

THE
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CChronicles
of
Jean
le Bel

1290 – 1360

TRANSLATED BY
NIGEL BRYANT



THE TRUE CHRONICLES OF JEAN LE BEL 1290–1360

The chronicles of Jean le Bel, written around 1357–60, are one of the most important sources for the beginning of the Hundred Years' War. They were only rediscovered and published at the beginning of the twentieth century, though Froissart begins his much more famous work by acknowledging his great debt to the 'true chronicles' which Jean le Bel had written. Many of the great pages of Froissart are actually the work of Jean le Bel, and this is the first translation of his book.

It introduces English-speaking readers to a vivid text written by a man who, although a canon of the cathedral at Liège, had actually fought with Edward III in Scotland, and who was a great admirer of the English king. He writes directly and clearly, with an admirable grasp of narrative; and he writes very much from the point of view of the knights who fought with Edward. Even as a canon, he lived in princely style, with a retinue of two knights and forty squires, and he wrote at the request of John of Hainault, the uncle of queen Philippa. He was thus able to draw directly on the verbal accounts of the Crécy campaign given to him by soldiers from Hainault who had fought on both sides; and his description of warfare in Scotland is the most realistic account of what it was like to be on campaign that survives from this period. If he succumbs occasionally to a good story from one of the participants in the wars, this helps us to understand the way in which the knights saw themselves; but his underlying objective is to keep 'as close to the truth as I could, according to what I personally have seen and remembered, and also what I have heard from those who were there.' Edward may be his hero, a 'gallant and noble king', but Le Bel tells the notorious story of his supposed rape of the countess of Salisbury because he believed it to be true, puzzled and shocked though he was by his material.

It is a text which helps to put the massive work of Jean Froissart in perspective, but its concentrated focus and relatively short time span makes it a much more approachable and highly readable insight into the period.

Nigel Bryant read History and French at Balliol College, Oxford. He worked for many years as a theatre director and radio drama producer for the BBC, and was head of drama at Marlborough College and Lecturer in Drama at the University of Manchester. He has translated five major Arthurian romances from medieval French; this is his first translation of a historical work.

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THE TRUE CHRONICLES OF
JEAN LE BEL 1290–1360

Translated by Nigel Bryant

THE BOYDELL PRESS

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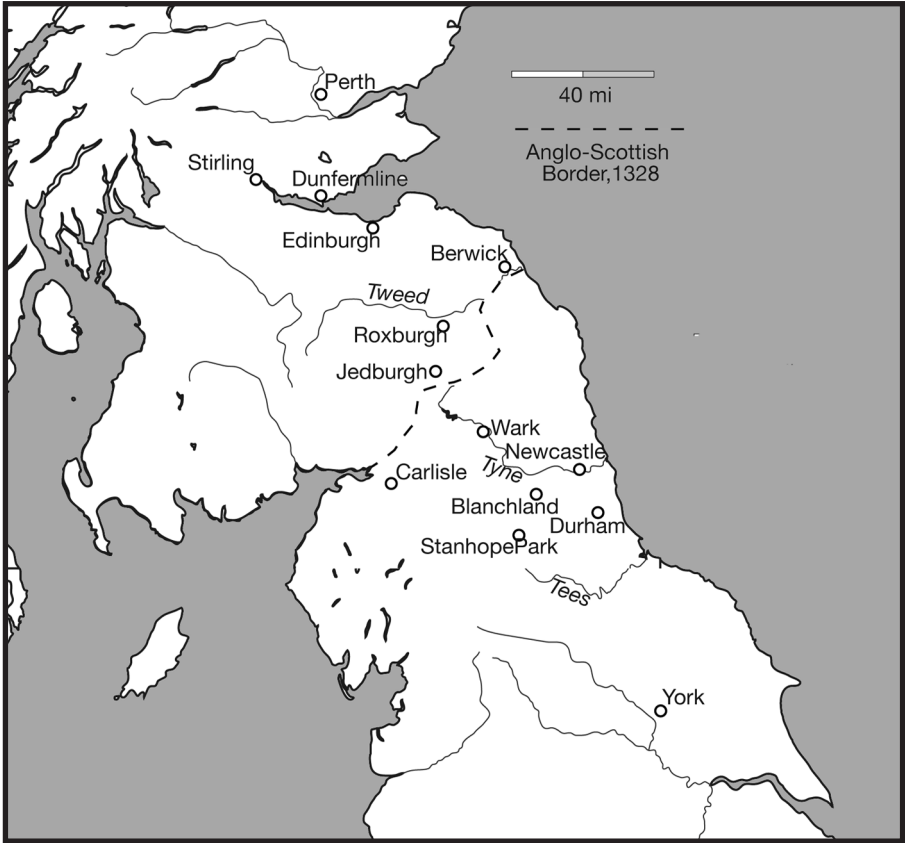
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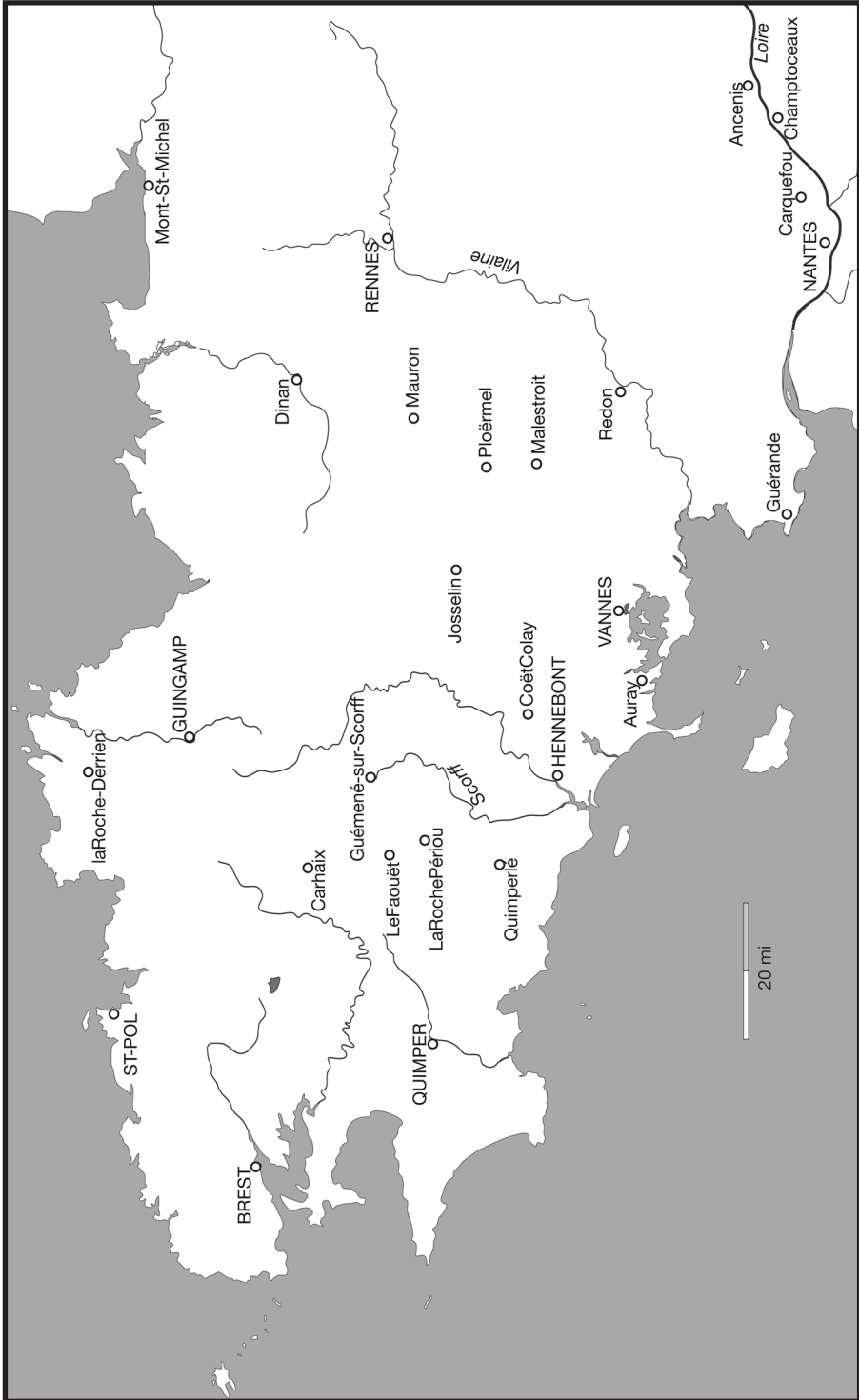
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THE SCOTTISH BORDERS



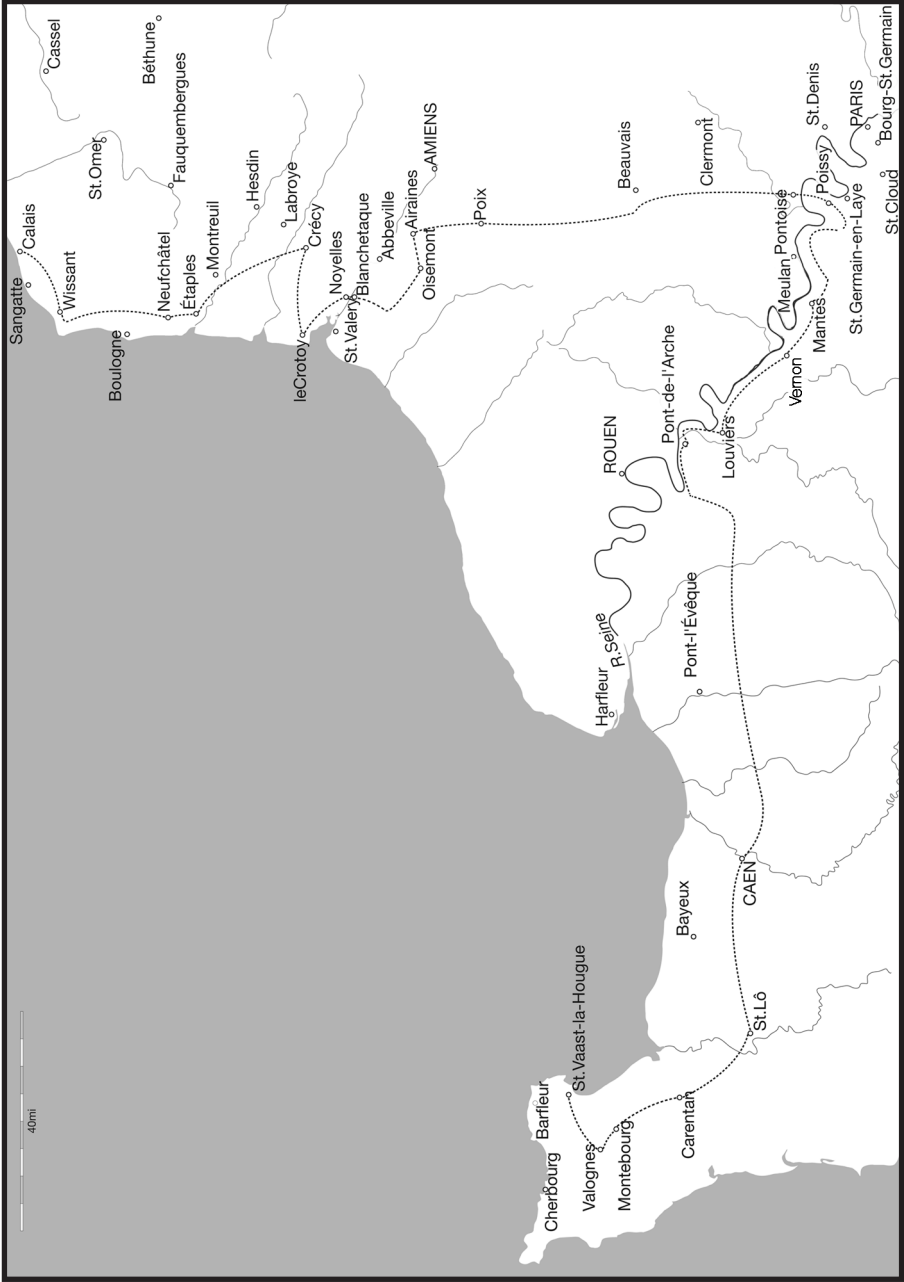
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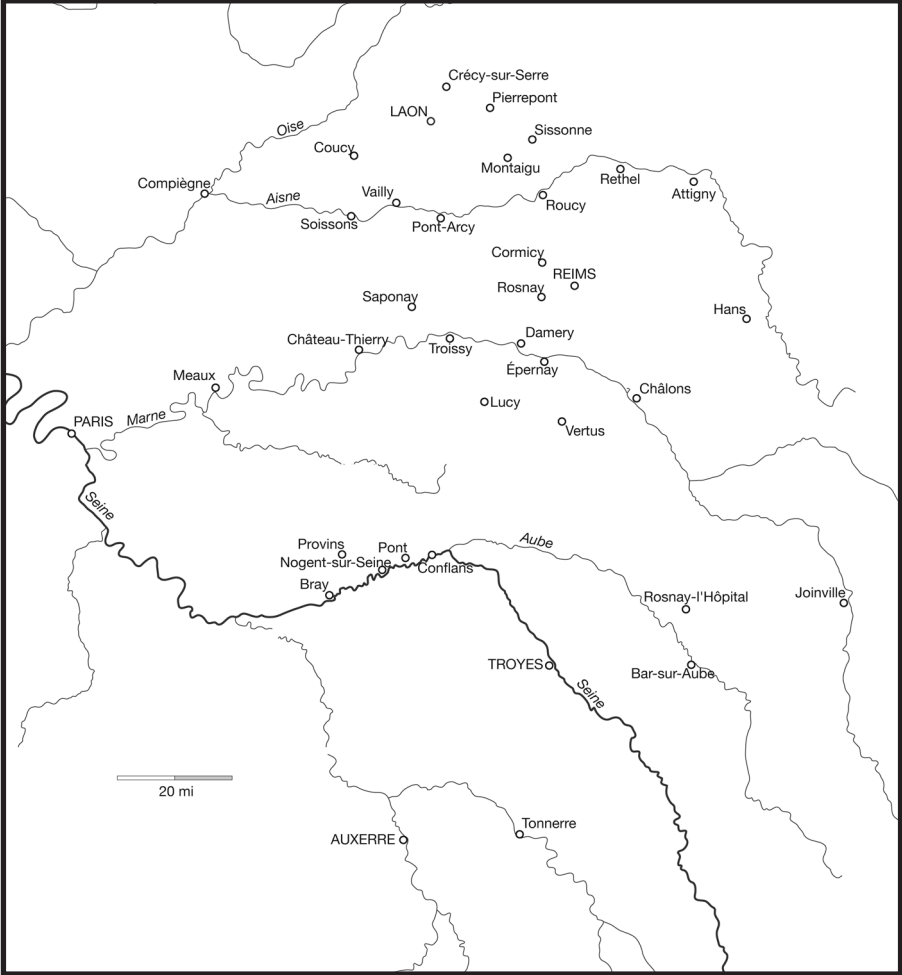
GASCONY



THE CRÉCY CAMPAIGN 1346



CHAMPAGNE



For Maurice Keen

Introduction

'True Chronicles'

This title is not Le Bel's own. It's a quote from the far more famous chronicler Jean Froissart, who in his very first pages acknowledged his debt to Le Bel by declaring:

I wish to base my work on the example of the *true chronicles* previously written and assembled by that venerable and astute gentleman Jean le Bel, canon of Saint-Lambert¹ at Liège. He applied great care and diligence to the task, which he continued throughout his life with all the precision that he could. It cost him a good deal to acquire the information, but he neither cared nor complained about the expense, for he was a man of wealth and power and was perfectly able to meet the cost, and he always spent his money freely, being a man of generosity, courtesy and honour. Moreover, he was a dear and close friend of that most noble and respected lord Sir John of Hainault,² who is rightly well remembered in this book, for he was a driving force and principal player in many illustrious events and very closely connected with kings, so that in his company the aforementioned Jean le Bel was able to witness and learn directly of many of the exploits that follow.³

It's only right that Froissart should have acknowledged his debt, for many of the early passages in his Chronicle for which Froissart is justly praised were lifted directly from Le Bel.⁴ Indeed, the main reason why Le Bel's work was for a long while little known and little copied – only one manuscript survives, and it wasn't found until the second half of the nineteenth century – is that Froissart absorbed sections of it into his own Chronicle which, because he then went on to recount the events of later years, made Le Bel's work seem redundant.

Froissart may also be indebted to Le Bel (and the title 'True Chronicles' justified) for a second reason: he was very much influenced by his predecessor's insistence upon accuracy and veracity. According to another Liégeois chronicler, Jean d'Outremeuse, it was at John of Hainault's behest that Le Bel wrote his Chronicle, and John wanted him to write 'the pure truth ... without favour to any party ... [and] without attributing blame or honour to any who have not deserved it... And when it was complete he was to show it to Sir John and others who had

¹ The cathedral.

² John (1288-1356) was the brother of Count William I of Hainault (1286-1337).

³ Besançon MS 864, folio 1 v.

⁴ That is not to say that the texts are identical. At some points subtle alterations and changes of emphasis – which become more marked in Froissart's later revisions – are important in revealing the chroniclers' differing intentions. See Gerald Nachtwey, "Scapegoats and Conspirators in the Chronicles of Jean Froissart and Jean le Bel" in *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 36, ed. Gusick and Heintzelman (Woodbridge, 2011), pp.103-25.

been present at the events described so that it could be corrected according to their truthful guidance, without any fiction...¹ At the beginning of his Chronicle, Le Bel writes scathingly about

the great book written in verse that I've seen and read, which some imaginative soul has concocted in rhyme, full of nonsense and wild invention... littered with errors and lies... [and] with a good deal of contrivance and repetition to embellish the verse, and such an abundance of feats of prowess attributed to certain knights and other persons that they test credulity, bordering on the impossible! Such a fanciful versified history is unlikely to please or appeal to people of wit and reason...²

It may be that these lines sobered and influenced Froissart as he embarked upon his work, because Froissart confesses to a change of method after composing a piece of his juvenilia:

I have consistently done all I can to seek and request true accounts of the wars and events that have taken place, especially since the great battle of Poitiers...; for before that I was young both in age and in thinking, and undertook rather presumptuously, having only just left school, to compose an account of the aforementioned wars in verse...³

At all points, Le Bel was determined to base what he wrote solely on 'what I've witnessed myself or have heard from those who've been present when I have not; and I mean to do so as truthfully as I can'.⁴ Indeed, he will sometimes even break off his account of events at dramatic and crucial moments with phrases such as 'I can't describe it in detail so I'll leave it at that'⁵ or 'I won't tell you exactly how it was done, as I wasn't there'.⁶ If, then, his version of an event ever differs from someone else's (as it sometimes does), we may depend at least on Le Bel's honest intention and desire to be accurate and authoritative. Some of his remarks about the battle of Crécy, for instance – not least his assertion that King Philip at no point entered the fray⁷ – may raise eyebrows, but he can very credibly assure us that

I've described this as accurately as I can, following the account given to me from his own lips by my lord and friend Sir John of Hainault...and ten or twelve knights and companions of his household; they'd been in the press with the noble and valiant King of Bohemia and had their horses killed beneath them. From the other side I've heard similar accounts from several English and German knights who were there.⁸

¹ Outremeuse, *Ly myreur des histors*, ed. A. Borgnet, Brussels, 1864-1880, vol. 6, pp.322-3. Outremeuse also tells that Le Bel had two copies made, one of which he kept and the other he gave to Sir John.

² Below, p.21.

³ Besançon MS 864, folio 1 v.

⁴ Below, p.22.

⁵ p.157.

⁶ p.215.

⁷ See p.181 and footnote 1.

⁸ p.181.

Certainly, as Outremeuse said, Jean le Bel was well placed to acquire good eye-witness reports. He was a canon of Liège Cathedral in an age when bishop-dukes and bishop-counts led armies into battle. And a vivid description of Le Bel by yet another Liégeois writer, Jacques de Hemricourt, makes the chronicler's status very clear. In his *Miroir des nobles de Hesbaye*¹ Hemricourt assures us that Le Bel was rather special. The cathedral of Saint-Lambert, he says, had never had a man of finer character than 'Johan le Beal'; he was 'tall and of fine stature' and notably well-dressed 'in the manner of a banneret,² his shoulders trimmed with ermine', wearing clothes 'of samite or silk depending on the weather'; whenever he went to church he 'never had an escort of fewer than sixteen or twenty persons ... and often as great a company as the Bishop of Liège himself, having fully fifty or at least forty followers, all of whom stayed to dine with him!' His household in fact was instructed to be ever-ready to entertain eminent visitors to Liège: 'whenever they saw any worthy stranger, be he a prelate or a knight or a squire, they invited him to dinner or supper ... and if any prince arrived in the city he would certainly be dining at his side'.³

This description endorses Froissart's remark that Le Bel incurred considerable (nay, probably lavish) expense in gaining his information; and it helps to explain why, being so fabulously well connected, Le Bel was able to compose his remarkably wide-ranging story – his Chronicle covers, after all, events in most of Western Europe, from Scotland to Spain, from Brittany to Germany – without ever apparently drawing on any written sources: it is, in a sense, a quite exceptional piece of oral history.

Le Bel's exclusive reliance on orally transmitted information leads to some curious imbalances. In dealing with Edward III's Scottish wars, for example, he doesn't so much as mention the major pitched battle of Halidon Hill (is he, one wonders, aware that it ever happened? – he surely would have made some reference had he been drawing on any other written sources), but devotes considerable space and detail to a relatively trivial clash at Boroughmuir. The reason is almost certainly that he happened to know and to have spoken to no one present at the former, while the latter involved a contingent from his native Low Countries, 'young knights and squires eager to gain experience in arms and test themselves and win honour [who had] set out to serve the noble English king whose fame was increasing by the day',⁴ led by the young Count John of Namur and his two brothers Sir Guy and Sir Philip. One or more of these 'young knights and squires' will presumably have been his source – though with his typical unwillingness to make assumptions and his commitment to recording only what he's been told by reliable informants, Le Bel adds that 'I could never discover whether the lords of Namur were kept in captivity or for how long or if they were ever released'.⁵

¹ Hesbaye was the name of the region centred upon Liège.

² A wealthy and eminent knight who led his own company of troops into battle.

³ Hemricourt, *Le Miroir des nobles de Hesbaye*, ed. Borman & Bayot (Brussels, 1910), p.226.

⁴ Below, p.63.

⁵ p.64.

It might be argued, however, that such imbalances and omissions are compensated for by Le Bel's aim for integrity, by the sense that he has at least personally assessed the reliability of what he is recording.

Chivalry

Jacques de Hemricourt's description of Le Bel gives another extremely important insight. He tells us that he 'had been engaged in arms in his younger days and taken part in the tournament, and was in the household of Sir John of Hainault, lord of Beaumont and Chimay'.¹ Indeed, Le Bel accompanied John of Hainault when he crossed the sea to England to support the young Edward III against the Scots in 1327, and his direct, first-hand account of this shambolic campaign in the Borders (not to mention the terrifying clash between English archers and their Flemish allies in the streets of York) is one of the most gripping and atmospheric passages in the Chronicle. But Le Bel's experience in arms is much more significant than that. Throughout his work it is clear that he is entirely wedded to the values of the chivalric class. The armies of Edward III and all the other great princes of his time may be wreaking death, destruction, havoc and misery on an epic scale, but, says Le Bel, 'these things happen in war and they have to be accepted'² and he idolises the glamour of knighthood. He loves display and pageantry, classifies fighting men according to their armour, and deplores the fact that standards are slipping:

At that time the great lords took no account of men-at-arms unless they had crested helms, whereas now we count any with lances, cuirasses, hauberks and iron caps. In my own time things have changed a lot, it seems to me: the splendid caparisoned horses and crested helms of old, and the shining plate and heraldic coats, are gone, replaced by cuirasses, gambisons and iron caps. These days a humble page is as well and as finely armed as a noble knight.³

He is clearly steeped in chivalric literature: some passages read uncannily like episodes from Arthurian romance. When, for example, John of Hainault hears of the plight of Queen Isabella and the young Edward, in exile and afraid to return to England,

Sir John began to weep fervent tears of pity, and said: "Lady, behold your knight, who will defend you with his life, truly, even if all others fail you. I shall do everything in my power to escort you and your son to England and restore you to your rightful stations, ... and I and all those I can rally will stake our lives upon the enterprise..."

¹ *Le Miroir*, p.226. There was nothing at all unusual about a churchman being engaged in arms; not only did bishop-counts and bishop-dukes lead armies, but see, for example, p.91 below, where a clash between opposing forces near Tournai involves 'Henry d'Asse, a canon of Saint John at Liège, whose prowess had often been witnessed, and Thierry de Mohalt, canon of Huy... [and] the rector of Winchekus, who acquitted himself splendidly and received a cut across the nose and face...'

² Below, p.173.

³ p.68.

Only the most hard-hearted man would have failed to feel deep pity if he'd seen how that fair and tearful lady stood then, ready to fall at the feet of the noble knight and thank him for the mighty pledge he'd made. But he wouldn't allow it; and when she couldn't do as she wished – that is, fall at his feet – she flung her arms about his neck and kissed him joyously, saying to the noble knight:

“A thousand thanks! If you'll do as you've so courteously promised, my son and I will be your servants evermore...”

And this good knight, then in his prime, replied: “My dear lady, if I didn't mean to carry it out I wouldn't have made the promise...”

Having promised to escort the lady to her kingdom, he wouldn't fail her were it to cost him his life; and he would rather die, if die he must, with that exiled lady than elsewhere, for all knights should do everything in their power to aid and comfort ladies and maidens who are deprived and distressed, especially when requested.¹

And straight from the pages of a romance, one could be forgiven for thinking, is the passage in which ‘the valiant Countess of Montfort’, besieged at Hennebont, desperately awaits the arrival of ‘the valiant knight Sir Walter Mauny’, who has been locked in a forty-day storm at sea. In cliffhanging fashion she is alone in still believing he's on his way, and her supporters are on the very point of surrendering her stronghold, when

the valiant countess, looking out to sea from a castle window, began to shout in jubilation, crying with all the strength she could summon: “I see the aid I've desired so long!”

All the people in the city ran to the walls to see what she had seen; and there, as plain as could be, they beheld a vast fleet of vessels, great and small, heading for Hennebont.²

Le Bel's references to things Arthurian are, in fact, numerous and striking: for him Carlisle is ‘the castle and city which the Welsh call Cardueil and which was formerly held by King Arthur’;³ Blanchland Abbey is ‘an abbey of white friars, known in King Arthur's time as the Blanche Lande’;⁴ the engagement at Boroughmuir is fought in the ruins of ‘an old city which had been known in the days of King Arthur's Round Table as the Castle of the Maidens’;⁵ and he is full of admiration for Edward III whose ‘noble heart inspired him not only to restore and improve the castle at Windsor, which King Arthur had built and where the Round Table was first established in honour of the worthy knights of that time, but also to create a counterpart to that Round Table for the greater honour of his own knights’.⁶

It may be interesting, indeed, to consider whether John of Hainault was moved to commission Le Bel's Chronicle by the example of such orders of chivalry

¹ p.27.

² p.134.

³ p.39.

⁴ p.45.

⁵ p.63.

⁶ p.153.

as Edward's Order of the Garter, who solemnly recorded the deeds of their members. In the more-or-less contemporary romance of *Perceforest* (in which King Perceforest's 'Order of the Franc Palais' may well have been the inspiration for Edward's Garter), a clerk named Cresus is commissioned 'to keep a record of all the events that have happened in this kingdom, and all the deeds that befall the noble knights of the Franc Palais, for their renown must never die';¹ likewise, Le Bel tells us, when in 1351 John II of France founded his ill-fated Company of the Star (probably in imitation of both *Perceforest* and the Garter), it was decided that at a plenary court held once a year each member

would recount all the adventures – the shameful as well as the glorious – that had befallen him since he'd last been at the noble court; and the king would appoint two or three clerks who would listen to these adventures and record them all in a book, so that they could annually be brought before the companions to decide which had been most worthy, that the most deserving might be honoured.²

It was probably in the following year (1352) or thereabouts that Le Bel's Chronicle was commissioned by John of Hainault,³ and the intention appears to have been very similar: on one extremely important level the Chronicle is just such a catalogue of honourable deeds, an attempt to record worthy feats of arms and prowess to assess which knights – and indeed kings – were most deserving of lasting credit and renown. Almost the whole of Le Bel's Prologue, in fact, is an expression of this aim, and in the first thirty-nine chapters, covering the years 1326-40, it is very noticeable that John of Hainault and his Hainaulter companions are themselves major players: Jean le Bel may be setting out to write the 'history of the worthy and noble King Edward', but the opening section of his Chronicle is also very markedly a record of the worthy deeds of the nobility of Hainault. The county might not have had a chivalric order like England's Garter or France's Company of the Star, but it would have an equivalent book of deeds.⁴

The great paladin Geoffroi de Charny earns several mentions from Le Bel as 'a most worthy and valiant knight', and in the 'manual' of chivalry that Charny wrote for the Company of the Star⁵ he has an oft-repeated catchphrase: '*Qui plus fait, mieux vault*' ['Who does more is of greater worth']. It is a knight's – and a king's – deeds that count for Charny, and for Le Bel. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in his comparison of the worth of Edward III and Philip VI:

¹ *Perceforest*, tr. N. Bryant (Woodbridge, 2011), p.260.

² Below, p.217.

³ For a discussion of the dates of composition, see below, pp.14–15.

⁴ In addition to the focus placed upon the deeds of Sir John and his companions in Chapters 1-39, every chance is later taken to record the prowess of the Hainaulter Walter Mauny, and a remarkable amount of attention is given to listing men from Hainault and Hesbaye (Le Bel's home ground) who participate in a minor skirmish outside Tournai. This accidental clash on a foggy morning is described in more detail (including a wound to a rector's nose) than the mighty battle of Sluys: see below, pp.90–1.

⁵ Available in translation as *A Knight's Own Book of Chivalry*, tr. Elspeth Kennedy, Philadelphia, 2005.

Some people, when they hear this story read, may wonder why I call the King of England ‘the noble King Edward’ but the French king simply ‘King Philip of France’; they might well imagine I’m biased or partisan. Saving the grace of all listeners, it’s not a question of taking sides; I do this to honour the one who behaved most nobly in this story, and that’s King Edward, who cannot be honoured too highly, for in all his deeds he always followed sound advice, and loved his men and knights and squires, and honoured each man according to his degree, and defended his land well against his enemies (and won a good deal from them), and bravely put his life at stake alongside his men both at home and abroad, and paid his troops and allies well and gave generously of his own wealth; for these reasons all should be glad to serve him and he deserves to be called ‘noble king’. None of this can be said of King Philip of France, who allowed his land in many parts to be ravaged and laid waste, and stayed ensconced around Paris in comfort and safety, and always followed the poor advice of clerics and prelates, especially those who said:

“Dear sire, don’t fret, and don’t go putting yourself at risk!”¹

In King Edward’s case, the list of his deeds is endless. Having just won Calais after a year-long siege,

it should be considered a sign of great honour and a great blessing from God, as indeed it was, that, as well as this, he and his men had destroyed and laid waste the whole land of Scotland between the city of Perth and the great forest of Jedburgh, and won the city of Berwick and all the surrounding fortresses; and elsewhere his men had ravaged and laid waste most of Gascony almost as far as Toulouse, and, nearer at hand, had ravaged and wasted all of Poitou and won many major towns and strong castles such as Lusignan, Saint-Jeand’Angély and the city of Poitiers, and likewise the great land of Brittany; and he personally had destroyed and laid waste the lands of the Cotentin and Normandy and the county of Évreux as far as Paris, and crossed the great River Seine at the bridge of Poissy and ravaged and wasted the country around Amiens and Beauvais and the county of Ponthieu, and had then stood arrayed for battle, with a small army in open fields, without ditches or fortifications, to face the entire might of France, and had held the field for two whole days and vanquished, captured and killed all the greatest lords in the kingdom of France, the Empire and Germany, and then laid siege to the mighty city of Calais and stayed there for a year without once returning home, and at the end of that year had taken it as you’ve heard. It seems to me that such great and lofty exploits are not without high honour, and that one cannot praise, esteem or honour too much the very noble king whom God so clearly wished to help.²

Meanwhile what has King Philip done, but repeatedly decline to do battle with the destroyer of his lands? ‘I just don’t understand it,’ says Le Bel. ‘To put it bluntly, he never had the stomach or the courage to fight.’³

Of all deeds, the famous ‘Battle of the Thirty’ in Brittany in 1351 – a formal and pre-planned engagement between two teams, fought on an appointed day

¹ Below, pp.167–8.

² pp.204–5.

³ pp.174–5.