

Edward II

His Friends, His Enemies, and His Death

Susan Higginbotham

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Prince Edward

The Legacy: Edward I

Edward I was a hard act to follow. By 1295, he had subdued Wales. He promulgated what Michael Prestwich calls a “majestic set of statutes” that led to his being called the English Justinian.¹ Though his relationships with the nobility were sometimes stormy, there was no doubt who was in charge. The same would not be said about his son.

Prestwich sums up Edward I’s character well in *The Three Edwards*: “Edward I was not the kind of king who was greeted by cheering crowds . . . Edward was a king to inspire fear and respect.”² The fear developed before the respect. As a young man in the 1250’s, Edward had gained a reputation for cruelty; the chronicler Matthew Paris records an incident when Edward and his men attacked a youth, cut off his ear, and gouged out his eye. Though by the time Edward became king, such youthful incidents were well behind him, he still could be brutal. In 1306, he ordered that Mary, sister of the Scottish leader Robert Bruce, and the Countess of Buchan, who had crowned Bruce King of Scotland, be imprisoned in open cages, albeit with privies. Such a punishment is probably much more shocking to people of our time than it was to Edward’s contemporaries; nonetheless, the conventional treatment of high-ranking female prisoners was to confine them honorably in castles or in nunneries. (Robert Bruce’s queen was confined in this

¹ Prestwich, *Edward I*, p. 267.

² Prestwich, *The Three Edwards*, pp. 37–38.

respectable manner, though with the odd provision that she should not have servants who were cheerful or riotous. One wonders what the selection process was like.) The dreaded traitor's death of hanging, drawing, and quartering, though not original to Edward I's reign, would become the standard method of execution for the king's enemies and was used on two high-profile prisoners: Dafydd of Wales in 1283 and William Wallace in 1305.³

There was another side to Edward I, however. When his first wife, Eleanor of Castile, died in 1290, Edward displayed his grief by erecting twelve crosses, one for each spot at which his wife's funeral cortege stopped. Several can still be seen today. When Edward remarried in 1299, it was to Margaret of France, a woman forty years younger than he. Margaret was young enough to catch the measles, prompting Edward to warn his physician that he would suffer "by God's thigh" if he allowed her to travel too soon afterward.⁴ When his daughter Joan thwarted Edward's remarriage plans for her by marrying Ralph de Monthermer, a squire in her late husband's household who was of decidedly obscure origins, Edward imprisoned Monthermer, but relented after Joan and her young children paid a personal visit to him. Monthermer was released and given the title of Earl of Gloucester in right of his wife, a title he retained until her death.

Whatever his character, Edward I was what his subjects expected of a king. When Henry III died, Edward I was on crusade—an eminently suitable activity for a prince. Edward I had in fact almost been killed by an assassin, whom he fought off; this episode could have only enhanced his reputation. He might have been regarded by the Scots and the Welsh as an oppressor, but his toughness toward his enemies suited the English.

³ Prestwich, *Edward I*, pp. 202–03, 508.

⁴ Prestwich, *The Three Edwards*, p. 130.

It should also be remembered that Edward I had left his boyhood far behind him when he became king at age thirty-two, and the times had presented him with many learning opportunities during his youth and young manhood. The reign of Edward's ineffective father, Henry III, was dogged by crises, most famously the rebellion of Simon de Montfort, whom Edward himself defeated at Evesham after the royal forces had been defeated at Lewes. Edward had the opportunity—and, more important, the ability—to learn from his father's mistakes as well as his own, and his father needed all of the help he could get from his more able son. By contrast, Edward II would spend his young manhood under his father's domination, very much in the shadows. He was not good at learning from mistakes, his or other people's, and when he made them, it was with the weight of the crown upon his head.

The Young Prince

Edward I and his first wife, Eleanor of Castile, had at least fourteen children, most of whom died young. Edward II himself was the couple's fourth son. His two oldest brothers, John and Henry, had long predeceased him, and the third boy, Alphonso, died within months of Edward II's birth.

Edward II was born on April 25, 1284—three years to the day before Roger Mortimer, the man who would kill him, was born.⁵ He was born at Caernarfon Castle in Wales. Legend has it that Edward I presented the newborn infant to the Welsh as a Welsh-born prince who could not speak a word of English. Neither Hilda Johnstone, who wrote a biographical study of Edward II's youth, nor Michael Prestwich puts much credence in the story; it was not until 1301 that Edward II was created Prince of Wales.⁶

⁵ Mortimer, pp. 7, 16.

⁶ Johnstone, pp. 6–7; Prestwich, *Edward I*, p. 226.

Edward I and his queen, Eleanor, went abroad when their only surviving son was but two years old, and did not return until over three years later. Edward was thus left entirely to the care of servants, though his household was a luxurious one. It was not unusual for royal and noble children to be raised apart from their families, so one should avoid making too much psychological capital of this. Nonetheless, the three-year separation could have hardly fostered a close relationship between father and son, who would meet as virtual strangers when Edward II was five years old. Within fifteen months of the reunion between parents and child, Edward's mother had died. Edward's primary emotional attachment in these years seems to have been to his nurses, who were looked after well by Edward after he became king.

In 1297, when Edward II was thirteen, he got his first taste of his future role when Edward I went to Flanders, having appointed his son as regent. This appears to have been a purely nominal role, however; the real authority lay in the hands of the adults on the regency council.⁷ By 1300, though, Edward had begun accompanying his father on military campaigns.

The most personal details that emerge from this time are in Edward's letters to his relatives and acquaintances. To Walter Reynolds, then his treasurer, he asked for the loan of a stallion. He informed his sister Elizabeth that he had a beautiful white greyhound and wished her to send him her own female greyhound, "for we very much want to have puppies from them." Hearing that the Abbot of Shrewsbury had a gifted player of the "crwth," a Welsh relative of the violin, in his house, he asked that he receive a minstrel of Edward's there so that the minstrel could take lessons. On a more serious note, he asked the mayor and sheriffs of London to relieve a well-connected female

⁷ Haines, p. 5.

prisoner.⁸ In one letter, he offered the Count of Evreux “some of our bandy-legged harriers from Wales, who can well catch a hare if they find it asleep, and some of our running dogs, which go at a gentle pace; for well we know that you take delight in lazy dogs.”⁹

Estrangement

Though as we have seen, Edward gradually played more of a part in his father’s business as the years passed, the relationship between father and son never seems to have been a particularly amicable one. This cannot be explained simply by the fact that king and prince were not much alike; when Edward I’s own ineffectual father, Henry III, died, the anything but ineffectual Edward I was said to be highly upset, much more so than about the death of his young son John.¹⁰

Whatever the cause of the uneasy relations between the two Edwards, in June 1305, they broke down completely. The story goes that Prince Edward somehow insulted Walter Langton, Bishop of Chester and royal treasurer, possibly after having poached some of his deer. Edward I ordered his son not to go in his presence and ordered the royal exchequer not to give his household any money. Prince Edward spent the next few months following his father’s court at a respectful distance and, at first, trying to meet his living expenses, although by July the king was allowing his son to borrow money. During this enforced separation, which lasted until October 1305, Edward found sympathetic helpers in his sisters Joan and Elizabeth, his stepmother, his tutor, the Earl of Lincoln, and even the king’s almoner. Another loyal friend was Hugh le Despenser the elder, a

⁸ Hutchison, pp. 163–64.

⁹ Johnstone, p. 64.

¹⁰ Prestwich, *Edward I*, p. 82.

member of the king's council who was to play a leading and fateful role in Edward II's own reign.

Four months later, trouble broke out anew in Scotland with the coronation of Robert Bruce. Edward I, eager to raise an enthusiastic force to deal with the Scottish problem, invited the eligible young men of the land to come to Westminster in May, to be knighted in company with the Prince of Wales. Nearly 300 responded. On May 22, Edward was knighted by his father. He in turn knighted the other young men. Two, Piers Gaveston and Hugh le Despenser the younger, would end their lives as his closest companions; a third, Roger Mortimer, would end the life of Edward II.

It was Piers Gaveston who would set the next father-son crisis into motion. Gaveston's father, a cash-strapped Gascon knight, had taken service with the king; by at least 1297, Piers himself had joined the king. Ironically, it was Edward I himself who, apparently pleased with the young man's abilities, placed him in the prince's household, in about 1300.¹¹

According to one chronicle, as soon as Prince Edward laid eyes on Gaveston, "he formed an indissoluble bond of fraternity with him before all other mortals."¹² During the prince's 1305 breach with his father, Edward I had removed the prince's closest friends, including Gaveston, from his household; Prince Edward had written a letter to his sister begging her to use her influence to persuade the king to let his friend come back. Gaveston himself, however, did not appear to be on ill terms with Edward I; he was knighted along with the prince in 1306.

In February 1307, the mood of the king toward Gaveston abruptly changed. He ordered that Gaveston return to Gascony at the end of April and remain there until

¹¹ Hamilton, pp. 29-30.

¹² Haines, p. 21.

recalled by the king. Only one chronicle supplies an explanation for this episode. Supposedly, Prince Edward asked that he be allowed to give Ponthieu to his friend. Edward I erupted in a rage, called his son a baseborn whoreson, and tore out chunks of his hair before booting him out of the room. If the prince did indeed make such a request, he was naïve, to put it mildly, in doing so. Edward I was not particularly generous with grants of land to his own trusted friends and associates, and hardly would have been likely to approve such conduct in his son.

Viewers of the movie *Braveheart* will recall that Edward I, displeased with the prince's domination by his foppish friend, puts an end to the relationship by pushing the hapless companion out of a castle window to his death. Whatever the cause of Edward I's displeasure toward the prince's real-life friend, he did not express it in this manner. The king gave Gaveston an annuity of 100 marks—about 66 pounds in an age where an income of 50 pounds per year was considered adequate for knighthood. He was allowed to depart England in high style, escorted by the prince himself. Prince Edward supplied his friend with clothing, tapestries, horses, and 260 pounds in cash.

It was a comfortable exile, and it ended abruptly. On July 7, 1307, Edward I, ailing but nonetheless determined to press on with his campaign in Scotland, died. Edward II was king—and two weeks later, Piers Gaveston was back in England.

The King's Brother? Piers Gaveston

The New King

The new king was twenty-three years old, tall and handsome, and with decidedly unkinglike interests: though he liked to hunt, an entirely respectable activity for a king, he also liked to swim and row, activities that were considered far beneath him. His defining characteristic, however, was his blinding loyalty to those he loved.

Much ink has been spent on the question of whether Edward's interest in Gaveston and his other favorites was a sexual one. Contemporary chronicles were vague about the subject; some imply a sexual relationship, others a brotherly relationship. Edward's fathering of four children by Isabella proves nothing either way; kings were expected to leave heirs, and Edward may have done his duty without enjoying it much, or he may have enjoyed it thoroughly for all we know. Edward did, however, father an out-of-wedlock son, Adam, "who was old enough to accompany his father to war in 1322,"¹³ but nothing is known about his mother; she could have been a long-term mistress, a casual fling, or something in between. (To muddle matters even further, Edward was also accused by a foreign chronicler of having an affair with one of his nieces, Eleanor de Clare, wife to Hugh le Despenser the younger.¹⁴) In the end, however, the nature of Edward's relationships is much less important than their intensity and their disastrous effect on the reign and the king himself.

¹³ Hamilton, p. 110.

¹⁴ Haines, pp. 42–43.

Edward showed his devotion as a friend in what was virtually his first act after learning of his father's death: recalling Gaveston. A month after Edward I's death in July 1307, Edward II made his friend the Earl of Cornwall. The new earl needed a suitable wife, and Edward promptly found him one: his niece Margaret de Clare, whose teenage brother was the Earl of Gloucester. In November 1307 the couple were married.

It was time for Edward to carry out his own wedding plans. After the death of his first wife, Edward I had arranged for himself to marry the French king's sister, Margaret, and for Edward II to marry the French king's daughter, Isabella. Edward I had duly carried out his own marriage, but Isabella and Edward II did not marry until February 1308. Edward and an entourage sailed to France for the wedding, leaving the Earl of Cornwall in charge of England as regent. Gaveston's actions during his two-week regency were not controversial in themselves, but he took the opportunity to lord it over his fellow earls, and he added to his unpopularity when Edward, returning with his bride from Dover, singled him out for a joyous, demonstrative greeting. But worse was yet to come: at the coronation of the king and queen in March, Gaveston appeared in royal purple, unlike the other nobles in their cloth of gold. At the banquet, the king was said to have neglected the queen in favor of Gaveston. It should be remembered, in fairness to the king, that Isabella was but twelve years old.¹⁵ Though she was old enough to marry in the eyes of the Church, and was probably quite mature socially in comparison to a modern twelve-year-old, she could have hardly been the most desirable company to a man in his twenties.

In the meantime, Edward was under pressure from the nobility to undertake reforms in order to curb certain abuses, which were only vaguely identified. Part of this

¹⁵ Doherty, p. 42.

pressure stemmed from the nobles' dislike of Gaveston, but part also stemmed from noble dissatisfaction dating back to his father's reign.¹⁶ After the coronation, however, Gaveston increasingly became the focal point of the nobles' demands. When even Edward's new father-in-law, the ruthless French king, threatened to become involved, Edward saw no choice but to agree to Gaveston's exile. He saved some face, however, by appointing his friend to govern Ireland as his lieutenant.

The Ordainers

Gaveston's stay in Ireland, which lasted until June 1309, was a surprisingly successful one. There, he showed none of his gift for alienating people that was to mark his relations with the English. Indeed, Irish chronicles praised his military abilities.¹⁷ Back in England, Edward devoted his energies to conciliating Gaveston's opponents—a concerted effort he would not make again in the future.

With the nobility of England, the French king, and even the Pope having agreed to Gaveston's return, all should have gone smoothly after the favorite left Ireland. In fact, things were destined to become even worse. Gaveston's success in Ireland had not had a humbling effect on him, and it may have been now that he took to calling his fellow earls by various offensive nicknames. The Earl of Warwick was dubbed the "Black Dog of Arden," the Earl of Lincoln "Burst Belly," and the Earl of Pembroke "Joseph the Jew."¹⁸ By the fall of 1309, some earls were refusing to attend Parliament if Gaveston was there. The end result, in February 1310, was the formation of a group of earls, bishops, and barons called the Ordainers, who began to draw up a series of guiding principles that the king was to follow.

¹⁶ Hamilton, pp. 46–47; Prestwich, *The Three Edwards*, p. 74.

¹⁷ Hamilton, p. 58.

¹⁸ Hamilton, p. 75.

There was a newcomer to the alliance against Gaveston whose involvement was to prove disastrous: the king's first cousin Thomas, Earl of Lancaster. Lancaster was a difficult man whose testy relations with his peers would ultimately lead to his own downfall, but his enormous wealth, which increased in 1311 when his father-in-law died, made him a formidable enemy.

While the Ordainers set about their work in London, Edward himself headed north, where he and Gaveston attempted to campaign against the Scots, who were waging a guerrilla warfare in the English counties bordering Scotland. Though the Earl of Gloucester—Edward's nephew—and the Earl of Surrey lent their support, nothing was achieved by the campaign.

The final Ordinances were delivered to the king in August 1311. Roy Martin Haines describes them as “an interesting amalgam of principle and personality.”¹⁹ Some were directed toward administrative reform, others toward legal reform. The most notorious and controversial were directed at certain individuals: Gaveston, the money-lending Frescobaldi family, and a brother and sister, Henry de Beaumont and Isabella de Vescy. Beaumont and Lady Vescy had been connected with the court since Edward I's time. They had prospered under both Edwards, but not outlandishly so, and it is difficult to see at this juncture why they in particular were targeted. The most significant Ordinance, of course, was directed against Gaveston, who was charged with such offenses as providing the king with evil counsel, appropriating the royal treasury, and estranging the king from his people. No attempt at proving his guilt was made.²⁰ The Ordinance mandated his exile by November 1311. Once again, the king had to agree to his friend's exile. It was to be a short one—and his last.

¹⁹ Haines, p. 77.

²⁰ Hamilton, p. 88.

The Death of Gaveston

Gaveston's whereabouts during his third exile are unknown; he might have gone to stay with Edward's sister Margaret, the Duchess of Brabant, who had been asked by the king to receive him kindly. In any case, by January 1312, he was back in England, emphatically against the will of the Ordainers. Why he came back at such a risk is unknown. Edward may have simply been fed up at being dictated to by his lords.²¹ Gaveston may have also come back to be present at the birth of his first child; shortly after his return, his wife, Margaret, gave birth in York to a daughter. Edward celebrated the birth of his friend's child lavishly.

The king, his queen, Gaveston, and their retainers stayed at York until April. Though Edward has sometimes been painted as a misogynist whose relations with women were hostile, the queen's ladies, including his former nurse, were on good enough terms with him to follow an old custom of dragging him out of bed on Easter Monday and forcing him to pay a ransom for his release. During the stay at York, Isabella became pregnant with the future Edward III.²²

The Earl of Lancaster ended this cheerful interlude at York by raising troops to pursue Gaveston. In April, Edward and Gaveston fled to Newcastle, then to Tynemouth, where the queen herself had gone. In their haste to leave Newcastle, the friends left behind valuable jewels, horses, and arms, which Lancaster was able to seize. In May, from Tynemouth, the king and Gaveston went to Scarborough Castle. Isabella, who remained at Tynemouth before proceeding to York by land, is often depicted as the forlorn victim of her husband's neglect and indifference during this time, but it is more likely that it was

²¹ Haines, p. 81.

²² Doherty, pp. 50-51.

considered safer for the pregnant queen to travel by land instead of by water.²³ She was certainly not in any danger from Lancaster, whose quarry was Gaveston, not the teenage queen.

Gaveston stayed at Scarborough while Edward went back to York, perhaps with the intention of raising troops to help his friend. At Scarborough Castle, Gaveston found himself under siege. The castle was underprovisioned, and Gaveston surrendered to the Earl of Pembroke, the Earl of Surrey, and Henry Percy, who agreed to take him to York and to guarantee his safety. If some sort of agreement could not be reached about Gaveston's future before August, Gaveston would be returned to Scarborough. Gaveston's captors took him to York as promised, and the king summoned a Parliament to meet in July. Gaveston, meantime, was committed to the custody of the Earl of Pembroke, who took him south.²⁴

Then in June, a shocking act of treachery occurred. Pembroke, finding himself close to the manor of Bampton where his wife was staying, left Gaveston at the rectory of Deddington at Oxfordshire overnight while he rode off to pay a conjugal visit. Somehow the Earl of Warwick learned of this and arrived at Deddington with a force that greatly outnumbered the men Pembroke had left at the rectory. Gaveston was forced out of the rectory and into the custody of Warwick, who imprisoned him at Warwick Castle for nine days. During this time, an appalled Pembroke rushed around the area seeking help in recovering his prisoner. The Earl of Gloucester, Gaveston's brother-in-law and one of the Ordainers, sent him away with the callous advice that he should negotiate more carefully in the future. Pembroke next went to Oxford University. Whatever help he might have expected from the scholarly community did not materialize.

²³ Blackley and Hermansen, pp. xxv–xxvi.

²⁴ These and the following details appear in Hamilton, pp. 96–99.

Meanwhile, the Earls of Lancaster, Hereford, and Arundel joined the Earl of Warwick. They agreed to support each other in the face of the royal hostility their acts were sure to engender. The earls also called in two justices to hear their charges against Gaveston and to pronounce Gaveston a traitor.

On June 19, 1312, the earls had Gaveston taken to Blacklow Hill, on lands owned by the Earl of Lancaster. There, two Welshmen were chosen to execute him. One ran him through the body and another beheaded him.

Why did Gaveston die? As J. S. Hamilton points out, he never demonstrated the unbridled lust for power or land that his chief successor in Edward's affections, Hugh le Despenser, was to exhibit. Hamilton considers various causes—moral outrage at the supposed sexual relationship between Gaveston and the king; Gaveston's outsider status as a Gascon—and concludes that the most likely reason for the intense antipathy to him was his command of royal patronage, a monopoly that shut out most of the other nobility.²⁵ Whatever the reason for the nobles' hatred of Gaveston, if there had ever been any chance that the king and the nobility would grow into a harmonious relationship, it ended that June day on Blacklow Hill.

²⁵ Hamilton, pp. 109–12.

The Battle of Bannockburn and Its Aftermath

Prelude to Battle

In the months after Gaveston's death, England was on the brink of civil war. Papal envoys stepped in to mediate between the king and the Ordainers, as did the Earl of Gloucester, perhaps regretting his arrogance toward the Earl of Pembroke. The national mood was somewhat lightened in November 1312, when Queen Isabella gave birth to a son, the future Edward III. Edward II seems to have been on good terms with the queen during this time; in the summer of 1313, while negotiations in England were still ongoing, the royal couple went to France to witness the knightings of Isabella's three brothers. During the stay in France, the pavilion in which Edward and Isabella were staying caught fire; Edward promptly acted to get Isabella to safety.²⁶

The negotiators' efforts at last bore fruit in October 1313. Already, the jewels seized by Lancaster had been returned to the king, who had also succeeded in having the Ordinances against Henry Beaumont and Isabella de Vescy abrogated. The king agreed to pardon those involved in Gaveston's death. The Ordinances were not mentioned, and Gaveston was not named as a traitor.

The king could now turn his attention to Scotland, which sorely needed it. In 1313, Robert Bruce's brother, Edward, had besieged Stirling Castle. Sir Philip Mowbray, the castle's commander, had offered in June 1313 to yield the castle a year hence if he were not rescued by battle. Edward Bruce accepted the challenge. The reconciliation of

²⁶ Haines, pp. 41, 92.

October 1313, though it proved to be tissue-thin, paved the way for Edward II to begin raising an army to relieve the castle.

Meanwhile, in February 1314, Robert Bruce invaded two castles, Roxborough and Edinburgh. Roxborough Castle fell in February to James Douglas, who had dressed his men in black surcoats and ordered them to crawl on their hands and knees so that they resembled a herd of black cattle straying toward the castle. When the men arrived at the castle, they had produced collapsible ladders carried beneath their bodies, scaled the castle walls, and overcome the garrison, the members of which were celebrating a feast day. The next month, Thomas Randolph led a group of experienced mountain climbers into Edinburgh Castle. Legend has it that he got the idea from one of his men, who had been accustomed to using rope ladders to get in and out of the castle to meet his lover.²⁷

As the time for the English to move into Scotland approached, the English were about as united as they would ever get during Edward II's reign. The Earls of Lancaster, Warwick, Arundel, and Surrey, the first three of whom who had condemned Gaveston to death, refused to come to battle themselves, although they did send the required number of knights and men of arms. The Earls of Hereford, Pembroke, Gloucester, and Richmond, however, all came in person.

With his enormous army, Edward was confident. The English army did not travel light, and the long baggage train that lumbered behind the soldiers contained not only supplies for the army, but furnishings for the Scottish castles the most loyal of Edward's followers had been promised as the rewards of victory. Edward had also brought Friar Baston, a monk noted for his proficiency in verse, to immortalize the victory. He would—though not for the side the English had expected.

²⁷ Bingham, *Robert the Bruce*, pp. 213–14.

The Battle

By June 23, the English army had reached the forest of Torwood, near the stream of the Bannock Burn. There they were met by Philip Mowbray, the constable of Stirling Castle, who told Edward that as he had arrived within three leagues of the castle within the proper time, there was no need for a battle now. No one, including Edward himself, was inclined to heed this advice.²⁸

The battle was about to get off to a most unpromising start. As the vanguard, led by the Earls of Gloucester and Hereford, emerged from the forest, watched by Scots standing to arms in the New Park, Hereford's young nephew, Henry de Bohun, saw a horseman inspecting the Scottish troops—Robert Bruce himself. Bohun wasted no time in thought. He charged at the Bruce, lance pointed straight at him. The Scottish king stood up in his stirrups, then sank his axe into Bohun's helmet and down into his skull. The delighted Scots charged the stunned English cavalry, which also had to deal with many small pits camouflaged with twigs and grass. The English retreated, while the Scottish king recalled his troops and expressed regret at having broken his good axe on the unfortunate Bohun.

As Bruce was talking with his commanders, he noticed two English commanders, Robert de Clifford and Henry de Beaumont, heading toward Stirling Castle, and reproached the Earl of Moray with not noticing them earlier. A flustered Moray hastened off to array his spearmen in a *schilttron* or *schiltrom*. Spelled either way, it was a formation of spearmen arrayed shoulder to shoulder, nearly impossible to penetrate. After futilely charging the earl's men for some time, the English retreated.

²⁸ Details of the battle are taken from Bingham, *Robert the Bruce*, pp. 216–41; Haines, pp. 256–60; Mortimer, pp. 54–64.

Morale began to sink among the English foot soldiers, already exhausted by the march north and now hearing of the day's disastrous events. Edward sent heralds to remind the men that victory was certain, but no one seemed convinced. The Scots' numbers were increased overnight by Sir Alexander Seton, who deserted and advised his new comrades that this was an opportune time to regain Scotland.

In another part of the camp, Gilbert de Clare, Earl of Gloucester, who himself had been unhorsed shortly after the death of Henry de Bohun, urged the king to rest his troops for twenty-four hours. Edward accused the twenty-three-year-old earl of cowardice, an insult that was still burning the next morning when the Earl of Gloucester and the Earl of Hereford argued over who should command the vanguard. Hereford said that the duty was lawfully his because he was the constable of England, while Gilbert contended that his forbears had always led the van. Vowing that he would prove that he was no coward, he charged straight toward the Scots without having first put on his surcoat, a garment that would have identified him as a wealthy earl who could be ransomed for a great sum by a lucky captor. No more than an anonymous young knight, he was quickly killed by Scottish spears.

The stage had been set for the day's disaster. More knights were killed against Scottish spears, and those who were alive could not maneuver around a field of dead and wounded men and horses. At last, a group of Welsh archers succeeded in crossing the Pelstream Burn and shooting at the Scots, only to be charged by the Scottish light cavalry. Then came a fresh schiltron, pushing the one ahead of it forward and moving the English in the only direction they could go—backward. "On them!" the Scots were shouting. "On them, they fall!"

“Slay!” screamed a fresh group of Scots. To the desperate English, it seemed that another army had materialized. In fact, the new arrivals were the “small folk”: servants, camp followers and others eager to share in what had clearly become a victory. With their appearance, the English began to retreat in earnest.

King Edward had been fighting with the rest. As the battle wound down, he was surrounded by would-be captors, whom he beat off with his mace. The Earl of Pembroke, realizing the danger in having the king captured, determined to get him to safety. With the aid of Sir Giles d'Argentan, reckoned one of England's finest knights, Pembroke dragged the reluctant king and his horse toward Stirling Castle, followed by five hundred knights. When the king was at a safe distance away, Sir Giles, declaring that he had never left a fight, returned to the field. He was soon killed.

As the king and his escort headed toward the castle, the men on the field tried to cross over the Bannock Burn. Many drowned in the attempt, so many that latecomers were able to cross safely over the bodies of dead men and horses. The Earl of Hereford found his way to Bothwell Castle, only to be taken captive there by his own deputy. The king and his party, meanwhile, were urged to leave Stirling Castle by Sir Mowbray, who told them that his presence there would only result in a siege. The king heeded this advice and set off toward Linlithgow, with James Douglas in pursuit so close that it was said that no Englishman dared stopped long enough to make water. Douglas's men were fought off by the Earl of Pembroke and his followers. Finally, the king reached Dunbar Castle, where the king was admitted by the Earl of Dunbar. From there he and a few others sailed in an open boat to Berwick.

Friar Baston, the poet brought by the English to write of their victory, was captured by the Scots. He was released, but only after writing a victory poem for the Scots.

Consequences

One wonders what Edward's reign would have been like had the English won the Battle of Bannockburn. Certainly a victory would have given him leverage over his enemies. Instead, he had little choice but to cooperate with them. Lancaster wasted no opportunity to take advantage of the defeat, which he disingenuously attributed to the king's failure to observe the Ordinances.²⁹ For the next several years, he would exercise great sway over the government. Lancaster, however, was better as a member of the opposition than as a member of the establishment: He was a poor administrator who was frequently absent from court, and he had a knack for making enemies. The Earl of Warwick, who might have been of use to Lancaster, died in 1315; there were rumors, unsubstantiated and improbable, that he had been poisoned by the king.

Martial disaster was followed by natural disaster. The years of 1314, 1315, and 1316 were marked by excessive rains, which in turn caused crop failure and immense human suffering. Meanwhile, the Scots continued to raid the north of England. There were disturbances in Bristol and Glamorgan, the latter precipitated by the death of the Earl of Gloucester and the dissatisfaction that arose from the administration of his lands by royal officials.

The death of the Earl of Gloucester, Gilbert de Clare, at Bannockburn was to have disastrous consequences for the reign, although it would be years before this would fully become apparent. Though his relationship with the king had been strained at times,

²⁹ Haines, p. 95.

Gilbert de Clare had been a moderate, sensible figure at a court not known for either moderation or sense.

Gloucester had been a very wealthy young man, and the problem that was to haunt the reign was the disposition of his vast estates. Gloucester had left a widow, who claimed to be pregnant. Nine months passed without a child, and still the widow continued to insist she was pregnant. She would continue to insist this for nearly three years.

The late earl was survived by three sisters, two of whom were widowed, one of whom was married to Hugh le Despenser the younger, a man who was to play a fateful role in Edward's reign. As the sisters would split Gloucester's inheritance into thirds if their brother had left no heir, Hugh, who as the husband of the eldest sister stood to get the best lands, was understandably frustrated with the endless pregnancy of the Countess of Gloucester. He demonstrated his unhappiness by seizing Tonbridge Castle, which seems to have earned him a royal slap on the wrist but otherwise had no effect. When this failed, he pestered the king's council and Parliament for a division of the estate. He was told at one point that he should get a writ to have the countess's belly inspected.

Meanwhile, Edward II had not gone without friends. Despite Lancaster's disapproval, he had acquired three other favorites, Hugh d'Audley, Roger Damory, and William de Montacute, whom he showered with gifts and favors, though not by any means to the extent he had Gaveston. By 1317, the king and his council at last decided that it was time to divide the Clare estates between the Earl of Gloucester's sisters. While the royal clerks were determining which sister should get what land, Edward II arranged for his two unmarried friends, Audley and Damory, to marry the two widowed Clare sisters, who were also the king's nieces.

In November 1317, the Clare estates were distributed. What Hugh le Despenser did with his newfound wealth would ultimately destroy himself and the king.

New Friends: The Rise and (Temporary) Fall of the Despensers

A New Friend

Hugh le Despenser, known as Hugh le Despenser the younger to distinguish him from his father, was to dominate the government for the last years of Edward's reign. Unlike Gaveston, merely a knight's son, Hugh was well connected. His grandfather had been justiciar of England during the reign of Henry III; he died fighting for Simon de Montfort. His father, Hugh le Despenser the elder, had become a trusted councilor of Edward I. A prosperous landowner, Hugh the elder had married the widowed sister of the Earl of Warwick. Indeed, Hugh the elder stood in such good stead with Edward I that in 1306, the king arranged for Hugh's son, Hugh the younger, to marry the king's thirteen-year-old granddaughter Eleanor de Clare. Eleanor, sister to the Earl of Gloucester, at this time was not an heiress, but the marriage brought Hugh the younger within the royal family.

Hugh the elder had been friendly with Edward II before he came to the throne—he had helped him out financially when the Prince of Wales was banished from his father's court—and had remained unflinchingly loyal to the king during the troubled Gaveston years. Because of this, he had become hugely unpopular with the Earl of Lancaster and had been forced to retire from court for a time after Bannockburn. Hugh the younger, meantime, had played an insignificant role during the early part of the reign, probably because he had little land except for what he would inherit one day from his father.

With the death of the Earl of Gloucester, Hugh the younger's brother-in-law, at Bannockburn, this situation radically changed. When the Clare inheritance was finally divided, Hugh found himself Lord of Glamorgan, one of the most important landholders in Wales. The wild side of Hugh's character had shown itself during the Countess of Gloucester's drawn-out pregnancy, when he seized Tonbridge Castle. It showed itself again in 1316 when he got into an unseemly brawl with another lord at Lincoln Cathedral, where Parliament was sitting. Now a different side of Hugh's character emerged—the grasping side. Not content with his rich lands in Wales, he was soon scheming to acquire more land, starting with that of his brother-in-law Hugh Audley. He did this by persuading Audley's tenants in Gwynllwg to pay homage and fealty to Despenser instead of Audley, on the theory that Gwynllwg had traditionally been part of the lordship of Glamorgan.³⁰

In Marlowe's *Edward II*, poor Gaveston is barely cold before the bereaved Edward bestows his affections (and a heap of titles) on Hugh the younger. In fact, it does not seem to have been until sometime in the middle of 1318 that Hugh became fully ensconced in the king's favor.³¹ The king had done nothing to speed up the division of the Clare estates, which was certainly what Hugh had desperately wanted, and he seems to have sided with Audley at first when Hugh was busily scheming in Wales. By July 1318, however, the king's affections had clearly swung toward Hugh. In that month, Hugh and his father were first on the list of men below the rank of earl summoned to a royal council. By October 1318, Hugh had become the king's chamberlain.

The Exile of the Despensers

³⁰ Fryde, p. 35.

³¹ This and the following are taken from Fryde, pp. 35–36.

Despenser wasted no time making enemies in Wales, managing to alienate both Welshmen and the English lords who ruled over them. By December 1318, Audley had conceded defeat and traded his lucrative lordship of Gwynllwg for some of Hugh's less desirable English lands. That same year, Despenser had executed Llywelyn Bren, the Welsh leader of the 1316 revolt in Glamorgan. His captors, the Earl of Hereford and Roger Mortimer of Wigmore, had persuaded the king to pardon his life, but Hugh, soon after taking possession of his new lands, had taken Llywelyn out of the Tower of London, brought him to Cardiff, and had him hung, drawn, and quartered.

Meanwhile, Lancaster's position at court was rapidly weakening. In 1318 a number of appointments were made to the king's council and administration, none of which were particularly advantageous to Lancaster.³² Though Lancaster initially cooperated with royal efforts to besiege Berwick, which had been captured by the Scots, in 1319, he later withdrew his troops, giving rise to rumors that he had been bribed to do so by the Scots.³³ Lancaster's withdrawal was followed by the king's.

While the Scots were ravaging the north of England, all eyes in Wales were on Gower, the reversion of which its impecunious lord, William de Braose, had put up for sale. Hugh le Despenser had no intention of letting this desirable property escape his hands and joined in the bidding. Braose's son-in-law John de Mowbray, however, wanted the property to stay in the family. After Mowbray took possession of the lands in October 1320, the king, at Despenser's urging, took Gower into his own hands on the ground that Mowbray had obtained it without license.

³² Haines, pp. 115–16.

³³ Fryde, p. 42.

The Marcher lords, as the English holding Welsh lands near the border were called, were furious at what they saw, probably rightly, to be an encroachment on the laws of the March. One by one, they left court and began fortifying their castles.

In May 1321, a group of Marcher lords—the Earl of Hereford, Roger Mortimer of Wigmore and his uncle, and Despenser’s brothers-in-law, Roger Damory and Hugh d’Audley—laid waste to the lands of Hugh the younger and his father. That summer, Hereford, Mortimer, Audley, Damory, and others came to London with armed men, demanding the exile of the Despensers. At the urging of the Earl of Pembroke, who is said by one chronicler to have told the king, “He perishes on the rocks that loves another more than himself,” Edward finally agreed.³⁴ Queen Isabella, who had just given birth to the royal couple’s fourth and last child, also urged her husband to exile the Despensers.

The two Despensers left England in August 1321. The elder Despenser went to Bordeaux and lived there quietly, but Hugh the younger, whose faults did not include idleness, elected to spend his exile more profitably as a pirate—a career for which he seems to have had a knack, for he had not been on the seas for long before he took a valuable Genoese ship, for which Edward III later had to pay restitution. His new career, however, was to be a short one.

³⁴ Bingham, *Life and Times of Edward II*, p. 137.

Boroughbridge and the Death of Lancaster

Edward II had no intention of accepting his friends' exile meekly. Instead, he concentrated on eliminating his enemies piecemeal, beginning in the southeast of England. His chief opponent there was Bartholomew Badlesmere, Edward's former steward. During the strained summer leading to the exile of the Despensers, the king had sent Badlesmere to negotiate with his opponents—only to have the steward switch his allegiance to their side. Badlesmere had ignored Edward's order that he surrender Tonbridge Castle to him and had gone to Oxfordshire, where the Marcher lords had been meeting under the guise of holding a tournament. He had already responded to Edward's act of bringing troops to Dover Castle by fortifying his own castles and by making a show of arms and men at Canterbury.³⁵

In September, the king himself traveled to Canterbury, supposedly on pilgrimage, and then went to Thanet Island to meet Despenser. With the king had come Queen Isabella, who in early October headed back to London by way of Leeds Castle, where she asked for lodging for the night. Leeds Castle was in the keeping of Badlesmere's wife. Probably Edward was hoping for what happened next. Lady Badlesmere refused to admit Isabella. Outraged, Isabella notified Edward, who promptly sent troops to avenge the insult to the queen. The Marcher lords did nothing to aid their new ally, perhaps because Lancaster disliked Badlesmere. By the end of October, the castle surrendered. Badlesmere himself was not present at the siege, but his wife was sent to the Tower for her defiance. She was luckier than a number of the members of the castle's garrison, who were hung. Edward II had decided to send a message that he was not to be trifled with.

³⁵ Doherty, pp. 67–68.

The king then turned his attention to recalling the Despensers. A poorly attended convocation of bishops agreed to their return. This being taken care of, in December Edward began moving west toward the Marcher lords, where Welsh troops came to the king's aid. The Marchers were expecting help from the Earl of Lancaster, who did not give it, evidently because of his animosity toward Badlesmere. Isolated and outnumbered, several of the lords, including the elderly Roger Mortimer of Chirk and his nephew, Roger Mortimer of Wigmore, surrendered and were sent to the Tower. Unfortunately for the king, it was not the last he would hear of the latter.

The Earl of Hereford had apparently been thinking of surrendering as well, but learning of the imprisonment of his allies, fled to the north, where he met up with the Earl of Lancaster. The king's troops, augmented now by the Despensers and their men, followed, seizing Kenilworth Castle, Lancaster's property. Along the way, correspondence was found indicating that the earl, signing himself "King Arthur," had been attempting to get support from the Scots.

A Sir Andrew Harclay had been ordered to gather troops for the king. Near Boroughbridge, Lancaster tried to get him to desert to his side but singularly failed. Instead, Harclay's troops killed the Earl of Hereford as he was leading his men across the bridge. After a day of battle in which Harclay's forces fought Scottish-style, Harclay and Lancaster agreed to leave off fighting until the next morning. Overnight, however, many of Lancaster's troops deserted him. Lancaster surrendered and was brought first to York, then to Pontefract, where a group of earls adjudged Lancaster guilty of treason. He was placed on a mule, led to a hill, and beheaded. Gaveston had at last been avenged.

The Despenser Regime and a New Enemy—The Queen

The Despenser Regime

Edward must have been in high spirits when Parliament met in York in May 1322. His enemies were dead or locked up, the Despensers were by his side. The Ordinances were repealed. Andrew Harclay, who had been instrumental in defeating Lancaster, was created Earl of Carlisle. Hugh le Despenser the elder was made Earl of Winchester.

Surprisingly, Edward restrained himself from creating Hugh le Despenser the younger Earl of Gloucester. Nonetheless, the younger Despenser was clearly in charge. Over the next four years, he exploited his position to the fullest, using legal, quasi-legal, and illegal tactics to gain more land. His victims included his sister-in-law Elizabeth de Burgh, whose husband, Roger Damory, had died of his wounds at Boroughbridge. Lady Burgh, the king's niece, was forced to trade Usk, part of her Welsh lands, for Gower, which Despenser had at last ended up with. Gower, however, did not stay in Lady Burgh's hands for long. Soon Despenser had arranged for legal action to be brought against the widow by Braose, who recovered Gower and then promptly handed it over to Hugh's father, who in turn handed it over to Hugh the younger.³⁶ Yet Lady Burgh was luckier than many widows and children of the Contrariants, as they were called. She and her children were able to stay on her English lands, which brought her a very ample income. By contrast, other widows and children, such as Roger Mortimer's family, were imprisoned in royal castles or in nunneries, albeit in many cases with servants and a

³⁶ Underhill, pp. 31–33.

modest allowance from the crown. Elizabeth's sister Margaret, whose husband had been imprisoned, spent the Despenser years at Sempringham priory.

Despenser was an efficient administrator as well as a grabber of lands, however. He, or at least the men who answered to him, have been credited with improving the efficiency of the government. During his tenure, the crown itself also amassed an impressive amount of money: over 61,000 pounds by the time the Despensers fell in late 1326.³⁷

In dealing with England's foreign enemies, however, the Despenser regime was no more effective than its predecessors. The Scots had taken advantage of the events of the last months to make raids into England, and Edward, having tasted victory for the first time, determined to conquer them. Instead, he met with another defeat; indeed, he and Hugh le Despenser the younger barely evaded being captured by the Scots at Rievaulx Abbey. Isabella, meanwhile, had been staying at Tynemouth. Though Edward sent troops to protect her, she ended up having to escape by sea, during which two of her ladies were killed.³⁸ She blamed Despenser the younger for her ordeal. Among the casualties of this ill-fated Scottish campaign may have been Edward's out-of-wedlock son Adam.³⁹

Frustrated with the events in Scotland and the continuing ravaging of the north of England, the unfortunate Earl of Carlisle attempted to negotiate a truce of his own with the Scots. Edward regarded the new earl's probably well-intentioned actions as treasonous and had him executed as a traitor. But soon the king had to bow to the

³⁷ Fryde, p. 209.

³⁸ Doherty, pp. 76-78.

³⁹ Fryde, p. 131.

inevitable and treat with the Scots himself. In 1323, the English and the Scots entered into a truce that was to last until the end of Edward's regime.

No sooner had the Scottish problem been resolved than the next problem rose to the fore: France. And it was the situation in France that would bring down the king.

Queen Isabella

Edward II's queen, Isabella, would play a vital role in the events to come, so it is fitting that we pause a while to look at her.

Married to Edward at age twelve, Isabella had played a relatively minor role in the reign. Though she is said to have been indignant at being slighted in favor of Gaveston when she first came to England, and supposedly wrote an angry letter to her father, she seems to have settled down comfortably enough with the king afterward. She had a large household of her own, though she often traveled with the king and was waiting for him at Berwick when he returned from Bannockburn.⁴⁰ She enjoyed queenly activities such as hunting and listening to music and had an impressive collection of manuscripts for the time. As queen, she engaged in the pious and charitable works expected of her. Isabella was generous to those who served her faithfully and was also kind to the poor; she served as patron to a orphaned Scottish lad and had him clothed and educated.

Yet by 1326 Isabella had become the "she-wolf" that she is known as today: certainly an adulteress, possibly a murderess. She displayed astounding greed and did nothing to stop her lover from exercising royal power to the detriment of the rightful king, her own son. After late 1330, her lover dead and her power gone, she settled into comfortable, uncontroversial retirement, traveling between her estates, going on pilgrimages, and receiving visits from her relatives and lady friends, some of whom, like

⁴⁰ Doherty, pp. 59–60.

the Countess of Surrey, were loyal to her throughout her long life. It was as if the years 1326 to 1330 had never existed.

It is difficult to find any clues in Isabella's early life to her later behavior. In 1314, she is said to have discovered, while on a visit to France, that her sisters-in-law were committing adultery with two young knights. Isabella, the story goes, told her father, who had the knights flayed to death and the young women imprisoned in harsh conditions. If Isabella did indeed share her knowledge with her father, knowing what his reaction would be, it suggests a cruel streak in her character, though it may also be that she simply acted out of loyalty to her brothers and a belief that her actions were necessary to protect her family's royal dignity. In any case, the story that Isabella was her father's informant may be apocryphal, although the gruesome fate of the adulterous lovers is certainly not.⁴¹ As for Isabella's own sexual conduct, the notion that any of her four children were not fathered by Edward is Hollywood nonsense, fostered by the movie *Braveheart*, where Isabella becomes the adulterous lover of William Wallace and bears him a child. (For the record, at the time of Wallace's death in 1305, the real-life Isabella was unmarried, living in France, and prepubescent.)

What is clear is that Isabella hated Edward II's last favorite, Hugh le Despenser. She may well have been appalled by his treatment of widows such as Elizabeth de Burgh and the Countess of Pembroke, both of whom were friendly with the queen and who had suffered financially at the favorite's hands. She may have been disgusted at the sexual relationship between Despenser and Edward, if indeed there was one. (Paul Doherty goes so far as to suggest that she may have been sexually harassed by Despenser.⁴²) But

⁴¹ Haines, p. 310; Doherty, pp. 58–59; Mortimer, p. 140.

⁴² Doherty, pp. 101–02.

whatever her feelings were, she probably kept them well hidden until she could act on them.

Isabella in France

When Isabella married Edward, her father, Philip IV, sat on the throne of France. In 1314, he died—the result, some said, of being cursed by Jacques de Molay, head of the Knights Templar. Philip had had him burnt alive the same spring that he had the lovers of his daughters-in-law flayed to death. Philip IV was succeeded by his eldest son, Louis X, who reigned only two years before dying. Louis X was succeeded by his short-lived infant son, then by Louis's younger brother, Philip V, who died in 1322. He was succeeded by the last of Philip IV's sons, Charles IV. Each of the adult French kings expected Edward II to pay them homage for Gascony, a task Edward II, like his father and later his son, found highly disagreeable.

In Charles's case, the issue of paying homage was complicated by a dispute over the actions of English officials in Gascony. To recount the background to this is well beyond the scope of this booklet, but by late 1324, relations between England and France were approaching a state of war. To make matters worse, a number of the king's enemies had found refuge in France after Boroughbridge—most notably Roger Mortimer of Wigmore, who in August 1323 had accomplished the rare feat of escaping from the Tower of London.

In the summer of 1324, Edward ordered that all French subjects in England be arrested and their goods confiscated. That September, Edward seized the lands of Queen Isabella, although she was given an allowance in compensation, and sent her French attendants packing. Isabella herself was treated as a potential spy for the French. The younger Despenser's wife, Eleanor—Edward II's favorite niece—was put in charge of

the queen's household and given the task of screening her incoming and outgoing correspondence, a duty that would later earn her a sixteen-month confinement in the Tower of London. Isabella's younger son, John, was placed in the care of Lady Despenser, while Isabella's two daughters were placed with Isabel de Hastings, a sister of Hugh the younger.

The French were not impressed by these measures, and Isabella must have been infuriated by them. Negotiations continued, though, and in 1325, it was proposed that Isabella herself go to France to meet with her brother. This seemed to be a sensible idea to everyone involved, and met with papal approval. Given Isabella's constrained personal and financial situation at the time, it is likely that she welcomed the opportunity to go to France, but whether she had any ulterior motives at the time is unknown.

At some point, Isabella became the lover of Roger Mortimer, the escapee from the Tower. Some historians believe that the relationship began when he was in prison in the Tower of London and that Isabella helped him escape; others believe that the affair did not start until Isabella had been in France for some time. The latter seems far more likely; the Tower with all of its comings and goings was not conducive for trysts between the queen and a prisoner. In any case, if Isabella did have a relationship with Mortimer before she went to France, she kept it very well hidden, for she would hardly have been sent to France had she been suspected of adultery with the king's enemy.

In May 1325, Isabella was successful in procuring a peace treaty. Though it was not particularly favorable to the English, it was probably the best that could be expected.⁴³ It was still necessary, however, for homage to be paid to King Charles. Edward was extremely reluctant to go. Aside from the disagreeableness of the task in

⁴³ Fryde, p. 147.

itself, the Despensers' unpopularity had put England in an unsettled state, and the king's own advisers were of differing minds as to whether the king should make the trip. The king finally determined to go, then pleaded illness at the last minute. It was finally agreed that Edward's eldest son, who would be thirteen in November 1325, should go in his father's stead. Accordingly, in September 1325, young Edward left England. He would never see his father again.

The Downfall and Death of Edward II

The Invasion

No one knows when Isabella decided not to return to England except under her own terms or whether the plan originated with her or with Mortimer. All agree, however, that in sending his son to France, Edward II had given his wife a weapon to use against him.

By the fall of 1325, it became apparent that Isabella was not going to come back to England. Reports came that she was dressing as a widow and insisting that she would not return to England until the Despensers were removed from court. She had also begun to consort with Roger Mortimer openly. Edward wrote a series of letters urging her return, but to no avail. Letters to his son also went unheeded.

Isabella and Mortimer, aided by other English exiles and even Edward II's half-brother Edmund, the Earl of Kent, began preparing to invade England. Money and troops were needed, some of which the couple procured by agreeing with the Count of Hainault, a wealthy man, that young Edward should marry one of his daughters. Edward II, meanwhile, prepared against the invasion and even drew up a specific plan of defense, but to no avail.⁴⁴ Aided by the treachery of men who were supposed to be working for the king, the queen landed unopposed in September 1326 and began moving westward.

The king and the Despensers were at the Tower of London when they learned of the queen's landing. London was particularly unhappy with the king, and it soon became

⁴⁴ Fryde, pp. 183–85.

apparent that no one there would aid him against Isabella. Edward and the Despensers left the city, probably hoping to raise troops in Wales.⁴⁵

On October 15, 1326, the city made it horrifyingly clear on whose side it stood. The day started with an associate of Despenser's being dragged out of his house by a mob and beheaded. The mob next went in search for Walter Stapeldon, Bishop of Exeter, who had served Edward II as treasurer and in other capacities and who was regarded as an enemy of the queen. As he rode into the city, he was discovered by the mob. He tried to escape to St. Paul's and sanctuary, but was captured, dragged to Cheapside, and beheaded with a knife. Two of his companions met similar deaths. The Archbishop of Canterbury, fearing a like fate, fled the city on horses appropriated from the Bishop of Rochester, who had to flee on foot. The next day, another official was killed. The Tower surrendered to the Londoners. The prisoners there, including Roger Mortimer's sons, were released.

Meanwhile, Hugh le Despenser the elder had gone to Bristol, while his son and the king continued into Wales. Isabella and her army arrived at Bristol, where after eight days Hugh the elder, faced with a garrison that refused to fight, surrendered the castle. On October 27, after a "trial" where the verdict was never in doubt, he was hung, cut down while still alive, and beheaded. Edward II and Hugh the younger, in Wales with an ever-dwindling number of supporters, were now so desperate that they enlisted the abbot of Neath to attempt to negotiate with the queen. His efforts were futile, and on November 16 the king and his entourage were caught as they wandered through Wales. The king was sent to Kenilworth Castle under the care of his cousin Henry of Lancaster. The next day, the Earl of Arundel, who had been loyal to the king for the last few years

⁴⁵ These dramatic events are summarized in Haines, pp. 177-86; Doherty, pp. 90-94, 105-07; Mortimer, pp. 153-63.

and whose eldest son was married to Despenser's eldest daughter, was executed, having been captured separately from the other royal supporters.

Despenser was sent to the queen. Knowing full well the fate that awaited him, he tried to starve himself to death, but succeeded only in making himself so weak that it was decided to execute him in Hereford lest he not make it alive to London. His captors had ensured that his progress was a humiliating and degrading one, and when he arrived outside of Hereford, worse was to come. He was pulled off his horse and stripped. Scriptural verses were etched on his arms and chest. When he was finally put back on his horse in preparation for being led into the city, he was dressed in a tunic bearing his arms reversed, with a crown of nettles placed on his head. Once brought before the queen, he was accused of a lengthy list of crimes, some real and some imaginary, and sentenced to die. He was drawn on a hurdle pulled by four horses to the place of execution, where a fifty-foot gallows had been erected. There on November 24, 1326, he was hung, cut down alive, castrated (according to some chronicles), disemboweled, beheaded, and finally quartered. The queen celebrated.

The Deposition of the King

With their enemies dead or imprisoned, the queen and Mortimer moved to Wallingford Castle, where they celebrated Christmas together and planned the future.

What to do about the king must have occupied quite a lot of their time. While Isabella had been at Hereford, the Bishop of Hereford, a major supporter of hers in the early days of the invasion, had been sent to recover the Great Seal from the king so that orders could be issued in his name. Young Edward had been appointed regent on the same day the elder Despenser was executed. This makeshift arrangement could not last forever, though, and some of the queen's clerical supporters were beginning to suggest

that Isabella should resume living with the king. Adam Orleton, the Bishop of Hereford, dealt with this handily by putting it out that the king carried a knife in his hose for the express purpose of killing the queen and would kill her with his teeth if he had no other weapon. With the Despensers gone, however, the invaders had achieved their stated objective. Something more would have to be done if Isabella and Mortimer wanted to stay in power—and staying in power was evidently something they wanted to do very much.

Isabella and Mortimer had summoned a Parliament, which met at Westminster in January. The events of the next few days seemed to have been carefully stage managed.⁴⁶ Bishop Orleton appeared before Parliament to ask whether it preferred Edward II's son to reign instead of Edward II. The bishop then adjourned Parliament until the next day. On the following day, Mortimer himself spoke and self-effacingly declared that the great men of the realm, of whom he was but a spokesman, wished the king to be deposed. Thomas Wake, Henry of Lancaster's son-in-law, there as sort of a cheerleader, enthusiastically declared that he thought the king should be deposed. Bishop Orleton then gave a sermon about the king's failings. His homily was followed by that of the Bishop of Winchester, John Stratford, who expounded on the text, "My head is sick." Thomas Wake then appeared once more to whip up the crowd's enthusiasm. Finally, the Archbishop of Canterbury, who owed his appointment as such to Edward II, denounced the king and his evil councilors. At his urging, the assembly unanimously consented to the king's deposition. On cue, the king's son entered the hall and was acclaimed as the new king. Those who did not join in the acclaim and the subsequent hymn-singing, such as the Bishop of Rochester, were beaten up by the watchful Londoners.

⁴⁶ Mortimer, pp. 166–71; Haines, pp. 186–94.

According to his enemies, Edward had been asked to attend Parliament but had refused. Now a delegation was sent to Kenilworth Castle to obtain the king's resignation, so to speak. The chroniclers report that Edward, dressed in black, fainted when he realized why the delegation was there. He was raised by Henry of Lancaster and the Bishop of Stratford, only to be threatened by Bishop Orleton that if he did not resign his crown to his son, someone else might take the throne. Thus persuaded, Edward agreed to give up the throne. The next day, his steward broke his staff of office, symbolizing the breakup of the king's household.

This business being concluded, fourteen-year-old Edward III was crowned on February 1, 1327. Because of his youth, a regency council was set up to advise him. Time would show, however, that the real rulers were not the king or his council, but Isabella and Mortimer.

The Death of the King

The deposed king spent the next few months at Kenilworth Castle, apparently in comfortable conditions. Plots to free him, however, quickly began to materialize, the first led by Thomas Dunheved, a Dominican friar who had been associated with Edward II, and his brother, Stephen. Isabella, Mortimer, or both—it is unknown whether one lover had the upper hand over the other—decided that Edward should be taken to Berkeley Castle. Its owner, Thomas de Berkeley, was an ideal jailor from Isabella and Mortimer's point of view: he was Mortimer's son-in-law and himself a former prisoner of the king. Edward was put into his custody and that of Berkeley's brother-in-law John Maltravers. He was transferred to Berkeley Castle in April 1327. In the summer of 1327, however, there was another attempt by the Dunheved brothers and their associates to free the king,

which may have been successful for a brief time. Others in England appear to have been plotting as well.⁴⁷

It was news of a Welsh plot that seems to have spurred Mortimer to action. As we'll discuss later, English troops had spent the late summer of 1327 in yet another humiliating campaign against the Scots. Donald of Mar, one of the Scottish leaders of the campaign and a nephew of Robert Bruce, had spent his youth in England and was so devoted to Edward II that given the chance after Bannockburn to return to Scotland, he had refused. Only after Bristol was captured by the queen's troops had he returned to Scotland, possibly to entreat Robert Bruce's aid for his friend.⁴⁸ After the 1327 campaign ended, Donald of Mar did not return to Scotland, but went to Wales, apparently to gain support for restoring Edward II to his throne. Had Robert Bruce used his influence to aid the deposed king, he would have been in a position to demand recognition of Scottish independence. Meanwhile, a Welsh lord, Rhys ap Gruffydd, was also plotting, perhaps in association with Donald of Mar, on Edward II's behalf.

The story goes that in the weeks before his death, Edward's jailers had determined to kill him by natural means and therefore put him in a damp cell over a pit of rotting animal carcasses and gave him poor food in hopes of speeding his death. In fact, castle records show that a variety of foods was purchased for him and that Isabella also sent delicacies to her husband, though it is possible that others helped themselves to the provisions before they made their way to the former king.⁴⁹

Whatever the treatment meted out to the king previously, after learning of the Welsh plots, Mortimer sent a William Ockley (also known as Ogle) and Thomas Gurney

⁴⁷ Haines, p. 224.

⁴⁸ Bingham, *Robert the Bruce*, p. 302.

⁴⁹ Doherty, pp. 119–20.

to Berkeley Castle. There, on September 21, 1327, Edward II died. Most of the chroniclers agree that he was murdered, and one of the charges brought against Mortimer three years later would be of procuring his death. Some chroniclers state that he was suffocated. Others put forth the gruesome story, the one now popularly known today and memorably dramatized by Christopher Marlowe, that a red-hot cooking spit was inserted into his anus through a drinking horn and used to burn out his insides.⁵⁰

As a prelude to the murder, according to one chronicler, Bishop Orleton had fashioned a Latin message that depending on the placement of a comma could be read as either “Do not fear to kill Edward, it is a good thing” or “Do not kill Edward, it is good to be afraid.” Fine drama as this is in the hands of Marlowe (not to mention propaganda for advocates of properly placed commas), Bishop Orleton seems to have had nothing to do with the king’s murder, being both out of the country and out of favor at the time.⁵¹

What of the queen’s guilt? Did Isabella order, or agree to, her husband’s murder? No one knows. She was notified of her husband’s death only two days later by Thomas Gurney, who rode from Berkeley to Nottingham to give the queen the news. Parliament, which was meeting, was not told until days later.⁵² Isabella had her husband’s body embalmed and the heart removed and sent to her. Removal of a person’s heart for separate burial was not an unusual practice or a disrespectful one; Edward I had his beloved first wife buried at Westminster Abbey, but her entrails were buried at Lincoln and her heart at Blackfriars.⁵³ Edward II’s heart was ultimately buried with Isabella years later. The female embalmer who had worked on the dead king was escorted to the queen, who presumably questioned her in some manner, but what she asked or what she learned

⁵⁰ Haines, pp. 226–27; Doherty, pp. 128–31.

⁵¹ Doherty, p. 130.

⁵² Doherty, p. 134.

⁵³ Prestwich, *Edward I*, p. 125.

is unknown.⁵⁴ If Isabella herself was innocent of guilt, she certainly does not seem to have had any qualms about continuing her relationship with the man who would later be accused of her husband's death.

The dead body remained at Berkeley, treated with proper respect, for a month and was then taken to Gloucester Abbey, now Gloucester Cathedral, for burial. (Westminster Abbey had asked for the king's body, but was refused.⁵⁵) The funeral was delayed until December 20, 1327, probably because of difficulties in Scotland.⁵⁶ There was much to be done, in any case, for the funeral was an elaborate and costly one. Mortimer had a black tunic made for the occasion. It was not a waste of money, however, for he would get the chance to wear it again—at his own hanging three years later.⁵⁷

The prevailing myth about Edward II, seen most prominently in the Derek Jarman film version of Marlowe's play, is that he was killed because of his sexuality. The truth is more complex. Edward's relationships with other men, if they were indeed sexual in nature, undoubtedly added to his unpopularity. But it is simplistic to view the men who destroyed Edward II and his favorites as some sort of fourteenth-century Moral Majority, bent on wiping out all who would not conform. Edward II was not killed simply because he was Despenser's lover, no more than Mortimer would be killed simply because he was Isabella's lover. It was abuse of power that led to Despenser's death, and it was Edward's acquiescence in this abuse, combined with his other shortcomings as a ruler and later with the threat that he would reclaim the throne, that led to his own death.

But those who had hoped that the king's downfall would result in a change for the better were soon to be disillusioned. If Isabella and Mortimer ever had had plans to

⁵⁴ Haines, p. 230.

⁵⁵ Doherty, p. 135.

⁵⁶ Haines, p. 229.

⁵⁷ Doherty, pp. 140, 162–63.

rule England more justly than the king they had dethroned, they very soon put them aside.

The Regime of Isabella and Mortimer

The New Rulers

On the day that Edward III was crowned in 1327, Isabella celebrated by granting herself an income of over 13,000 pounds, nearly triple the generous income of 4,500 pounds she had enjoyed before her estates were confiscated.⁵⁸ This act set the tone for the rest of the Isabella-Mortimer regime, of which greed was one of the hallmarks. Petty mean-spiritedness was another. Less than six weeks after their father's death, at least two and probably three of Hugh le Despenser's young daughters were ordered to be rounded up and veiled as nuns immediately.⁵⁹ Edward II himself had sent wives and daughters of his political opponents to stay at nunneries as boarders, but none had been forced to take the veil. As the girls could have hardly posed a security threat and were most unlikely to attract ambitious suitors (their parents' lands were all in the crown's possession at the time, and their mother was a prisoner in the Tower), it is hard to see any motive but personal spite in the queen's actions. Isabella also kept her own son the king short of funds and, as we shall see, delayed crowning his bride as long as possible.

Isabella's windfall was not the only event that coincided with the coronation: the Scots raided Norham Castle that day. Both sides soon prepared for war. Mortimer was an able soldier whose activities in Ireland had been among the few military successes of Edward II's regime, but the Weardale campaign, as it would come to be called, was a pale

⁵⁸ Mortimer, p. 171.

⁵⁹ Underhill, pp. 39–40. Three Despenser daughters became nuns, but as the extant orders refer to only two of the daughters, it is possible that the third might have taken the veil voluntarily. Of course, the third order might have been lost.

shadow of Edward II's own Scottish disasters. It began with the English troops and the foreign mercenaries enlisted by Mortimer engaging in a wild and bloody fight in the streets of York and ended with young Edward III almost getting captured by the Scots in a night-raid on the English encampment. The teenage king is said to have cried with frustration when the Scots finally left without ever having been brought to battle.⁶⁰

The new regime was in no shape to fight a protracted war: it was broke. This was no fault of Edward II, who had accumulated huge financial reserves before his death: Natalie Fryde noted that nearly 62,000 pounds were in the treasury on November 17, 1326. By March 1327 only a little over 12,000 pounds was left. In June 1327, over 13,000 pounds came to the treasury from Caerphilly Castle, where the fleeing Edward II and Despensers had left money.⁶¹ Nonetheless, the regime was soon borrowing money to stay afloat.⁶²

Strapped for cash, embarrassed by the latest defeat in Scotland, and undoubtedly dogged by suspicion about the death of Edward II, Isabella and Mortimer entered into negotiations with the Scots, resulting in a ratified peace treaty in April 1328. Scottish independence was to be recognized; the Scottish king's little son was to marry Edward III's sister Joan; and twenty thousand pounds were to be paid to the English. The treaty was an unpopular one, its opponents including Edward III himself, who flatly refused to attend the wedding between David Bruce and Joan a few months later. The Scots dutifully paid the twenty thousand pounds in installments as agreed, but Isabella herself, not the crown or the northerners who had suffered from Scottish raids over the past

⁶⁰ Haines, p. 278.

⁶¹ Fryde, p. 209.

⁶² Fryde, p. 213.

years, personally benefited.⁶³ Another opponent of the treaty—and increasingly of Isabella and Mortimer themselves—was Henry of Lancaster, who had succeeded to his brother's title of Earl of Lancaster.

Crushing the Opposition

Henry of Lancaster was fast becoming disenchanted with the Isabella-Mortimer regime. Though he had been appointed to the young king's regency council, the council had no real say in the governing of the realm: that belonged to Mortimer and Isabella, neither of whom were on the council. The bungled war in Scotland and the treaty that followed added to his displeasure. Men on both sides, called the "Disinherited," stood to lose lands through the treaty. Among those affected was Henry of Lancaster's son-in-law Thomas Wake, who had played such an energetic role in urging the deposition of Edward II.

By the fall of 1328, Lancaster and Wake were refusing to attend Parliament. They had attracted another important ally, John Stratford, the Bishop of Winchester, to their cause, as well as the Londoners. Through the bishop and other spokesmen, Lancaster complained about the relatively impoverished state of the king, the outsized dower of Isabella, and the diminished role of the council.⁶⁴ He never did appear at Parliament, which nonetheless was not entirely unproductive. On October 31, 1328, Roger Mortimer had himself created Earl of March—a title that implied that he was sovereign over all the border between England and Wales.⁶⁵ Even in his glory days, Hugh le Despenser the younger had never aspired to a title more grandiose than Earl of Gloucester—and Edward II had been prudent enough never to grant it to him.

⁶³ Haines, p. 213.

⁶⁴ Haines, p. 204.

⁶⁵ Mortimer, p. 215.

The country once more appeared to be veering toward civil war. Thomas of Lancaster collected more adherents, among them the Earls of Norfolk and Kent, who were Edward II's half-brothers and Edward III's uncles. Both sides had determined to fight when, in mid-January 1329, Norfolk and Kent apparently lost their nerve and deserted Lancaster, who then had no choice but to surrender to the king's troops. Lancaster and some of his followers were fined heavily, while others fled the country.

The Earl of Kent, meanwhile, had become convinced that Edward II was still alive and was being held captive by Roger Mortimer. The earl determined to free his brother. Toward this end, he enlisted the help of a number of notables, including the Archbishop of York and the Bishop of London. Donald of Mar, who had plotted to free Edward II from Berkeley Castle, also pledged money. Some of the Earl of Kent's supporters, like the expatriate Henry de Beaumont, had been associated with Henry of Lancaster; others had had close ties with the Despenser family; others had been attached to Edward II or simply disliked Isabella and Mortimer. Whether all of these people believed that Edward II was still alive, or whether some joined the conspiracy simply in hopes of stirring up trouble against Isabella and Mortimer, is unknown.

Unfortunately, the Earl of Kent was being cruelly duped by Roger Mortimer, who had enlisted agents to entrap the earl into believing that his half-brother was alive and in need of rescue. In March 1330, a stunned Parliament was told that the Earl of Kent had been arrested for treason. As proof, a letter from the earl to Edward II was read aloud. The enthusiastic earl told his elder brother that that he would soon be king again. Unable to deny authorship of the letter—which the Earl of Kent's wife had written at his dictation—the earl confessed and was sentenced to die by beheading. Whether Edward III himself ordered his uncle's execution is unclear; he certainly must have been in

Parliament, however. What is clear is that the death sentence on the earl appalled those assembled; on the day Kent was scheduled to die, the executioner flatly refused to do his job. As no one else would step in, a condemned felon was finally found for the task, taking the earl's life in exchange for his own being spared.

Though Mortimer refrained from executing Kent's supporters, he had a number of them arrested. Some were imprisoned, others like the Archbishop of York were allowed to remain free pending trial. Many on the arrest list simply fled the country. The trials of those remaining in England were postponed, perhaps because Mortimer did not relish having to put men like the Archbishop of York to death, perhaps because the possibility of a treason conviction had the effect of keeping Kent's erstwhile supporters very quiet.

Isabella, who at the time of her invasion had decried the Despensers' treatment of widows and orphans,⁶⁶ did not forget the Earl of Kent's widow and children. The Countess of Kent and her small children were ordered to be imprisoned. The countess, Roger Mortimer's cousin, was nine months pregnant.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Haines, p. 180.

⁶⁷ Mortimer, p. 234.

The Biters Bit

Mortimer did not have to set traps to find his next enemy, however. The king had turned seventeen in November 1329, and he was becoming less docile every day.

Edward III had married Philippa of Hainault, the bride whose dowry had financed his mother's invasion, in 1328. The wedding had been a suitably elaborate one, but Philippa would have to wait for two more years to be crowned. There seems to have been no good reason for the delay; Isabella herself had been crowned on the same day as Edward II. Perhaps Isabella and Mortimer believed that having a queen consort would spur the young king toward greater independence; perhaps the lovers were also reluctant to incur the financial expense of setting up Philippa in her own household.⁶⁸

In February 1330, however, Philippa was visibly pregnant, making her uncrowned status most unsuitable, and in that month she was duly crowned Queen of England. The next month, the Earl of Kent was executed. In June, Philippa gave birth to Edward III's first son, Edward, who much later would be known as the Black Prince.

Edward III was now seventeen. Despite the king's increasing maturity, his newly crowned queen, and the birth of an heir, Mortimer and Isabella showed no signs of loosening their hold on him. Indeed, Mortimer's conduct had grown less, not more respectful of his sovereign. Chroniclers claimed that Mortimer walked alongside the king and sat in his presence. He had also grown much more acquisitive, granting himself manor after manor, monetary allowance after monetary allowance.⁶⁹

Edward himself was exploring ways to shake of his yolk. Quietly, he was assembling a group of supporters, most of them young men, whose loyalty to him would

⁶⁸ Caroline Shenton, "Philippa of Hainault's Churchings," p. 116, in Richard Eales, ed., *Family and Dynasty in Late Medieval England*. Proceedings of the 1997 Harlaxton Symposium (2003).

⁶⁹ Mortimer, pp. 226, 233–34.

not be in doubt when a crisis presented itself. The foremost of them was William de Montacute, whose deceased father had been a friend of Edward II. Montacute had gone on a papal embassy in 1329, during which he seems to have discussed the king's situation with the Pope and the necessity of opening a channel of private communication with the pontiff. The next year, Edward had his keeper of the privy seal write a letter to the Pope which stated that letters from him personally, as opposed to those written by his manipulators, would bear the words "Pater Sancte" in his own hand.⁷⁰

In the end, however, it was not a carefully laid plan, but the alacrity of the king's supporters in taking advantage of an opportunity, that toppled Mortimer. In October 1330 Mortimer summoned a great council to meet at Nottingham. Mortimer's spies had not been idle, and he had received suspicious reports about Montacute and his associates. He interrogated them but was unable to get any of them to admit to anything incriminating. The Earl of March had no choice but to release them for the time being. He was taking no chances, though: Isabella had the keys to Nottingham Castle in her own custody, and Mortimer had instructed that his orders should be obeyed over those of the king.

That night, as Mortimer and his cronies met inside the castle, Montacute and two dozen young men stormed into his chamber. Within minutes, several of Mortimer's followers lay dead and Mortimer himself was the king's captive. Through a William Eland, Montacute had learned that there was an underground passage leading into the castle. The men had met outside it and made their way into the castle. When England awoke the next morning, it was to a king who would henceforth govern on his own.

⁷⁰ Haines, p. 215.

Isabella, who had famously cried out for her son to have “pity on the gentle Mortimer,” was taken to Berkhamstead Castle.⁷¹ But there was no pity in the king’s heart for Mortimer. He was taken to the Tower, from where he had escaped in 1323, to be tried before Parliament. The result of the trial was no more in doubt than those of Lancaster or the Despensers. On November 29, 1330, Roger Mortimer was taken to Tyburn and hung. Someone had remembered to dress him in the mantle he had worn to Edward II’s funeral.⁷²

⁷¹ Doherty, pp. 161–62.

⁷² Doherty, pp. 162–63.

A New Beginning

Edward III

The morning after Mortimer's capture, Edward III proclaimed that he would henceforth rule on his own. He would rule England until his death in 1377.

Few kings started their reigns less promisingly than Edward III: first the pawn of warring parents, later the tool of Mortimer and Isabella. Had he been a poor ruler or a neurotic wreck, he would have had an excellent excuse. Instead, his reign was a largely successful one, not the least because Edward had learned from his parents' mistakes. No single individual would dominate, as had Gaveston and Despenser with Edward II and Mortimer with Isabella. Edward spread his royal patronage widely, rewarding the young men like William de Montacute who had been his most loyal supporters while at the same time not neglecting the established nobility.⁷³

He also did not hold grudges. Only two of Roger Mortimer's associates were executed; the rest, like the Bishop of Lincoln, continued to play an important part in the regime. Nor did he hold men responsible for the sins of their fathers. Roger Mortimer's oldest son was allowed to succeed to his father's lands, although Edward III balked at allowing him to hold the title of Earl of March. He relented, though, in the case of Roger Mortimer's grandson; the young man became the second Earl of March and was a member of the Order of the Garter. The Despenser family also regained royal favor. Hugh the younger's eldest son (another Hugh) served Edward III well in the French wars, forcing the crossing of the Somme before the battle of Crécy. One Despenser

⁷³ Fryde, pp. 225–26.

grandson, Edward, was closely associated with the Black Prince and became a Knight of the Garter; another, Henry, became the Bishop of Norwich. The person who benefited the most from Edward III's leniency, however, was his own mother. No blame attached to her for the events of the last several years. She was given a comfortable allowance of three thousand pounds (later increased) and spent the rest of her long life in the comfortable role of dowager queen, traveling between her estates and on pilgrimages, receiving and paying visits, and occasionally visiting court.

Edward is perhaps best known today for the flowering of chivalric culture during his reign. The Hundred Years' War gave the nobility a chance to perform splendid military feats and to win glory and booty, all in a common cause. In peacetime, there were tournaments, which neither Edward I or Edward II had encouraged.⁷⁴ Most famous of all was the Order of the Garter. It was also a time, as Michael Prestwich points out, of growing national pride, and one when the English language began to be heard more and more at court and in literature, most famously in the works of Geoffrey Chaucer.⁷⁵

Unlike his father, Edward III was fortunate in his wife. Queen Philippa bore Edward a dozen children and was universally popular among the chroniclers; though she was extravagant, her high living did not come at the expense of others. Edward himself seems to have been fairly faithful to his queen until late in the marriage, when he took up with an unpopular mistress, Alice Perrers. The latter, unfortunately, was to dominate the king's last years, when Edward was ill and perhaps also failing mentally. Edward III also had loyal sons.⁷⁶ Sadly, however, Edward III's eldest son, the Black Prince, died before his father, leaving Edward III to be succeeded by his nine-year-old grandson Richard II.

⁷⁴ Prestwich, *The Three Edwards*, p. 183.

⁷⁵ Prestwich, *The Three Edwards*, p. 265.

⁷⁶ Prestwich, *The Three Edwards*, p. 251.

With a boy on the throne surrounded by ambitious men, there was nothing Edward III could have done to prevent the dynastic struggles between his descendants that followed and that would culminate in the Wars of the Roses.

A Final Mystery

Edward II, despised in life, had acquired a rather different status in death. As with Thomas, Earl of Lancaster, his grave attracted pilgrims, and soon stories began to arise that miracles had taken place at his tomb. The offerings of the pilgrims, combined with later gifts from Edward III and other members of the royal family, allowed the monks at Gloucester to embark on an ambitious renovation of the abbey, the grand results of which can still be seen in today's cathedral. Richard II would go so far as to attempt to have his great-grandfather canonized, but the effort went nowhere.⁷⁷

After Mortimer's downfall, the men associated with Edward II's death fled the country, except for Thomas de Berkeley, who stayed in England and boldly asserted in Parliament that he had been away from Berkeley Castle on the night of the king's death and had never known that he was murdered. Though evidence indicates that Berkeley was, in fact, at the castle at the time, he eventually was acquitted of suspicion and spent the rest of his life as a dutiful subject to Edward III. Interestingly, he arranged for his young son to marry Elizabeth le Despenser, a daughter of Hugh le Despenser the younger. Probably because she was a baby at the time of her father's downfall, Elizabeth had escaped being veiled like her older sisters. (As Thomas de Berkeley's wife was a daughter of Roger Mortimer, one wonders what the private discussions at the Berkeley dinner table must have sounded like at times.) Thomas Gurney was eventually caught by English agents and was being taken to England when he died in transit. Though some

⁷⁷ Haines, pp. 338–39; Doherty, pp. 169–70.

accounts claimed that he was murdered, accounts of his caretakers indicate that he probably fell ill on the journey from natural causes. William Ockley disappeared. John Maltravers, who is named by some chroniclers as one of the king's murderers but who was indicted for his role in the entrapment of the Earl of Kent, eventually regained favor with Edward III and was allowed to return to England after a number of years abroad.⁷⁸

In the nineteenth century, a researcher thumbing through a sheaf of long-ignored papers stumbled across a letter purportedly written to Edward III by Manuel di Fieschi, a prominent papal notary at the time. In the letter, Fieschi claimed that Edward II had not died at Berkeley Castle but had escaped, killing a porter in the process. Afterward, disguised, he wandered around for a time before finally taking ship, visiting the Pope for a short time, traveling through Europe, and settling in Italy, where at the time of the letter he was living as a hermit.⁷⁹

This letter has intrigued scholars ever since. Roy Martin Haines argues that it was a fabrication written in support of the effort to have Edward II canonized and that the king did indeed meet his death in Berkeley Castle.⁸⁰ Some have taken it quite seriously; articles by Italian scholars in the 1900's led to the placement of plaques commemorating Edward II's stay in a local castle there.⁸¹ Paul Doherty discounted the letter itself as a blackmail attempt but believes that Edward II may well have escaped his murderers.⁸² The most elaborate theory has recently been put forth by Ian Mortimer, who in his biography of Roger Mortimer posits that the latter faked Edward II's death and used the king's continued secret existence as a means of maintaining power over Edward III. Once

⁷⁸ Doherty, pp. 166, 168–69.

⁷⁹ Doherty, pp. 186–88; Haines, pp. 221–22.

⁸⁰ Haines, pp. 237–38.

⁸¹ Doherty, pp. 189–90.

⁸² Doherty, pp. 214–15.

Roger Mortimer died, his biographer suggests, it suited Edward III well to preserve the fiction that his father was dead. Edward II wandered through Europe for a time but eventually ended up in the hands of Church officials, who brought him to meet Edward III.⁸³

Supporters of this and similar theories base their arguments on a number of factors, including Edward III's lenient treatment of Berkeley and Maltravers; the high caliber of some of those attracted to the Earl of Kent's plot; the fact that Edward II's body was not subject to close scrutiny before being shut in a closed coffin; Berkeley's boldness before Parliament; and the respectful treatment accorded to a "William the Welshman" who claimed to be Edward II.

Though Ian Mortimer in particular argues his case well, I remain skeptical. Edward III had had his enemy, Roger Mortimer, executed on a number of charges, including the murder of his father. Having had Mortimer put to death, he may well have decided that his accomplices were simply following orders and that they should not suffer the death penalty for their obedience to the person who was for all intents and purposes the ruler of England at the time. Furthermore, a close inquiry might well have implicated Queen Isabella herself in the king's murder. Edward III had nothing to gain, politically or psychologically, by being confronted publicly with allegations that his mother was a murderess. Nor was his own passivity during the Isabella–Mortimer years a subject that he would have relished discussing.

All of the escape theorists agree that someone's body was displayed, then buried at Gloucester Abbey; if not Edward's, then whose? Edward II was a handsome, tall man. The dignitaries of the area would have seen the king before and would have surely

⁸³ Mortimer, pp. 259–63.

spotted a substitute; as Haines points out, though it was said that the body was viewed “superficially,” the chronicler did not suggest that the features of the king could not be seen at all.⁸⁴ Such a proceeding would have only added to suspicion. Assuming, however, that the viewing was only at a distance or the face wrapped in cloth so that facial features could not be distinguished, a body of a man about the same age, coloring, and build would still likely have to be found for safety’s sake, and it would have to be recently enough dead so as not to be overly decomposed. Unless a porter was indeed killed in an escape attempt and he happened to resemble the former king, the deception would presumably require that a suitable body be snatched from somewhere close by or that someone be abducted and murdered. Such an operation would require help from people of a rather shady character who would have to be kept silent, either through bribes or intimidation. Moreover, the body rested in state for three months before being buried. There was the chance that a person of importance, one familiar with the late king, might ask to see the king close up. If the body was not the king’s, refusal would be the only option, and one that would lead to suspicion.

Ian Mortimer’s theory that the body of the real Edward II was moved to the abbey in the 1340’s⁸⁵ gives rise to even more questions. How could one body be substituted for another without any of the monks in the abbey noticing or commenting? Granted, the abbey, which had benefited greatly from having the king buried there, would have had strong reasons to keep quiet about any deception, but it is hard to believe that no one was tempted to gossip. Furthermore, both bodies would have to be treated with due respect, which makes such higger-mugger proceedings even more unlikely.

⁸⁴ Haines, p. 228.

⁸⁵ Mortimer, p. 263.

Whatever the truth, its elusiveness means that this question will continue to be debated. Those wanting to consider the issue further should read the books mentioned below.

Conclusion

Michael Prestwich, obviously eager to move on to a more successful king, begs off from the debate about Edward II's death or survival with the comment that even if Edward II did not die at Berkeley Castle, he played no further part in the history of England.⁸⁶ Yet in one respect Edward II did play a further part in the history of England: his deposition and death were to serve as a blueprint for others to come, beginning with his great-grandson Richard II. The royal person was no longer quite so sacred, as some of the king's successors would find.

Moreover, as even the dismissive Prestwich admits, "the reign has its fascination."⁸⁷ Rather than being simply an embarrassing interlude between the mighty reign of Edward I and the glamorous one of Edward III, it is filled with the stuff of great drama: loyalty, treachery, murder, love, lust, greed, vengeance, daring, and sudden falls from power. Edward II and his queen also command a certain sympathy after the passage of hundreds of years. Isabella's leaving what must have been a frustrating marriage to embark on a passionate love affair has endeared her to the romantically minded, while Edward II's stubborn insistence on maintaining his unconventional lifestyle at all costs cannot help but appeal to nonconformists of all stripes. We can see, better than his contemporaries, that he was the wrong man in the wrong position at the wrong time.

In this booklet I have merely skimmed the surface of the fascinating reign. For those who are interested in doing more reading, the following should prove helpful.

⁸⁶ Prestwich, *The Three Edwards*, p. 88.

⁸⁷ Prestwich, *The Three Edwards*, p. 71.

Further Reading

Paul Doherty, *Isabella and the Strange Death of Edward II*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2003. Written by a well-known writer of medieval mysteries who also did a doctoral thesis on Isabella, this is a highly readable account of the ill-fated marriage of Edward and Isabella and the mystery surrounding Edward's death.

Natalie Fryde, *The Tyranny and Fall of Edward II: 1321–1326*. First paperback edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. A scholarly account of the last years of Edward II, with a brief look at the reign of Mortimer and Isabella and its collapse.

Roy Martin Haines, *King Edward II: His Life, His Reign, and Its Aftermath. 1284–1330*. Montreal: McGill–Queen's University Press, 2003. A thorough, scholarly biography, but one that requires some advance knowledge of the subject.

J. S. Hamilton, *Piers Gaveston, Earl of Cornwall 1307–1312: Politics and Patronage in the Reign of Edward II*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1988. A well-written study of the brief life and tragic death of the king's dearest friend.

Hilda Johnstone, *Edward of Carnarvon: 1284-1307*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1946. A fascinating study of Edward's youth before he became king.

Ian Mortimer, *The Greatest Traitor: The Life of Sir Roger Mortimer*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2003. An excellently written study of the queen's lover in which the author passionately argues his position that Edward II was kept alive by Roger Mortimer. At the time of this writing, Ian Mortimer's biography of Edward III was scheduled for publication in 2006.

Michael Prestwich, *The Three Edwards: War and State in England, 1272–1377*. Second edition. London: Routledge, 2003. A handy introduction to the reigns of Edward I, Edward II, and Edward III.

Frances A. Underhill, *For Her Good Estate: The Life of Elizabeth de Burgh*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. Based on household records, this study of a wealthy, charitable, and tenacious niece of Edward II is particularly useful for those interested in the lives of medieval women.

Alison Weir, *Queen Isabella: Treachery, Adultery, and Murder in Medieval England*. This biography, to be published in the United States in late 2005, should be an interesting look at this controversial queen by a well-known writer.

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St. Martin's Press, 1999.

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