



*King, Edward I: A New King
Arthur?*

Andy King

London: Allen Lane (Penguin Monarch
Series), 2016

Review by: Danna R. Messer

Edward I: A New King Arthur? By Andy King. London: Allen Lane, 2016. ISBN 978-0-141-97877-2. xiii +124 pp. £12.99.

As a new addition to the Penguin Monarchs series, Andrew King's biography of Edward I (r. 1272-1307) deals with both the complexities of the late-thirteenth, early-fourteenth century political climate in Britain, and France, and the complexities of a multifaceted king in a concise and readable way. Rather than following the ubiquitous diachronic narrative that often accompanies medieval biographies, King's is thematic, setting a wider backdrop that helps the reader contextualize the reign of England's famed monarch in a more nuanced fashion. The thematic approach highlights Edward's methods of ruling, both ruthless and fair, which illuminates the character of the man himself.

Beginning with the background of circumstances and relationships that defined Edward's future as a king, the author adeptly introduces the complexities of Edward's character and how his early life experiences outlined the trajectory for his future reign. Edward was a man known for his ability to change his spots, and allegiances, and King's discussion on his apprenticeship in the lessons of European kingship is instructive. He underscores Edward's ability to learn lessons and apply them in practice through observation and mistake. His awareness of how his father, Henry III, was crippled with an anaemic and ineffective authority that prompted the Baron's Rebellion, civil war and the real subjugation of royal authority in England, led to the legal and political reforms Edward achieved throughout his reign. By the time he was king, Edward understood the importance of the performance of rule to validate authority, through the public and graphic executions of political opponents, for instance, and use of political propaganda to further his agendas. The mistakes he learned as a young man during the civil war, especially in terms of trying to garner power through conflicting allegiances, further developed his infamous strength of character. King reveals how these experiences moulded Edward's attitude towards overlordship and his expectations of how kingship should have been defined and put into operation. Throughout the biography, the reader is reminded of the running themes of overlordship and the ideals of kingship that the king held so dearly. This approach enhances our insight into Edward as an individual and as a royal entity.

Although his was a reign demarcated by controversies and conflict, it was one that was wholly successful on balance. The chapter examining the king's achievements at reform and establishing good governance supports this and is especially informative. The author shows Edward's concern for establishing power by ensuring that his wider audience, in other words his

subjects, felt ‘included’ in the movement for reforms. Such examples as the petitioning system designed to allow subjects to air grievances and general reform of the justice system, including the establishment of a more permanent parliament, helped work towards the fostering of “an increased sense of an English state among his subjects” (99). In this way, allusions to Edward’s reign as that of “a new king Arthur” are closely associated with the ideals of a unified Britain. In Edward’s case, this was achieved through smart and documented governing. The explanation of events surrounding elements of reform and, more importantly, the discussion on the increased production of medieval documents such as the Hundred Rolls enquiries and Quo Warranto demonstrate why Edward is rightly viewed as one of England’s greatest lawmakers.

Edward was not only a lawmaker, but also a military combatant, the latter of which is duly demonstrated in King’s discussion on Edward’s dealings with Wales, Scotland, and France. Here, he tackles the complicated events and relationships with England’s neighbours; ordeals and clashes with regions where Edward saw himself as overlord and showed great determination in imposing his power. The author was confronted with a particular challenge in providing a succinct and yet informative narrative concerning the enormous, interrelated, and wide-reaching conflicts involving Wales, Scotland, and France. Largely, King accomplished this with aplomb and in a way that interweaves discussions of overlordship, both in ideal and practice, into the mix. Saying that, in some instances the relationships and consequences thereof, both personal and political, could have been teased out further. A more intimate look at the personal and political relationship between Edward and Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, prince of Wales, for example, would have further emphasized the tyrannical elements of Edward’s character—especially as a manipulator of relationships, juxtaposed with his real affection for family and friends. The impact and the importance of the marriage of Llywelyn to Eleanor de Montfort was both a political and personal slap in the face to the king, who enjoyed a close relationship with his cousin Eleanor. Yet, he also, and importantly, expressed concerns in her ability to stoke a new rebellion. Her imprisonment and subsequent marriage to the Welsh leader, who defied Edward’s demands to pay homage, played a formative role in Anglo-Welsh events between 1278 and 1282. As King does refer to marital and familial relations in regards political dealings with Scotland and France, including this discussion would have further strengthened his overall analysis. In summary of Edward’s kingship, King affirms that “A hard-line approach to those who offended him was entirely characteristic of Edward’s rule” (85). The changing of Edward’s spots is discernibly clear when considering his personal relationships. They are just as shrewdly tied to his

attitude towards overlordship and the ideals of European kingship as his connections with political opponents.

Although Edward “made no attempt to create any over-arching power structure, or to bring political unity to his dominions” (84), King shows how Edward really did both. From his leadership in war to his leadership in political reform, he united Britain in ways that have had long-lasting effects. Certainly, even when viewed as an autocrat or tyrant, Edward can still be considered a new king Arthur because he “came closer than most to fulfilling the medieval ideal of a great king” (101).

A nice addition is the appendix of some of the surviving buildings associated with the king. It provides examples of important structures that highlight his political dominance, specifically the ring of castles he built in North Wales after the conquest of 1282, such as Caernarfon, Harlech, and Conwy; his ecclesiastical patronage, namely the Cistercian abbey of Vale Royal in Cheshire, Edward’s only religious foundation; and his patronage of commerce, the market hall in Monpazier, France built at his directive.

Overall, this biography makes the complexities of Edward’s reign accessible to a wider audience. It is a gratifying and thought provoking read, even for professional historians of the era. Arguably, it can be granted the accolade that it comes across as a compact companion to Michael Prestwich’s tour de force, *Edward I* (1988). Certainly, the aim of the book is achieved, leaving the reader to ponder whether or not Edward I’s shrewd political acumen and objectives as a king define him as an astute legal reformer, a ruthless tyrant or as the medieval ideal of a great king, the new king Arthur of the High Middle Ages.

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