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Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Title

Politics and Crisis in Fourteenth-Century England (review)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6dp021bz>

Journal

Comitatus: A Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 23(1)

ISSN

0069-6412

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Publication Date

1992-10-01

Peer reviewed

John Taylor and Wendy Childs, eds., *Politics and Crisis in Fourteenth-Century England* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1990) 157pp.

Politics and Crisis in Fourteenth-Century England is a collection of eight papers, the original drafts of which were delivered at a conference of fourteenth-century historians at Leeds in 1986. The essays cover various aspects of political, diplomatic, and economic history, with particular attention to the troubled reigns of Edward II and Richard II. The editors admit in their introduction to "a somewhat traditional approach" to fourteenth-century history, noting that interest in the problem of the secular state has been surpassed in recent years by attention to topics in social and ecclesiastical history. Nevertheless, John Taylor and Wendy Childs promise a fresh approach to the subject. The governing thesis of the entire book is that "what really mattered in politics . . . were questions of private feud, rather than of public policy" (x). This issue of the breakdown of royal authority and its subordination to private interests occupies the bulk of the essays in this collection.

The limited space of a review allows for the treatment of only a few of the essays in the book. The first two essays focus on the troubled reign of Edward II. Michael Prestwich's "The Ordinances of 1311" fits in well with the theme of the collection, arguing that this often overlooked attempt at administrative reform was genuinely novel in the scope of its intended application. The authors of the Ordinances, Prestwich argues, asserted an unprecedented extension of baronial authority over royal initiative. Of particular interest is the barons' attempt to gain control over appointments to the royal council, which may suggest that the barons were determined to prevent another unpopular favorite, such as Piers Gaveston, from gaining too much power and influence. Prestwich suggests that the problems addressed in 1311 by the Ordinances "restated familiar questions which had been debated under Edward I" (10). Though the problems of 1311 were hardly new, the Ordinances carefully defined "a new range of business for which (baronial) consent was needed" (12). With this in mind, Prestwich's conclusion is that the Ordinances are perhaps best regarded as a manifestation of baronial anger at Edward II rather than as a statement of disagreement over fundamental constitutional issues. Thus he asserts "personal rivalries and disputes" (15) between the king and his barons, though framed in the language of constitutional reform, were the primary force behind the creation of the Ordinances. According to Prestwich, this ambiguity of motive "should

not obscure recognition of the fact that parliamentary consent was specified as being needed for a whole range of matters that had hitherto been the king's alone to decide" (15).

Wendy Childs's "Finance and Trade under Edward II" is an appropriate companion to Prestwich's article. Childs observes that "finance seems, superficially, to be the one successful feature of Edward II's reign" (19). Yet despite having inherited financial resources that far exceeded those of previous reigns, Childs argues that Edward squandered any advantage that could have been gained from such potential prosperity. Childs also devotes attention to the Ordinances of 1311, which sharply limited Edward's free access to loans from Italian bankers (particularly the Frescobaldi) and curtailed his income from customs duties. Once again, the personal dislike of the barons for Edward II may have been a greater motive for these restrictions than economic concerns. The king's "increasingly lavish personal grants to members of the Frescobaldi family and their close association with Gaveston made them a clear target for Edward's opponents" (26). The barons, Childs suggests, expected access to the king's ear and a "reasonable amount of royal patronage" (34). Edward allowed his favorites, "first Gaveston then Despenser to block the channels of access and patronage" (34). As a result, Childs argues, Edward lost the advantage that could have been won through the more responsible management of the considerable resources to which he had recourse. Greed, ineptitude and private feuds with his barons crippled Edward's financial endeavors from the beginning.

An interesting counterweight to these two articles is found in the last two essays of the book, which focus on aspects of the reign of Richard II. Anthony Tuck's "Richard II and the Hundred Years War" focuses on English negotiations with the French between 1389 and 1396. The theme of a monarch at odds with his subjects, central in the essays mentioned above, is evident here as well. Tuck concludes that the truce which Richard negotiated with France in 1396 was politically unpopular due chiefly to the king's willingness to accede to France's request for homage for the duchy of Aquitaine. This was obviously "unacceptable to a substantial body of opinion in England" (127). Though the political tensions between king and parliament had any number of causes, Tuck argues that Richard's "apparently cordial relationship" (129) with Charles VI did much to arouse English suspicion, and considerably undermined the king's political position. Tuck briefly mentions Richard's inclusion of a clause in his dowry instructions, asking Charles to "aid and sustain his son-in-law against any of his subjects" (128); and this is an indication of the mutual distrust between both the doomed king and his subjects. It is to be regretted that Tuck fails to examine

more closely Richard's unfortunate penchant for threatening to seek help from England's chief enemy against his own rebellious nobles—he had done so in Parliament in 1386. Yet while this issue might be central to the theme of this collection, it is only tertiary to this particular essay. In any case, Tuck's examination of Richard's relations with France during the middle years of his reign does much to bring to light the possible origins of the tension and distrust between the king and his countrymen.

The concluding article, Caroline Barron's "The Deposition of Richard II," challenges three widely held views about Richard: that his personal unpopularity led to his deposition; that he had few supporters, none of whom rallied to his cause in 1399; and that Bolingbroke's insurrection enjoyed widespread support. Barron's argument against the first view, that "unreliable" (136) Lancastrian accounts of Richard's reign were all written after the deposition, is not entirely convincing. The fact that the chronicles most critical of Richard were written under Lancastrian influence after 1399, when it was "clear on whom fortune had smiled" (134) fails to disprove the king's general unpopularity during the last decade of his reign. Nevertheless, Barron does bring to light a couple of chronicles from the north of England, written shortly after the deposition, which indicate that Richard did enjoy some popular support, even in his final years. Barron's contention that "the failure of armed resistance to Henry in 1399 (may) have more to do with logistics than loyalty" (136) is impressively documented. She notes that Bolingbroke "encountered pockets of resistance" (138) as he made away across England in the summer of 1399. But perhaps her most effective argument for the rehabilitation of Richard II's popularity lies in his murder itself. Richard did inspire an abortive rebellion in December 1399, after he had been deposed and imprisoned. "Had he inspired no loyalty", Barron writes, "he would not have been dangerous. As it was, he could not be allowed to live" (144). In this sense, Richard's murder is similar to that of his great-grandfather, Edward II. Like Edward II, Richard quarreled with his barons and suffered from a frequently hostile and distrustful relationship with his parliament. Putting aside the question of his personal popularity, it is clear that Richard's regicide, like Edward's, resulted at least in part from his personal and often bitter feuds with his barons.

It must be noted that five of the eight essays in this collection focus directly on the reigns of Edward II and Richard II. Of the remaining three, only one focuses on the reign of Edward III. This is John Taylor's "The Good Parliament and its Sources," which deals exclusively with the tempestuous final years of his long and largely happy reign. Nigel Saul's "Conflict and Consensus in English Local Society" is devoted as much to the fifteenth

century as to the fourteenth. Helen Jewell's "*Piers Plowman—A Poem of Crisis: An Analysis of Political Instability in Langland's England*," and James Sherbourne's "The Defence of the Realm and the Impeachment of Michael de la Pole" also focus on issues related respectively to the waning years of Edward III and the troubled reign of Richard. Yet Edward III's reign was more than twice as long as his father's and his grandson's put together, lasting a full fifty years. Thus my only criticism of this otherwise outstanding collection is that with its stated focus on politics and crisis in fourteenth-century England, it has limited itself to aspects of the two most unstable and controversial regimes of the century. The conception of the fourteenth century as a period of breakdown, conflict, and crisis in English history is consciously maintained by the lack of attention to the generally stable rule of Edward III. Given the broad title of this collection, it is indeed odd that only one of the essays within should examine what was by far the longest and most successful reign of the century.

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