



*The Letters of Edward I: Political
Communication in the Thirteenth
Century*

Kathleen B. Neal

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The Letters of Edward I: Political Communication in the Thirteenth Century. By Kathleen B. Neal. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2021. ISBN 978-1-78327-415-4. xviii + 240 pp. £60.

Edward I's reign (r.1272-1307) was a crucial moment in British history, during which the English kingdom witnessed the consolidation of Parliament, as well as the wars against Wales and Scotland, and the loss of Gascony. Kathleen Neal, lecturer in History at Monash University, demonstrates in her first book the relevance of epistolarity during this period as a key part of the king's rule, highlighting Edward I's facets as an "epistolary politician" and a "persuasive user of language" (17, 18).

Drawing from an extensive corpus of 1,044 letters, Neal examines royal correspondence as a medium of political communication; one that echoed the authority traditionally associated with the writ, and that through the use of the first-person singular was able to channel the king's own voice. Edward I adopted in his letters a set of conventions, following the epistolary norms known as *ars dictaminis*, as well as the rhythmic prose or *cursus* in Latin. Yet, Neal convincingly argues that letters were understood and conceived as much more than mere formulae. Instead, they functioned as rhetorical instruments carefully crafted to maximise Edward I's interests and his royal authority, and they were utilised in order to secure the desired effect on his recipients. A well-trained and highly specialised body of clerks, in close collaboration with Edward I himself, paid careful attention to the details and nuances of the letter-writing process, evidencing the potential impact of even the slightest change in language and style. The effectiveness of a letter as a means for political communication depended as much on its careful crafting as on its ability to appeal to the recipients' own understanding of their relationship with the monarch, a harmonising exercise that Neal reveals through the attentive selection and examination of case studies. Moreover, receiving a royal letter or hearing it read aloud constructed and maintained a sense of community between Edward I, his magnates, his closest clerks, and a variable audience. When the recipients of Edward's correspondence were not subject to his rule, such as those living beyond the borders of his kingdom, the rhetorical strategies employed by the monarch changed. In this context, gratitude, intercession, patronage, and the language of favour were fundamental in order to persuade, particularly in times of crisis or tense relationships between sender and recipient. Neal effectively evidences how rhetoric was also adapted to particular contexts within the polities under Edward I's dominion, for example, by the amplification of the affective discourse and diplomatic strategies in his correspondence with his subjects in Gascony.

Neal's analysis of Edward I's correspondence leads her to distinguish between two differentiated periods within his reign, attending to his distinct rhetorical strategies. During the first two decades of his rule, Edward I emphasised through his letters the ideas of counsel, mutual dependence, and alignment of interests between him and his magnates; a rhetoric of partnership that sought to reinforce the binding nature of his relationships, as well as the legal and affective bonds between him and his closest subjects. This astute amplification of the conciliar rhetoric gave way in the turbulent decade of the 1290s to a new strategy. During this period, Edward I resorted to a conscious favouring of the privy seal over the great seal, and to the adoption of a much more authoritarian tone in his epistolary exchanges. This change in his language, register, and style was mainly motivated by the 1294 loss of Gascony, the 1295 campaign against the Scots, and the 1297 crisis; a time of instability

in which Edward I substituted his conciliar approach for the favouring of the autocratic ideas of royal grace and punishment. Neal's analysis successfully makes use of rhetoric as a thermometer to evaluate the state of the relationships between the king and his magnates, and to shed light on crucial events which Edward I saw as a serious threat to his rule, leading him to change his epistolary discourse.

Throughout the book, Neal makes an impressive use of case studies, drawing from a broad source-base to exemplify every key point of her argument. Neal revisits well-known events of Edward I's reign—the two regencies during his absences in Gascony in 1286-1289 and 1297-1298, the tensions between him and the king of Scots Alexander III, the conflict with Wales, the war against the Scots in the 1290s, and the 1297 crisis, among others—providing an original and fresh perspective on these episodes through the lens of the king's epistolary exchanges and letter-writing. A particularly interesting aspect of the book is the thought-provoking footnotes it includes, where Neal identifies several further topics yet to be explored, such as the implications of the enrolments of letters, or the study of materiality of English royal epistolary production (6, 33). This book makes significant contributions to scholarship, as it examines topics previously overlooked or dismissed, including the editing process of royal correspondence, and the *litterae de statu*, which had been largely disregarded as relevant instruments for political communication. Moreover, Neal includes an appendix with twenty-two letters, making accessible to scholars a sample of Edward I's letters which remained unedited until this day, and which will hopefully be followed by further editions by this author.

This is an excellent book which is difficult to fault. Perhaps the reader would have benefited from a more thorough explanation of the sample of over a thousand letters upon which the book draws. This could have been achieved by including graphs and tables to visually show the variety of recipients, the kingdoms involved in Edward I's epistolary exchanges, as well as the chronological distribution of this correspondence throughout the reign. Moreover, a more extensive description of all this extant material would have contributed to highlighting the relevance of the selected letters included in the appendix; although these are minor questions which do not diminish the quality of Neal's impressive work. In conclusion, Kathleen Neal's first monograph is an outstanding contribution, not only to the study of Edward I's letters, but also to the understanding of letter-writing, rhetoric, and epistolarity in general, and constitutes a model for future work in royal correspondence.

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