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Henry III: The Rise to Power and Personal Rule, 1207-1258

David Carpenter

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Henry III: The Rise to Power and Personal Rule, 1207-1258. By David Carpenter. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020. ISBN 978-0-300-23835-8. xxv + 763 pp. £30.

Michael Prestwich's remark in the preface to his first edition of *Edward I* (1988)—"In 1968, I decided not to write this book"—can be read as self-congratulation, an acknowledgement of a difficult task accomplished, or as straightforward caution. In a similar vein, David Carpenter's new biography of Edward's father, Henry III, commences with a warning, but this is an admonition to avoid a hot Aga (x). Carpenter would be entitled to repeat Prestwich's weary reflection if he wanted. He began work on a biography of the King in the 1980s, but the resulting 490-page book, *The Minority of Henry III* (1990), covers only the first eleven years of the reign, from 1216 to 1227. In 1996, Carpenter's *The Reign of Henry III* considered the King's minority and so-called personal rule, but the book's twenty-one thematic essays are synchronic studies of the monarch and his people and their politics; consequently, it is not wholly biographical. Only now, twenty-plus years later, is Carpenter's Henrician biography project nearing completion. Or, part of it. The current volume covers Henry's life and reign from 1207 to 1258. A second volume, still to be finished, will continue the narrative to the King's death in 1272. Carpenter's task has so far taken a decade longer than Prestwich's, but Henry's reign is the fifth longest in English history. It was the fourth longest when the project started.

Carpenter's decision to commence his book with a personal anecdote about an Aga, rather than a justifiable lament about the length of his royal subject's tumultuous life, establishes the text's tone and its open-handed treatment of Henry. For as much as this is a book about an English monarch, so too is it a story of an English scholar. The book's many footnotes are replete with the author's musings. Readers will learn about the garden Carpenter cultivated "between the chapel's ruined pillars" at Westminster (195n132); one of his favourite meals in a French restaurant (263n90), and his disinclination to eat lampreys (390n390). More obviously, the book is a product of how Carpenter has reflected at length on Henry's paradoxes; for example, that of Henry's piety and attitude to royal prerogatives (435). This is, then, a very human biography, which is a curiously rare thing in scholarship, especially for a medieval king born over 800 years ago.

One of the book's great strengths lies in the meticulous care that Carpenter has taken to weave together the myriad studies and diverse interpretations of Henry's reign. This is necessary given the increased scholarly attention that the reign has received during the past twenty years, and important because a small body of this writing, characterised by its thundering denunciations against the King and his policies, *à la* thirteenth-century chronicler Matthew Paris, has probably had a disproportionate impact in galvanising academic opinion that Henry was well meaning and witless.

If the book benefits from being studiously balanced, a difficulty for readers is that this verdict emerges gradually. In many respects, this is how it should be. Henry came to the throne of a kingdom riven by war at the age of nine. Consequently, it took time for contemporaries to understand whether he would be a different man and monarch to his

little-lamented father, King John. Carpenter's year-by-year structure charts, as no other approach could, the vacillations in Henry's character and kingship. A chronological approach—save for two thematic chapters on Henry's piety (273–348) and court (349–413)—does, however, make the identification of themes, comparison with Henry's contemporary rulers, and contemplation of pan-national and pan-European cultural shifts, challenging. Sub-headings and a comprehensive index are essential aids, but there is much in the richness of this biography that can still get lost and glossed. This reviewer was struck by Henry's decision to take "two gilded helmets studded with gems" with him on his Welsh campaign of 1245, but Carpenter's commentary on this surely revealing choice is limited to a single sentence: "There is no evidence he ever used them" (431). Further thematic chapters promised for volume two will doubtless address this concern.

Exploration of the complex nature of Henry III's character, and the circumstances in which it was shaped, is perhaps the most important contribution to scholarship made by this first biographical volume. Henry's deep piety and strong sense of his royal prerogatives were fundamental in conditioning the constitutional crisis that brought his personal rule to an end in 1258. They were also, as Carpenter avers in the book's final sentence, and in a tantalising teaser for the sequel, the very thing that enabled him to recover from it (716). Carpenter's ability to grapple with something so enigmatic as a monarch's character, particularly that of a medieval monarch, is convincing and compelling because the book's footnotes evidence his forensic knowledge of the period's primary sources, as much as his personal tastes. On many occasions, readers can trace how Carpenter has stitched together points of detail by cross-referencing records in The National Archives with the printed volumes of the chancery rolls and the reports in chronicles. This methodology is requisite for any medieval historian, but Carpenter does it with unique skill and surety. One senses that he would easily rival the knowledge and passion of the chancery clerk who signed off a letter, "Salute all our colleagues" (377), if it were possible for him to travel back in time.

Certainly, were Carpenter to time travel, his royal subject—who apparently proclaimed, "I prefer to be thought a king foolish and remiss than cruel and tyrannical" (122)—would approve of his work. It is surely reflective of the Latin maxim that Henry had painted on the walls of the great chamber at Westminster and in the royal hall at Woodstock, "He who does not give what he loves, does not receive what he desires" (286–287). In the giving of himself to the study of Henry's reign—and in supporting so many students and colleagues whose work he enthusiastically cites—David Carpenter has crafted something that very many of us can delight in.

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