar title from *The Instruction of Princes* to *Instruction for a Ruler*. While “princeps” is flexible and basically means “foremost,” “princes” rather than “ruler” (especially in the singular) helps to fit Gerald's work better, and more directly, into the literary genre of mirrors for princes, where book one certainly belongs.

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