

EDWARD THE FIRST

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649569083

Edward the First by T. F. Tout

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T. F. TOUT

**EDWARD
THE FIRST**

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New edition
PROFESSOR T. F. TOUT

London
MACMILLAN AND CO., LTD.
NEW YORK: MACMILLAN & CO.
1896

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CHAPTER I

EARLY YEARS

1239-1258

EDWARD I. was born at Westminster on 17th June 1239. He was the first offspring of the marriage of Henry III. with Eleanor of Provence. Henry had long held in special reverence King Edward the Confessor, whose pious, weak, but amiable character in some ways is suggestive of his own. He therefore at once bade the child be called Edward, in memory of the holy king whose ashes reposed in the neighbouring abbey of St. Peter's. A papal legate performed the baptismal ceremony, and among the sponsors was the great Simon of Montfort, Earl of Leicester, newly reconciled to his royal brother-in-law after his audacious marriage with the widowed Countess Eleanor of Pembroke, King Henry's sister. Exceptional rejoicings attended the birth of the heir to the crown, for many feared that the young Queen was barren, and all were glad that a man-child, born on English soil and bearing an English name, had come into the world to settle the question of the succession to the throne. Significantly passing over the long line of foreign rulers who had borne sway in England since the

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Norman Conquest, an English chronicler gleefully traced back young Edward's genealogy to Alfred, the greatest of the old English kings. The laws of the good King Edward, after whom the child had been named, had been the rallying cry of more than one generation of oppressed and down-trodden Englishmen. It was hoped that a new King Edward might renew the golden age of the holy Confessor. Groaning under weak and irresolute rule, wounded in all their dearest national aspirations, Englishmen looked forward from the dull present to the possibilities of a happier and brighter future. Nor were such hopes doomed to the disappointment which so commonly waits upon those who reckon upon the goodwill of princes. The son of the weak Henry and the greedy and unpopular Eleanor was destined to become the greatest of English monarchs.

Henry III. in many ways reminds us of Charles I. There is in both kings the same strict religious principle, the same high standard of private life, the same strong and pure domestic affections, the same intelligent, artistic temperament, the same graciousness, refinement, and love of culture. But a complete paralysis of will, an utter absence of straightforwardness, manliness, resolution, and clearness of vision, made Henry even more unfitted than Charles to act as ruler of England. Like Charles, Henry could never see that the times were changing. He held ideas of his own rights that the sons of the men who had wrested the Great Charter from King John could never allow to pass unquestioned. But it was not the policy so much as the want of policy of Henry that gave his subjects most offence. Thirteenth-century England had no

objection to a strong king, who, clearly grasping the identity of interest between himself and his people, strove with might and main to grapple with anarchy and lawlessness, and drive the people into the ways of sound rule and good order. Henry III. was too feeble, too frivolous, too idle, to be such a king. Moreover, he was jealous and suspicious of all able men. He was afraid to allow his ministers to exercise the powers that he was too weak to use himself. He strove to rule personally through clerks, dependents, and foreign favourites. The result was an almost complete collapse of all sound rule. While the material and spiritual activities of the nation were alike rapidly expanding, the strong centralised government which Henry II. had handed down to his sons was smitten with palsy. The begging friars were working out a great religious revival. The young enthusiasm of the Oxford masters had made England the home of an intellectual activity that could only be paralleled in the great University of Paris. Roger Bacon was preparing the way for English medicine and science. Vast and noble minsters in the new Pointed style were arising throughout the land, and proclaiming the culmination of mediæval art. The English tongue was again becoming a vehicle for original literature, while in the learned Latin and the noble French a vigorous and abundant crop of great works were written by Englishmen. Englishmen were again conscious of national life and national unity. But with the weak Henry on the throne political progress that should match the rapid movement of the greatest and most constructive period of the Middle Ages could only be obtained through revolution.

Henry III. was himself in full sympathy with at least the religious and artistic movements of his time. His love of English saints, his anxiety to uphold English power abroad, shows that he was no mere foreigner, as has so often been said. But his wife and his mother, a Provençal and a Poitevin, exercised an unhappy influence upon him. The Provençal and Savoyard uncles of his wife, his Poitevin half-brothers by his mother's second marriage, claimed the chief places in his court and councils, and aspired to the greatest offices, estates, and dignities in the land. Henry's superstitious fear of papal authority, combined with a shrewd sense of the temporal benefits to be got from close friendship with the spiritual head of the Church, exposed England to the invasion of a swarm of greedy foreign ecclesiastics. The very good points of Henry told against his popularity as a king. His appreciation of the great position of the Roman Church, his sympathy for the great wave of religion and culture which radiated from the France of St. Louis, and exercised an influence over western Europe only second to that exercised by the France of Rousseau and Voltaire, led Henry to a love of foreign manners and methods that became increasingly repugnant to his nobles. The barons of England might talk French at home, and vie with Henry in their love of French ways, but French-speaking Englishmen of the thirteenth century were no more good Frenchmen in the political sense than the French-speaking Vaudois or Genevese of to-day. Since the loss of Normandy under John, most of the English barons had become sound English patriots and enemies of French political influence, however fully they shared in