



*King John: England, Magna Carta
and the making of a Tyrant,*

Stephen Church

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Review by: Stephen Donnachie

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The association of King John with tyranny, bad governance, and the abuse of power is an image long accepted of England's most infamous monarch. John's negative reputation was one well known to contemporary chroniclers and avidly seized upon by later writers to villainise his rule. John's reputation has proceeded him down through the centuries, his crimes deemed inexcusable and his reign viewed as an abysmal failure. Compared to the successes of his illustrious father Henry II, bellicose brother Richard I, and great rival Philip II Augustus of France, John's achievements have always appeared as shallow victories and he as the least of the "devil's brood". Despite his longstanding legend of cruelty more recent works upon John have attempted to rehabilitate him, presenting the image of a complex individual and talented administrator whose abilities and accomplishments are both admirable and praiseworthy. However, these attempts to reform John's image and to reassess his reign return to his key failures: the loss of Normandy and other continental possessions, the defeat at the battle of Bouvines and short road to rebellion and Magna Carta that followed. Stephen Church in this thoroughly engaging and well written biography does not attempt to dispel the notion of John as a tyrant and cast him in a new light, nor does he seek to provide us with a misunderstood hero or melodramatic villain. He presents John as he was, a man of acute intelligence and ability placed into circumstances for which he was ill-suited in both temperament and political experience. Yet no man is born a tyrant; it is through Church's detailed investigation of the circumstances of John's life that we might better understand the road that would lead him to infamy.

It is all too easy in an exploration of John's reign to become lost in a discussion of the dramatic events that framed the final years of his life. The build-up of military resources for a great continental campaign, the establishment of a grand alliance against the king of France, the battle of Bouvines, the rebellion of the English baronage and the imposition of Magna Carta upon John can dominate any assessment of his reign. While Church does consider these crucial events in detail he does so without letting them overwhelm the book and become the centre piece of discussion. Likewise, he does not allow these later events to cast a shadow back through John's reign and create a narrative that suggests John's inexorable move towards such a fate.

Church amply examines John's early life, exploring his formative years and experiences in the art of medieval rulership under the auspices of his father and brother. John as the youngest son of Henry II is presented as a

man not initially intended for high politics or the crown and as such his very upbringing, education and socialisation were at odds with those of his elder brothers. In an age where kingship was personal John was a man who stood apart from his peers from the very outset and lacked the shared experiences to readily empathise with them. John's early career was one lived in the shadows of others. His father by his mid-twenties had conquered Normandy and been crowned King of England while John's brothers had come into possession of great lordships in Brittany and Aquitaine, yet John, holding no such resources, was known as "Lackland". John even lacked agency in his own affairs; his political position, marriage, and future were all in the hands of others. This theme of John's fate being determined by others is one that is frequently returned to throughout the course of the book, from his earliest years to the close of his reign. It is then no wonder that his first independent attempt at governance as a young man in Ireland in 1185 was a catastrophe and did not bode well for the future. John was ambitious and tried to forge his own path, disregarding the advice of more experienced advisors, ruling free from the constraints that had been placed upon him. Such ambition would be a feature throughout John's life but his determination to go his own way would consistently lead him into conflict with those with whom he needed to cooperate.

Church also presents John as a man of ability and keen intellect who could at times be remarkably politically astute. John's reign started well; he secured the all-important treasury in Anjou and thereby power while his negotiations with Philip II removed the French king's assistance from his nephew and royal rival, Arthur of Brittany, who was then captured through John's quick military thinking. John possessed a library of varied political, philosophical and theological works that was often to hand as he travelled his domains. He succeeded where his predecessors had failed in establishing the English crown's political dominance over the rest of the British Isles, and he dextrously used governmental institutions to raise the vast sums of money needed to wage war against his rivals. Despite the shortcomings of his reign John was not without some triumphs and Church does not shy away from acknowledging the importance of these achievements. However, Church also comes back to reflect upon John's failures and these failures were of his own making. John was ruthless in the pursuit of his ambitions; the death of Arthur of Brittany in a rush to secure his dominance over disputed continental territories was a gross miscalculation on his part and a fatal demonstration of his inability to gauge the disposition of his baronage. Such personal blunders in understanding the character of his peers had previously thwarted John in Ireland and in his bid to seize power during Richard I's imprisonment in 1194. These personal failings would continue to plague John's reign seeing disputes

with the Papacy, the persecution of the de Briouze family, and eventually the revolt of the English barons. John had counsellors willing to offer him sound advice but he chose to ignore them in favour of those making recommendations more in line with his own views. In 1204 when the duchy of Normandy needed its Duke the most John was not there to save his people despite the pleas of his followers. John's actions made bad situations worse and drove away those who might otherwise have supported him. John possessed great potential but his personal failings squandered the advantages he gained.

Church's work is readily accessible and a pleasure to read. It provides an excellent overview of John's reign and proceeds directly into getting to grips with understanding his personality. It amply explores John's world and the circumstances of his life but is not weighed down by unnecessary detail or excessive discussion of the wider issues of royal administration, thirteenth-century European politics and the intricacies of medieval Christianity that all impacted upon John's reign but risk overwhelming the casual reader. John, the man, remains at the heart of the work with his achievements and failures presented in their respective contexts. Tyranny was no bar to success but John was not successful. John's tyranny combined with his failures did not leave a favourable impression of his reign and that has darkened his reputation ever since.

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