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Stephen: The Reign of Anarchy (Penguin Monarchs), Carl Watkins (London: Penguin Random House, 2015).

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Stephen: The Reign of Anarchy (Penguin Monarchs). By Carl Watkins. London: Penguin Random House, 2015. ISBN 978-0-141-97714-0. x + 110, pp. £10.99.

Anarchy: the word evokes images of revolution and political upheaval and has been the enduring scourge of the twelfth-century reign of King Stephen. *Stephen: The Reign of Anarchy* is one of 45 titles in Penguin Books "Monarch" series which commenced in 2014 and aims to satisfy an increasing public appetite for history in a small, easily digestible hardback format complete with notes, illustrations, and suggestions for further reading. By 2018 the series will include every English, and later British, monarch from Athelstan to Queen Elizabeth II, including Oliver Cromwell, and have been written by some of the most renowned historians in the country. This book by Carl Watkins, Senior Lecturer in Central Medieval History at Cambridge University, seeks to push aside the traditional Stephen verses Matilda saga and shine a light on the man who "never quite transcended the essential flawedness of his claim to be king" (back cover). This publication explores Stephen's improbable rise to prominence at a time when the fledgling Norman monarchy was without clear rules of succession and examines the man whose "personal history was saturated with contingency" (x), shaped by a series of chances and mischances as he attempted to establish a strong but fair reign over England and Normandy.

The scene is set by a short prologue, outlining the White Ship disaster of November 1120 and the death of the only legitimate son and heir of Henry I, William Adelin, followed by five chapters with punchy, modern titles, exploring Stephen's reign. The key events are well covered as Watkins succinctly attempts, in a little over one hundred pages, to explore the main issues surrounding Stephen's accession and reign, and gives an uncomplicated analysis of leading figures and key sources for the period. In a subtle interpretation of the evidence for the period, Watkins examines whether Stephen's own character was as much to blame for the failure of royal authority and descent into civil war as the actions of his opponents, the delicate nature of royal rule and the rising power of the noble elite. He argues Stephen's claim to the throne of England and Duchy of Normandy was weak and this key factor repeatedly thwarts his attempts to consolidate his position. Whilst he was a grandson of William the Conqueror and looked upon with fondness as Henry's nephew, he was not a realistic candidate for the succession as Henry pushed his nobles to acknowledge Matilda and her sons as heirs. However, Stephen's decisive move across the Channel to England to secure London and the treasury at Winchester when Henry died in 1135 gave him the advantage. England needed a strong king, not a woman or a child, but

a man with "the means to challenge" (18), and Watkins argues if Stephen had not acted then another contender from among the elite would have, as a new political class began to develop, taking advantage of royal weakness.

The book draws upon a wide range of church chronicles to build a picture of Stephen's reign, particularly from the author of the *Gesta Stephani*, Henry of Huntington, John of Worcester, Orderic Vitalis, William of Malmesbury, and William of Newburgh to emphasise his ambitions (18, 19), familial bonds (10, 17) and obligations of fealty and patronage both before and after he became king (25, 59). Watkins takes care to subtly balance the sources, analysing their supporting or opposing perspectives of Stephen to argue that while he did not lack courage or vigour to stamp his authority and overcome opposition, his inability to decisively put down that opposition, whether from Matilda, Robert of Gloucester, David of Scotland, or Geoffrey of Anjou, is the defining legacy of his reign. He does this convincingly, but without over-analysing the evidence; the very fact that Stephen could not adopt the "oppressive, brutal" (12) style of rule exercised by Henry I and essential to keep the fractious elite at bay weakened his position. Having usurped power Stephen was dependent upon the support from the barons to legitimise it, and that support had to be rewarded with gifts and favours; Watkins emphasises the arrival of a new breed of political player, the powerful noble, emergent at a time when the king's authority was challengeable. The realisation that his sovereignty would continue to be contested and his magnates had no appetite for further conflict led Stephen to accept Henry of Anjou as his lawful heir in the Treaty of Winchester in 1153 and to draw the sad conclusion that his reign had been merely "an interruption, a hiatus, almost an interregnum" (89) to the dynastic ambitions of Henry I.

This book probes the evolving study of Norman kingship, and Watkins offers supplementary arguments highlighting the problems associated with hereditary succession in a time of intense competition for power. He stresses that the political precedents set by William Rufus and Henry I after the death of William the Conqueror gave the extended royal family a route to power if they wished to exploit it and emphasises the role played by the elite in supporting a candidate for kingship. It was not enough to take power, and Watkins argues that because of his weak claim to the throne and his reticence to stamp his authority upon his nobles, Stephen was unable to consolidate the position he had seized because he did not "radiate the self-assurance of a man who knew that he was destined to be king" (24). Militarily Stephen was sometimes over-ambitious but generally purposeful and authoritative; however "his political operations continued to lack sureness of touch" (69) because he lacked confidence in his position to exercise authority over those

he saw as his equals and was unable to reconcile internal tensions among his own supporters.

Watkins presents the reign of Stephen as a balance of ambition, opportunity, opposition, and realisation and provides an analysis of Stephen which is coherent and based upon available evidence, whilst acknowledging the limitations of that evidence by virtue of personal bias, religious perspective, and reflection. The book lacks the extensive analysis of more detailed studies by RHC Davies and E King; however Watkins presents an adequate interpretation of the *Reign of Anarchy* in this carefully balanced and well-written narrative, and it would be unfair to criticise the absence of new theories given the premise of the "Monarch" series.

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