



*Henry III:
The Son of Magna Carta*

Matthew Lewis

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Henry III: The Son of Magna Carta. By Matthew Lewis. Stroud: Amberley Books, 2016. ISBN 978-1-4456-5357-0. 287pp. £20.

Henry III came to the throne of England in 1216 at the age of nine, and he reigned for the next fifty-six years. Henry was therefore the longest reigning king of medieval England. It should therefore come as no surprise that with such a long reign the biographer is presented with an array of challenges to adequately encompass the full scope of Henry's kingship. Henry's lengthy reign witnessed many tumultuous events and political developments that defined the medieval English realm, as well as some of the period's leading personalities who were key participants in those affairs. To compile all these factors into a single volume, and to do them justice while keeping the attention of the reader, is no easy task. Many works on Henry have been produced, but a thorough and readily accessible biography has thus far proved elusive. Undoubtedly, such complications in writing have contributed to the general historical amnesia that surrounds Henry. Henry is a "boring king", who "slips beneath the historical radar", and "from the notice of history" (7, 245). Henry's reputation for mediocrity is not helped by being caught between the dramatic events that characterised the reigns of his father, John (r. 1199–1216) and that of his son, Edward I (r. 1272–1307). However, Matthew Lewis's well-paced, accessible, and comprehensive overview of Henry III's reign, and indeed the complexities of his age, does a good job of jogging our collective memory of this easily overlooked monarch. Lewis has succinctly condensed a vast topic into a single volume that is just under 300 pages in length. The narrative is well paced, the style of prose is open and engaging, which makes it an exciting page-turner that does not become bogged down in the dryer details of the legal and institutional history that could so easily overwhelm the text.

As the title of the work suggests, the volume examines Henry's reign in light of the creation of Magna Carta, which was sealed in 1215—shortly before his accession. This documentary theme is continued throughout the book by studying the other great legislative charters that stemmed from Magna Carta, which appeared across Henry's reign. The ebb and flow of royal-baronial relations as one side pushed, prodded, and provoked the other to rebellion or civil war, the rise and fall of great men that dominated Henry's reign on the back of these charters, and Henry's consistent efforts to exert his independence, are the key pillars that Lewis explores in this work. Translations of these documents have been provided in appendices for reference. These translations are quite necessary as the various documents, their relationships and influence upon each other are consistently referred to, and they provide waypoints through which the narrative of Henry's reign

weaves. Henry's reign began amid rebellion and bloodshed in the shadow of Magna Carta, and its later years would similarly be marked by the violence that followed the issuing of the Provisions of Oxford and Westminster in 1258–1259. Henry's kingship is inseparable from these documents and the events that produced them. This volume is as much a history of these medieval texts as it is about Henry.

However, the narrative does sometimes lose sight of Henry, who often fades into the background of fast moving events, or is upstaged by more vibrant personalities, such as William Marshal, Simon de Montfort, and even his own son Edward I. In the early chapters that cover Henry's minority up to the mid-1220s this is understandable, as the boy king wielded little direct authority or political agency. Yet, Henry remains a passive figure throughout the rest of the volume even after he comes of age. While this is in part an assessment of Henry's personality, and how he is easily lost among the towering figures of his reign, the book does at times risk becoming the story of the great men who surrounded Henry, rather than a biography of the king they served. The chapters covering the late-1220s and 1230s are very descriptive of medieval English history, and the events of the 1240s are quickly rushed through, but they leave the reader with little understanding of Henry's personality or character. Henry emerges in detail in some sections, only to rapidly retreat into obscurity in others. This is counterproductive for a biography. Henry needed to be foregrounded more firmly and consistently in these earlier chapters, and there needed to be a more penetrating analysis of Henry the individual. Such limitations recede as the book progresses through Henry's reign, and the second half of the work that deals with the tumultuous events from the 1250s and 1260s is much stronger than the first half. Henry emerges much more clearly in the discussion: his involvement in events is better defined, and the reader is left with a firmer impression of Henry the man.

One intriguing aspect that is considered in the conclusion is whether or not Henry may have been autistic, and that this may explain much about his approach to kingship and interactions with his leading magnates. This notion deserved more attention, as it helps bring the historical character of Henry to life: but at the same time, such discussions about his personality needed to be seeded more frequently throughout the work. Another area that merited further investigation by Lewis was Henry's religious devotion and piety, as expressed through the renovation of Westminster Abbey, the promotion of the cult of St Edward the Confessor, and other works of art and architecture. These were great projects undertaken by Henry, and while they were personal, they were also public displays of power and kingship. These were briefly

discussed, but they needed to be more thoroughly assessed in order to provide a greater insight into the mind of the king.

Matthew Lewis has produced a fine work that provides an enjoyable and accessible overview of Henry III's reign. It leaves the reader with a firm grasp of the intricacies of Henry's world, and bridges the narrative from the failures of Henry's father, John, to the astounding successes of his son, Edward I, and frames Henry's role in that transformative period. Lewis gives the reader a good feel for the age, and this volume is a good starting place for those interested in getting to grips with the events of the mid-thirteenth century, before moving on to more specialist and detailed works. However, as a biography of Henry, we are often left wanting a little more illumination of the man who still remains hidden by the shadows of the great events and great men who surrounded him.

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