



DWARD
II *THE UNCONVENTIONAL KING*



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KATHRYN WARNER

AMBERLEY



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To my parents, Phil and Elaine

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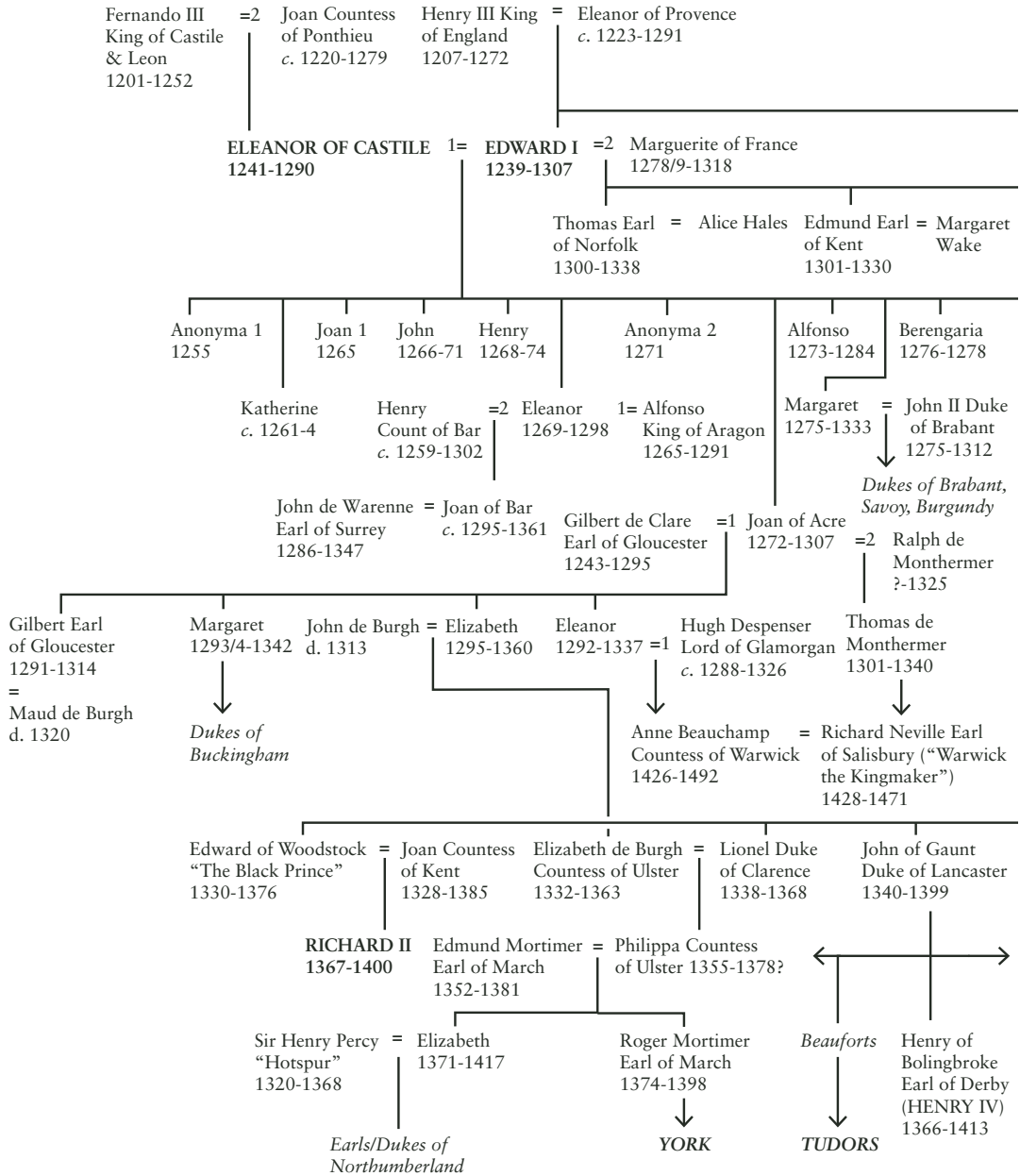
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Foreword by Ian Mortimer

Primogeniture was a cruel method of selecting a king. The very idea that a man should be given absolute power simply on account of his paternity – with no reference to his father’s or mother’s qualities, or even his own ability – seems a recipe for disaster. The added notion that his selection was a divine appointment made it impossible for him to refuse, even if he was exceedingly unsuited for political responsibility. At the same time, the dire penalties for failure meant that the throne cast a dark shadow across the consciences of its occupants. Even the most successful English kings had their daunting moments – one thinks of Henry II’s war with his sons, the rebellions against Edward I in the 1290s, the parliamentary challenges to Edward III in 1341 and 1376, the attempts on Henry IV’s life, and Edward IV’s period of exile in the middle of his reign. All in all, it is surprising that so many English princes rose to the challenge of positive kingship: of the nineteen monarchs crowned between the Conquest and the Reformation, perhaps ten emerge with a reputation for successful leadership. As is well known, Edward II was not one of them.

Edward is rather a member of a more select group: a king whose failings were more important than his successes in the history of the realm. This does not make his reign any less significant than those of his predecessors; indeed, England’s great traditions of legal freedom and parliamentary representation owe far more to disastrous reigns than magnificent ones. We may look to William II, whose tyranny and ‘accidental’ assassination paved the way for Henry I’s charter of liberties – the first time a king of England was formally bound to the law. There is the even more notable example of King John, without whose ineptitude there would have been no Magna Carta. The divisive rule of his son, Henry III, led to the establishment of the English parliament. And it was the reign of Edward II that brought to the fore the radical notion that Englishmen owed their loyalty to the Crown itself, not its wearer. Even more importantly, Edward II’s enforced abdication demonstrated that there were limits to

the inviolable status of an anointed, hereditary monarch. From 1327, if a king of England broke his coronation oaths, he could be dethroned by his subjects acting in parliament.

There can be no doubt therefore that Edward II occupies a seminal place in the history of England and, indeed, of the whole of Europe. Moreover, it was not just his reign or a particular series of bad decisions that were important; it was his very personality that was the critical factor. When government was vested in a single individual, its failings were almost entirely personal. As Kathryn Warner makes clear in this book, Edward II's short temper, his overbearing pride, and his refusal to compromise or make allowance for similarly brittle qualities in others, led to a violent clash with his most powerful cousin, Thomas of Lancaster, resulting in the latter's downfall – one of Edward's few triumphs. His personal vindictiveness towards Lancaster and his adherents led to many executions and accusations of tyranny, which ultimately led to Edward's own downfall. Trust Edward to snatch an utter calamity from the jaws of success! Overall, his internal battle to understand his own complex nature meant that he was always trying to have things both ways: to have the dignity and power of a king and yet at the same time the freedom of the common man – to dig ditches, go swimming and give lavish gifts to his friends, if he felt like doing so. The result was the almost inevitable alienation of the nobility, who expected a man to be one thing or the other: either a properly regal king or a plain commoner. And Edward himself could not come to terms with their requirement for him to be both something he was and something he was not. Despite his piety, he was never truly able to resolve the great accident of his own birth – that he, with all his faults and doubts in himself, had been chosen by God to be king.

A new biography of Edward II is thus an important publication. This is all the more the case as Edward II studies in the past have in many respects been lacking. Even at the sharper end of the historiography, academics adopted a sort of 'Edward II routine' in which certain difficult questions were not asked, let alone answered in full. Nowhere is this more in evidence than with regard to his death – the information underpinning which has been shown to be a deliberate lie, carefully designed to conceal the location of his new prison in late 1327. But it also applies to Edward as a man and thus to the entire understanding of precisely why his reign foundered. Scholarly medievalists who, in the twentieth century, favoured objectivity over a sympathetic portrait of the man, simply sat in judgement on him and did not seek to understand why he acted as he did. Thus they missed much of the man's character and failed to understand the reasons for his nobles' actions. Only relatively recently with the publication of Seymour Phillips's *Edward II* has this generally parlous state of affairs been remedied – but even that book demonstrates its author's inability

completely to break away from the 'Edward II routine' in respect of the man's death and possible later life.

Kathryn Warner brings fresh air to the study of this reign. For her no aspect of the 'Edward II routine' can be taken at face value. She re-examines the issues, and criticises and corrects the rest of us fearlessly and tactfully. She understands the limits of historical evidence but she also knows its power, and she revises many distortions that have crept into the traditionally accepted version of events, especially where they are not supported by contemporary sources. But most importantly of all, she understands the importance of the human subject beyond the evidence. After all, the evidence in itself is a matter for antiquaries; the historian has to reach for the vitality that is only touched upon here and there by the documents. In this case the essential things to grasp are the man's personality and his contemporary reputation: what motivated him, what frightened him, and what he perceived to be his worth to others. I was once criticised by an eminent scholar for devoting more pages in a biography to the matter of whether Edward III raped the countess of Salisbury than the parliamentary crisis of 1341. But I still maintain that in a true biography – as opposed to a history book about a reign – it is important to present not only what a man thought of himself but his awareness of what others thought of him. In this context I very much admire Kathryn's concentration on Gaveston at the outset of Edward's reign: some historians would regard the Gaveston episode as a mere distraction, and less important than Edward's governmental crises. However, putting that relationship centre-stage reflects Edward's own priorities. It demonstrates how his whole approach to kingship was secondary to the companionship of his adopted brother. Edward II's personal relationships, and his lack of awareness of how they were seen, lies right at the very heart of his story, along with the contradictions in his nature mentioned above. The more objectively and judgements you view the man, and ignore the huge distortions of his personal life, which ultimately were his undoing, the further you drift from the truth.

It goes without saying that deliberate attempts to understand a medieval character, and to present his concerns and priorities in proportion, are fraught with difficulty. Too often attempts to write a sympathetic study end in a whitewash. Worse, there is a danger that an emotional credulity may seep into the narrative, and obscure the contradictions of the character. Such romanticism does not affect Kathryn's work. When she says the king 'swooned' at the start of the book it is because she has an early-fourteenth-century source that says Edward 'swooned'. What emerges from her work is an integrity which is both reassuring and refreshing. You know you can trust her because she passionately wants to understand the reality of the man's life.

Edward II's reign will always be regarded as a failure but as a result



of studies like this, there is a hope that the man who was the centre of events will emerge in all his complexity, not simply as a weak king. He had his virtues – among them his piety, his loyalty to his friends and his generosity. As Kathryn observes, he was not devoid of strategic ability – I smiled when I read her line that the astuteness he showed when defending his favourites was ‘to the intense frustration of his contemporaries’. Reading this book I found myself asking the question, was there ever a ruler of England whose perception of his own virtues differed so much from those of his contemporaries? Where he saw virtue, they saw betrayal. Given that state of affairs, what could he possibly have done to make a success of his reign? He was, it seems, doomed by his inheritance.

Ian Mortimer



A Note on Wages and Prices

Rather than giving modern equivalents of incomes and prices in the early fourteenth century, which are almost impossible to calculate accurately and which, with inflation, date quickly, this page is intended to give an idea of the value of money in Edward II's reign.

The only coin in general circulation in England was the silver penny, which could be broken in two to make a half-penny, or into four to make a farthing. The main unit of currency was the pound, consisting of 240 pence or twenty shillings, though it remained a purely theoretical notion for most people. Large sums of money could only be transported in barrels containing thousands of pennies. The mark was another unit of currency often used in accounting: it equalled two-thirds of a pound, or thirteen shillings and four pence, or 160 pence.

The average daily wage of an unskilled labourer was one or one and a half pence.

Skilled craftsmen of course earned more: Edward II's carpenters were paid three pence a day, and his master carpenters six pence.

In Edward's household, pages earned two pence per day, grooms and archers three pence, squires seven and a half pence, and sergeants-at-arms twelve pence (one shilling). His steward earned 200 marks per year, or £133, six shillings and eight pence.

The minimum annual income to qualify for knighthood was £40.

The annual gross income of the earl of Lancaster, the richest man in England, was £11,000.

A loaf of the cheapest bread cost a farthing (quarter of a penny). A chicken, two dozen eggs and a gallon of ale each cost a penny.

The cost of a trained warhorse was £50 to £80, a cow cost ten or twelve shillings, and a sheep cost twenty pence or less.

Introduction

Kenilworth Castle, Warwickshire, Tuesday 20 January 1327

Edward II wore black and swooned. Pale-faced and surrounded by his enemies, had you not known he was the king you would never have guessed it from his demeanour or that of the bishops, barons, knights, abbots and others who had come to Kenilworth from parliament in London to do what had never been done in England before. Hostile, angry, uneasy, they demanded that the king abdicate his throne to his fourteen-year-old son.

They hurled accusations at Edward. He was incompetent to govern and allowed evil counsellors to rule for him, he had lost Scotland and lands in France and Ireland, he had imprisoned, exiled, killed and disinherited many noblemen and churchmen, he neglected the business of his kingdom and pursued worthless hobbies fit only for peasants. Powerless, in captivity and with his closest friends dead, there was little Edward could do but consent to their demand, and so for the first time in English history, a son succeeded to the throne while his father still lived. In tears, Edward knelt and begged his subjects' pardon for his trespasses.¹ Aghast at what had become of him and his reign, he declared passionately, 'I greatly lament that I have so utterly failed my people, but I could not be other than I am.'²

I could not be other than I am. Edward II's entire life was a battle against what was expected of him. Entirely unconventional by the standards of his time, even eccentric, he had neither the temperament nor the ability to fill the position he had been born into, to the great unhappiness of himself and his subjects. His reign of nineteen and a half years, July 1307 to January 1327, was a turbulent history of constant threats of civil war, endless conflicts and quarrels with his barons, failed military campaigns and dependence on male favourites. Before his accession, no English earl had been executed since Waltheof in 1076. During Edward's reign

and its immediate aftermath, the regime of his queen and her own male favourite, an earl counted himself lucky to die in his bed. No fewer than six were executed between 1312 and 1330, and two died in battle.

Edward's reign ended in his own wife rebelling and launching an invasion of his country, his forced abdication in favour of his son and, according to traditional accounts, in his atrocious murder. Subject to scathing criticism in his own lifetime, Edward has fared even worse since. 'A more complete ninny than Edward II has seldom occupied a throne'; 'Brutal and brainless ... incompetent, idle, frivolous and incurious'; 'A scatter-brained wastrel'; 'A weakling and a fool'; 'Weak-willed and frivolous'; 'A coward and a trifler'; 'Worthy never to have been born' are just some of the harsh judgements passed on this most maligned of monarchs.³ That Edward II was an utter failure as a ruler and war leader is very hard to deny. After all, no king ends his reign wandering around Wales with a mere handful of followers, pursued by an army, without making a long series of truly horrible mistakes. However, Edward had the misfortune to be born in the wrong era. Many of the character traits and behaviour that made him such a disastrous king, and were incomprehensible and even shocking to his contemporaries, would be judged differently today. In many ways, Edward was ahead of his time. He was openly a lover of men, he enjoyed the company of his lowborn subjects and their activities such as thatching roofs and shoeing horses, he bought his own fish and bread, he spent much time near the end of his reign living in a cottage rather than in one of his luxurious palaces, he once had to pay compensation to his jester for accidentally injuring him while swimming in the Thames in winter, he went on a swimming and rowing holiday with a large crowd of 'common people', he watched fishermen fishing and ditchers digging and sometimes joined in, he loved the outdoors and physical exercise, he is one of only two people in history to found colleges at both Oxford and Cambridge.⁴

Edward inspired polarised opinions in his own lifetime and afterwards. Many people despised him. A few adored and were passionately devoted to him. Edward was a complex and difficult man, and a bundle of contradictions. Fiercely emotional, he loved and hated to extremes, could nurse a grudge for many years and never forgave a betrayal, though on the other hand he was remarkably generous and kind to people he loved and those who pleased him. Although often amiable and good-natured, with a highly developed sense of humour, he had a vile temper and could be unpleasant and spiteful. He reacted, and frequently overreacted, emotionally rather than with his intellect, and his personal likes and dislikes entirely dominated his policy throughout his reign. He showed little in the way of determination or ambition, except when his male favourites were threatened. Then, he acted with great energy and astuteness, to the intense frustration of his contemporaries; he had plenty

of ability when he chose to use it, but directed it to the wrong ends. His indecisiveness was also infuriating, and he had a tendency to believe and act on whatever the last person had said to him. His great-grandson Richard II made unsuccessful attempts to have him canonised as a saint, and the fourteenth-century chronicler Geoffrey le Baker depicted him as a Christlike figure nobly suffering the torments of lesser people. On the other hand, the Westminster chronicler spoke at length of his 'insane stupidity' and his 'wicked fury', and other contemporaries despaired of him and his inability or unwillingness to be what his subjects wanted and needed him to be.

This biography is not intended to whitewash a deeply flawed man or skate over his numerous errors and failings and the miseries heaped on his subjects during his reign, but it is intended to provide a more vivid and personal portrait of Edward than has been seen before, and to demolish some of the myths invented about him which have come to be widely and wrongly seen as historical fact. Edward II was far more than the disastrous king who came between two great ones, his father Edward I and son Edward III, even if many people are only aware of him as the gay foppish prince who was cuckolded by William Wallace in the Hollywood film *Braveheart* and who had a lover named Piers Gaveston, who may or may not have been thrown out of a window by Edward's father. The one thing that almost everyone is sure they know about Edward II is that he died at Berkeley Castle with a red-hot poker thrust inside his anus. It is beyond all reasonable doubt, however, that this story is a myth, and the tale that Wallace slept with Edward's wife and was the real father of his son Edward III is sheer modern invention.

He was passionate, brutal, kind, generous, capricious, indolent, spiteful, obsessive, good-humoured, affable, foolish, erratic, gracious, shy, charming and vengeful. He was Edward II, and this is his life and death.

1

Heir to the Throne and Accession

On Friday 7 July 1307, sixty-eight-year-old King Edward I of England, ‘fearless and warlike, in all things strenuous and illustrious’, came to the end of his long and eventful life in a remote corner of his kingdom, at Burgh-by-Sands near Carlisle.¹ Appropriately enough for a man known as the Hammer of the Scots, he died with Scotland in sight across the Solway Firth, on his way to yet another military campaign there. Around three in the afternoon, the harsh and terrifying king, survivor of an assassination attempt in the Holy Land, conqueror of North Wales, and father of at least seventeen children, raised himself from his bed to take some food, and fell back dead in his attendants’ arms.² Messengers set out immediately to inform his successor, and galloped the 315 miles to London in a mere four days.

Lord Edward of Caernarfon, prince of Wales, duke of Aquitaine, earl of Chester and count of Ponthieu, was staying at the palace of Lambeth. Edward had set out in mid-June to join his father in the north, but on reaching Northampton changed his mind and returned to London, apparently in no great rush to help chase Robert Bruce and his adherents around the south-west of Scotland. Before returning to the safety of the capital, he sent his father two barrels of expensive sturgeon, a thoughtful if not terribly useful gift for a man heading into a war zone.³ On 11 July 1307, Edward heard himself addressed as ‘my lord king’ for the first time, and although no chronicle or letter records his reaction, we may assume that he was pleased to succeed to the throne for one reason, at least. Ten weeks earlier, his father had sent his beloved friend, the Gascon knight Piers Gaveston, into exile on the Continent. Now free to do whatever he wanted, Edward recalled Gaveston, most probably the very first act he took as king.⁴ He thus immediately set out his main priority for the next couple of decades: dedication to his male favourites. Probably the royal messengers told Edward that his father, on his deathbed, had ordered him not to recall Gaveston to England.⁵ Edward, missing his friend terribly, took not the slightest notice.

The kingdom rejoiced at the news of Edward II's accession, at least for a while; the new king was young, regal in appearance, a breath of fresh air after the thirty-five-year reign of his father, and 'equal to or indeed more excellent than other kings'.⁶ His subjects were to become considerably less enthusiastic when they discovered what he was really like: a man with little desire to rule, finding the grind of government considerably less to his liking than gambling, thatching roofs and swimming, with little aptitude for warfare, and deeply in love with another man and determined to treat him as an equal. In July 1307, Edward II was twenty-three years old, at least the fourteenth and perhaps fifteenth or sixteenth child of Edward I, the fourth but eldest surviving of his six sons. He had been born in Caernarfon, North Wales, on the feast day of St Mark the Evangelist in the twelfth year of his father's reign, 25 April 1284, and was baptised there on 1 May, with nineteen pounds paid out in alms to celebrate his birth and baptism.⁷ Edward is one of three kings of England born in Wales, the others being Henry V in 1386 and Henry VII in 1457, and he was the only one close to the throne at the time of his birth.

Edward I was almost forty-five in April 1284, born on 17 June 1239, and had been king of England since the death of his father Henry III in November 1272. Edward of Caernarfon's Spanish mother Queen Eleanor was forty-two at the time of her youngest child's birth; she was born in late 1241 as Doña Leonor de Castilla, twelfth of the fifteen children of the great warrior king Fernando III of Castile and Leon, later canonised as San Fernando.⁸ Born the son of a reigning king, grandson of two more kings, Edward of Caernarfon's ancestry was impeccably royal on both sides. His parents had been married for just under thirty years at the time of his birth: their wedding took place in Burgos, northern Spain, on 1 November 1254. Edward was named after his father, who himself was named in honour of his father King Henry's favourite saint, Edward the Confessor. Between 1066 when the Confessor died and Edward I's birth in 1239, the Anglo-Saxon name Edward had fallen out of use in England and by the middle of the thirteenth century probably sounded as old-fashioned as Leofwin, Ethelred and Wulfnoth, but the fact that all the kings of England between 1272 and 1377 bore the name ensured its popularity for evermore.

Edward of Caernarfon was not born as heir to his father's throne. That honour belonged to his ten-year-old brother Alfonso, born in Bayonne in south-west France in November 1273 and named after his uncle and godfather Alfonso X of Castile. Alfonso of Bayonne's sudden death on 19 August 1284, while Edward I was arranging a future marriage for him with Count Floris V of Holland's daughter Margaret, came as a shock to his grieving parents and to the people of England, who for a decade had grown accustomed to the idea that one day a King Alfonso would rule

over them. Two other sons of Edward I and Eleanor of Castile, John and Henry, had died in 1271 and 1274 at the ages of five and six respectively. At four months old, Edward of Caernarfon became his father's sole male heir and next in line to the throne, and having lost three boys in childhood, Edward I must have been desperately worried about his remaining son's welfare and the future of his dynasty. Luckily, Edward of Caernarfon was a sturdy, healthy child who is only known to have been ill once in childhood, when he came down with tertian fever shortly before he turned ten.⁹ As well as their four sons, Edward I and Queen Eleanor had at least ten daughters, five or more of whom – Katherine, Joan, Berengaria and others whose names are unknown – died in childhood. Five survived: Eleanor, born in 1269 and fifteen years Edward of Caernarfon's senior; Joan of Acre, born in the Holy Land in 1272; Margaret, born in 1275; Mary, born in 1279; and Elizabeth of Rhuddlan, born in August 1282 and only twenty months older than Edward.

Edward left Wales when he was a few months old and didn't return until just before his seventeenth birthday in April 1301. There is no truth to the often-repeated tale that his father tricked the people of North Wales by promising them a prince who spoke no English, then presenting them with his newborn son; this story was invented 300 years later.¹⁰ Edward of Caernarfon was not created prince of Wales (and earl of Chester) until 7 February 1301. He may have been conceived in Caernarfon as well as born there, as his father's itinerary demonstrates that he and the queen spent much of July and August 1283 in the town.¹¹ Edward's very existence was threatened eight months before his birth in late August 1283 when a fire broke out in his parents' bedchamber one night at Caergwrle Castle, and the royal couple barely escaped with their lives.¹² Even before he was created Prince of Wales and returned there, Edward of Caernarfon was remembered in the land of his birth: in 1290 when he was six, a man from Caernarfon brought him a gift of six herons, and in 1300 the constable of Conwy sent him a gift of two greyhounds.¹³ Many of Edward's letters for the years 1304/05, when he was at the beginning of his twenties, fortuitously survive, and a famous one to Philip IV of France's half-brother Louis of Evreux shows him poking gentle affectionate fun at Wales:

We send you a big trotting palfrey which can hardly carry its own weight, and some of our bandy-legged harriers from Wales, who can well catch a hare if they find it asleep, and some of our running dogs which go at a gentle pace – for well we know that you take delight in lazy dogs. And, dear cousin, if you want anything else from our land of Wales, we can send you plenty of wild lads, if you wish, who will well know how to teach breeding to the young heirs and heiresses of great lords.¹⁴

This letter has often been misunderstood in modern times, but clearly demonstrates Edward's sense of humour and ability to share a joke with a man he knew well; Evreux was his second cousin and frequent correspondent.

Edward was only two years old when in May 1286 his parents left England and sailed to the king's duchy of Aquitaine, in south-west France. They didn't return until late July 1289, and sixteen months later Queen Eleanor died, at Harby in Nottinghamshire on 28 November 1290, aged forty-nine.¹⁵ Her body was buried at Westminster Abbey and her viscera at Lincoln Cathedral, and her heart was given, with that of her son Alfonso, to the Dominican friars of London. Her grieving husband movingly referred to her in a letter as 'whom in life we dearly cherished, and whom in death we cannot cease to love', and remained a widower for nine years.¹⁶ In her memory, the king built the famous Eleanor Crosses at the dozen places where her funeral procession had rested on the way to Westminster, three of which still survive, and the queen's magnificent brass effigy can be seen to this day at Westminster Abbey. Only six of her fourteen or more children outlived her. Six-year-old Edward of Caernarfon inherited Eleanor's county of Ponthieu, which she had in turn inherited from her mother Joan, Queen of Castile, and became count of Ponthieu, his first title. Ponthieu was a small but strategically important county in northern France bordering Normandy, with its capital at Abbeville, in the modern department of Somme and region of Picardy.

Edward can barely have known his half-Spanish, half-French mother, and seven months after her death his paternal grandmother Eleanor of Provence, widow of Henry III and the only one of his grandparents still alive when Edward was born, also died. Eleanor of Provence was a devoted mother and grandmother who took an interest in Edward's welfare, once asking her son Edward I to allow the boy to remain in the south of England while the king travelled north, on the grounds that his health might be at risk in the bleaker northern climate and its 'bad air'.¹⁷ The lack of a maternal figure as he grew up may well have affected Edward emotionally, and in a 1305 letter to his much older kinswoman Agnes de Valence, he rather poignantly called her his 'good mother' and promised that he would do whatever he could for her, 'as a son who would gladly do and procure whatever could turn to your profit and honour'.¹⁸

Throughout Edward's childhood, his older sisters also left his company as they married, though he remained on close and affectionate terms with at least some of them into adulthood. Eleanor, although betrothed for many years to the Spanish king Alfonso III of Aragon, wed Henri III, count of Bar in eastern France, and had two children before her death in 1298. Joan of Acre was betrothed in childhood to Hartmann von Hapsburg, son of the German king Rudolf I, but he drowned in 1281 and

she married instead Gilbert ‘the Red’ de Clare, earl of Gloucester, with whom she had four children. She outraged her father in 1297 by secretly marrying a humble squire named Ralph Monthermer, while the king was negotiating for her to marry the count of Savoy, and had another four children with him. Margaret married John II, duke of Brabant in modern-day Belgium and the Netherlands, and had one child, Duke John III. Mary became a reluctant nun at Amesbury Priory in Wiltshire. Elizabeth married firstly John I, count of Holland, who died childless aged fifteen, and secondly Humphrey de Bohun, earl of Hereford, with whom she had ten children. Edward I married his second wife Marguerite of France, half-sister of Philip IV, in September 1299, when he was sixty and she twenty, and Edward of Caernarfon fifteen. Queen Marguerite was the mother of Edward’s half-siblings, Thomas of Brotherton, born in 1300 and sixteen years Edward’s junior, Edmund of Woodstock, born in 1301, and Eleanor, born in 1306 when their father Edward I was almost sixty-seven, who died when she was five.

Edward of Caernarfon himself was betrothed three times in childhood in furtherance of his father’s foreign policy. His first fiancée, when he was five, was his cousin Margaret the ‘Maid of Norway’, daughter of Erik II of Norway and granddaughter of Alexander III of Scotland. On the death of Alexander – Edward I’s brother-in-law – in March 1286, Margaret became queen of Scotland in her own right, but died in September 1290 at the age of only seven. It is fascinating to contemplate how different British history might be if Margaret had lived to adulthood and married Edward, and whether England and Scotland would have been united centuries earlier than really happened. Edward was next betrothed in 1291, when he was seven, to Blanche, another half-sister of Philip IV of France. Philip and Edward I went to war in 1294, and this engagement was broken off and Edward betrothed instead to Philippa, daughter of Edward I’s ally the count of Flanders. This in turn was ended in 1297 when Edward I and Philip IV made peace. Edward’s fourth betrothal in 1299 was the one which ultimately ended in marriage.

Edward lived at the centre of a large household of many dozens of people, as was appropriate for the heir to the throne. His tutor was Sir Guy Ferre and he may also have been taught by Dominican friars, and although we know little about his education, there is no reason to assume that it was lacking in any way or that Edward was ignorant and stupid.¹⁹ Although we have no direct evidence that Edward could write – the earliest extant example of a king of England’s handwriting is his son Edward III’s, from 1329 – we may assume that he could. His sisters Eleanor and Mary and his sister-in-law Margaret Wake were able to write, and it would be odd if the future king of England had less education than his sisters and especially if he had less than a woman from the baronial house of Wake.²⁰ The St Albans chronicler tells a story that in 1317 a woman on horseback



placed a letter in front of Edward, who began to read it out loud: proof that he could indeed read, as his powerful chamberlain and ‘favourite’ of the 1320s, Hugh Despenser, certainly could.²¹ Edward’s strong interest in the universities of Oxford and Cambridge is hardly the sign of an uneducated man unconcerned with learning, and he also supported the archbishop of Dublin in his creation of a university there, which was formally established in 1312.²² Edward’s native language was French, or rather the version of it used by the medieval English elite, now known as Anglo-Norman. He would have learnt Latin and presumably could also speak fluent English, though as with his ability to write, there is no direct evidence for this.

During his childhood Edward spent the winter at one place, often Langley near St Albans in Hertfordshire, and in spring and summer travelled around the south of England and the Midlands, rarely spending more than a night or two in each town. The size of the future king’s household and the amount of food and drink required for them could prove onerous to local inhabitants as he travelled around the country: in 1294, when Edward was ten and had spent a few weeks at Langley and St Albans, the Dunstable annalist complained, ‘Two hundred dishes a day were not sufficient for his kitchen. Whatever he spent on himself and his followers he took without paying for it.’²³ Even as a child Edward regularly entertained many magnates and prelates, who visited him with retinues of their own. His extant household accounts of 1292/93 show that, for example, Edward Balliol, son of the king of Scotland John Balliol, visited him on 17 May 1293; a week later, the bishop of Jebail in Syria dined with him; and Edward’s sister Mary the nun, his cousins Thomas and Henry of Lancaster (sons of Edward I’s brother Edmund) and his brother-in-law John of Brabant (who married Edward’s sister Margaret in 1290) arrived in June. The three boys stayed for a few days with large retinues who all had to be provided with food, drink, accommodation, and lodging and fodder for their horses, to the exasperation of Edward’s clerk, who recorded their presence daily as ‘they are staying’, ‘they are still here’ and ‘here they are still. And this day is burdensome.’²⁴ A few weeks later, the clerk recorded somewhat vaguely that nine-year-old Edward dined with ‘a monk and some other monks’.²⁵ As well as all the relatives, nobles and prelates who regularly visited Edward of Caernarfon, there were highborn children who lived in his household with him, at least for a while. In 1290 when he was six, he had the company of, among others, Maud Chaworth (born 1282), granddaughter of the earl of Warwick, who married Edward’s cousin Henry of Lancaster in or before 1297; Eleanor de Burgh, eldest daughter of the earl of Ulster; and Humphrey de Bohun, heir to the earldom of Hereford, who would marry Edward’s sister Elizabeth in 1302.²⁶ In the early 1300s, the earl of Gloucester’s nephew Gilbert de Clare, lord of Thomond in Ireland, and



Piers Gaveston from a noble family of Béarn were among the members of Edward's household, and according to the much later chronicler Jean Froissart, Edward's notorious favourite Hugh Despenser also lived in the future king's household as a boy or young man.

Edward of Caernarfon's childhood came to an end and his public life began in earnest in August 1297 at the age of thirteen, when his father departed from the kingdom with an army to campaign against the French and Philip IV in Flanders. Edward was left behind as nominal regent in the king's absence, not an easy position, given the many crises in England that year: defeat by William Wallace at Stirling Bridge and a mighty row between Edward I and the earls of Norfolk and Hereford, among much else.²⁷ On 7 February 1301, Edward was granted all the royal lands in Wales and the earldom of Chester, and from that point on, was always known as the prince of Wales. A few weeks later he finally revisited the land of his birth – though not, in fact, Caernarfon itself, where he never set foot again – when he travelled there to take the homage and fealty of his Welsh tenants.²⁸ More lands and titles came on 7 April 1306, when Edward I gave the duchy of Aquitaine to his eldest son.²⁹ Edward of Caernarfon was now prince of Wales, duke of Aquitaine, earl of Chester and count of Ponthieu, and at Pentecost, 22 May 1306, a month after his twenty-second birthday, he was knighted at Westminster with almost 300 other young men.³⁰

The appreciative chronicler Piers Langtoft described the mass knighting and the banquet afterwards as the most splendid sight seen in Britain since King Arthur was crowned at Caerleon.³¹ Edward of Caernarfon was knighted by his father in a private ceremony in the chapel of Westminster Palace, and the king then girded his son with the sword-belt, and Henry de Lacy, earl of Lincoln, and Edward's brother-in-law Humphrey de Bohun fastened on his spurs. Then, before the high altar in the abbey church itself, Edward knighted all the other young men, who were supposed to have spent the previous night awake and in prayerful contemplation, but instead filled the New Temple church with the noise of talking, shouting, laughing and trumpet calls. Among the men knighted in May 1306 were Piers Gaveston and Hugh Despenser, Edward's favourites; the earls of Surrey and Arundel; and Roger Mortimer, who twenty years later would bring down the king.³² To entertain the new knights at a lavish banquet in Westminster Hall afterwards, Edward I hired eighty minstrels, who included Pearl in the Eye, William Without Manners, Reginald the Liar, Edward of Caernarfon's trumpeters Januche and Gillot, his *crwth* (a Welsh stringed instrument) player Nagary and his harper Amekyn, the famous acrobat Matilda Makejoy, and others called Gaunsaille, Grendone, Fairfax, Mahu of the North and 'the minstrel with the bells'.³³ A list of silk items handed out at this time to some members of the royal family gives an idea of the colourful splendour of Edward's surroundings:

he received five pieces of yellow silk for lining a quilt, one piece of green for lining his cloak, five pieces of red to make a curtain for his bed and ten pieces of various colours to make two mattresses.³⁴

Little more than a year later, Edward I was dead. Soon after recalling Piers Gaveston on hearing the news of his father's death on 11 July 1307, Edward II set out from London, and reached Burgh-by-Sands in eight days. There, he viewed the embalmed body of his father, and supposedly wept for him.³⁵ At about the same time, a letter announcing Gaveston's return to England reached him.³⁶ This was breakneck speed considering that Edward's messenger had to cross the Channel and find Gaveston, busily covering himself with glory on the jousting fields of the Continent. No doubt he cut a fine figure with the outfits Edward had sent him, one of which was of green velvet decorated with pearls, gold and silver piping, and gold aiguillettes. He was certainly not short of money, as Edward had recently sent him the enormous sum of £260.³⁷

Edward's weeping is merely a conventional expression, and it may be that he did not grieve much for Edward I. In 1305, the two men quarrelled, and the king refused to allow his wayward son to enter his presence for much of that summer. Not long before his death, Edward I tore out handfuls of Edward's hair, called him an 'ill-born son of a whore', and perhaps even threw him to the ground, during another dreadful quarrel.³⁸ On the other hand, disputes between the king and his heir were common in the Middle Ages – as Edward's biographer Professor Seymour Phillips points out, Edward I himself clashed with his father Henry III on occasion – and there is no real reason to suppose that Edward I found his heir particularly disappointing or unpromising; the notion that he did is based on hindsight after Edward's failed reign.³⁹ Neither, apparently, did anyone else, and the author of the *Vita Edwardi Secundi* comments that Edward as prince of Wales showed considerable promise and raised his future subjects' hopes (but dashed them when he became king).⁴⁰

It can hardly be doubted, though, that in many ways Edward II's character and behaviour were utterly unconventional by the standards of his time and position. Most eccentrically of all, 'from his youth he devoted himself in private to the art of rowing and driving carts, of digging ditches and thatching houses, as was commonly said, and also with his companions at night to various works of ingenuity and skill, and to other pointless trivial occupations unsuitable for the son of a king'.⁴¹ As well as digging, thatching and driving carts, Edward loved building walls, swimming, hedging, working with wrought iron and shoeing horses, and not only did he enjoy such hobbies, he did them well: he was 'very skilful in what he delighted to employ his hands upon'.⁴² The contradictory king, 'bountiful and splendid in living', spent vast sums on clothes and jewels and took delight in dressing lavishly, yet was equally happy to go out into the fields or shimmy up a roof, which he would hardly have done

while wearing all his court finery.⁴³ How Edward came to take part in and enjoy such hobbies is not known, but perhaps his interest arose during his childhood at Langley.

Edward revelled in his own enormous strength and excellent health, and was devoted to the outdoors and exacting physical exercise. But whereas nowadays he would no doubt be seen as an excellent role model for a nation with an increasingly sedentary lifestyle, in the fourteenth century Edward's love of rustic pursuits met with a total lack of comprehension from his contemporaries, who entirely failed to see the appeal. Worse, his hobbies attracted scathing contempt from the magnates, chroniclers, his own household and even the pope, in an era when knights and nobles did knightly and noble things like jousting, hunting and fighting, and peasants did peasant things like digging, building and thatching, and never the twain should meet. Edward's great-grandfather Count Raymond-Berenger V of Provence had even passed laws prohibiting the knightly class from undertaking the tasks of villeins.⁴⁴ The king's willingness to 'give himself up always to improper works and occupations' was deemed important enough to be mentioned many years later at his deposition as one of the reasons for his unsuitability to be king, not only because such occupations were considered incompatible with his royal dignity, but because they led him 'to neglect the business of his kingdom'.⁴⁵ Edward did not only appreciate the pursuits of the lowborn, he also enjoyed their company, and whereas a king with the common touch would be applauded today, the fourteenth-century mind found this fact abhorrent. 'He forsook the company of lords, and fraternised with harlots, singers, actors, carters, ditchers, oarsmen, sailors, and others who practise the mechanical arts,' sniffed the chronicler Ranulph Higden.⁴⁶ Edward's enjoyment of the company of his lowborn subjects is almost certainly indirect evidence that he could speak English, as such people would not have spoken French, the language of the elite.

On 20 July 1307, Edward II was proclaimed king of England and lord of Ireland at Carlisle Castle, 'by descent and heritage', and added two more titles to the four he already held.⁴⁷ He may not yet have realised it, but his father had left him an extraordinarily difficult legacy: empty coffers, an unwinnable war in Scotland, unfriendly relations with France, dissatisfied, restless magnates.⁴⁸ Even a man more suited to the role he had been born into might have struggled to fulfil this position adequately, and Edward II, as he would soon demonstrate, was not suited to the role of king.

The New King and His Favourite

In the great hall of Carlisle Castle, Edward II sat in solitary splendour and watched the earls and lords who had attended his father before his death come before him and in order of rank, drop to one knee, kiss his hand, and swear homage and fealty to him as their liege lord. What these men thought of their new king cannot be known. Certainly they knew of his love for Piers Gaveston, almost certainly of his unseemly rustic pursuits, and perhaps felt uneasy about the future. But whatever they, and Edward's subjects, might have thought of his strange hobbies and his abilities, or lack of them, nobody ever criticised his appearance. He was every inch a king. The contemporary author of the *Vita Edwardi Secundi* (Life of Edward II), who knew him well and who criticised him far more often than not, described him as 'tall and strong, a fine figure of a handsome man'. In 1300, aged sixteen, he was said to be 'of a well-proportioned and handsome person', and after his accession, 'handsome in body and great of strength', 'physically he was one of the strongest men in his realm', 'elegant, of outstanding strength', and 'a handsome man, strong of body and limb'.¹ He had a moustache and beard, and fair curly or wavy hair, which he wore parted in the middle, sometimes held in place with a circlet, and falling almost to his shoulders. He must have been about 6 feet or a little more: his father stood 6 feet 2 inches, and his son Edward III's life-sized death mannequin measured 5 feet 10½ inches. Edward II was probably taller than his son, however, as the author of the *Vita* remarked on his height, and the chronicler Thomas Walsingham said that Edward III was 'not excessively tall'.²

Around 23 July, the new king supervised the departure of his father's funeral procession as it began its long journey south to Westminster. The procession was led by Anthony Bek, bishop of Durham and the only Englishman in history to hold the title of patriarch of Jerusalem, whom Edward called 'our entire and certain friend'.³ Edward left Carlisle on 31 July and crossed the Scottish border with his army, or rather his father's

army, to march the 30 miles to Dumfries. Prior to his death, Edward I had intended to hunt down Robert Bruce, defeat him utterly, and execute him with all the considerable brutality the age was capable of. In March 1306, Bruce had had himself crowned king of Scots at Scone Abbey, a few weeks after stabbing his greatest enemy and rival John 'the Red Comyn' to death in the Greyfriars church in Dumfries. This act followed a ten-year interregnum in Scotland, and the previous king, John Balliol, removed from the throne in 1296, was still alive in Picardy with his son, another Edward (who had dined with Edward of Caernarfon in 1293). English kings did not claim the throne of Scotland, to which they had no right, but felt entitled to interfere in Scottish affairs and believed that the Scottish kings owed them fealty for their kingdom. Edward I and his son refused to acknowledge Robert Bruce as king of Scots, and neither did the pope, thanks to Bruce's sacrilegious murder of Comyn in church. After his inauguration as king, Bruce fled to the west of Scotland with his only remaining brother – yet another Edward – and his few supporters; most of Scotland was dominated politically by the powerful Comyn faction, who, understandably, were as keen as Edward I to find and execute him. In England, 'King Hob', as Bruce was derisively known, was considered a rebel and a traitor, having previously been an ally of Edward I, and much of Edward II's reign would be taken up with endless campaigns to defeat Bruce and assume what he considered his rightful position as overlord of Scotland.

On 6 August 1307, Edward granted the earldom of Cornwall to Piers Gaveston, possibly without Gaveston's prior knowledge, as Edward would later claim to the pope.⁴ Although Edward's earls later complained bitterly about Gaveston's advancement, all but one of them, Warwick, put their seals to the charter, and it is not true, as the *Annales Paulini* claim, that the barons later had the charter burnt: it still exists in the National Archives in Kew.⁵ The earldom of Cornwall was Edward's own inheritance: the previous earl, Edmund, nephew of Henry III, died in 1300, and as he had no children, nieces or nephews, the earldom passed to his first cousin Edward I as Edmund's nearest male heir, and thence to Edward II.⁶

Edward and Piers Gaveston were reunited at Dumfries, sometime in August. This must have been an extremely emotional occasion for Edward, who probably loved Gaveston more than he loved any other person in his life. The flamboyant Piers, whose family took its name from the Béarnais village of Gabaston close to the Pyrenees, was of noble birth, the second of the four sons of Arnaud de Gabaston or Gaveston and Claramonde de Marsan, and far from being the low-born nobody he is often made out to be.⁷ His father and grandfathers were among the leading barons of Béarn. Gaveston's date of birth is not known, but he was older than Edward, born by July 1283 at the latest and possibly

a few years earlier; his parents were married before 30 June 1272.⁸ The first known reference to ‘Perrot Gaveston’ – ‘Perrot’ or ‘Perott’ was his nickname – appears in November 1297, when he was a squire of Edward I’s household.⁹ Edward I sent Gaveston to live in his son’s household in 1300 when Edward was sixteen, though it may be that the two young men had met before.

Odd though it might seem from later events, Edward I placed Gaveston, a courageous and excellent soldier and successful jousting *par extraordinaire*, in his son’s household with the intention that he should become Edward’s role model, which perhaps indicates that he was indeed several years older than Edward. Gaveston served in the king’s army in 1297 and impressed Edward I with his military ability, which the king probably hoped would rub off on his son. By 1303, Gaveston was described as Edward’s ‘companion’.¹⁰ No likeness or physical description of him exists, and contemporary chroniclers were so unremittingly hostile that it is difficult to form a clear picture of his personality, but he was athletic, charming, courteous but sharp-tongued, irreverent, witty, and boundlessly self-confident, even arrogant. A later chronicler – who in fact never saw him – described him as elegant and agile, sharp-witted, refined and well-practised in military matters.¹¹ Much like Edward himself, Gaveston polarised opinion, and most people hated him. Edward loved him beyond reason, and far beyond sense.

In February 1307, Edward I banished Gaveston from England, a move that, contrary to contemporary chroniclers’ beliefs, was not intended to be punitive. The king set the date of departure two months in advance, after Gaveston had competed in a jousting tournament, gave him a generous financial settlement of a hundred marks a year, and ordered him to await his eventual return.¹² None of this suggests that Edward I was angry with Gaveston personally. At that stage in his life, fierce and irascible, his fury would be very apparent, as he demonstrated around this time by tearing out clumps of his son’s hair and kicking him. It is highly likely that it was Edward of Caernarfon’s own conduct which caused Edward I to order Gaveston out of England, perhaps because Edward had asked his father permission to grant either his county of Ponthieu or the earldom of Cornwall to his friend – though the *Scalacronica* claims that Gaveston ‘was accused before the king of diverse crime and vices, which rendered him unfit company for the king’s son’.¹³ Edward I was probably troubled by the relationship that had developed between the two men and ‘the undue intimacy which the young Lord Edward had adopted towards’ Gaveston, and deeply concerned that his son’s love for the Gascon would create insurmountable problems and divisions in England when he himself was dead and Edward acceded to the throne – correctly, as it turned out.¹⁴

That Edward II loved Piers Gaveston is beyond all doubt. Precisely how

he loved him, however, is a difficult question to answer. There is nothing written by Edward himself that would give us any insight into his feelings for Gaveston, except that, occasionally, he referred to him in official letters as ‘our dear and faithful brother’, the same address he used for his half-brothers. Five chronicles written during or shortly after Edward’s lifetime say that he referred to Gaveston as ‘my brother’ in speech, the *Vita* calls Gaveston ‘a great earl whom the king had adopted as brother’, and the *Annales Paulini* also say he was Edward’s ‘adoptive brother’.¹⁵ For two young men to swear an oath of adoptive brotherhood was usually considered honourable; the problem with Edward naming Gaveston as his brother, as their contemporaries saw it, was the gulf of rank which separated them.¹⁶ Chroniclers also commented on Edward’s immoderate, inordinate and excessive love for Gaveston: ‘I do not remember to have heard that one man so loved another. Jonathan cherished David, Achilles loved Patroclus. But we do not read that they were immoderate. Our king, however, was incapable of moderate favour,’ says the *Vita*, and other chroniclers wrote much the same thing.¹⁷ Edward’s behaviour in the first five years of his reign bears out this judgement. We also learn that when Edward first saw Gaveston, ‘he fell so much in love that he entered upon an enduring compact with him, and determined to knit an indissoluble bond of affection with him, above all other mortals’.¹⁸ It is important to remember that this did not automatically mean romantic love, as we would understand it. The early fourteenth century was an age when men bandied about declarations of love for other men far more easily than in later eras; the earl of Richmond’s chaplain claimed in 1309, for example, that Piers Gaveston loved Richmond ‘beyond measure’.¹⁹ A few years later, Edward’s cousin the earl of Lancaster, on learning that his friend and confidant Robert Holland had abandoned him during his rebellion against the king, groaned ‘How could he find it in his heart to betray me, when I loved him so much?’²⁰ The usual assumption that Edward and Gaveston’s relationship was sexual and erotic owes far more to Christopher Marlowe’s c. 1592 play *Edward II* and numerous modern productions of it, including Derek Jarman’s explicit film version of 1991, than to any fourteenth-century evidence. Although Edward definitely loved Gaveston, Gaveston’s feelings for the king are impossible to determine with any certainty. One might be tempted to take a cynical view: Gaveston was a younger son with little chance of inheriting his family’s lands, and besides, his father left Gascony for England in the late 1290s in dire financial straits, and had to support himself by entering Edward I’s service.²¹ Gaveston therefore had few prospects for wealth or advancement in his homeland or in England, and had nothing to lose and everything to gain by courting the favour of the future king. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that Gaveston did genuinely love Edward.

Although Edward II was a man who loved men, we cannot say with

any certainty how he loved them, and his sexuality was rather more complex than is often surmised these days. He fathered an illegitimate son, Adam, sometime between 1305 and 1310, when he was in his early to mid-twenties.²² In the fourteenth century, people were almost invariably named after close members of their family, and as none of Edward's relatives bore the name, this implies that either his son's mother was the daughter or sister of a man called Adam, or that his son's godfather was called Adam. Piers Gaveston also fathered an illegitimate daughter, Amie.²³ Despite some modern speculation to the contrary, there is no reason whatsoever to think that Edward did not father his wife Isabella's children; a comparison of their itineraries proves conclusively that they were together approximately nine months before the births of all their offspring. The true nature of Edward II's and Piers Gaveston's relationship is unknown, and forever unknowable. Whether they were lovers, whether their relationship was romantic, or romantic on one side and calculating on the other, or erotic but unconsummated, or based on an oath of adoptive brotherhood, or the deeply affectionate bond of two men who met in adolescence and formed a close and unbreakable friendship, ultimately matters less than the fact that Edward's excessive favour to Gaveston caused widespread envy and resentment.

At Dumfries, Edward took the homage of the Scottish lords who were loyal to him, and left on 12 August with Gaveston and his army, intending to march north and pursue Robert Bruce. He spent several weeks wandering from Dumfries to Sanquhar and Cumnock, doing and achieving nothing in particular except attending a feast that Gaveston gave on 17 August – where he gave a pound each to the Welsh trumpeters Yevan and Ythel who played for them – and soon gave up the pursuit.²⁴ In late August he retraced his steps to Carlisle, and from there, travelled to Knaresborough Castle in Yorkshire, which now belonged to Gaveston. For the new earl of Cornwall, the huge costs involved in entertaining the king and his retinue for a few days hardly constituted a problem, as Edward had just made him one of the richest men in the country, with an annual income of about £4,000.²⁵

Puzzled by Edward's unwillingness to chase up hill and down dale in pursuit of a fugitive, albeit royal, Scotsman, three fourteenth-century chronicles claimed that he abandoned the war with Scotland because of his desire to marry his fiancée, Isabella of France, as soon as possible.²⁶ This is extremely unlikely. Isabella was probably only eleven years old in the summer of 1307, and although Edward II had many faults, lusting after prepubescent girls was not one of them. There are no grounds to suppose either that he was desperately keen for his wedding to a girl he had never seen and whom he had to marry for political reasons to go ahead, or that he was trying to get out of it.²⁷ The real reasons for Edward's departure from Scotland are not hard to find: it was important

for him to return south and take over his father's government, and make arrangements for his coronation and wedding. Edward's precipitate departure from Scotland, however, where he didn't return for three years, allowed Robert Bruce the breathing space to consolidate his position and gain allies.

Edward around this time ordered the arrest of Walter Langton, bishop of Coventry and Lichfield, possibly at Piers Gaveston's instigation.²⁸ In 1305, Edward and Gaveston had entered Langton's lands and stolen his deer, and Edward insulted him with 'certain gross and harsh words', the main cause of his quarrel with his father which ended with the old king refusing to allow his son anywhere near him.²⁹ Langton remained in prison, accused, among other things, of consorting with the devil and, rather more conventionally, of misappropriating public funds. However, he would be reconciled with the king by early 1312, and served him faithfully until his death in 1321. Edward also asked the pope to restore Robert Winchelsey to the archbishopric of Canterbury, from which he had been suspended the year before at the request of Edward I.³⁰ Winchelsey returned to England in March 1308, and repaid Edward by becoming one of his and Gaveston's most intractable enemies, a stance he maintained until his death. Edward's dislike of a future ally and trust of a future enemy provide early evidence of his inept judgement of character.

In the early months of his reign, Edward communicated with Philip IV of France about his wedding to Philip's daughter Isabella, which was to go ahead in January 1308 in Boulogne, and set about making arrangements for his trip to France.³¹ Edward and Isabella, his fourth fiancée, had been betrothed since 1299, when he was fifteen and she three or four. The reason for their betrothal lay in the rich province of Gascony. Edward's great-great-grandmother Eleanor had brought the duchy of Aquitaine to the English Crown in 1152 on her marriage to the future Henry II. In 1259, in an attempt to end the decades of military conflict between England and France over the vast French territories ruled by England, Henry III and Louis IX signed the Treaty of Paris, which stated that the English king could keep Gascony of the original inheritance, but held it as a vassal of the king of France.³² This meant that the English kings owed homage to the French king as their feudal overlord, which caused great friction between the two countries. Every time a new king of either country acceded to the throne, the English king had to travel to France and kneel to its king, a situation they found intolerably demeaning and tried to delay as long as possible. The French kings for their part hated that the English Crown ruled such a large area of France. These tensions would erupt into war between England and France in 1294, 1324 and, most notably, the Hundred Years War in 1337. If a vassal did not pay homage within a certain time limit, his overlord had the right to confiscate his estates. Therefore, paying homage to the king of France was a duty

Edward II had no means of escaping, and he was particularly unfortunate that no fewer than four kings ruled France during his comparatively short reign. Philip IV seized an opportunity to confiscate Gascony from Edward I in 1294, and the price of regaining it was a marriage alliance: Edward I would marry Philip's half-sister Marguerite, and his son would marry Philip's daughter, Isabella.

After enjoying Gaveston's hospitality at Knaresborough, Edward travelled to Nottingham, where he spent a week in early September supervising alterations to the castle and paid a pound to his harper Robert Clough for playing for him.³³ He moved on to Northampton, and opened his first parliament on 16 October. Parliament sat for a mere three days, its objectives only to discuss the late king's funeral arrangements and the new king's nuptials and coronation, and to grant Edward expenses for them. At Northampton Edward sent a letter to Oljeitu, 'illustrious king of the Tartars', who was the ruler of the Ilkhanate, part of the Mongol Empire covering much of modern-day Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Turkey, and ordered his falcons and dogs brought to him.³⁴ His enjoyment of hawking and hunting, far more conventional than his other hobbies, aroused no ire or incomprehension among his contemporaries, though it is notable that unlike his son Edward III he never competed personally in a joust, that sport so beloved of medieval royal and noble men. Perhaps he was simply not interested, or perhaps his father, concerned for the future of his dynasty, forbade it (the earl of Surrey's son and Duke John I of Brabant were killed jousting in 1286 and 1294 during Edward's childhood; it was a dangerous activity).

Edward I's funeral took place at Westminster Abbey three and a half months after his death on 27 October, and he was buried in a simple tomb near his first wife Eleanor of Castile and his father Henry III in the chapel of St Edward the Confessor. A story told much later in the fourteenth century claims that the old king had ordered that his flesh be boiled down and removed and his bones carried before an army to Scotland, but this is unlikely to be true, and even if he had, his son took no notice.³⁵ Edward II spent £100 on horses for knights to ride in the procession, and gave 100 marks to be distributed to the poor and £2 to William Attefenne, sumpter-man, 'for the great labour he sustained in providing torches and leather for the body of the deceased king'; he spent £453 altogether.³⁶ His filial duty done, Edward issued an edict ordering everyone to refer to Gaveston by his title, earl of Cornwall, rather than by his name.³⁷ This probably reflects Edward's determination that Gaveston, only a minor noble by birth, should not be disparaged by the great magnates, rather than being a statement on the formality or otherwise of his court.

Edward was determined that his 'brother Piers' should become a member of the royal family, and arranged a marriage for his friend. Unfortunately, the three of Edward's numerous sisters who were still

alive were unavailable: twenty-five-year-old Elizabeth was married to the earl of Hereford; twenty-eight-year-old Mary was a nun; and thirty-two-year-old Margaret was married to the duke of Brabant. There remained his little half-sister Eleanor, Edward I's youngest child, but she was only eighteen months old in the autumn of 1307. Edward, therefore, was forced to make Gaveston his nephew by marriage rather than his brother, by marrying him to one of his nieces. A few of them were already unavailable. His eldest niece, fifteen-year-old Eleanor de Clare, had married Hugh Despenser in May 1306. Eleven-year-old Joan of Bar was married to John de Warenne, earl of Surrey, and ten-year-old Mary Monthermer was betrothed to Duncan MacDuff, earl of Fife. Joan Monthermer was promised to the priory of Amesbury, and Eleanor de Bohun was only three, which left Edward's other Clare nieces, thirteen-year-old Margaret and twelve-year-old Elizabeth. Because sisters usually – though not always – married in birth order, it fell to Margaret, second of the five daughters of Edward's sister Joan of Acre (who had died in April), to marry her uncle's Gascon favourite. Evidently Edward had been planning a Clare-Gaveston match for months; the charter granting his friend the earldom of Cornwall in August 1307 was decorated with the Clare arms as well as Gaveston's own.³⁸

On 1 November 1307, only five days after her grandfather Edward I's funeral, Margaret married Gaveston at Berkhamsted Castle, 30 miles from London. Presumably it was attended by Margaret's brother Gilbert de Clare, recently granted his earldoms of Gloucester and Hertford at the age of sixteen, five years before he could normally have expected to inherit.³⁹ Possibly, Edward offered him this as a sweetener to accept his sister's marriage to Gaveston, but also, an earl was far more use to him politically than an underage ward. Gloucester didn't complain; he now had an annual income of £6,000, which made him one of the richest men in the country, even wealthier than his new brother-in-law. He was Edward's eldest nephew, only seven years younger than the king, and fifteen years older than his aunt, Edward I's youngest child Eleanor.⁴⁰ Edward II's stepmother Marguerite of France, dowager queen of England, also attended the wedding. Before his accession, Edward had been on good terms with the stepmother who wasn't much older than he was, and often asked her to intercede with his father on his behalf. Forty years younger than her husband, Marguerite had nevertheless enjoyed a good relationship with him, though she was never crowned as queen. Edward gave jewels worth thirty pounds to the bride and groom, a roan-coloured palfrey horse worth twenty pounds to Margaret de Clare and expensive cloth worked with gold and pearls to her ladies, and provided the generous amount of seven pounds, ten shillings and six pence in pennies to be thrown over the heads of the bride and groom at the door of the chapel.⁴¹ His almoner collected the money, which would comfortably

have fed several families for a year, and distributed it to the poor. The king spent an enormous twenty pounds on the minstrels, and evidently it was quite a celebration, as he gave five shillings in compensation to a local resident for ‘damage done by the king’s party’ to his property.⁴² Edward also spent fifty-two pounds on two warhorses for himself on 4 November, one a bay and the other ‘white spotted’.⁴³

And so a thirteen-year-old girl married a man in his mid-twenties or older, who was involved in an intense relationship with her uncle. To modern sensibilities this seems callous, but nobody at the time complained about it in such terms. They did, however, protest that the old king’s granddaughter was being disparaged, and that her marriage should be used to further English interests instead. Edward, predictably, ignored them. Given Margaret’s youth, it is unlikely that she and Gaveston began cohabiting after the wedding, and Gaveston’s marriage made little difference to his relationship with Edward.

After the wedding, Edward returned to his favourite residence of Langley in Hertfordshire, where he had to deal with a difficult situation that had recently arisen: the Knights Templar. The Templars were a military monastic order, extremely rich, and Edward’s second cousin and future father-in-law Philip IV of France itched to get his hands on their money. On Friday 13 October 1307, he ordered all the Templars in France to be arrested, accusing them of sodomy, heresy, idolatry and urinating and spitting on the cross. He and Pope Clement V, who resided at Avignon, not Rome, pressed Edward to arrest the Templars in England. Edward refused, telling Philip he found the accusations ‘more than it is possible to believe’.⁴⁴ This infuriated Philip, who had no mind to allow the young man to defy him and to make him look foolish in the eyes of Europe. Edward’s refusal to arrest the Templars speaks well of him, as it was an easy opportunity for him to seize their goods, lands and money, to pay off some of the enormous debts his father had bequeathed him.

On 4 December 1307, Edward wrote to the kings of Sicily, Castile, Portugal and Aragon, the first three of whom were his cousins, telling them that he believed the charges against the Templars were nothing more than ‘the slanders of ill-natured men, who are animated ... with a spirit of cupidity and envy’, a very daring way to refer to the king of France and his counsellors, asking them to remember the Templars’ devotion, honesty and long service to the Christian faith, and saying that belief in the accusations was ‘hardly to be entertained’. Edward also sent a letter to the pope on 10 December, saying he had heard ‘a rumour of infamy, a rumour indeed full of bitterness, terrible to think of, horrible to hear, and detestable in wickedness’ and that ‘we are unable to believe in suspicious stories of this kind until we know with greater certainty about these things’.⁴⁵

On 14 December, however, Edward received the papal bull *Pastoralis*

praeeminentiae, which ordered all Christian rulers of Europe to arrest the Templars and seize their lands, in the name of the papacy.⁴⁶ A papal bull was next to impossible to ignore, and therefore, he issued an order for the Templars to be arrested on 10 January 1308, a few weeks in advance; in France, they had been given no warning.⁴⁷ Edward did his best to protect the Templars, and ordered his sheriffs to see that they were honourably housed and ‘not to place them in hard and vile prison, and to find them sustenance’.⁴⁸ This was a kindness in an age when prisons had no obligation to feed their prisoners. A year later, he ordered the sheriffs to pay the Templars their wages, four pence a day, with arrears from the first day of their imprisonment.⁴⁹ It is easy to criticise Edward for caving in to pressure and betraying his principles, but he was young, inexperienced, not yet crowned, and facing the two most powerful men in Europe. Other European rulers also ordered the Templars in their countries to be arrested, despite initial reluctance. In March 1312, Pope Clement V finally disbanded the order.⁵⁰

Edward found time to remember the Welsh woman, Mary or Mariota Maunsel, who had nursed him for a few weeks after he was born, and granted her seventy-three acres of land at Caernarfon rent-free for life. Some years later, he gave her an income of five pounds a year – a generous amount for a woman of her status – and paid for her to travel from Caernarfon to visit him.⁵¹ He sent letters on behalf of the bishop of Lidda to his ‘dearest friend’ the king of Armenia – not named but either Leo III or his successor Oshin – and Oljeitu, ruler of the Ilkhanate, upgraded in the letter from ‘king of the Tartars’ to ‘emperor’ and also not named, presumably because Edward and his advisers were uncertain of the current political situation in distant countries.⁵²

While Edward dealt with Templars, Tartars and Welsh nurses, Piers Gaveston held a jousting tournament at his castle of Wallingford near Oxford in honour of his young bride Margaret. Edward encouraged him to hold the tournament, though evidently didn’t attend himself, as his itinerary places him at Langley, 45 miles away, and at Reading, 25 miles away, on 2 December.⁵³ Gaveston and his team of knights defeated the earls of Surrey, Arundel and Hereford, and destroyed their dignity by knocking them off their horses into the mud, to their great humiliation and anger. Indignant commentators said that Gaveston ‘most vilely trod under foot’ the opposition, and accused him of fielding 200 knights instead of the agreed sixty.⁵⁴ Not only did Gaveston dominate Edward’s favour to an incredible degree, the earls could match him neither in wit nor in military prowess, and their hostility to him increased as a result of the tournament.⁵⁵ Gaveston, secure in Edward’s love and favour, cocked a snook at the high and mighty earls, and they found him aggravating and arrogant to an incredible degree: ‘his countenance exacted greater deference than that of the king. His arrogance was intolerable to the

barons and a prime cause of hatred and rancour'. The earls and other barons did have very good reason to be concerned. Gaveston monopolised Edward's presence; no one could see him without Gaveston's being there, and Edward rudely ignored his barons and talked only to his friend.⁵⁶ Chronicler Adam Murimuth wrote that Edward 'was ruled by Piers' counsel, despising the counsel of the other nobles'.⁵⁷ Edward's obsession with Gaveston is shown in the numerous favours, lands and gifts of money granted to him and his adherents, to the detriment of others, who believed – correctly – that they had more right than the Gascon to wield so much influence over the king. It was said that Gaveston was 'almost a king', that two kings ruled England, one in name and one in deed, and that Edward did Gaveston great reverence and worshipped him, as though his friend were a god.⁵⁸

Although the *Annales Paulini* claim that Edward and Gaveston spent Christmas together at Wye in Kent, in fact Edward didn't reach Wye until 3 January 1308, and spent the festive season at Westminster, presumably with Gaveston and perhaps with Gaveston's wife Margaret.⁵⁹ On 26 December, the king took the extraordinary step of appointing his friend *custos regni*, keeper of the realm, while he travelled to France to marry Isabella.⁶⁰ The author of the *Vita* spoke for many when he exclaimed 'An astonishing thing, that he who had lately been an exile and outcast from England should now be made ruler and guardian of the realm'.⁶¹ It would have been far more tactful and acceptable to appoint one of his little half-brothers Thomas or Edmund as regent, a nominal one at least, though they were only six and seven years old. Gaveston, in fact, did little controversial during his regency, and although he was criticised for making the earls kneel to him and for his customary tactlessness, this seems to be insecurity rather than arrogance; he was unsure of himself without the king, and out of his depth.⁶²

Edward left London and Piers Gaveston in late December and travelled through Kent towards Dover, which he reached on 13 January 1308, having already ordered numerous provisions, including vast amounts of wood and charcoal and 'ten good leaden cauldrons', to be laid in against his arrival. He also ordered the mayor and sheriffs of London to provide and deliver a ship for his tents for his retinue to sleep in once they reached France, sent his baker ahead to Boulogne 'to make preparations for the reception of the king', and ordered William le Portour to find '300 boards of the longest to be found for making tables'.⁶³ Edward spent his last few days as a single man at the priory of St Martin with some of the men who were to accompany him to France, including his cousin the earl of Pembroke, brother-in-law the earl of Hereford, nephew-in-law the earl of Surrey, and his friend Anthony Bek, bishop of Durham and patriarch of Jerusalem.

All the barons could do was hope that Edward's impending marriage

would distract his attention from Gaveston, and that he would start to rule as a king should. Unfortunately, their hopes were to be dashed. Edward II had neither the ability nor the temperament to fill his difficult role, and in 1308 the unpromising beginning of his reign deteriorated almost to the point of civil war.