



## *The Fighting Essex Soldier: Recruitment, War and Society in the Fourteenth Century* ed. Christopher Thornton, Jennifer Ward, and Neil Wiffen.

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A recent concern of medieval scholarship has been the cooperation of military communities with royal authority. In *The Fighting Essex Soldier*, historians Christopher Thornton (Univ. of London), Jennifer Ward (formerly Goldsmith's College, Univ. of London), and Neil Wiffen (Essex Record Office) have gathered seven essays<sup>1</sup> on fiscal-military change in England during the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453). The volume reveals how local governments dealt with royal prerogatives and the available sources for researching the individuals and communities that were forced to make sacrifices for the goals of the crown.<sup>2</sup>

In chap. 1, "Introduction: Crown, County, and Locality," Thornton and Ward describe the difficulties the nobility had in recruiting troops and funding military campaigns on the continent. They had resisted such ventures in the thirteenth century, because they required lengthy commitments of resources and rarely yielded victories. By 1340, the authors argue, the conflict between centralized taxation and extended military service was solved as relations between lord and retainer became tied more to money-fees than to the personal bonds of vassalage (2). Similar tensions over funding the construction of defensive projects in Essex within the greater context of the Hundred Years' War were resolved through improved relations between crown and nobility. The war provides the framework of the volume. Chapters 2-4 concentrate on the role of the local nobility, while 5-7 investigate the position of individuals on the lower rungs of society.

Essex was one of many "home fronts" for the crown's military affairs abroad. In chap. 2, Ward examines how aristocratic officers accommodated royal prerogatives. At the local level, sheriffs, escheators, and coroners kept order and collected war supplies across the county, while royal commissioners collected taxes and raised soldiers from the local population. Ward describes the evolution of sending justices to the county to keep the king's peace. Finally, though official documents attest "gentlemen" in 1413, her evidence suggests that gentry existed as a class at least from the early 1300s (41). Ward also shows that ambitious gentry used violence and other means to further their careers and expand their families' land-holdings.

In chap. 3, David Simpkin (Birkenhead Sixth Form College) discusses the Essex gentry in the reigns of Edward I and II. The essay updates an earlier piece,<sup>3</sup> adding more archival evidence and material from an online database—*The Soldier in Later Medieval England*. He contends that the Essex gentry did in fact contribute significantly to the wars of Edward I (61). His argument hinges on the inclusion of individuals whose lands were principally within the county, even if they resided outside it (51). He also shows convincingly that, by the Battle of Bannockburn (23-24 June

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1. Based on papers delivered at the Essex Record Office conference in March 2014.

2. The book features twenty-one black-and-white figures, fifteen tables, substantive endnotes, and a map of fourteenth-century Essex clearly showing the local communities of the county (3).

3. Simpkin, "On the Fighting Essex Gentry," *Essex Journal* 46 (2011) 7-14. Database online – [www.medievalsoldier.org](http://www.medievalsoldier.org).

1314), the Essex gentry was a well established and highly militarized group—a conclusion that corresponds to Ward's (61).

Chapter 4, by Gloria Harris (M.A. Essex Univ.), concerns the gentry's role in organized crime. She argues that the life of Hugh de Badewe reveals how young gentlemen who had fought in the Hundred Years' War went on to employ violence in their activities back home in England. Using three records of Hugh's criminal activity in the Calendar of Patent Rolls, she maintains that fighting on the continent had militarized him and endeared him to soldiers of similar status. Because warfare was intermittent, many knights engaged in raids and violent acts against nearby rivals; in Hugh's case, within twenty-five miles. While the reasons for these attacks remain obscure, revenge seems to have been the usual motive (75).

Chapters 5–7 address three groups of individuals of lesser material means: archers, mariners, and peasants. In chap. 5, a careful prosopographical study using a 3-Tier System Relational Database, Sam Gibbs (Univ. of London) analyzes service relationships between archers and their retinue captains.<sup>4</sup> Specifically, he compares the English poll taxes of 1377 and 1381 (1379 returns for Essex do not survive) to muster lists and other documents (81, 84). He concludes that

Overall, the poll tax data does [*sic*] provide some insight into the Essex men who served as archers. They appear to be relatively unremarkable, with no particularly strong trends to mark them out as distinct from those individuals who did not undertake military service. The slightly higher numbers at the bottom of the taxation scale and a corresponding decline at the top suggest that men of lower economic status were more likely to serve as archers than those of greater wealth. This theory fits with the demographic structure of Essex, characterized by relatively high population density and income inequality compared with other regions of England, perhaps providing stimulus for military service. (95)

In chap. 6, Andrew Ayton (Univ. of Hull) and Craig Lambert (Univ. of Southampton) analyze mariners and the evolution of naval recruitment in fourteenth-century Essex. There is sufficient matter here for two or three separate chapters. First, the authors compare the accounts of the Essex Mariner Survey of 1372 with those of similar regions. They argue that the 1372 return is both locally and nationally significant, because it records mariners' names and locations and indicates whether they were at home or at sea (104). It also shows a shift in royal strategy regarding forms of recruitment. They use ratios between numbers of mariners and ship tonnage to demonstrate that the crown changed over from transport fleets to offensive and defensive naval warfare. This strategy, they argue, necessitated fewer mariners than did fleets carrying large numbers of troops and supplies across the channel.

Second, the authors use an analytical tool they call the "three-identifiers method" to evaluate the crown's recruitment designs on local Essex communities. This method links ship designation, home port, and shipmaster's name in naval records to the English poll taxes and the 1372 return. (They also use ship tonnage to verify linkages between ships.) They conclude that royal impressment of even a few ships from small ports harmed local economies more than arrestments from larger ones did (123). With this in mind, Ayton and Lambert link naval recruitment to the Peasants' Revolt (1381) and the role of Essex mariners in the Great Rising (133).

In chap. 7, Herbert Eiden (Univ. of Reading) investigates the military knowledge and performance of participants in the Peasants' Revolt. Using primarily chronicle evidence, he notes that

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4. See, further, Gibbs, "The Service Patterns and Social-Economic Status of English Archers, 1367-1417: The Evidence of the Muster Rolls and Poll Tax Returns" (Diss.: Univ. of Reading, 2016).

the speed and precision of the rebellion's spread mean prior planning and coordination were essential (152). A telling example is the conjoining of three columns of rebels before London on the eve of the Feast of Corpus Christi (149). Eiden concurs with Ayton and Lambert that further research into the military capabilities of the rebels is much needed. Also interesting is Eiden's use of the term "insurgent" to refer to the rebel groups. Is that the appropriate designation for people taking part in a revolt in the fourteenth century? Knighton's Chronicle, for example, simply calls them "wicked commoners" (*plebs ista nephanda*).<sup>5</sup> Still, Eiden's word choice suggests there may be value in drawing analogies between the participants in modern and medieval uprisings, given the large body of scholarly analysis of the former.

*Fighting Essex Soldier* will appeal to a diverse readership. Medievalists will appreciate its innovative arguments and meaty endnotes with archival references that may spur future research. Military historians will find Gibbs's chapter on archers and Ayton and Lambert's on mariners to be excellent models for analytical case studies of other wars in other eras. And, too, the collection's home-front approach—divided between local government agents and lower-class actors—is most suggestive. In short, the book is an exemplar of a high quality collection of succinct studies with salutary implications for the larger historical community.

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5. See G.H. Martin, ed., *Knighton's Chronicle, 1337-1396* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1995) 208.