



*Henry III: The Great King
England Never Knew It Had*

Darren Baker

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Review by: Benjamin Wild



Henry III: The Great King England Never Knew It Had. By Darren Baker. Stroud: The History Press, 2017. ISBN 978-0-7509-6814-0. 416 pp. £20.

In *England and Its Rulers*, Michael Clanchy observes that “ready-made characterisations” of kings are expedient “to fit the rest of the jigsaw into place” ([Blackwell, 2006], 284). The need for historians to “come forward” to facilitate the construction of a “completed picture” seems especially necessary in the case of Henry III, England’s fifth-longest reigning monarch, who ruled between 1216 and 1272. Henry’s reign saw the establishment of Magna Carta as a benchmark of good governance and the corollary emergence of parliament. It was a fifty-six year period riven by court factionalism that sparked, first, a program of reform to curb royal authority and when this failed, second, open conflict between courtiers and their allies that culminated in the longest castle siege in British history.

Clanchy’s ready-made characterisation suggested King Henry was “good but weak,” and this view is found in much of the scholarship. Indeed, a chronicle from Osney Abbey—dating from the thirteenth century—described the king as “a simple and God fearing man.” Thus, to have a new biography of the king that claims he was ‘great’ seems tantamount to upturning the table upon which the incomplete jigsaw rests.

In the spirit of Clanchy’s search for completion, Baker’s biography is welcome, and is seemingly comprehensive at nearly 400 pages with notes. However, an immediate problem is that his book does not engage with the historiography of Henry’s reign. Nor does it clearly explain how Henry was great, at least not in terms that contemporaries would have recognised. Baker’s criterion for determining Henry’s worth is curiously modern, and arguably better suited to assessing Britain’s twenty-first century politicians wrangling with the spectre of Brexit than a thirteenth-century monarch (Brussels is mentioned on page 8). Baker seems to argue that Henry’s claim to greatness arises in spite of himself and chiefly because he survived. In essence, if Henry retained the throne for so much longer than his immediate predecessors and successors, he must have been doing something right. Baker praises Henry’s creation of “the pageantry of English royalty” (unaware of Victorian contributions), his alms giving, his inclination to compromise and avoidance of “unseemly scandals” (7–8, 354), but many of these actions would have been witnessed and understood by ministers and courtiers alone, and some of the most important of these men challenged the king in 1258, when they sanctioned political reform, before openly defying him in 1263, when they took up arms and started to ravage the estates of royal supporters. How Henry’s greatness is affected by these political wrangles is not considered explicitly by Baker.

If the insistence on Henry's greatness poses problems, one reason for this is Baker's approach. The book's argument suggests what its bibliography confirms; the thesis is almost wholly dependent on English sources, primary and secondary. Printed Latin chronicles are cited, but the extent to which these are actually engaged with is unclear. Much of the most recent and rewarding writing on Henry's reign has made use of foreign scholarship and sources, which is as it should be. Sufficient work has been done to show that Henry's outlook and objectives, and the consequences of both, were framed by European concerns. Another methodological peculiarity is the author's inclination to cite chronicles directly and uncritically. Passages of reported dialogue are quoted as authentic, and verbatim dialogues are used to establish how Henry felt (30, 252, 300). At times, Baker lets his imagination roam in much the same way that chroniclers could; for instance, and without evidence, he states Henry, "preferring to draw" (43), "probably passed his time sketching new churches and clothes for his wardrobe" (41).

A counter to these critiques may be that Baker is not aiming at an academic audience, so the need to invoke many historians and a full range of sources is consequently diminished. This would explain the colloquial, and at times journalistic, tone of the text, which describes political discussions as "lame" (44, 45), and likens parliament to a "club" (341). While these conventions make the book more engaging than many academic tomes, an argument as bold as Baker's and a reign as tumultuous as Henry's does not lend itself to generalisation, which may be why biographers of the king can still be counted on one hand. Moreover, by offering such a divergent view of the king and his reign, Baker's project is ill-suited to readers unfamiliar with the thirteenth century, especially as important figures are repeatedly identified by their first names alone; a problematic choice, given the limited number of French names that were favoured by the aristocracy.

In reviving a concept as unfashionable and difficult as historical 'greatness,' it seems apposite that Baker uses the structure of the now-largely negated grand narrative, akin to James Ramsey's *Dawn of the Constitution, or The Reigns of Henry III and Edward I* published in 1908, which ostensibly paraphrases the major chronicles between 1216 and 1307 in English. Historical narratives are not inherently problematic, but their effective use—perhaps demonstrated by Simon Schama's *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (1989)—necessitates a deep engagement with primary sources. The notion of greatness is compelling, and one to which medieval historians have been drawn of late: the title of Marc Morris's biography of Edward I describes him as "Great and Terrible," and the subtitle of Malcolm Barber's account of Edward III's Crécy campaign refers to the "Triumph of England." Henry's political acumen, however, has been explored more thoroughly and

convincingly by other scholars, not least Michael Clanchy, whom Baker does not cite in this regard. Consequently, while Baker's book may give some pause for reflection, after righting the table, completion of the jigsaw will likely continue as before; the book serving, perhaps, as a useful *aide-memoire* for historians unable to access Ramsey's convenient, out of print, and now expensive, guide.

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