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Edward the Confessor: Last of the Royal Blood

By Tom Licence

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Reviewed by: Ryan Lavelle

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Edward the Confessor: Last of the Royal Blood. By Tom Licence. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020. ISBN 9780300211542. xv + 369pp. £25 (hb) 2022. ISBN 9780300260823 (pb). xv+ 327 pp. £12.99.

Edward the Confessor (r. 1042-66) is a king who has brought out some strong opinions over the centuries. First portrayed as a holy figure, the saintly reputation stemming from the manner in which his fate was linked to Norman claims to English kingship in and after 1066, Edward's reputation in historical quarters took a dive as a result of the publication of Edward Freeman's influential six-volume *History of the Norman Conquest of England* (1867-1879). Edward's years spent in Norman exile—as a result first of the deposition of his father Æthelred II the Unready in 1013, and the subsequent conquest by Cnut 'the Great' after the deaths of Æthelred and his eldest surviving son, Edmund 'Ironside,' in 1016—followed half a century later by two more foreign invasions have tended to seal his historical fate in the eyes of many. To the arch-Anglo-Saxonist Freeman, the childless Edward may have been a saint, but as a king who failed in the duty of siring a legitimate heir he was the harbinger of the Norman Conquest.

Even today the study of Edward and his reign is frequently overshadowed by Earl Godwine, his son Harold, and William the Conqueror, not to mention—when we remember him—Harald Hardrada. In this, the latest contribution to Yale University Press's *English Monarchs* series, Tom Licence attempts to move away from reading Edward's reign as a prelude to 1066, considering it in terms of the expectations of Edward's own day. Licence is not the first to do this, of course, nor the first for the *English Monarchs* series either. In 1970, Frank Barlow's biography of Edward was published in the same series but, as with Yale's publication of David Bates's new biography of William the Conqueror (2016) in a series which already had a Conqueror biography, the decades which have elapsed are an indication of how scholarship on the topics has moved on.

Licence takes a different approach from Barlow, who deliberately stepped away from the sanctity and Normanness of the portrayal of Edward, drawing from his own work as editor of the contemporary *Life of King Edward*, the *Vita Ædwardi Regis*

(first published in 1962) reflecting on Edward's courtly activities (he liked to hunt—a lot), and attempting to drill down to the politics of Edward's reign, shorn of the exaggeration that the *Vita* imposed. Licence has the luxury of being able to look more fully at the contemporary expectations in the source material, the paraphernalia of rulership in terms of what it meant to contemporaries (including new coin evidence), and even attempts to move a little into the mind of the king himself.

This last point responds nicely to many of the criticisms levelled at writers of medieval biography, particularly early medieval biography. The *Vita*, written mainly at the end of Edward's life, may purport to tell us much about the king's actions and his motivations, but can we really get to the inner person when sources are so obfuscatory? At points, Licence indicates that we can. Edward's formative childhood and youth play a big role, including his dead father ("a face in his dreams"), his mother (the influence of genes and upbringing gets a mention), and, helped by Licence's considerable understanding of the thought-world of medieval theology, the expectations of his faith. As has been applied to the charters of Edward's father by both Simon Keynes and Levi Roach, the preoccupations of the king may be reflected in the ways that particular phrases are expressed—and indeed not expressed. It's not a lot to go on, but a version of a real person does emerge in the biography, and he's certainly a figure who seems credible.

Paying attention to the impact of the experiences on his subject, Licence addresses the experiences of exile, balancing the comparative calm of Duke Richard I's court with the last years of his father's reign. The negotiations for power, failed bids for power in the 1030s, and the machinations of rule, including the rebellion of the Godwine family in 1051–1052, all play their part too. Licence places these events squarely in a continental European setting, paying close attention to the significance of the Flemish parties (a comparative rarity in Anglo-Norman studies). Licence's Edward emerges as a figure with a clear importance on a European stage, not a Norman quisling but someone who understood the balance of power in this setting.

Readers who pick this book up to discover more about Edward and his wife Edith's sex lives, or indeed to ponder on its possible absence, could come away disappointed, but that is not the point of this book. The fact here is that Edward and

Edith did provide an heir in the figure of Edgar Ætheling, the often-forgotten descendent of Edmund 'Ironside'. Licence puts great store—and I suspect he is right to do so—in the appearance of Edgar alongside Edward and Edith in the *Liber Vitae* of Winchester's New Minster, a record of an evident family visit that he dates to the early 1060s. When Edgar is in the picture, Edward's attention to the restoration of his line and the projection of kingship during his reign makes more sense. Licence's skills as a Latinist come into their own in this respect, and it is especially appropriate to mention for this journal his consideration of the meaning of the coronation ceremony through a forensic reading of the Second English *Ordo*. For such a figure as Edward, this sort of thing mattered, and Licence shows why.

Licence wears his scholarship lightly, though, and this book is probably a better read for it. Except where Licence is discussing the historiographical trends on Edward's reign, most historians' names and the debates that they stir up are relegated to the footnotes. This does lead to occasional omissions. Domesday Book, which records landholding "on the day on which King Edward was alive and dead," doesn't really get much of a mention as a source of evidence of the wealth of the lands of the royal family. In Licence's book, the evidence of land transactions tends to be concerned with the favour given to religious houses. Still, that is probably in line with the Edward the Confessor's own interests.

There are extended *pièces justificatives* as appendices at the back of the book that might have been better as journal articles to which the author could have referred to in the footnotes—though that would have taken a level of superhuman planning, which few academics are able to manage. The nineteen pages on royal diplomas are excellent but they fall a bit flat after the race to Edward's death in the final chapters, written in an altogether different style. Could we have had something on Edward's posthumous reputation, perhaps? The style of the majority of the book is otherwise engaging and very well written. Some of the extended metaphors, the visual representations, and elaborate scene-setting may not be to every reader's taste, but on balance each helps to convey the book's subject and the author's dry wit ensures that it doesn't veer too far into pomposity. Still, I could not help but admire the assuredness of the line "Let us pause Time," located at the start of Chapter Five.

Why not indeed? It is worth pausing on this, the eve of the Norman Conquest, not—as Freeman would have had it—because it was some last hurrah of "Anglo-Saxon freedom," but because Edward's reign deserves study in its own right and in its own terms. This book is an excellent demonstration of why.

RYAN LAVELLE
University of Winchester