



*The Restless Kings:
Henry II, His Sons and the Wars
for the Plantagenet Crown*

Nick Barratt

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Review by: Gabrielle Storey



The Restless Kings: Henry II, His Sons and the Wars for the Plantagenet Crown. By Nick Barratt. London: Faber & Faber, 2018. ISBN 978-0-571-32910-6. xvi + 304 pp. £20.00.

In his most recent book, Nick Barratt examines the familial dynamics and power plays of the first Angevin king, Henry II, and his sons Henry, Richard, Geoffrey, and John. Barratt's work is an accessible read that captures the nuances of the Angevin conflict and situates them within their political conflict. It cohesively brings together the actions of Henry and his sons in the twelfth century, with particular focus on significant political figures at the time including Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Eleanor of Aquitaine, Queen of England and Henry's wife. Although the Becket incident is one of the most famous conflicts that Henry faced during his reign, it is nonetheless one of many, and its dominance here does overshadow the preceding disagreements Henry had with other nobles and churchmen.

The ease with which Barratt lays the context of each rebellion and key moment of political upheaval, before launching into a discussion of each event, makes this work a refreshing insight into the disputes of the Angevin kings. It follows a chronological structure, opening with the rise of the Angevins, and then the exercise of power across the growing Angevin domains. It then moves on to the familial rebellions of the 1170s and 1180s, which are covered in rapid succession, before analysing the loss of Normandy. The book concludes on the road to Magna Carta and the collapse of the dominions Henry II ruled over. The discussion of Henry II's foundational work to rebuild royal authority and control after the civil war is of great interest, as the development of the exchequer and reforms of the sheriffs in England would last through his sons' reigns and beyond. Barratt also provides a valuable insight into the familial dynamics outside of Henry and his sons, noting how his tenuous relationship with his brother Geoffrey after their father Geoffrey of Anjou's death laid precedent for Henry's conflicted relations with his male offspring (122). The alleged personality of Henry II, notably his famous temper, and his contentious relationships with both his family and the nobility have caused ample speculation since his reign, and Barratt's writing here encourages the idea of a temperamental ruler who was at loggerheads with those around him.

The discussion of authority in the twelfth-century Angevin domains is central to the book, and gives food for thought for those interested in notions of royal power. Although it lacks any references to recent discussions of authority and power in the Middle Ages, the political acumen of Henry is apparent when considering how he exerted control over his domains, which

was partially achieved through his use of Eleanor and his sons as co-rulers. Although warring families were by no means unique in the Middle Ages, the dissension between Henry II and Henry the Young King demonstrates the problems of having limited lands and several heirs, which was compounded by Henry II's style of rulership. This dissension was amplified by the interference of the French kings, Louis VII, and his son Philip Augustus, who encouraged both of Henry's sons and his vassals, as well as their own nobles, to rebel against Henry. Although the blame for the 1173 rebellion of Henry's sons is often laid at Eleanor's feet, there are further complexities and additional protagonists that are lost in the fast-paced action of the re-telling.

Perhaps the one criticism of the book is its erratic structure. Though as noted above the book is laid out chronologically, Barratt opens each chapter with an event and then jumps back and forth through the narrative which can make the flow of the story difficult to follow. Though plenty of excerpts from medieval chronicles are peppered throughout the book for dramatic effect and evidence, any criticism of the chronicles is brief, which, given the loyalties and cultural background of the chroniclers, would be important to examine in further detail here. A notable example is Gerald of Wales, often quoted by Barratt, and a medieval chronicler who found little favour with Henry's rule. It would have been useful to have a more nuanced analysis of the primary sources that are deployed in the work.

This book would be suitable primarily for the interested public seeking further information on the conflict of the Angevin kings, and their separate disputes with selected ecclesiastics and members of the nobility. It is not an academic history, and does not pretend it is one, though it may be of use for students looking for an introduction to the topic. Overall, it is an interesting and lively narrative of the political drama during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and would appeal to those looking for a re-telling of these events.

GABRIELLE STOREY

The University of Winchester