

Sara McDougall, *Royal Bastards: The Birth of Illegitimacy, 800-1230* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). Print, 336 pp., £65.00, ISBN: 13: 9780198785828.



*Review*

Sara McDougall's new book on bastardy in the Middle Ages is a fundamental contribution to the field of family history, remarkable for the breadth and number of examples provided across Europe and the Mediterranean throughout four centuries, the in-depth analysis of literary, documentary and legislative sources considered, and the convincing nature of the case she puts forward.

The volume opens with a survey of the last fifty years of studies on the topic, highlighting how scholars have had the tendency to read backwards the sources about illegitimacy, presenting as true throughout the Middle Ages a clear-cut attitude towards illegitimacy as an unerasable stigma that prevented children born out of wedlock from inheriting. First, the author flags an inherent problem with this presentation, namely the lack of a widely accepted definition of legitimate marriage in canon law before the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, which makes defining which children were and weren't born out of wedlock complex before this point. Secondly, McDougall points out how, even when marriages were denounced as illegitimate or invalid, stress was put by Church writers on the sinful parents rather than the children resulting from their unions which were regarded as innocent. Finally, the author first puts forward the case she will seek to substantiate throughout the volume: that before the 13<sup>th</sup> century it was a combination of factors, primary among them the social status of one's mother, that determined the status of children of marriages or unions of uncertain legitimacy, and that even acknowledged bastardy did not automatically prevent someone from inheriting property or even a throne (defining what she calls "being throneworthy", p. 81).

The first chapter then proceeds to examine the language of illegitimacy, showing how the terms now most commonly in use, *bastardus* and *illegitimus*, did not appear until later (11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century respectively). Other terms examined, such as *nothus*, *spurius*, *naturalis*, *manzer*, are shown in their evolution from imperial Roman law and Judaic law to medieval sources. Emphasis, argues McDougall, was placed not on the circumstances of a union but rather on the respective social standing of its members, with particular stigma placed on the children of socially different parents (thus William the Conqueror was called bastard '*sanguine obliquo*', because of his uneven blood, pp. 46–7). The ground is further complicated by the varying vocabulary applied to female companions, from *concupina* to the classical *pellex*, and to the state of thinly veiled polygamy still extant into the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

The book then proceeds to review a number of different kin groups, establishing how different inheritance mechanisms affected different attitudes towards children of illegitimate or uncertain unions. Thus the Merovingian model, in which the bloodline justifies the throneworthiness of anybody who can boast a Merovingian male ancestor, is supplanted by the Carolingian one, in which an uncertain claim is boosted by careful consideration of both the male and the female bloodline, privileging children of prestigious families in the female line. Then kin groups are considered for which inheritance seems to have worked in a highly contextual way, without any stable protocol, such as the Capetian, Ottonian, and Anglo-Saxon rulers. The importance of a mother's kin is reaffirmed with the Anglo-Normans, and the *causes célèbres* of Matilda of England and Bohemond of Taranto are reviewed.

A watershed is then identified in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, first with the canon law writing of Ivo of Chartres, who emphasised forgiveness for the children and rather explicitly condemned the sinning parents, as in the case of Phillip I and Bertrade de

Montfort, and then a series of papal pronouncements on the topic of illegitimacy. McDougall highlights how such pronouncements were reactive, the result of a specific appeal to the papacy rather than of papal involvement with private marriage, and contingent on political expediency rather than canon law, as with the odd Anstey case. The elastic attitude to illegitimate marriages is shown with the cases of Marie of Boulogne and Ramiro of Aragon, both professed members of the clergy who had children to ensure descendants for their lands.

A firmer watershed is finally identified in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, in which the reduction of forbidden degrees of kinship both more firmly defined 'legitimate' marriage and put a stop to easy annulments from the papacy. The process of legitimisation is then discussed, further crystallising the status of illegitimate children by putting forward a clear process for clarifying their status. This power, however, is shown to be shared by clergy and laity, and to be used contextually.

Finally, the book closes with the examination of two theatres, the Crusader and the Iberian, in which canon law was repeatedly flouted to ensure descendency in an unstable political context, showing the willingness of clerical authority to compromise on the matter of legitimate marriage and legitimate inheritance on the edge of Christendom, where enduring influence was held to trump the finesse of the law.

Throughout her analysis, McDougall accumulates an impressive breadth of case studies, from comital and noble houses as well as royal, which together contribute to making a strong and convincing case for her premise. The only drawback of this otherwise impressively comprehensive volume is the lack of discussion of the stigma clearly attached in literature to illegitimacy, even in cases in which this did not affect an illegitimate child's chance of inheriting (see again William the Conqueror). However, McDougall's volume remains a ground-breaking

and sorely-needed contribution to the field, and one which clearly will affect kin studies across Europe and the Medieval Mediterranean.

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