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King John: Treachery, Tyranny and the Road to Magna Carta,

Marc Morris

(Hutchinson, 2015)

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King John: Treachery, Tyranny and the Road to Magna Carta. By Marc Morris. Hutchinson, 2015. ISBN 9780091954239. 381pp. £25

The eight hundredth anniversary of the creation of Magna Carta has inspired a rich range of new historical writing about the document itself and the king whose rule provoked its creation. The flier and dustjacket of Marc Morris's contribution promise "a definitive new biography", which combines analysis of chronicle sources and royal letters "to bring the real [King] John vividly to life". The striking cover, showing the head from the king's tomb effigy at Worcester Cathedral, set against a background of the text of the Salisbury Cathedral Magna Carta, and (on the back) Corfe Castle shrouded in mist, conjure a sense of the dark and menacing character that the book itself describes.

Directed at an audience wider than the academic world, this is a well-written book. The narrative develops at a lively pace, with a keen sense of holding the reader's attention. There is plenty of detail, in a structure which spans an introduction, fourteen chapters (with striking titles such as 'A Pact from Hell', 'A Deed of Shame'), and a conclusion. These are prefaced by three useful maps (although the western-most parts of Wales, and of Cornwall, are inexplicably sawn off). At the centre, there are a series of well-presented colour plates, providing images of several of the castles central to the events of John's career, in Normandy, Ireland, and England, along with the surviving Plantagenet tomb effigies from the royal abbey of Fontevraud, seals of John and the foremost of his baronial opponents, Robert fitz Walter, and the tomb of King John in Worcester Cathedral. Meanwhile, the reader searching for further information can follow up the references presented as endnotes (except for the conclusion, where the endnotes that clearly exist have not been printed).

As Morris notes, "King John … has always exerted a hold on the public's imagination" (3). In seeking to unpack his character, the biography develops "two interwoven stories" (dust-jacket). Because of the lack of a consistent run of detailed evidence for John's early life, Morris begins with the unravelling of John's hold on large parts of his continental inheritance in 1203, and looks back to earlier episodes to fill in the gaps, both in terms of events and the evolution of this ruler's dreadful reputation.

Thus, in the first half of the book, chapters alternate between events of the early years of the reign, and episodes which preceded them. After charting John's retreat from Normandy in 1203, Morris moves back to the forging of the Angevin Empire and the young John's first active political involvement, his expedition to Ireland in 1185. It was an inauspicious start, made famous by Gerald of Wales's tale that the young man tugged at the beards of native Irish rulers. Whether or not there is substance to this,

Morris argues that John's real problem lay in antagonising the Anglo-Norman families who had settled in Ireland earlier in his father's reign.

Chapter 3 returns to the loss of Normandy, and problems John faced in marshalling a response. This is juxtaposed, in chapter 4, with his behaviour during the first half of the reign of his brother Richard, culminating in an attempt to usurp the throne after the Lionheart was captured as he attempted to return to England following the Third Crusade. Chapter 5 returns to the early 1200s, noting John's extensive efforts to raise increasing revenues, and that this led to a campaign of consolidation overseas, particularly in Poitou and Gascony. The alternating pattern continues in chapters 6-8, looking at the later years of Richard's reign, at John's accession in 1199 and his rule down to 1202, then at royal government in 1207-08, marked by building financial pressure on his subjects and the early stages of John's long-running dispute with the papacy. Morris then considers the disappearance and presumed murder of the king's nephew, Arthur of Brittany, in 1203.

Readers who would prefer a chronological narrative have thus been warned. The strength of this approach is that Morris successfully conveys why John consistently failed to inspire trust. His attempt to seize his brother's crown did lasting damage to his reputation. It was inexcusable to act in this way against a sworn crusader. In failing to reconcile the original fiancé of his second wife, a potential "masterstroke" became a political "disaster" (120), illustrative of a wider pattern in which John "sought to achieve desirable ends by resorting to underhand methods, only to find that his scheme had backfired" (120). Meanwhile, there were apparently few limits to the king's desire to raise revenue. Add in his resort to "cruel and unusual punishment" (153), and the murder of Arthur, and it becomes clear why John could increasingly be seen as tyrannical. "To a large extent … the death of Arthur made no difference to the loss of the Angevin Empire" (158). However, "John had broken one of society's fundamental taboos, with dire consequences for his reputation" (159).

From chapter 9 onwards, the biography proceeds chronologically, charting the downfall of the Briouze family, and the ever increasing financial pressure on the king's subjects, intended to pay for renewed continental campaigns. This played out against the backdrop of a political community increasingly reluctant to turn up to provide military service. The narrative builds logically and clearly towards its culmination, in the final chapters, with Magna Carta, and the civil war and French invasion which ensued. Morris concludes that "there was no doubt that John's reign had been a disaster" (286). Contemporary observers were unanimous in identifying the king's personality as the root cause. His reputation was already badly damaged when he came to the throne. This was compounded by lack of both military boldness and political nous. If he was a skilled financial operator, "when it

came to the fundamental skills of political management, he was clumsy and foolish" (291). Not to mention cruel and vindictive. Thus, for Morris, Magna Carta was not so much a commentary on Angevin government, but a direct critique of John. It was also the king's "lasting legacy … [because] his oppressions led to the creation of a document that ensured they would not be repeated, and which still symbolizes the rights of the subject against the power of a tyrant" (298).

This then is a lively biography, conveying a sense of tyranny and of the scale of the problems faced by the king's subjects in dealing with their ruler. Morris is fair in his judgements, acknowledging where John was successful, and where we need to proceed with caution in accepting the claims of certain chroniclers. Is this a "definitive" picture of the "real" King John? There is a clear sense of how John acted, and of how his actions came to be seen, making the period accessible to academics, students and a wider readership alike. As such, this very much holds its own amongst the new scholarship prompted by the 2015 anniversary. There are some further questions that might be addressed. Magna Carta certainly stands as an indictment of John's methods, but their emergence from those of his father and brother is worthy of further consideration. Is it possible to identify models for John's style of rule? To what extent did his predecessors' methods inspire his activity as king? Does study of John's attitude to kingship tell us more about his failure to adapt than the thorny question of whether or not the observers of the day had the measure of his character, the 'real man' who occupied the throne? With various new works now available or planned for the next few years, including other biographies, it will be interesting to see which aspects of Morris's valuable study stand as a definitive history for future historians of the road to Runnymede.

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