

About writing

Medieval Intrigue: Decoding Royal Conspiracies

‘All men have a natural tendency to oppose anything they have not thought of for themselves.’ –
Sir Barnes Wallis (*remembered from school, when I was 11 or 12, so probably a little inaccurate*)

Medieval Intrigue is a volume of ten essays, with a total of just under a thousand endnotes and a four-page genealogy of a relatively obscure Italian noble family. It is not easy reading – it is not a comfortable murder mystery or delicious anecdote book. Nevertheless, in the distant future, when my name has been forgotten, the ideas in this book will still have relevance, and probably this will have the longest currency of any of my works.

The strength of the book lies in its various methodological innovations, several of which centre on the difference between information and evidence. This is not a straightforward matter; indeed, many academics in the English-speaking world do not have a sound grasp of the difference. All too often they come up with a theory and quote evidence in support of it, as if contrary evidence can be ignored and as if the information contained in a piece of evidence is trustworthy simply because they trust it. Most of the time that’s fine; but not all information is sound, and in matters of proof, that methodology is insufficiently robust. It may be enough to convince a non-specialist but in terms of serious argument, it is superficial. As I say in the book, it is like claiming that the sun goes round the Earth on the strength that it appears to do so, and ‘a simple explanation is nearly always the right one’ (as I am told with tedious regularity).

The starting point for all this was the afternoon of Friday 7 December 2001, when I started to rewrite ‘Chapter Twelve Revisited’ in *The Greatest Traitor*. If you read my note about writing that book, you’ll see how I first came to the conclusion that Edward II did not die in Berkeley Castle in 1327. It was based in part on the correlation of the claim of innocence by the person accused of his murder and the specific nature of inconsistency of the accusations against him (which indicated that they were groundless). This correlation, coupled with direct evidence for the king’s survival to the end of 1335, led me to conclude we ought to take that survival narrative far more seriously than historians have done to date.

I knew that that conclusion was extremely controversial for a number of reasons. For a start, very few academics knew my name; therefore it seemed to them as though a member of the public was trespassing on their patch. Second, academics had become used to dismissing the survival narrative as political propaganda; why should this new narrative force them to change their minds? Third, most people could not see that my argument was *not* based on a balance of the evidence, so they presumed it was a matter of my judgement rather than information; they accordingly accused me of being misled. Fourth, a large number of people thought – as I had predicted in the book – ‘oh no, it’s the Princes in the Tower all over again. Every supposedly dead king’s survival was, in my critics’ minds, the same – they were all falsehoods. This is

reductionism – like saying that since most car accidents are caused by young men, *all* young men are bad drivers.

I found this frustrating and revealing in many ways. It was frustrating that people did not see that you can adopt more rigorous approaches to the evidence. It was equally frustrating that they could not see the implications of an extraordinary plot that had allowed Edward II to be kept alive; and that the ex-king's survival continued to have political importance under Roger Mortimer's regime; and that it was a factor in bringing down the earl of Kent; and that it affected Edward III's overseas campaigning until 1340. People couldn't see that it is not just a matter of a sensational story. It was deeply annoying to see the argument dismissed when it solves so many previously unanswerable questions (such as why the earl of Kent was executed for trying to free Edward II from Corfe Castle in 1330). But at the same time, such responses were very revealing. They showed in shocking detail how superficial most traditional historical arguments are, and how basic most people's understanding of historical methodology is. People coming to the subject with the traditional belief that Edward died in Berkeley saw almost all the evidence pointing that way, including all the evidence from the royal household, and they concluded on the *weight of evidence* (not quality of information) that the death narrative is correct. They did not appreciate that you can have all the evidence pointing in one direction and still not have proved anything. In this case, all the evidence (in chronicles, royal accounts, letters) depended on the information flowing out of the royal household after 24 September 1327. Where did the royal household get such information? From a message sent by Lord Berkeley, which arrived on the night of the 23rd September. And how reliable was Lord Berkeley's message, on which the whole edifice of evidence depends? Three years later he said in Parliament he did not know about the death. So, with the sole information source denying the truth of the matter, one has to investigate how those who claimed Edward II was still alive in 1330 and afterwards got their information. All this I put into an article for *The English Historical Review* – the most respected of all the historical scholarly journals – in 2005. This essay is reproduced in *Medieval Intrigue*.

The approach pioneered in this essay set me thinking. If we can disprove a body of evidence, can we use this to arrive at points of certainty about the past? By proving things wrong can we prove their opposites true? And if we can prove a traditional event is founded on unreliable information, can we use this proven doubt to revise what we *do* know about the past?

The next example was another variation on the same theme of 'who knew what and when they knew it'. I attended an academic colloquium at Nottingham University about Edward II at which Professor Mark Ormrod put forward an essay on the sexualities of Edward II, showing that while 'homosexuality' is a modern descriptor that cannot rightly be applied to a medieval king, contemporaries wrote about Edward in a markedly different way from the way in which they normally talked about a king. Professor Ormrod specifically referred to the red-hot poker death in terms of 'anal rape' and used this to give a likely interpretation of the unkingly descriptions of him. Keen to try out my new-found information-based ideas, I started with the question: 'Given that he had four children and at least one illegitimate child, why do we think Edward II was anything other than heterosexual?' The answer lies in descriptions of his 'love' for his friends (which Professor Ormrod noted had no sexual connotations at that time) and the accusations of sodomy levelled against him. Where did these accusations come from? The answer appears to be a sermon preached against Edward by his political enemies during the civil

war of 1326. The sermon in question was preached by Bishop Orleton who had used the same technique (accusations of being a sodomite) to discredit the Templars in the previous decade. Even then the technique was not new: it had been pioneered by Guillaume de Nogaret, chancellor of the king of France, to discredit and disempower Pope Boniface VIII in 1303. It had nothing directly to do with Edward II's personal life; and, while one cannot rule out the possibility that the choice to use it reflects an awareness that Edward II's unkingly status would make it believable, as far as his actual personal life goes you have to take seriously his recreational habits, which included sex with other women as well as with his wife. Therefore there is no direct evidence that he fancied men, but there is direct evidence that he enjoyed sex with women. The essay was first published in the academic press and included in this new collection.

The third of these essays concerned the succession in 1399, and the rightness of Henry IV to take the throne. Herein I was able to show how the alteration of a chronicle had led to a misdating of an event that had led people to presume that Richard II did not make the Mortimer family heirs to the throne. But I was also able to take the certainty question a stage further. If one has all the records of a certain type – say, royal grants of estates and titles – one can use them to show what was *not* done. In this case I was able to blow away the concept of Henry IV and Richard II as being close in the 1390s by demonstrating how little Richard II gave his cousin compared to how much he gave other members of the royal family.

At the same time as writing the above, I had my work on Edward II in Italy on the slow burner. If Edward did not die in Berkeley, what did happen to him? Thinking through the implications for Edward III and the pope if, as seems probable, the ex-king was sheltered by the pope in Italy, took time. Scouring the Peruzzi and Bardi accounts for more references to strange payments from Edward III to the probable keepers of his supposedly deceased father was tantalising. None of this can be regarded as certainty; trying to reconstruct patterns of international intrigue and blackmail after six hundred years is not easy. But it too was methodologically useful. You end up regarding every document as potentially meaning more than its face value reveals – and the more you think about it, the more you realise this is true of all historical evidence. Everything potentially has wider significance for its intended readers than it does for us. Finally I wrote two essays on Edward II in Italy – one about what I think happened to him after 1330 and the other about the financial implications for Edward III if I am right. In the process of composing the former, the Fieschi letter emerged from its obscurity to have, ironically, its own second voice arguing for the authenticity of its message in the circumstances of its creation, so I have no doubt that it is broadly accurate. As for the blackmail angle, this was for many years merely a hunch – it was only the publication of the surviving accounts that made me realise there was more going on here than I had guessed at. Most of Edward's colossal debt to the Italian bankers did not go on equipping an army; it was swallowed by the bankers who (I suspect) fed it through to the pope. I put in everything I could in the hope that someone with access to the Italian archives – and enough time – can take up the baton of research. The only detail that I did not include that is relevant was one whose source I have not yet found. The Bardi stated in 1339 that they would be fortunate to recover even a part of the debts of 'Messer Edward'. Because most historians have dismissed the possibility that Edward II was still alive, this has always been presumed to be an extraordinarily insulting reference to King

Edward III. But if the debts those of Edward II to the pope, paid by the Bardi and Peruzzi, the reference makes sense. [If anyone knows the whereabouts and references of these memoranda, I'd be very grateful if they could pass on the information; it was because I could not cite this document that I left it out of *Medieval Intrigue*.]

With half a dozen essays done, I decided to create a book. I was inspired by Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*. Hughes hardly ever responded in public to the many criticisms of him arising from Sylvia Plath's death; he kept a dignified silence. He eventually produced a book of his responses – in poetic form. That was the way I felt about my controversial work; I should pour all my thoughts on the subjects in question into a book, including my responses to my detractors, and leave the book to do the talking. Otherwise I'd spend the rest of my life talking about Edward II's fake death.

The methodological introduction, 'Objectivity and information', is the most important piece in the book. It shows how my approach to historical evidence draws from RG Collingwood, EH Carr and Adrian Wilson, and develops their ideas about document analysis. ('Objectivity and Information' is freely available on the publisher's website.) In addition to the 'objectivity' and 'information' elements of the title it also shows how proving details can limit the extent of the possible re-descriptions of the past. The catalyst for this is an understanding so simple that it is amazing that no one had articulated it before. It concerns infinities.

For most of my life I have heard people saying blithely that 'nothing in the past can be proved'. I have often listened to people floundering when asked 'how can you prove the Battle of Hastings happened?' or 'how can you prove that Queen Victoria existed?' And it is true that the veracity of the information in any piece of evidence is questionable, especially when looked at in isolation. Therefore the past is open to infinite reinterpretation. But one night I was drowsing in front of the television – I don't normally watch TV but on this occasion I was too tired to work – while a programme about the mathematician Georg Cantor was on. In my half-asleep state I heard that Cantor started theorising about infinity. I somehow absorbed the message that he argued there are big infinities and small ones. A big infinity is a number line from zero to infinity. A small one is all the numbers between one and two. After that I can't remember anything about the programme; but when I woke up, I had big and small infinities lodged in my head. Yes, the past may always be reinterpreted – and it may be reinterpreted in an infinite number of ways, as Keith Jenkins and other postmodernist commentators state; but not all infinities are big ones. In fact, if you can prove just two things about the past, you have narrowed down the infinite possibilities. You haven't made them finite but you have shrunk the size of the infinity of possible accounts of the past. Coupled with my points about achieving certainty in some limited aspects, one can reduce the infinite ways of reinterpreting historical information so that one can arrive at a point where there is no room to question or reinterpret. The infinite re-descriptions vary from each other only to a small degree. With reference to the particulars of my work, there is no room between the provable points to argue that Edward II died in Berkeley Castle as traditionally thought: one can prove the information was sent in bad faith, that it was not checked, that the evidence that he died was created as a result of this misinformation and that several people who knew the ex-king attested to his survival in the years 1329-1338. Likewise there are boundaries that rule out the possibility that Henry IV did not murder his cousin, or that the Mortimers were recognised by Richard II as the heirs to the

throne after 1387, or that Richard II was close to his cousin in the 1390s, or that Bishop Orleton's sole inspiration for describing Edward II as a sodomite was knowledge of his private life. We can prove too many contrary things – 'objective inconsistencies' as I refer to them – for these readings to be correct.

It is this angle that I most hope people pick up on. I still read online that my work on Edward II's death is an 'aberration' or that I am 'ignoring the evidence' as if the evidence is a god that must be worshipped, regardless of whether it holds any truth or not. I don't worship evidence; I pull it apart and experiment on it, to test its face-value and to understand what the people who created it really knew. Therefore this book is not simply nineteenth-century positivism, as one academic has stated. Readers will decide for themselves whether they can actually make use of the methodological tools outlined in it to achieve a point of certainty about a historical debate; but I hope that, with its availability as a paperback and an ebook, people will look at the seriousness of what is proposed, and not simply dismiss my work because it does not accord with their pre-formed opinion of what happened. It is an uphill battle to change any views on the past (as suggested by Sir Barnes Wallis in the near-quotation which forms an epigraph to this note) but it is possible. It is also wholly desirable: if the discipline of history is to advance it has to test all the evidence on the basis of the information it contains, and how rooted that information is in the past. Anything else is just storytelling.