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Peter Hoskins. *In the Steps of the Black Prince: The Road to Poitiers, 1355-1356*. Woodbridge, United Kingdom: The Boydell Press, 2011. 274 pp. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 1843836114.

Review by Anne Curry, University of Southampton.

There must be many, including myself, who have looked at maps of the great *chevauchée* across southern France by the Black Prince in 1355, with amazement and admiration. Leaving Bordeaux, close to the Atlantic, on 5 October, the prince led his troops almost to the Mediterranean in just over a month, before returning by a different route to Bordeaux by 2 December. Eight months later, in early July 1356, he undertook another lengthy march northwards from Bordeaux reaching the south bank of the Loire, before diverting south, fighting the battle of Poitiers on 19 September, and returning to Bordeaux, John II of France in tow, on 2 October. In many ways, these campaigns characterise the Hundred Years War more impressively than Edward III's *chevauchée* across Normandy to Paris in 1346, his ensuing victory at Crécy and his siege of Calais. The main difference is the lack of capture of any major stronghold in 1355-1356, in contrast to the fall of Calais in 1347. But the Black Prince's actions demonstrate the emphasis on short sharp shocks against the French, and the impact of the capture of a king. This made his successes decisive where those of his father were not.

Surprisingly there has been relatively little historical study of the Black Prince's campaigns since Herbert J. Hewitt's work in 1958. This book approaches the subject in a novel and imaginative way. Hoskins walks the routes which the prince took on his campaigns, all 1,300 miles of them. He came to the task armed not only with chronicles of the period (especially Geoffrey Le Baker's *Chronicon* for 1355 and the *Eulogium Historiarum* for 1356), but also modern maps. As he says, "I was interested to know what the routes would be like on the ground, and what the countryside that I saw could tell me about events during the expedition" (p. 1). The task was not wholly straightforward. Sometimes it is difficult to identify with certainty the place names mentioned in contemporary accounts, but walking the routes generates a much more scientific approach to likely locations. Also there is no complete knowledge of the medieval road system, but again on the ground it is easier to follow the most likely route, often by focusing on Roman roads as revealed in eighteenth-century maps.

The result is a fascinating study which enhances our understanding of the way the *chevauchées* unfolded as well as impressing us even further with the qualities of the Black Prince and the resilience of his men. After a short introduction to the causes and earlier phases of the Hundred Years War (which helps to make the book accessible to those with little previous historical knowledge but an enthusiasm for reconstruction or the areas being visited) Hoskins sets out from Bordeaux. He calls to mind the preparations undertaken to launch such a campaign with an army of 6000 to 8000 men, especially in terms of victualing even when it was anticipated that food could be gleaned en route. Indeed a constant theme throughout the journey was the need to find water and to maintain supplies. Autumn was a good time to campaign since the peasants' stocks of food were plentiful and easy pickings. At Miremont, for instance, a location reached six weeks into the *chevauchée* on 18 November 1355, recent excavations have revealed barrel-shaped grain silos hollowed out of the ground within the walls of houses (p. 92). Together they could have stored eleven tonnes of wheat. Bread would have been the staple diet of the

soldiers as much as the peasants. Indeed, the need to find food also helps to explain the speed and constant movement of the army.

Hoskins describes each place as he reaches it, describing its topography as well as its history. His account moves on quickly, like his subject, but a good feel of the terrain is generated, especially in terms of how rivers were crossed and overnight camps established. Outline maps are provided but it is a pity that they do not show landscape features. How useful it would have been to have used the Institute Géographique National map series with the routes superimposed, and more photographs, especially in colour of locations. Perhaps a link to a web site where such were deposited might have solved the prohibitive cost of reproducing colour pictures (which is no doubt the reason the publisher did not wish to include them!) But at least walking makes it apparent when routes are gruelling up-hill struggles. Hoskins suggests this is why the topographically inappropriate term 'mountains' is used in the chronicles. They would have marked a hard day's march on foot.

Hoskins' direct experience of the route also reveals the options which the Black Prince faced and explains the choices he made, especially in the major challenge of crossing rivers. Juxtaposing chronicle narratives with visual observation of the sites as they are now, he explains why the prince avoided attacks on well-defended places such as Carcassonne. He also emphasises the extent of physical damage caused by the *chevauchée* over a wide range of villages and even into the suburbs of major fortified towns. The effects of the campaign were, he notes, "profound, and remain seared in the history of the region to this day" (p. 109). An intimate knowledge of each individual place, generated by observation and by measured analysis of local traditions, adds to this feeling of living history.

Following the reconstruction of the 1355 campaign, Hoskins provides a brief discussion of the interlude before the campaign of the following summer. This was part of a multi-pronged attack on the French king. It saw the Black Prince moving northwards towards the Loire. Hoskins again reconstructs the route, emphasising different phases. On this occasion there seems to have been little damage until the Vienne was crossed. Then followed, as he puts it, a "classic phase of *chevauchée* operations during the advance to the Cher" (p. 135). Finally there was a manoeuvre phase leading to the battle at Poitiers. As Hoskins points out, this battle and the preparations for it are particularly difficult to reconstruct because of the vagueness of the contemporary sources. He puts forward some candidates for the marsh which is spoken of by Geoffrey Baker. By assessing the various possible vantage points that the Black Prince might have used, he suggests that the English deployment was "along the axis of the road to the west of the woods at Nouaillé" (p. 171), suggesting a possible front of around 1,200 yards. But to make the archers fire effective in this scenario he argues that they must have been "distributed between the three divisions" (p. 173) rather than on the flanks. The various possibilities are intelligently argued, and supported with photographs of the likely site. Indeed, this book is worth reading simply for the account of this battle set against the landscape of the area. It concludes with a reconstruction of the return march to Bordeaux and an Epilogue on the aftermath of the English victory.

The book is based on an intimate knowledge of geography and local history combined with careful reading of chronicles and assessment of modern interpretations. It stands as a new and imaginative approach to the subject. The level of detail sometimes makes it a hard read, but it is only through such painstaking assessment that we can really understand the complexity of medieval warfare. The skills of the Black Prince as a commander emerge strongly, as do too the need for military intelligence, forward planning and flexibility in the face of enemy responses. Although French movements are not reconstructed to the same level of detail, there is due regard to where the French were and the effect this had on the choice of routes and speed of progress. It is to be hoped that the methodology which Hoskins has applied might be adopted for other major campaigns of this period and beyond. But for maximum benefit, more sophisticated use of maps and photographs is called for.

Anne Curry
University of Southampton
M.Cross@soton.ac.uk

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