

An inconvenient fact:

thoughts on the academic reception of 'The death of Edward II'

On 15 August @Plantegematt posted a message to me via Twitter which read as follows: "Loved *The Perfect King* but why can't I find another historian who agrees that Edward II wasn't murdered? Where else can I look?"

This is a really interesting question. Why do scholars stick so rigidly to the traditional narrative when I have so carefully and positively undermined it? There are undiscussed matters here that go beyond what I have previously said on the subject. Thinking about it systematically, there are two essential questions underlying the 'why?': first, why do scholars on the whole not accept my conclusion (that Edward II did not die in Berkeley Castle but was still alive in 1330 and probably did not die until the 1340s, spending most of the interim in Italy in the custody of his kinsman Cardinal Luca Fieschi); and why do they continue to repeat the traditional narrative (that he was murdered in Berkeley Castle in 1327), even though I have proved it to be epistemologically untenable?

First, and let's get this out of the way straightaway: there will inevitably be those who respond to the question 'why do scholars not agree that Edward II survived Berkeley Castle?' by shouting that I am simply wrong. This is a reductive line of reasoning: just because people don't agree with you does not mean you are wrong. At the same time I was writing my book *The Greatest Traitor* there was a strong consensus that the West *had* to attack Saddam Hussein because he had weapons of mass destruction. Any politicians or peace activists who expressed doubt on the matter were ridiculed and sidelined by the experts: it did not mean that they were wrong. In fact it turned out that the experts' consensus was based on a series of flawed assumptions. What I did in my article, 'The death of Edward II', published in *The English Historical Review* in 2005, was to prove that the story of Edward II's death in Berkeley was ultimately founded on a message sent in bad faith, which was not checked and which the sender later admitted in November 1330 was fraudulent, in that he had not heard about Edward II's death. There is no way anyone can say that this is not a cause to doubt the traditional narrative. The only criticisms of this I have read are that (a) that there could have been some other, later unevicenced check on the identity of the corpse buried as that of Edward II in 1327; and (b) that when Lord Berkeley said that he had not heard 'about' Edward II's death he really meant that he did not know the details or specifics of the case. With regard to (a) I hope it goes without saying that it is most unprofessional for scholars to invent non-existent evidence that might have backed up their argument had it existed. As for (b) I have shown in my essay 'Twelve Angry Scholars' how it is dangerous for leading professors of history to start to mistranslate lines of Latin on the basis of what they would like to think the writer really meant. In this case, not only is that not what the Latin says, it also contradicts the context of the statement (a question of how Lord Berkeley wished to acquit himself of the charge of murder). Scholars and members of the public alike need to face the fact that Lord Berkeley's message announcing the supposed death on the 21st September was taken

from Berkeley Castle 130 miles across the country to Lincoln, where it arrived on the night of 23rd September, and was announced publicly the following day without any check on the truth of the information. There is no evidence that any viewing of the body buried as that of Edward II took place prior to the official watching of the corpse at Berkeley, by which time it was completely encased in cerecloth, with the face concealed. Three years later Lord Berkeley, who sent the message about the death, admitted he had not heard about it. Therefore the whole *idea* that Edward II died in Berkeley Castles rests on the veracity of a single message that the sender himself said was false. Any scholar applying normal standards of historical rigour to the debate would admit that that means the traditional narrative is based on a self-confessed lie. If scholars were to err on the side of caution, they should discount this narrative as doubtful, at the very least. But in this case, scholars have not exercised such caution. Their predecessors did not and they in turn do not. They continue to embrace a narrative that is founded on disinformation. This applies even to the very best scholars working in the field, as this note will show. This is why @plantagematt's question is such a good one. Why would the leading fourteenth-century scholars of our age prefer you *not* to approach the subject with an open mind? Why have they suspended normal academic rigour and practice in this matter?

It is necessary to be clear from the outset that the lines of argument I put forward in 2003 and 2005 were very different. The first appears in my book, *The Greatest Traitor* (2003). In that work I built an argument that Edward II did not die in Berkeley Castle on an analysis of the legal processes in 1330 against Lord Berkeley, the ex-king's erstwhile keeper. In short, not only did Lord Berkeley try to plead that he had not heard about the death, his fellow-keeper (John Maltravers) was not even charged with the ex-king's murder. Either the charges that should have been brought against both of them were false, or, if true, then Edward III was shielding Maltravers. But Edward was not shielding Maltravers as he sentenced him to death in his absence for another crime. It followed that the charges against Berkeley were false and Berkeley's defence (that he had not heard about the death of the ex-king) was reasonable. I have to admit, the full argument was relatively complicated; and clearly the fact that my conclusion did not depend on opinion but rather was implicit in the documents went way over most people's heads. But my conclusion could be reconciled with other problematic events – for instance, it solved the problem of why the earl of Kent tried to rescue the ex-king from Corfe Castle three years after his supposed death and why he was executed for it. Together with the details of the Fieschi letter, which explained what happened to Edward II over the nine years after his supposed death, it made a strong case for the re-consideration of the traditional narrative. I did not think any scholar worth his or her salt would ever again accept at face value the contemporary documents that refer to Edward II as dying in 1327.

How wrong I was in that assumption! There was a widespread refusal even to reconsider the matter. This surprised me. I had not expected everyone to embrace such a complicated argument and change their minds overnight but I had expected scholars to address the points I had made. They did not wish even to reconsider them. I concluded that I had not made my argument clearly enough. Therefore I went back to the drawing board and started all over again.

The result was my second line of argument regarding Edward II's supposed death. This was much stronger than the first in that it amounted to the proof outlined above: that the announcement of Edward II's death on 24 September was based exclusively on a report issued

in bad faith and accepted at face value at the time, but later cast into doubt by the sender. As mentioned above, this was published in *The English Historical Review*, the leading peer-refereed scholarly historical journal, in the last days of 2005. An abstract appeared as an appendix to my biography of Edward III, *The Perfect King*.

In considering the question of why scholars did not agree with me, you have to consider the stages in which that lack of agreement took place. The argument that Edward II did not die in Berkeley did not appear fully formed in the academic press but only partially formed in a popular book. And I was right to conclude my 2003 argument had not been clear enough. Although it showed that certain documents implied that Edward II had not died in Berkeley Castle, it did not automatically follow that we should prioritise this over all the many other documents that seemed to show he *did* die in that place. Looking back from this distance in time I can see I really should have begun by examining why all the evidence for the traditional narrative was unreliable. That only came later, in the 2005 *EHR* article.

Then there was the bias against a non-academic to consider. In 2003, when *The Greatest Traitor* was published, I was not an academic (nor am I now: I have avoided working in universities because of the limitations they place upon one's creativity and freedom). Therefore I was not part of the academic establishment that regularly met at colloquia and conferences. Also, I had only two degrees. Almost no medieval scholar had heard of me. My training was that of an archivist, and my PhD (then still in progress) was concerned with the social history of early modern medicine. Thus a large number of senior scholars – who were mostly of the vintage who had studied for their PhDs in the 1970s, and who had together discussed the death of Edward II as a certainty for the best part of thirty years – were confronted by a whippersnapper they had not heard of who did not even have a relevant PhD and who was proposing a radical new interpretation which they presumed was just a rehash of the Fieschi letter. The prejudice was evident. I have to say it was not universal: several leading academics used other elements of *The Greatest Traitor* in their own work, including the new edition of the *Parliamentary Rolls of Medieval England*. But where there was prejudice, it stank. The Berkeley Castle archivist David Smith joined me in an interview on BBC Radio Gloucester determined to argue against my work on the supposed death – freely admitting on air that he had not even read my book.

Another important aspect to bear in mind when considering the non-acceptance of the argument in *The Greatest Traitor* is what it would have meant for the academics concerned. Think of it from the point of view of someone like Professor J. R. S. Phillips, a most eminent and respectable scholar. In 2003 he was entering the twilight of his career, having completed his PhD on Aymer de Valence, earl of Pembroke, in the year that I was born (1967). He had published a large number of scholarly articles on the assumption that Edward II had died in Berkeley Castle. You can say much the same for Professor Roy Martin Haines, who was in his seventies, having completed his MLitt Dissertation way back in 1954. Haines had published work specifically on the death in a journal, and in a small-press publication as recently as 2002, and clearly felt threatened by my work. What were these senior academics supposed to do? They had collectively repeated the traditional narrative of Edward II's death in Berkeley Castle for decades; how could these leopards change their spots? Were they supposed to admit that all they had written that touched on the death of Edward II was wrong, and that all the things they had said about the period 1327-1330 were open to doubt? It was impossible, I suspect, for any academic

of their generation to begin to consider revising his life's work – decades of it – on the strength of that 2003 argument alone. Unfortunately for me, most of the experts on Edward II were very much of their generation.

That was the state of affairs in 2003-5. Overall, it can hardly be considered surprising that academics during this period rejected my work when (a) it threatened to undermine (and make irrelevant) their own lifetimes' publications; (b) it rested on a complicated argument about some apparently minor matters of detail; (c) it did not show why other, apparently very strong evidence for the traditional narrative should be discounted; and (d) it came from the pen of someone of whom they could not be sure, a non-academic.

This provides the context to the reception of the much more important piece in *EHR* in 2005. A number of scholars could reasonably feel that, as they had read *The Greatest Traitor* and considered the question of Edward II's survival once, they had no great need to do so again. I suspect that the combination of such a controversial article and such a prestigious journal meant that a number of them *did* read it; but even so I doubt that many specialists felt they had to reformulate a defence of the traditional narrative. After all, if they could ignore the argument in 2003, why could they simply not do so in 2005? Only two felt inclined to articulate their opposition in the press. One was David Carpenter in the *London Review of Books* and the other J. S. Hamilton, in an online historical journal, called *History Compass*. In neither case was it a wise move: there is something intellectually ugly about a historian trying to disprove a proof. All sorts of falsehoods are told, inconsistencies occur, and speculation is used as fact. In case you are interested, I have published refutations of both in my book *Medieval Intrigue*. In addition, my reaction to the *History Compass* piece appears on this website, at <http://www.ianmortimer.com/essays/uncertainties.htm>.)

My 2005 article in *EHR* showed that the news of the death of Edward II was exclusively based on an admitted falsehood, and that scholars should now set aside the evidence for the death as doubtful. Everyone should have taken note. But herein lay another problem. To admit that the 2005 piece was of significance, having ignored a similar argument in 2003, was even more difficult. Academics would have had to admit not only that their own work on the subject had been flawed but their setting aside of my earlier work had also been a misjudgement. Therefore they had twice over made the wrong call. And on top of this, if I was right, then why had they not thought of this alternative narrative for themselves? After all, they were supposed to be the experts, not me. By 2005 I had my PhD and I had won the Royal Historical Society's Alexander Prize, so they could be reasonably sure that the fact that a peer-refereed article by me in *EHR* was something to be taken seriously; but at the same time I was not one of *them*, a university-based scholar, attending conferences and taking on the responsibilities that follow on from holding a university post. These points meant that, although the argument no longer rested on the subtle correlation of some apparently minor matters of detail, and although I had now shown why the evidence for the traditional narrative should be discounted, it was easier simply to deny me any authority in the matter than join in the debate. The fact that academics were now upholding a narrative based wholly on a self-confessed lie was less of an inconvenience than having to admit that they had overlooked this blatantly obvious fact for decades, and that the Fieschi letter, which academics had airily dismissed as a very clever forgery, might well relate to a real set of events.

This brings us to the second question, of why academics continue to repeat the traditional narrative of Edward II's murder in Berkeley Castle in 1327. There are several obvious reasons. First, even I have to admit that the traditional narrative is a well-rehearsed line of argument which can expect to get far less criticism than one based on the fraudulent nature of the announcement of the death. Anyone who has seen the level of prejudice flung at me in public and in private since 2003 has a very good reason to want to avoid going out on a limb. In addition to the David Smith incident mentioned above, I have seen myself compared with the novelists Dan Brown and Agatha Christie – the latter by Professor R. M. Haines in a peer-refereed journal, of all places. I have had to put up with some very senior professors of history doing all they can to stop me being awarded a DLitt degree. One refused to endorse my medieval work on the basis that, *in his opinion*, books written for the public should not be eligible for a higher doctorate. Another pretended she was an expert on every subject on which I had written to try to denigrate my achievement – including the philosophy of history, archival theory, the social history of seventeenth-century medicine and sixteenth-century antiquaries (all of which are well outside her field of expertise). I have had articles rejected simply because the referee did not want my work published, not because there was any flaw in it. I went into great detail in *Medieval Intrigue* to show readers the flimsy, self-referential foundations on which academic consensus is built. At the time I would attend conferences and be greeted by some smug professor with the words 'so, do you *still* believe Edward II did not die in Berkeley Castle?' Thankfully that sort of behaviour is dying down now. Nevertheless, if you were a historian of the early fourteenth century over the last ten years, taking my side over the death of Edward II could not possibly have made your life easier.

In *Medieval Intrigue* I took a look at some specific examples of high-profile publications that kept to the traditional narrative. A good example of one that did not ignore the existence of my work but played to the academic gallery by dismissing it was J.R.S. Phillips's *Edward II* – a book which, in other respects, is the best yet published on the reign. Why, when my regard for the book as a whole is so high, do I reject it on this matter of the death? It is because Phillips shields himself behind the cloak of academic orthodoxy. He states some of my conclusions are 'unlikely' or 'puzzling'. At one point he dismisses as 'implausible' the idea that Roger Mortimer would have revealed to the young king that his father was in fact still alive. In all this business we have gone way beyond knowing what is plausible – the whole Berkeley Castle plot is unique, so it does not allow us to say what 'normally' happens in such circumstances, or to say what is 'plausible'. It is very easy simply to deny an argument by taking a few circumstantial details and dismissing them – but several members of the older generation have held themselves aloof from the postmodernist's criticism of their methodology, and for them this has long been an acceptable form of rhetoric. For me it isn't. For me, one has to account for *all* the direct evidence for one side of the argument and *all* the direct evidence for the other, and balance the two; and then, only when the inconsistency in the direct evidence is resolved does one start to interpret the circumstantial evidence in the light of the findings. What Professor Phillips thinks 'likely' or 'puzzling' or 'plausible' is not evidence at all. I could say that it is 'puzzling' that people believe that the Earth goes around the Sun – on face value, the evidence contradicts it. But as we all know, appearances can be deceiving, and whether or not people are 'puzzled' is neither here nor there. Professor Phillips's argument against the veracity of the Fieschi letter is that it is 'superficially plausible but ultimately unbelievable'. Well, of course anything is unbelievable if you

are a firm believer in its falsehood; but as it happens I *do* believe that the narrative it contains is essentially true, and so it is clearly not ‘unbelievable’. Indeed, ‘belief’ is the key word. Senior academics simply cannot believe that Edward II lived beyond 1327: his death in that year is an article of academic faith, and one to be maintained even in the face of evidence to the contrary. Trying to persuade them is like trying to persuade Richard Dawkins that he is a product of God’s munificence. However, Phillips’s actual argument in favour of the traditional narrative rests on this line on page 581: ‘We shall never know the whole truth but the simplest explanation is surely the best one: that Edward II did die at Berkeley on 21 September and that he was murdered’. There you have it – the simplest is the best. Ockham’s Razor, for those who understand such things. However, in note 27 of the relevant chapter, Professor Phillips writes: ‘although I disagree with the conclusions reached by Mortimer, the issues he raises need to be addressed’. I wonder why, then, Professor Phillips did not see himself – the leading expert on Edward II – as the one most fit to address them? If he could not do it, whom did he think would? That note is tantamount to an admission that he could not find a logical fault with my argument. His refusal was founded in his own belief, not his analysis of the evidence.

Sadly, Professor Phillips’s failure to address the ‘issues’ I raised has led to others thinking they too can ignore my work. Professor Chris Given-Wilson, a man for whom otherwise I have a very high regard, reviewed Professor Phillips’s book in the *TLS* as ending the debate about Edward II’s death – even though there was no material discussion of the matter beyond what Professor Phillips found convincing, puzzling or otherwise unlikely. This really was a case of ‘history at the whim of the historian’ as the postmodernists and literary theorists so often have complained – but with backup from other members of the profession. More recently books by Helen Castor and Richard Barber, aimed at more popular audiences, have simply ignored altogether the survival narrative. Their readers are left with the simple ‘dead in Berkeley’ narrative. Although Professor Phillips realised he was not in a position to revise the fate of Edward II in any way other than the conventional one, that has been taken as a green light by others less knowledgeable than him to ignore the matter altogether.

Fear of isolation, the desire to avoid controversy, blind faith, and the willingness to leave it to others to address the ‘issues’ I have raised are not the sole reasons to maintain the traditional narrative. Two more are illustrated by a passage in Professor Mark Ormrod’s *Edward III* (pp. 122-3):

These tantalising snippets have provoked much speculation in modern times about the plausibility of the escape story and raised the intriguing possibility that Edward of Caernarfon did indeed live on in obscure and romantic circumstances on the continent for some years after his supposed burial at Gloucester.

How did Edward III respond to such fantastical tales? If he suspected that there was any truth in them, then there is of course a major issue to confront as to whether Edward was an arch-hypocrite who preferred for reasons of self-preservation, to support the fiction of Edward II’s death at the hands of Mortimer’s toadies over the fact of the former king’s biding in wait for his return to the throne. We cannot expect to know Edward of Windsor’s innermost thoughts on the subject, and always need to keep open the possibility that he did at least momentarily experience the pangs of filial disloyalty and the panic of political threat.

Certainly the king's actions around the time of these stories might suggest the need to preempt the admission of dangerous rumours into the realm...

All that said, we also need to emphasise just how tenuous is the evidence after 1330 for the survival of Edward II. There is nothing to prove that Manuel Fieschi's ever actually reached its intended recipient, for the only copy of the letter that exists today is in Montpelier...

The first reason why this passage is so helpful in understanding why academics have not accepted my work is Professor Ormrod's refusal to accept that Edward III was an 'arch-hypocrite'. This is, of course, an assumption: far from being an 'arch-hypocrite' I would say Edward's denial of his father's survival marks him out as a most pragmatic king. Why should he have renounced the throne in October 1330 in favour of a father who had openly threatened him, who had been a failure as a king, who would probably have threatened his mother if he was restored as her husband, and whose whereabouts were then unknown? However, that is another matter. If one looks beyond the loaded language (e.g. 'fantastical tales', 'romantic circumstances'), one can see that a fundamental reason why Ormrod will not accept that Edward II did not die in Berkeley Castle is that it would have an impact on his reading of Edward III's character. His argument is that he does not believe Edward III was an 'arch-hypocrite' and, because participation in covering up his father's survival would highlight this facet of his character, it could not be true. It is without doubt an exceptionally dangerous way of arguing. It is like the argument that allowed Jimmy Savile and a large number of priests over the years to abuse children – they were not *like* that, therefore they were innocent. Also, I wonder if Professor Ormrod has really thought his argument through, because it implies that, if he is wrong in this matter, his wider understanding of Edward III's character is flawed. However, to draw back a little from this particular interpretation, one can see that there is a good argument for an academic to set aside my research because it does not fit the over-arching framework that he wishes to apply to the whole period. As with Professor Phillips, Professor Ormrod is careful not to say that I am wrong but again, like Professor Phillips, he is happy to leave addressing the 'issues' I have raised to others and to proceed with an interpretation based on his decades of experience, most of which was published before I was on the scene.

There is a second angle to this, and it is best seen through a wider reading of Mark Ormrod's work. Along with Paul Strohm, he stands out as one of the most sophisticated readers of fourteenth-century literature. He considers the context in which things are said; he understands the possibilities of expression that are raised by modern social theorists. And while not being led by modern theory, he does employ it to show why things may not mean what we instinctively think they mean. Given a fourteenth century fact, Professor Ormrod will discuss the various descriptions of the fact and their inconsistencies, including what the words meant at the time within the range of conceptual understandings then in place. If the event has religious overtones, these will be drawn out and explored in relation to their secular meanings. He is enormously thorough in investigating the cultural context of texts. Ultimately his goal is to discover what the writer of the text intended by a certain phrase, and thus what that man understood. Ormrod's history is thus a string of cultural discourses which do not lend themselves to a positivist statement as to what happened in a particular instance. This is the opposite of my approach. Probably because of my archival background, my instinct is to trace the links between the text

and the event that it describes, reconstructing the information trail. I will ask how the scribe got hold of his information. In most respects Ormrod's approach and mine are complementary. A good example of the two approaches next to each other is our respective articles about Edward II's sexuality in Gwilym Dodd and Anthony Musson (eds) *The Reign of Edward II: New Perspectives* (Boydell, 2006). Therein Ormrod discusses the cultural context of the evidence that states Edward II was a sodomite – what did people mean by this? – while I asked the simple question: where did this story come from? When it comes to the supposed death of Edward II, however, the two systems clash. The wider, cultural description does not matter if one can show the essence of the news was based on a falsehood. And when a fact can be defined absolutely, as in life and death, positivism is the most powerful philosophical tool available to us. Whatever Ormrod's reading of Edward III's character – and I bow to his far greater knowledge of the primary and secondary source material of the reign generally – it is still ultimately a modern historian's judgement and not rooted in the past. No appreciation of cultural nuance and no amount of reading into the character of Edward III can get past the plain fact that the source of the news of Edward II's death should not just be treated with great caution by academics but with scepticism.

The second significant point in Ormrod's passage quoted above is that the evidence for the survival of Edward II after 1330 is 'tenuous'. While the Fieschi letter itself is nowhere near as 'tenuous' as he suggests, there being further material on the custody of Edward II which was unknown to Ormrod (see the relevant essay in *Medieval Intrigue*), he is quite right in saying that there isn't a great deal of it. He is correct that the only copy of Manuel Fieschi's letter is in Montpellier. Whether it only exists in this copy is neither here nor there; as Professor Ormrod knows, most records of secret business were routinely destroyed. Only in the last twenty years have we learned from a chance finding that Edward III entailed the throne on his male descendants: all original copies of that document were destroyed. The same fate befell Edward I's entailment of the throne (only known from an oath to uphold it) and Richard II's entail (the existence of which can only be inferred from the wording of his will). Important documents that compromised the power of a king were normally destroyed. On top of this, we have a lot of evidence for the king's 'secret business', including indirect payments for his secret business (such as Edward III's payments to the Bardi to pay the Fieschi). But normally we don't know what that 'secret business' was. This is another key reason why an academic – by which I mean specifically a university lecturer – would be cautious of following my line of research. An academic is principally a teacher, albeit in higher education, and such teachers need to use evidence, not doubt. They need to be seen to take a body of evidence and analyse it and present a coherent argument based on the results. How can scholars do this for Edward II if there is so little evidence? What are they to make of a vast body of data that simply says 'Edward III's secret business' and offers no clue as to the nature of that secret business? The implications of my work on Edward II for Edward III studies, in which Edward may have been blackmailed by the pope over Edward II's survival, and certainly was compromised by those who knew what had happened in Berkeley Castle – or, rather, what had *not* happened – are of such a nature as to make normal scholarly progress very difficult, if not impossible. Scholars such as Mark Ormrod are not unaware of the dangers of revising a historical theme to the point that the 'real' story cannot be studied or taught within the normal parameters of higher education. From a purely academic point of view, it would be counterproductive.

To sum up, there are many reasons why academics have chosen not to agree with me. I am sure that I have not covered them all. Those to which I have drawn attention include the preservation of their own careers and reputations; the bias that academics extend against non-academic historians; the refusal to acknowledge the strength of the 2005 argument over the 2003 one; the desire to avoid the predictable prejudices which I had suffered and which would be in all probability thrown against any academic who agreed with me; the failure of scholarly leaders to deal with problems that clearly fell within their remit; the desire of established academics to continue to interpret Edward III's reign as if it was untainted by the complicating factor of his father's survival; the shortage of evidence as to what really happened to Edward II after 1330; and cultural historians' refusal to give weight to a positivist interpretation on principle. One can add the general prejudice against revisionism, which I anticipated in the pages of *The Greatest Traitor* and have regularly highlighted since. Overall they boil down to this fact: it is even harder for a historian to make a U-turn than for a politician. A politician can at least say that circumstances have changed; a historian has to admit he was previously wrong. Treating the evidence for the death with healthy scepticism would force historians to explain what *did* happen to him, and that entails telling the story in the Fieschi letter, which is just too 'unbelievable' for people who believe in his death (entailing another U-turn). Finally, there is the fundamental implication for the whole of society. As my wife, Sophie, put it to me: 'if we can doubt the death of a king, what is there left that is truly certain?' That sums it up. We want certain knowledge about the past, especially our famous kings and queens. My work threatens that certainty. Sorry, but that's the way it is.

With all these factors at work, it is not surprising that my work has not found widespread acceptance within academic circles. Members of the public can follow the logic but established academics will not. Interestingly, a lecturer at the University of Kent at Canterbury said to me earlier this year, 'I use your *EHR* article as a training device for my undergraduate students; and they all agree with you. I have to play Devil's advocate.' That gives me hope – that in due course a fresh generation of scholars will look again at what I actually wrote on the subject. But I am not going to hold my breath in the hope that in ten years my *EHR* article becomes the new orthodoxy. Think about it. If an academic were to propose rethinking the last days of Edward II in line with my work in ten years' time, would he or she get the credit? No, I would. My name is firmly associated with this revisionism and all the problems and fights to which it has given rise. Any new scholar entering the fray would have precious little personally to gain by adopting my line of argument. What's in it for that scholar? Unless he or she finds some new information, the likelihood is that he or she will be accused of going against academic consensus, and isolated, for no good reason. I predict that there will be no substantial academic support for my idea until someone edits a new piece of evidence, or a known but misunderstood piece of evidence, within the framework of the survival narrative. What is more, there will be no research funding made available for such a task, nor any departmental support. Isn't that interesting, for what it implies about modern scholarship – that it depends more on relationships between modern people, and how conventional they are, than what actually happened in the distant past? I have to tell you, there is nothing like pioneering a revisionist narrative to understand how much history depends on authority in the present day – much more than analysis of documentary evidence. George Orwell was absolutely right: whoever controls the present controls the past.

Does it matter? I suspect everyone – for various reasons and in varying degrees – will answer ‘yes’ to that question. For me there are three key reasons why it is important. It matters hugely how arguments (historical and otherwise) are put together. Do you want a story of the past that is based on a careful analysis of the information implicit in a piece of evidence? Or would you prefer an overview of what an expert finds ‘convincing’, ‘believable’, ‘puzzling’ and ‘plausible’? Of course, there will always be the impatient contingent who just want a simple answer, ‘alive or dead?’ without further explanation; but why should we allow that lazy approach to condition our responses as historians? This brings us very close to the question at the heart of another essay I have recently written, entitled ‘The Shakespeare Authorship Debate and Historical Responsibility’. The fact that people like to criticise great men should not lead us into giving prejudiced and ill-founded arguments column inches when they contradict the information within the evidence and mislead the public. What is more, to maintain the old line ‘I am an expert in this field and it is implausible/puzzling/unbelievable that...’ is simply not good enough in the modern age. Postmodernist critics attacked such approaches with great success, weakening the discipline. Historians need to sharpen their acts up and root their stories in the reality of the past if they hope to write anything that will have widespread and *lasting* public meaning. Otherwise it’s all just so much academic opinion – and nothing goes out of date faster than an opinion.

The fear factor alarms me too, and that is another reason to be concerned. My work has caused the current crop of academics to adopt a more blinkered approach than ever before. An article on the subject of Edward II’s death by G.P. Cuttino and T. W. Lyman appeared in the scholarly journal *Speculum* in 1978: this concluded that Edward II might not have died and might not even be buried in Gloucester. In 1979 Natalie Fryde obliquely suggested in her book *The Tyranny and Fall of Edward II* that the Fieschi letter allows us to understand why Thomas Berkeley declared in parliament in 1330 that he had not heard about the ex-king’s death, three years after it supposedly happened. She did not follow up this suggestion but both pieces show that, before 2003, discussion of Edward II’s survival was not off-limits. Today, no academic can touch the subject of Edward II’s death without realising that it has political overtones – including the fragility of the profession’s methods. To discuss the matter is to admit that I might be right, and to admit *that* is to criticise academia by implication. There are, I am sure, some who think that to agree with me is anti-academic, even though what I have actually done is only to apply the standards of academia more rigorously to this question than anyone else.

The third reason why it matters is that the prejudice against my work has now got out of hand and is twisting the interpretation of new material. A book on Edward II published in 2005 had an introduction in which the editors expressed the hope that there would be no more attempts to investigate Edward II’s survival. Why? What gives publicly funded academics the right to hope that research into well-evidenced points of view with which they do not agree should be stopped? I hope the three professors who put their names to that introduction one day reflect on the shame such a view brings upon our profession. But the problem goes beyond such a general expression of prejudice; it affects its detailed application too. In 2009 an original 1330 letter from Archbishop William Melton, Edward III’s treasurer, in which he declared to his London agent, Simon de Swanland, that he had received ‘certain news’ that Edward II was still alive, was edited by Roy Martin Haines. Haines did not seriously consider the possibility that this letter might

mean what it said. He only sought to answer the question how could Melton have been so deceived? I suspect that his whole purpose in editing the document was to present it in this slanted way. Either way, the blindingly obvious point eluded him: if the treasurer of England and a man trusted by both Edward II and Edward III could believe that Edward II was still alive in 1330, then who was he, a modern historian, to dismiss such a narrative?

The person who raised this question, @Plantegematt, also asked ‘Where else can I look?’ Traditionalists have published little in-depth debate on the matter despite the passage of ten years (seven and a half since my *EHR* article). There is only Hamilton’s substandard contribution in *History Compass*; David Carpenter’s similar refutation in *The London Review of Books* and the detailed comments in J. R. S. Phillips’s *Edward II*. The issues I raised that ‘need to be addressed’, according to Phillips in 2010, still have not been addressed. Therefore I would suggest anyone interested in this subject looks at my in-depth book of essays, *Medieval Intrigue*, half of which is concerned with Edward II’s fate and its consequences. I recommend also Kathryn Warner’s article in *EHR* on the earl of Kent’s plot (which goes well with my essay on the same subject in *Medieval Intrigue*). I also suggest readers look at her blog (<http://edwardthesecond.blogspot.co.uk/>). She is a shrewd and very well-informed commentator, is not compromised by the need for academic funding or by a long track record in emphasising the traditional narrative, and is not afraid to criticise academics when necessary. Finally, I would recommend reading two writers mentioned above who do not agree with me. Although both J. R. S. Phillips and Mark Ormrod follow the traditional line on the death of Edward II, and therefore have compiled narratives that conflict with my own and do not do justice to the fake death or its consequences, they are both scholars who have written otherwise excellent books on Edward II and Edward III respectively. Not every history book has to be correct in every respect to be worth reading or recommending. Indeed, with regard to history books, perfection and completeness are to be desired, not required. If the latter, we would never read anything.

Lastly, a personal note. When I originally put forward the idea for *The Greatest Traitor* I told my publisher it was the story of ‘the only man in British history to kill the king and sleep with the queen – a sort of Freudian double’. I had to do a U-turn on that when I realised the death narrative simply cannot be supported. It was easy for me to do so as I had at that point published nothing on the subject. I knew what I had chosen to write was controversial but I had to go with what the documents implied. I don’t regret what I wrote in 2003 in the slightest; it taught me a lot. Revisiting the subject two years later only proved that my first conclusion was right: everyone should doubt the traditional narrative. How do I feel now that academics have refused to accept this view? Ambivalent. Yes, I do find it annoying when an individual patronises me, as if I should think following the consensus better than following my conscience. And it annoys me when all my work is set aside by someone as ‘implausible’, ‘unconvincing’ or ‘unlikely’ (whether he is an academic or not). But then I think of Galileo in 1616, when he was informed that Copernicus’s theory that the Earth revolved around the Sun was contrary to scripture, heretical, and could not be defended. What was he supposed to do with his proof of that theory? Later he was accused of heresy, threatened with torture, imprisoned, and his works on the subject banned. If it could happen to a great man like Galileo over such an important matter, why should I be surprised it happens to me over such a little one? Moreover, if the ecclesiastical

authorities will maintain that a scientific argument cannot be defended, why should anyone be surprised that the historical authorities will maintain that an information-based argument likewise cannot be defended? Whether people are 'convinced' or not is ultimately neither here nor there – just as it made no difference to the orbit of the Earth that the Catholic Church did not agree with Galileo. What I have published will stay published. I am just grateful that the academics who disagree with me cannot condemn me for heresy.

Ian Mortimer, 19-24 August 2013