

Jersey & Guernsey Law Review – October 2012**BOOK REVIEW**

T Thornton, *The Channel Islands 1370–1640: between England and Normandy*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2012. ISBN 978-1-84383-711-4.

1 Professor Tim Thornton will already be known to some of our readers. He is a full-time academic historian—he is Professor of History at the University of Huddersfield—who takes an active interest in the history of the Channel Islands. Fortunately for us, that active interest extends to contributions in the written form, including for this *Review*. *The Channel Islands 1370–1640* is his most ambitious project yet on the Islands. The *Review* is particularly delighted to have supported some of the research that went into its preparation.

2 This work takes as its core enquiry how it was that these small Islands, from 1066 usually under the same ruler as the kingdom of England, although separated politically from Normandy in 1204, retained close social, religious and economic ties with the latter between 1370 and 1640, squeezed as they were between the more often than not competing interests of England and France. In particular, the author is concerned to examine how the Islands fared by comparison with other territories dependant on the English Crown, where key themes were the process of centralisation and imposition of uniformity, often driven from the power bases at the centre of the kingdom (notably but not restricted to the Crown) but also in part by members of local society keen to benefit from the perceived advantages of a powerful, centralised state. The author concludes that the Channel Islands provide a “fundamental contrast” to the experiences of Wales and Ireland where notwithstanding—

“their strongholds of social, cultural and political identity, all of these were sooner or later under ultimate English control. The strongholds and elite connections of the Norman-French society, culture and politics of the Channel Islands were not . . . The islands therefore present us with a fascinating opportunity to consider . . . the fate of local and provincial distinctiveness in the

late medieval and early modern periods amongst the territories of the English crown.”¹

3 The Islands were in a peculiar position. Nestled close to the west of the Cotentin, they were over a hundred miles away from England; their language was Norman French; their laws drew from the Norman custom; Islanders held lands in Normandy; individuals and religious houses in Normandy held land in the Islands; ecclesiastically, the Islands were within the Norman diocese of Coutances (in 1496 they were transferred to the diocese of Salisbury and then in 1499 to that of Winchester, to little lasting effect in either case; it was not to be before the 1560s that they were successfully transferred from the Norman diocese to that of Winchester); they had close trade links with Normandy; some individuals retained family ties with people in Normandy; some even showed signs of a preferred allegiance to the French Crown. However, the Islands were the King of England’s strategically important outposts on the edge of a kingdom frequently cast as the enemy and over which successive English monarchs bore territorial ambitions. In times of war, the Islands often found themselves at the eye of the storm, housing English troops, taking an active part in the warfare, facing numerous raids and sometimes occupation by the French. Such a range of competing factors was a prescription, at the least, for confusion of identity and allegiance. The peculiarity of the position can be seen, for example, as Professor Thornton records, in the papal schism at the beginning of 1378. England supported Pope Urban VI; France, Pope Clement VII; although part of the kingdom of England, as the Islands fell with the diocese of Coutances, they were now officially linked to a pope that their English compatriots viewed as the anti-pope.

4 As we discover in this work, by a mixture of circumstance, in particular the strategic store the English Crown set in retaining the loyalty of the Islanders and hence access to their useful outposts, but also a persistence amongst certain Islanders to retain and indeed expand their degree of independence and rights vis-à-vis England, the Channel Islands managed to avoid being drawn in to a centralised kingdom and maintained and gained rights and privileges far beyond what such small and dependent territories might more usually have anticipated.

5 It was perhaps during the Reformation that the threat of uniformity and subjection to central control was at its highest, as successive English monarchs showed themselves prepared to intervene rather more closely in the internal religious affairs of the Islands. And so they

¹ p. 8.

did, to varying degrees and with different results in Jersey and Guernsey. However and yet again, the religious change received in the Islands reflected English and French interactions, as it did the unique way in which the local community developed in its own religious outlook.

6 Throughout this work it is striking how successive English monarchs continued to reassert the rights and privileges of the Islands *via* Royal Charters. These Charters varied, some simply reconfirming rights and privileges previously granted, others extending and expanding the rights of the Islanders which, at their highest, as the author observes, gave them the fiscal and financial advantages of the English alongside the right to be governed by their own laws and tried by their own courts. For readers of the *Review*, it is interesting to see how these grants were interpreted locally as reinforcing the local custom and were deployed to resist incursions into the local jurisdictions by English courts. Thus, we are told, for example, of the pleaded response of Helier de la Roque to an action by Helier de Carteret over the alleged non-payments of *rentes*, which action was brought before the English Court of Chancery at a date within the period 1518–1529: the—

“matter is clerely deternynable within the kynges Ile of Jarsey in the said bill named after the Course and ordre of the lawes and Customes there vsed *which the kynges highnes vndre his grete seall of Englonde hath confermed* and ought nott to be deternyned in this honorable Court [of Chancery] ne in noo place els owt of thesame.”²

7 This book fills an important gap in our history. Apart from the Reformation, which has received recent academic scrutiny—in Guernsey *via* Ogier’s *Reformation and Society in Guernsey*³; in Jersey *via* Evans’s, *The Religious History of Jersey 1558–1640*⁴—the last work to cover the period was Eagleston’s *The Channel Islands under Tudor Government 1485–1642*.⁵ Professor Thornton makes an important contribution to a theme often referred to (not so often examined in any great depth) by historians of the Islands, namely the effect of growing up between and under the influence of two much larger and powerful cousins. Perhaps against all the odds, the Channel Islands managed to retain a high degree of distinctiveness. Tantalisingly, this book leaves us on the cusp of the English Civil War.

² p. 154.

³ Woodbridge, 1996.

⁴ Unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2001.

⁵ Published for the Guernsey Society, Cambridge University Press, 1949.

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