

DAVID STEPHENSON. *Medieval Powys: Kingdom, Principality and Lordships, 1132–1293*. Studies in Celtic History 35. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2016. Pp. 339. \$99.00 (cloth). doi: 10.1017/jbr.2018.17

This book offers a thorough reassessment of the medieval history of Powys—and indeed calls for “a fundamental revision of how we approach the history of high-medieval Wales” (20). Of the major Welsh polities, Powys was always the most geographically exposed to England, with several river valleys connecting its territory with the shires to the east. The medieval rulers of Powys, in good part because of this, had a distinctive tendency to intermarry with English Marcher families and to negotiate agreements with kings of England or their representatives. It has been all too easy to see this sort of behavior as obstructing the efforts of the princes of Gwynedd, to the north of Powys, at exerting influence over Wales as a whole—and indeed as confounding any hope of national unity in the face of English domination and aggression. As David Stephenson notes in his introduction, recent scholarship has moved on from chastising the rulers of Powys as unpatriotic, but it has still tended to neglect them. Stephenson’s book is the first comprehensive study of medieval Powys, and its aim is “to replace an interpretational framework of, essentially, ‘national history’ (with an emphasis on ethnicity) by one that stresses lordship and the struggle for regional power—and in the process not only to rescue a significant part of Wales from historiographical neglect but also to serve as a model for a different conceptualization of the ‘Age of the Princes’” (11).

Stephenson brings formidable skills to the task. His first book—recently reissued—was on political power in thirteenth-century Gwynedd, and the work under review is the fruit of over a decade’s research, teaching, and publishing on medieval Powysian history (it is further informed by Stephenson’s interest in the satellite states of the Soviet Union). Stephenson notes the lack of evidence for Powys, compared with other parts of Wales (no doubt, as he observes, another reason for Powys’s comparative neglect by modern-day historians). Yet what evidence we have, he deploys comprehensively. Both in part one, which offers a “political narrative,” and in part two on “structures, fault-lines and political culture,” he draws on the chronicles (in Welsh and Latin); the writings of Gerald of Wales; the acts of Welsh rulers; monastic cartularies; legal, archaeological, and genealogical evidence; and the sources produced by the English chancery and exchequer, as well as for the Marcher lords, but also—more unusually, and to good effect—on Middle Welsh poetry.

The benefits of shifting the historiographical focus are evident throughout Stephenson’s book. Only a few of his conclusions can be mentioned here. He begins the first, narrative, section (part one) by casting doubt on the existence of a *kingdom* of Powys in the late eleventh century. For Stephenson, a “re-emergence” of that kingdom in the first decades of the twelfth century was driven by two processes (36): the members of the future dynasty, the descendants of Bleddyn ap Cynfyn, diminished in number (in good measure by meeting violent deaths at each other’s hands) and also began to restrict their activities to the territory which was gradually to become redefined as the kingdom of Powys (rather than exerting a “loose primacy in much of Wales” [39n1]). This conclusion, of course, serves to underscore even further the achievement of Madog ap Maredudd (ruled 1132–60), who, by the later 1150s, “had consolidated the realm created by his father (Maredudd ap Bleddyn, d. 1132), and had made it one of three major polities in Wales.” At that time, a “Welsh supremacy” of Powys, which “could have co-existed well with the Angevin empire,” seemed possible (57). This conclusion, in turn, casts an even more poignant light on the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when Powys became subject to “dynastic fragmentation” (74)—by stages which Stephenson securely establishes—and when the dynasty of Gwynedd rose to unprecedented power. Gwenwynwyn (d. 1216) used the style “prince of Powys” (82). But by 1240, for Stephenson, the descendants of Bleddyn ap Cynfyn “no longer saw themselves as potential rivals” of the princes of Gwynedd for supremacy within Wales (114). Further, they differed amongst themselves in

their outlook and ambitions. The lord of southern Powys at the time (Gruffudd ap Gwenwynwyn, d. 1286), having grown up in England, “apparently regarded himself primarily as a Marcher lord” (114; fully explored 133–58). On the other hand, Gruffudd, lord of Bromfield in northern Powys (115–32), may have “begun to abandon his role as a magnate of the March in favour of a more thoroughly Welsh lordship” (132). Stephenson closes the narrative section with a careful analysis of Powysian lordship towards the end of the thirteenth century, under the new dispensation imposed by Edward I of England (159–77).

In part two, as noted, Stephenson focuses on “structures, fault-lines and political culture” within high medieval Powys. Chapter 9 is devoted to aspects of governance, analyzing the legitimation of rule, the role in decision making played by counsellors, especially family members and by assemblies of freemen; the increasing importance of seigneurial officials; and the place of Powys in the history of Welsh laws. In chapter 10 he discusses why high medieval Powys was apparently conspicuously prone to “dynastic fragmentation” (compared to other Welsh kingdoms). In chapter 11 he considers “the ecclesiastical dimension”; and a fascinating concluding chapter titled “Some Powysian Perspectives: Fears and Aspirations” sets out to discover “Powysians’ perceptions of their geopolitical neighbours, and their view of Powys in Wales and the marchland” (274). Throughout part two, notable elements of Stephenson’s analysis include a focus on the possible influence of the women who married into the dynasty of Powys, and of local Powysian social elites. For Stephenson, it may have been the latter’s memory of lands once held to the east that shifted the attention of Bleddyn ap Cynfyn’s descendants from the Irish Sea towards the March (292).

The reader is guided by means of chapter conclusions, maps, and genealogical tables. The book could have been rendered more accessible, especially for those new to the subject, by providing a general conclusion (and also, on a minor point, if the map of castles had provided names). Yet there can be no doubt that Stephenson has succeeded brilliantly in synthesizing and expanding his work on high medieval Powys. His book comes highly recommended to all those interested in the nature of high medieval lordship and politics, in Wales—and beyond.

Max Lieberman  
*University of Zurich*  
[max.lieberman@hist.uzh.ch](mailto:max.lieberman@hist.uzh.ch)

COURTNEY ERIN THOMAS. *If I Lose Mine Honour I Lose Myself: Honour among the Early Modern English Elite*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. Pp. 302. \$56.25 (cloth).  
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Beginning in the 1970s, the “cultural turn” drew the attention of many historians away from high politics and social change to the study of cultural phenomena, and the concept of honor emerged as an attractive subject. As cultural history acquired more prominence, many scholars turned to Geertzian “thick descriptions” of the ways in which conceptions of honor influenced behavior. The early modern period, dominated by aristocratic culture, where disputes were often settled through face-to-face confrontations rather than anonymous judicial processes, proved to be a particularly fertile ground for such studies.

But in the case of early modern English history, one historian had made the cultural turn before the turn itself, and that historian was Mervyn James. James is one of the more intriguing figures in early modern historiography. He devoted his scholarly life to the study of the Tudor North, and helped make the field a subject of interest, largely by arguing that between 1540 and 1640 the North was transformed from a traditional aristocratic, or, “lineage” society, to a modern civil society upholding values associated with rule of law and centralized authority.