VINTAGE

THE PERFECT KING

IAN MORTIMER

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About the Book

He ordered his uncle to be beheaded; he usurped his father's throne; he started a war which lasted for more than a hundred years, and taxed his people more than any other previous king. Yet for centuries Edward III was celebrated as the most brilliant king England had ever had, and three hundred years after his death it was said that his kingship was perhaps the greatest that the world had ever known.

In this first full study of the man's character and life, Ian Mortimer shows how Edward personally provided the impetus for much of the drama of his fifty-year reign. Edward overcame the tyranny of his guardians at the age of seventeen and then set about developing a new form of awe-inspiring chivalric kingship. Under him the feudal kingdom of England became a highly organised, sophisticated nation, capable of raising large revenues and deploying a new type of projectile-based warfare, and without question the most important military nation in Europe. Yet under his rule England also experienced its longest period of domestic peace in the middle ages, giving rise to a massive increase of the nation's wealth through the wool trade, with huge consequences for society, art and architecture. It is to Edward that we owe our system of parliamentary representation, our local justice system, our national flag and the English language as the 'tongue of the nation'.

Nineteenth century historians saw in Edward the opportunity to decry a warmonger, and painted him as a self-seeking, rapacious, tax-gathering conqueror. Yet as this book shows, beneath the strong warrior king was a compassionate, conscientious and often merciful man – resolute yet devoted to his wife, friends and family. He

emerges as a strikingly modern figure, to whom many will be able to relate – the father of both the English nation and the English people.

About the Author

Ian Mortimer has BA and PhD degrees in history from Exeter University and an MA in archive studies from University College London. From 1991 to 2003 he worked in turn for Devon Record Office, Reading University, the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, and Exeter University. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1998. In 2003 the first of his medieval biographies, *The Greatest Traitor* was published by Jonathan Cape. He was awarded the Alexander Prize (2004) by the Royal Historical Society for his work on the social history of medicine. He lives with his wife and three children on the edge of Dartmoor.

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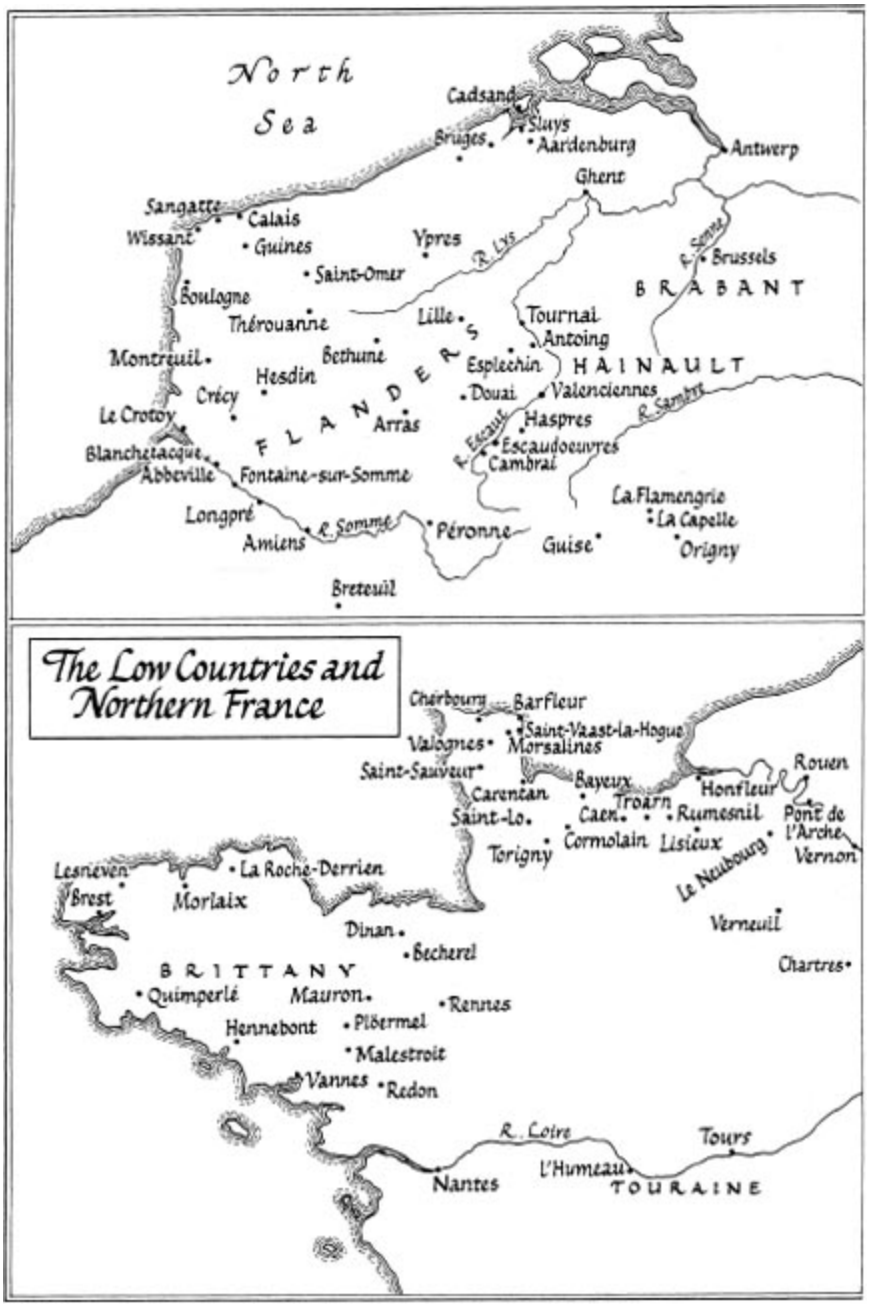
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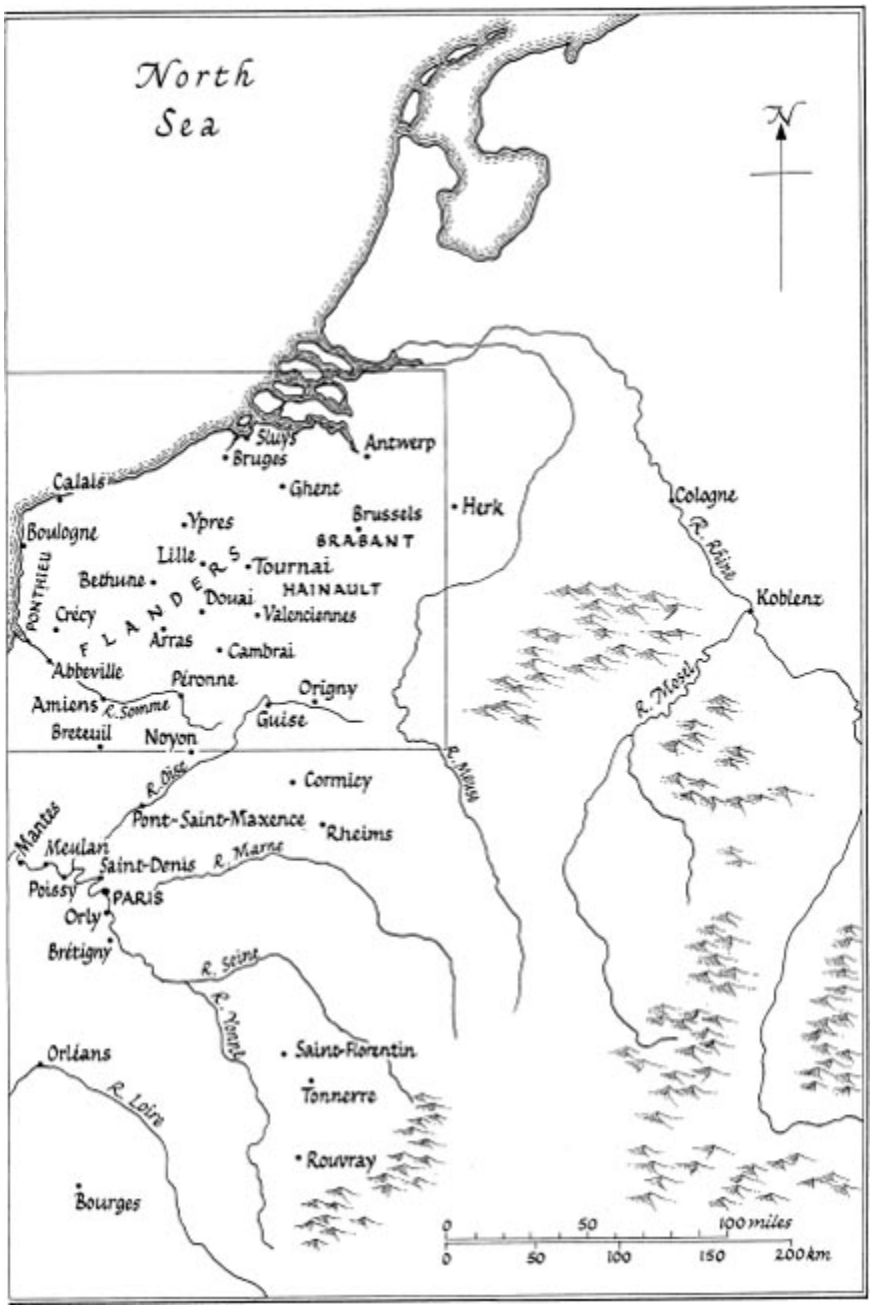
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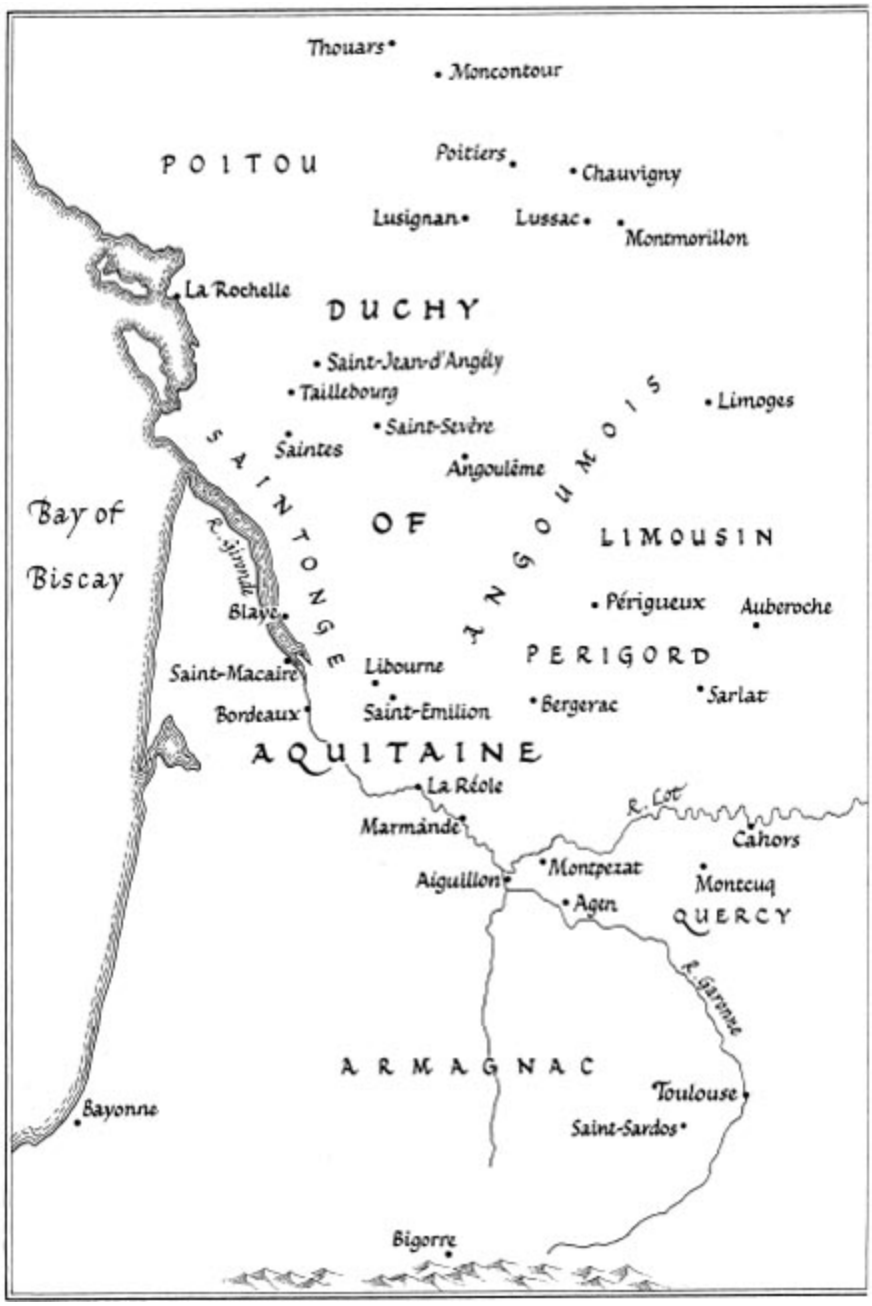
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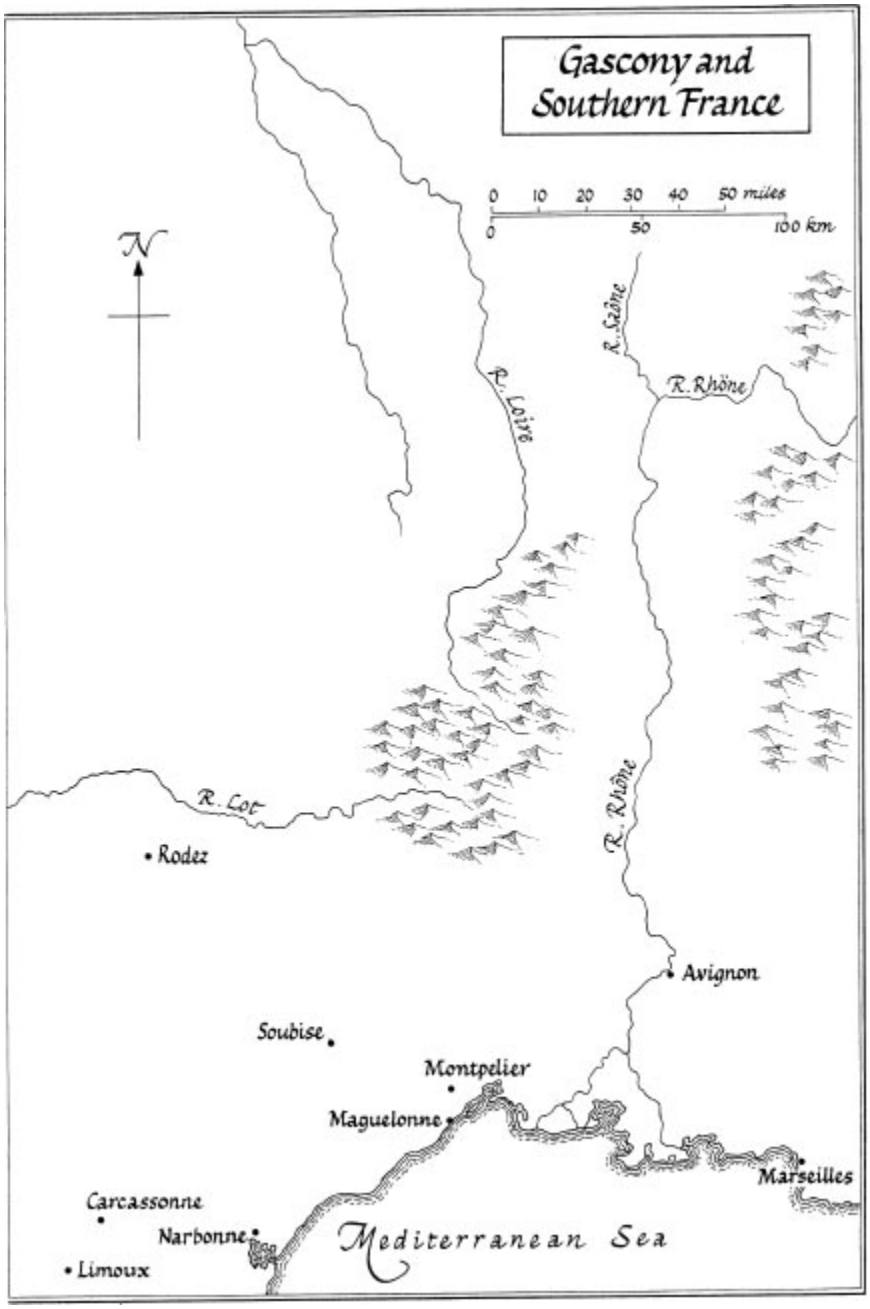
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Limoux
Mediterranean Sea

This book is dedicated to my wife, Sophie, who has been so supportive during the months of frustration, stress, worry and euphoria which inevitably occur when trying to encapsulate a life as rich and complicated as Edward III’s. She has sat outside the walls of Calais, as it were, and watched Sir Walter Manny take on whole armies armed only with a toothpick. The completion of this book is something in which she too can take pride.

The Perfect King

The Life of Edward III, Father of the English Nation

Ian Mortimer

VINTAGE

AUTHOR’S NOTE

This book deliberately employs the ambiguous use of the term Gascony to describe the English-ruled territory in the south-west of France, in keeping with most books on the fourteenth century. The duchy of Aquitaine – as inherited from Eleanor of Aquitaine – was far more extensive than Gascony but there were times when English authority was squeezed and the two were practically synonymous. It would be convenient to use just the one word to describe the duchy and its extensions, and there is one – Guienne – but it is very rarely used, even by scholars, and would look very odd in a biography. So, in order to avoid the awkward adjective ‘Aquitainian’ and the even more awkward ‘Guiennese’, two terms have been used: Aquitaine for the title of the duchy and (later) principality, and ‘Gascony’ and ‘Gascon’ when referring to the region generally.

Most English surnames which include ‘de’ in the original source have been simplified, with the silent loss of the ‘de’. Where it remained traditionally incorporated in the surname (e.g. de la Pole, de la Beche, de la Ware) these have been retained. ‘De’ has generally been retained in French names (e.g. de Harcourt, de Montfort, de Blois). With Italian names, ‘de’ has normally been retained (e.g. del Caretto, de Controne, de Sarzana) but where it is customary not to keep it (e.g. Fieschi, Forzetti) it has been dropped.

With regard to international currency, the gold florin fluctuated greatly over the period covered by this book. According to the *Handbook of Medieval Exchange*, it was worth as little as 2s 8d in 1346 and as much as 4s in 1332 and 1338. It was also worth different amounts in different

places at the same time, and could even be worth different amounts in the same place at the same time. Very roughly speaking, one florin was usually worth slightly more than 3s prior to 1340 and slightly less than 3s thereafter. Many other writers use the rate of 1 florin = 3s 4d, as this allows the easy conversion of 6 florins = £1. In this book this rate is used up to 1340 and the slightly more accurate rate of 1 florin = 3s is used after that year, which implies a conversion of 6.67 florins = £1. The other unit of international accounting used in this book, the mark, was a constant 13s 4d.

He who loves peace, let him prepare for war.

Flavius Vegetius Renatus, writer on warfare (c. 375)

According to the Theory of War, which teaches that the best way to avoid the inconvenience of war is to pursue it away from your own country, it is more sensible for us to fight our notorious enemy in his own realm, with the joint power of our allies, than it is to wait for him at our own doors.

King Edward III (1339)

When you don't fight, you lose.

Leszek Miller, Prime Minister of Poland (2003)

INTRODUCTION

ON 19 OCTOBER 1330, at dusk, two dozen men gathered in the centre of Nottingham. They were mostly in their twenties, and all on horseback, ready to ride out of the town. But unlike merchants or pilgrims assembling to set out together, these men were silent and unsmiling. Beneath their riding cloaks they were all heavily armed.

The reason for their gathering lay within the fortress which overlooked the town. Somewhere within those walls, high on the massive outcrop, was Roger Mortimer, the earl of March, who kept the young king, Edward III, within his power and ruled in his place. Several of the riders had already been summoned that day to see the brooding dictator. He had questioned each of them in turn; all but one had refused to speak. The only man who had dared to answer back was their leader, Sir William Montagu. He had replied evasively that he would give a short answer to anyone who accused him of being part of a plot inconsistent with his duty. Mortimer had let him go, but not with good humour.

Now Montagu was waiting. He knew it would only be a short time before Mortimer would arrest him and his friends. Mortimer had already given the order that the guards were to ignore the king’s commands, and only to obey his own. How suddenly political fortunes changed! It was just four years since Edward II had been swept from power by Mortimer and Queen Isabella, his mistress. It was only seven months since the earl of Kent, the king’s uncle, had been beheaded on Mortimer’s orders. Shortly after that, the young heir to the earldom of Arundel, Richard Fitzalan, had

been arrested before he could carry out his plan to seize Mortimer. Montagu had no wish to suffer the same fate. Nor did he wish to see the young king set aside. He had spent most of the last twelve years at court, and had seen Edward III grow up. But that was how serious matters had become. The future of the English monarchy was at stake. Somewhere in that castle above, young Edward was in fear of his life. Montagu believed Mortimer was plotting his murder and the seizure of the throne.

‘It is better to eat the dog than be eaten by the dog’, Montagu had remarked quietly to the king, after being dismissed from Mortimer’s presence.

But as Montagu knew, it was one thing to suggest ‘eating the dog’ and quite another to do it. Mortimer had spies everywhere. Although John Wyard had been the king’s trusted friend for several years, it emerged that he was an informer. It had been Wyard who had told Mortimer of Montagu’s plot. Mortimer had been thrown into a fury, like ‘a devil for wrath’. And now he was on the defensive, perhaps about to order all their deaths. Already he had mustered troops throughout the kingdom, ready to defend his position. He was, after all, a soldier, one of the very few successful war commanders of the last twenty years. He was a clever manipulator and an arch-propagandist. Men like him, when they know their lives are stake, cannot be trusted.

Montagu and his men rode through the town and then south, as if they were in flight. But they were not running away. They were about to embark on a dangerous and adventurous mission. Their courage was swelled through their companionship; they were friends as well as fellow plotters. With them rode William Eland, the castellan or overseer of the castle. It was his idea that had prompted them to ride out into the gloom.

Some way out of the town Montagu gave the signal for them to stop. By now Mortimer would have heard that they

had fled, but he would not pursue them until the morning, for there would be no moonlight tonight. They waited until the darkness was nearly complete, and then they turned back and led their horses slowly across to the hunting park by the river. At a thicket which Montagu had chosen as their mustering point, they stopped and waited for those conspirators who had not been interrogated earlier, who had remained in the town, waiting for night to fall.

It grew cold. No one came. Before long they realised that they were on their own. Maybe their companions had been arrested. Or maybe their courage had failed them.

It was Montagu's decision to go on. There were only about twenty men with him, and Mortimer had more than two hundred in the castle. Their plan was a desperate one, to attack through a secret passage which William Eland knew. It led, he said, directly into the building in which the queen was lodged. The king or someone acting on his behalf would unlock the door at the top. Then Montagu and his men had to overpower the guards, arrest Mortimer, and silence those present before anyone could raise the alarm. Most of all they had to stop Mortimer getting a message out of the castle. If he did that, they were all done for.

But the men gathered with Montagu were neither cowards nor weak. They were the very pick of the young English nobility, prepared to die rather than be shamed in honour or arms. Robert Ufford was there, William Clinton, the brothers Humphrey and William Bohun, Ralph Stafford, and John Neville of Hornby. There too were Thomas West, John Molyns, William Latimer, Robert Walkefare, Maurice Berkeley and Thomas Bradeston. If they succeeded, all their names would be celebrated for centuries. If they failed, they would probably be hanged as traitors the next day, their lands confiscated, their wives and children locked up.

Montagu decided that they could wait no longer, and they would have to go on alone. They tethered their horses at the thicket, and followed Eland carefully along the marshy

riverbank. After a while they felt the great rock on which the castle was built. A little further on they came to an opening. They entered the tunnel and began to ascend its long, steep slope.

High above them, within the queen's chamber, Mortimer, Queen Isabella and the bishop of Lincoln were discussing what to do about the intended coup. Mortimer had let the men go in order to organise the case against them carefully. They should be indicted for treason: that was his way of crushing opposition. Parliament would assemble in the hall of the castle on the following day. Those who had fled could be charged in their absence, soldiers pursuing them at the same time. There would be ample opportunity to seize them over the next few days, one by one if necessary. If they fled the country, well, so much the better.

Pancio de Controne, the king's Italian physician, visited Edward in his room elsewhere in the castle. The king had retired earlier, claiming ill-health, to get away from Mortimer. Robert Wyville, Isabella's clerk, was also up and about. Probably either he or de Controne went down to the basement of the queen's lodgings, and checked the bolts on the door to the spiral staircase which led down to the secret passage. This secret door, which few of the important people would have known about, was the keyhole through which the castle could be unlocked. In the silence of the night, while Mortimer and Isabella talked with Bishop Burghersh in Isabella's chamber, the bolts were slid back, leaving the castle open to attack.

About midnight, in the darkness, the door swung open, pushed by the hand of William Eland. If a torchlight was burning there, it would have revealed the determined faces of those following him: John Neville, William Montagu, and the others. One by one they came up the last few steps. They proceeded to climb the stairs, as quietly as possible, up into the tower of the queen's chamber.

At that moment a door opened. Sir Hugh Turpington came out, looked along the corridor, and saw them, their weapons ready. He had no sword with him, but he drew his own dagger, and, without thought for his own safety, yelled the warning ‘Traitors! Down with the traitors!’ Turpington hurled himself at Sir John Neville. Neville lifted his mace and, side-stepping, smashed it into the head of the royal steward, who fell in a pool of blood. But his final cry had alerted the others. Next came the chamber guards. Mortimer realised what was happening and grabbed his sword. Two more men were killed defending him. Men rushed at Mortimer; they seized him, and his sword clattered on the floor. Isabella, realising that the attackers could not have got into her apartments without her son’s help, screamed into the dark corridor ‘Fair son! Have mercy on the gentle Mortimer’.

A few minutes later it was all over. The king went with Montagu from chamber to chamber, ordering the arrests of Mortimer’s sons, Geoffrey and Edmund, and Mortimer’s henchman, Simon Bereford. The bishop of Lincoln – Mortimer’s closest friend – was found trying to escape down a privy chute. He was told he would not be arrested. Mortimer, however, could expect little mercy. He was bound and gagged, and led down to the basement and then pushed through the door into the tunnel. Then he was taken down, out into the park, tied to a horse, and removed from Nottingham and power.

*

It might seem strange to begin an account of the life of Edward III with an event in which he personally played little part, but it is appropriate. For the first four years of his reign Edward had struggled to do anything in his own interest. He had been utterly disempowered by his mother and Mortimer. It is a telling fact that it was his closest and bravest friends who allowed him properly to take the throne.

Reliance on his most courageous and capable advisers, who understood bonds of chivalric companionship and the cult of noble achievement, would be a hallmark of his whole reign. When Edward had been crowned, his reign had been greeted as that of a new Arthur, and his young, brave, energetic knights all wished for a place at the round table. They knew that in order to gain such distinction, they would have to earn it. And Edward knew that in order to lead these men, he himself would have to show extraordinary courage. No other medieval English monarch had come so close to being put out of his royal inheritance. Edward was determined to demonstrate that he deserved his crown. It was this determination which inspired his friends to help him.

Within a few years of the Nottingham Castle plot, Edward won his first great battle. By the age of fifty he was famous as the master of European military strategy. Glorious battle had followed glorious battle, orders of chivalry had followed chivalric achievements, so that to be a member of his Order of the Garter was an exceptional honour. He had given England pride, prestige and, through the championing of St George on an unprecedented scale, a new national identity. The nation's wealth had massively increased. The blight of the plague had been weathered. He had taken greater pains than any previous monarch to work with parliament in framing legislation for the benefit of the kingdom. For the next three hundred years he was hailed as simply the greatest king that England had ever had.

Just how great Edward's reputation was, and how long it lasted, can be seen by referring to assessments of his character written between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries.[1] A contemporary wrote in a long eulogy that he was 'full gracious among all the worthy men of the world, for he passed and shone by virtue and grace given to him from God, above all his predecessors that were noble men and worthy'.[2] His only failing, according to this

writer, was his lechery – ‘his moving of his flesh haunted him in his age’ – and this was the reason why the author thought his life had been ‘cut short’. This was intended as a joke. At sixty-four, Edward had outlived almost everyone of his generation.[3]

Edward’s reputation was still shining three hundred years later. In 1688 Joshua Barnes published the first study of Edward and his reign: a huge volume, about 850,000 words long.[4] Its short title is *The History of that Most Victorious Monarch Edward III, King of England and France, and Lord of Ireland, and First Founder of the Most Noble Order of the Garter*. In case his readers had any doubts about the eminence of his subject, Barnes spelled out his own understanding of his theme in the preface: ‘the Life and Actions of one of the Greatest Kings, that perhaps the World ever saw’. At the end of the book Barnes gave his judgement on Edward’s character. As a collection of superlatives it is unique. Edward was:

> Fortunate beyond measure . . . wise and provident in counsel, well-learned in law, history, humanity and divinity. He understood Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, and High and Low-Dutch, besides his native language. He was of quick apprehension, judicious and skillful in nature, elegant in speech, sweet, familiar and affable in behaviour; stern to the obstinate, but calm and meek to the humble. Magnanimous and courageous above all the princes of his days; apt for war but a lover of peace; never puffed up with prosperity nor dismayed at adversity. He was of an exalted, glorious, and truly royal spirit, which never entertained any thing vulgar or trivial, as may appear by the most excellent laws which he made, by those two famous jubilees he kept, and by the most honourable Order of the Garter, which he first devised and founded. His recreations were hawking, hunting and fishing, but chiefly he loved the martial exercise of jousts and tournaments. In his buildings he was curious, splendid and magnificent, in bestowing of graces and donations, free and frequent; and to the ingenious and deserving always kind and liberal; devout to God, bountiful to the clergy, gracious to his people, merciful to the poor, true to his word, loving to his friends, terrible to his enemies . . . In short he had the most virtues and the fewest vices of any prince that ever I read of. He was valiant, just, merciful, temperate, and wise; the best lawgiver, the best friend, the best father, and the best husband in his days.[5]

Maybe some other ruler somewhere has, at some point in history, received praise as great and all-encompassing. But if so, he was not a king of England.

Then something happened, something which none of Edward III's contemporaries could have predicted. Social change allowed a new front of politicised historians to step forward. Less interested in the champions of the past, such men were keen to understand how society had developed. Indeed, within a short while they were only too ready to kick the heroes of yesteryear. Froissart's chronicle – a benchmark of chivalric history – became regarded as a literary masterpiece but worthless as historical writing. Chivalry became the stuff of fiction. Sir Walter Scott led the vanguard of interest in the deeds of knights: a poet and novelist, not a historian. The great historians of the period were exploring how ideas and social movements, coupled with the leadership of political figures, had changed Europe. By comparison, the age of chivalry seemed stagnant, unchanging and distasteful in its glorification of violence and bloodshed.

The development of historical writing along social themes in the early nineteenth century dealt a succession of severe blows to Edward's reputation. History itself became less a matter of narrative than judgement, and this was not just judgement on individuals but power structures and social hierarchies. There is no better example of the High Victorian ethos of historical condemnation which annihilated Edward's glory than Lord Acton's famous phrase: 'power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men.'[6] William Stubbs, peering down on the middle ages from the twin heights of an episcopal throne and a professorial chair, condemned Edward as 'ambitious, unscrupulous, selfish, extravagant and ostentatious'.[7] Such attitudes were strongly supported by the popularity of massive, all-encompassing histories which compared individual kings' achievements with the demands

of modern society. As a political leader, Edward III was judged to have prejudiced his kingdom's economic and social welfare for a series of expensive and ultimately futile foreign wars, calculated only to add to his own personal grandeur. As a cultural patron he was deemed insignificant because subsequent generations had destroyed most of his great buildings, and as a social reformer he was castigated for attempting to undermine the social changes of the mid-fourteenth century, thereby creating the social tension which led to the Peasants' Revolt. And his love of women generally, and Alice Perrers in particular, was seen as morally reprehensible. In every area in which a great king should be forward-thinking, he was portrayed as conservative or regressive, and in every area in which a king should be circumspect, he was judged reckless.

This change in historians' attitudes towards Edward III was mirrored in the three biographies of him published in the nineteenth century. Although these early biographers should have been able to present the king in relation to the values and needs of his age, and could have resisted the historical trend to condemn him simply on account of the warlike character of the fourteenth century, they failed to do so, beholden to the judgement of academic historians. This is perhaps understandable – they were men of small intellectual stature compared to Bishop Stubbs – but the result was that they developed even more extreme views. They held Edward up as singularly responsible for a horrific international conflict, high taxation and a self-indulgent court. William Longman, the first of Edward's Victorian biographers, writing in 1869, concluded that:

> It was the venturesomeness of war, its stirring strife and magnificent pomp that delighted him – as it has delighted barbarians in all times . . . Courage he possessed in an eminent degree, combined, however, with no small amount of chivalrous rashness . . . Of his personal character in other respects but few traces remain, and some of them are not such as to excite much admiration. Conjugal fidelity at that time was not

> considered a necessary virtue in sovereigns, and certainly was not practised by Edward III. In this matter it is but fair to judge him by the habits of the times, but his disgraceful subjection in his old age to a worthless woman was the natural sequel to a licentious life, and deeply stains the conclusion of his reign. That he was unscrupulously despotic is clear enough from the facts mentioned in the course of this history, and that he was cruel and revengeful is far from doubtful when his conduct to the burgesses of Calais is considered; for he either intended to put them to death in revenge for their courageous defence, or else, with cat-like wantonness, cruelly disregarding their misery, tortured them with the fear of a punishment he never intended to inflict.[8]

This shows a startling disregard for Edward's out-of-date virtues and an exaggerated emphasis on his still-relevant vices. Longman concluded his book with the dictum that we should not be

> dazzled by the splendour of the victories they [Edward III and his eldest son] gained into a blind forgetfulness of their vanity, or into an unreflecting admiration of two men, who, though possessed of qualities particularly qualified to excite the admiration of unthinking hero-worshippers, have but little claim to commendation of the wise and thoughtful.[9]

That was how he ended a two-volume study of Edward III: an exhortation to disregard the man's achievements and to meditate on the barbarity of his behaviour, completely failing to consider him as a man in his haste to condemn the values of the age.

Longman's portrait was deemed 'remarkable for its justice, its variety of interest, and its completeness as a picture of the times' by Edward's next biographer.[10] The Reverend William Warburton was, in fact, a little more sympathetic to Edward than Longman, and more subtle, pointing out that Edward 'understood better perhaps than any other sovereign of his dynasty the great importance of keeping on good terms with his people', adding that 'almost in every successive parliament he had the credit of making concessions to the nation . . .' However, Warburton's compliments always have a fatal sting in the tail, in this case adding: 'but he was, in all probability, quite as arbitrary

as the most arbitrary of his predecessors'.[11] Unlike Longman he does not damn Edward outright for his warrior-gallantry, but belittles him, stating that 'as a soldier and a legislator he looms large between Edward II and Richard II, but seems a man of ordinary stature when measured with the great first Edward or the greater first William'. On and on he goes, diminishing Edward at every opportunity, mainly for his failure to have lived in other centuries. But then Warburton was a man who saw the Black Death as one of the 'real glories' of the fourteenth century, for by it the English serf was freed from servitude.[12] In so doing he shows how little he understands the social priorities of the fourteenth century. He also demonstrates a gross detachment from everyday human existence: the agonising and lonely deaths of one in three of the population of Europe was the antithesis of glory in the fourteenth century, just as it would have been in the nineteenth. For Warburton, another 'real glory' was the *loss* of Gascony, allowing England to 'acquire its insular character'. Probably only Englishmen between the French Revolution and the Great War could have seen the acquisition of an insular character as a positive development. Basically, in Warburton's eyes, Edward was a bland third-rater because he had not contributed to nineteenth-century industrial democracy, as far as Warburton could see. Rarely has a biographer been so unfair in his expectations of his subject.

The third and last of the Victorian biographers was the best writer of the three and the worst historian. Dr James Mackinnon was a biographer of such extreme prejudice and perverse judgement that one quakes under his sentences. Yet, steadying ourselves after reading his outrageous and wrong judgements, we have to reflect that he too was a product of his time. Writing in 1900, in a society whose fear of war was of paramount concern to men such as himself, the fact that Edward was a warmonger was enough to seal his fate.