

THE REBELLION OF 1321: A WARWICKSHIRE PERSPECTIVE

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All place-names have been modernised. Except for the earls of Warwick and Lancaster, articles, prepositions and titles have been omitted from personal names and a compromise spelling adopted to avoid the extremes of medieval variations. The maps are intentionally simplified: I am grateful to Olivia for her patient help with these. P.T.

In Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II* the playwright imagines Guy Beauchamp, the earl of Warwick and among the most powerful barons in the land, threatening to confront the king with a popular uprising from his midland power-base: 'all Warwickshire will leave him for my sake'. Actual events, in fact, had not quite followed that pattern, nor has much historical evidence emerged so far to suggest that the civil war which eventually swept Edward from power was fuelled to any great extent by the peasants' revolt of Marlowe's oppressed multitude, 'that are but sparks rak'd up in embers of their poverty'.¹ Yet the worst famine in English history, coupled with discontent over increasingly frequent taxation imposed by an inept young king busy squandering a rich inheritance, significantly aggravated the many undercurrents of social unrest, and the sheer precariousness of existence must have made both lord and peasant more than usually ready to resort to desperate measures.² Local gentry leaders found little difficulty in tapping this discontent and in mobilizing support to oppose the king's capricious policy-making, particularly after the English humiliations in Scotland,

¹ *The Plays of Christopher Marlowe*, Everyman Library, 1950, pp. 226, 228. For Marlowe's rewriting of history, see the introduction to Christopher Marlowe, *Edward II*, ed. C.R. Forker, Manchester 1994, pp. 41-66.

² I. Kershaw, 'The great famine and agricultural crisis in England, 1315-22', *Past and Present*, 59, 1973. On taxation, R.H. Hilton, *Bondmen Made Free*, London 1973, pp. 146-7; J. Taylor and W. Childs, *Politics and Crisis in Fourteenth Century England*, Gloucester 1990, p. 21; F.M. Powicke, *The Thirteenth Century*, Oxford 1962, pp. 523-525; J.F. Willard, *Parliamentary Taxes on Personal Property, 1290-1334*, Cambridge, Mass., 1934, pp. 344-5. On Edward's inheritance, M. McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century*, Oxford 1959, pp. xvii-xviii, 1-2.