REVIEW

Nigel Bryant, trans., *The True Chronicles of Jean le Bel, 1290-1360*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011. Pp. 294. ISBN 978-1-84383-694-0. £60.00.

As Nigel Bryant points out, the title “True Chronicles” is not le Bel’s own, but comes from Jean Froissart’s description of the work, which provided the basis for the first part of Froissart’s own much better-known chronicles. Froissart’s respect for le Bel came partly from the latter’s claim that he had based his work on “what I’ve witnessed myself or have heard from those who’ve been present when I have not” (p. 22). Some of the chronicle is based on his own eyewitness account, which makes it particularly valuable for Scottish historians; Le Bel came to England with John of Hainault in 1327 to serve on Edward III’s lacklustre expedition against the Scots in Weardale, and his account of the travails and miseries of the campaign is one of the most detailed and vivid accounts of Anglo-Scottish warfare from the Middle Ages. As a Liègois churchman writing for other Liègois, his account includes numerous details of the sort that English and Scottish writers did not bother to record, as they took them for granted. In particular, he provides a detailed discussion of methods of war adopted by the Scots, which he obviously considered unorthodox. Coming from the heavily urbanized Low Countries, he regarded the uplands of the Anglo-Scottish Marches as a mountainous wilderness, steeped in Arthurian history. He refers to Carlisle as a city founded by Arthur, and to the Northumberland monastery of Blanchland as another survival from the Arthurian age—notwithstanding the anachronism of a house of friars in Arthurian Britain (anyway, Blanchland was actually a house of Augustinian canons). Later, he refers to “an old city which had been known in the days of King Arthur’s Round Table as the Castle of Maidens” (p. 63); this is in fact a reference to Edinburgh.

Although he never returned to Britain, le Bel maintained a keen interest in the Scottish wars. Unfortunately, however, he was not always able to obtain accurate information, and the claim that

his work was a “true chronicle” does not always withstand scrutiny. His account of Neville’s Cross in 1346 portrays the battle as taking place beside Newcastle (instead of Durham), with the archbishop of Canterbury, and the bishops of Lincoln and Durham amongst the commanders, and with Queen Philippa in attendance, when in fact, none of them were present. On the other hand, this does provide a fascinating insight into how Anglo-Scottish affairs were perceived and understood on the Continent, albeit from someone whose sympathies lay with the English. In particular, the wars of the 1330s are presented as straightforward national conflicts between England and Scotland, without a hint of the civil war raging within Scotland. Edward Balliol’s claim to the Scottish kingship is never mentioned, nor the “Disinherited” (a faction of Anglo-Scottish magnates who had lost lands in Scotland, and who were Balliol’s main supporters), or even their spectacular victory at Dupplin Moor in 1332. Balliol himself appears simply as one of the English commanders at Neville’s Cross (p. 189—probably incorrectly, as no other source mentions his presence); he may also appear misnamed as Lord Robert Balliol, mentioned (also incorrectly) as the English captain of Berwick (p. 147). Le Bel’s work demonstrates how news could reach the Continent in a form distorted through rumour or wishful thinking. For instance, the terms of the 1357 Treaty of Berwick, as reported by le Bel, are wildly exaggerated in Edward III’s favour, reducing David to the status of a client king along lines which Edward III fervently aspired to, but was never able to bring about.

Bryant provides a translation of the text edited by Jules Viard and Eugène Déprez (*Chronique de Jean le Bel*, Société de l’histoire de France, 2 vols, 1904-5). It would have been nice to have a facing page reproduction of the French text, but Viard and Déprez’s edition can readily be downloaded from the Internet for free. The translation is nicely done, and captures the idiom and style of the original. There are one or two choices of phrase with which one might quibble; for instance, “heavy cavalry” (p. 41, for *armeures de fer*) has a somewhat anachronistic feel. Nevertheless, Bryant has done a very good job of balancing accuracy and readability. The volume could perhaps have included more background information on le Bel’s life and career, and with a bit

more historical annotation, but overall, it is invaluable in making this fascinating source readily accessible to those without a good working knowledge of fourteenth-century French. It certainly deserves a place on the bookshelf (or e-book reader) of every historian of Anglo-Scottish warfare, and indeed, of anyone interested in chivalry and warfare generally.

Andy King
University of Southampton