



*Richard I:
The Crusader King*

Thomas Asbridge
London: Allen Lane, 2018

*Richard the Lionheart:
The Crusader King of England*

W.B. Bartlett
Stroud: Amberley, 2018

Review by: Stephen Donnachie



Richard I: The Crusader King. By Thomas Asbridge. London: Allen Lane, 2018. ISBN 978-0-141-97685-3. 119 pp. £12.99.

Richard the Lionheart: The Crusader King of England. By W.B. Bartlett. Stroud: Amberley, 2018. ISBN 978-1-4456-6270-1. 408 pp. £25.



Other than the legendary figure of Arthur and the frequently married Henry VIII, Richard the Lionheart, England's crusader king, is perhaps the most well-known and well-remembered of all English monarchs. His heroic reputation has withstood the test of time, and he remains a readily identifiable figure who occupies a prominent place in popular historical consciousness. The perennial appeal of the stories of Robin Hood, in which Richard plays an important but limited role, has undoubtedly assisted his enduring fame and helped preserve his positive image in popular imagination. Yet, Richard's reign was relatively short at just ten years (1189-1199), and comparatively little of that time was spent within the kingdom of England that gave him his prestigious royal title. Consequently, despite being one of England's most famous monarchs, Richard also possesses a rather negative reputation as a neglectful and absentee king who cared little for his English realm. Richard is, therefore, a rather controversial figure who divides both popular and historical opinion. In the centuries that have elapsed since his death, criticisms of his reign and the near legendary reputation he was able to forge within his own lifetime have inevitably arisen. Was he one of the most brilliant military strategists of the Middle Ages, a remarkable warrior king able to inspire great loyalty in those around him, and a shrewd international diplomat? Or was he a greedy, selfish, and negligent monarch who was prone to fits of rage and jealousy, a man who impoverished his kingdom in pursuit of his own vainglory, and whose rash and impulsive nature resulted in his own untimely death? Two popular volumes have appeared already this year which tackle these problems and explore the complex life, reign, and legend of Richard the Lionheart, demonstrating that the answers to such questions are far from simple.

The first volume is by Thomas Asbridge, and forms part of the Penguin Monarchs series that is intended to provide a short biographical overview and introduction to English and British monarchs since the early tenth century. In his biography of Richard, Asbridge has succinctly and carefully distilled the essence of the crusader king's reign into just 105 pages. Indeed, to write a thorough account of a medieval monarch in such a small space—even one whose reign was relatively short like Richard's—is no easy task, but Asbridge has successfully produced a detailed and captivating history of the Lionheart. Rather than approach the topic as a traditional narrative

account of Richard's life, Asbridge has chosen to explore Richard's reign through a series of thematic chapters that dissect different aspects of his life and legend. These are the "Absent King," "The Crusader King," "The Warrior King," and "The Legendary King." While these chapters roughly mirror the overall chronology of Richard's life, they are not limited to particular episodes of his reign and allow Asbridge to better explore different aspects of Richard's kingship.

The first chapter deals with the issue of Richard's absence from England, explaining Richard's choice to remain outside of his English realm by examining the importance of religion, family, and political prestige to a medieval monarch, as well as the measures Richard took to ensure the good governance of his kingdom despite his prolonged absence. The second chapter focuses predominantly upon Richard's participation in the Third Crusade (1189-1192), which has remained the defining episode of his kingship. It can be all too easy for a biographer of Richard to become lost in the dramatic details of the Third Crusade, thereby losing sight of Richard in the retelling of its events, but Asbridge avoids this potential pitfall by focusing upon Richard's military abilities, using the crusade as a stage to explore his style of command and to showcase his strategic skills. This theme is continued into the next chapter, "The Warrior King," which focuses upon Richard's conflicts in France following his return from the Third Crusade. The final chapter examines the legend of Richard and its evolution throughout the Middle Ages and into modern times.

This thematic approach is practical for such a slim volume, as there is little room for the wider historical background that is needed to adequately contextualise the Lionheart's reign. The wider context may be sparing, but Asbridge's style is more than sufficient to safely guide even the first-time reader through the complexities of medieval kingship and the politics of western Europe in the late twelfth century. In these chapters, Asbridge is able to cover events across the entirety of Richard's reign, from his formative years in Aquitaine, to the Third Crusade, to his death and legacy, and in so doing neatly tie together numerous threads to improve the reader's understanding of Richard the monarch and Richard the man. Consequently, Asbridge has created an admirable biography and introductory work that is accessible to all.

W.B. Bartlett, in contrast, has produced an all-encompassing work that covers the life and times of Richard the Lionheart in great detail. Bartlett has adopted a traditional narrative approach to his biography and adeptly covers the people and events of Richard's life from his birth to his death. The book can be roughly split into three parts, with chapters outlining Richard's early years up to his accession to the English crown, his time on campaign during the Third Crusade, and his post-Crusade reign until his death. Bartlett's style

of prose flows well, and he is good at maintaining the narrative's pace so that the reader does not become bogged down in the details of the numerous campaigns and intricate politics of Richard's youth and reign. Indeed, Bartlett is very good at explaining the complex politics and social forces at work in western Europe in the late twelfth century that are vital to framing Richard's reign, and he deftly weaves Richard into this narrative. The reader is left with a strong sense of the medieval world and Richard's place within it. This approach also enables Bartlett to rebuff some of the common criticisms of Richard as a neglectful, politically inept, or short-sighted monarch in regards to his relationship with his brother John, the governance of England, and his international diplomacy. However, while Bartlett defends many of Richard's actions as monarch and generally places him in a positive light, a more critical view of Richard's personality does come to the fore. Bartlett presents Richard as a frequently arrogant, greedy, and prideful individual, cognisant of his own legendary reputation and fame, and aware of the great economic benefits that his English realm can provide in maintaining that prestige. Bartlett's Richard is a very capable and formidable king with many admirable qualities, but his flaws are the source of many of the misfortunes of his reign.

Both Asbridge and Bartlett's volumes raise two important issues for consideration. Firstly, much of Richard's heroic reputation rests upon a few key historical sources that are highly favourable towards him, and provide such glowing reports of his actions that they border on the realm of romantic literature. It is these sources that have contributed so greatly to positive assessments of Richard throughout the centuries. The historical Richard and the legendary Richard created by this body of literature are to some extent inseparable. Secondly, although Richard is often portrayed as a medieval warrior or general par excellence, he was actually undergoing a consistent learning process, and his exemplary military talents should not be read backwards into his earlier years. Richard made mistakes and he had to learn from those mistakes; he was not always the formidable military figure that he so often appears to be, nor was he destined to be so.

While there is much to commend in these two works, they are not without their limitations. Both Asbridge and Bartlett rightfully highlight Richard's role as a crusader king, which remains the most well-known aspect of his reign. Yet their focus upon the crusade is often too intense. This is quite understandable considering the plethora of source material concerning Richard's actions on crusade, which provides more information for this single episode than other key points of his life. However, this focus on the Third Crusade often comes at the expense of other periods of Richard's life and reign which were no less important. Both Asbridge and Bartlett acknowledge the importance of Richard's youth in Aquitaine and his relationship with his

family, demonstrating that his experiences prior to his accession were instrumental in defining the nature of his kingship. But analysis of these earlier years is often limited or quickly summarised rather than explored in depth. Of the 371 pages that comprise Bartlett's narrative, approximately 150 are dedicated to the two years (1190-1192) that cover Richard's presence on Crusade, while about 100 pages cover the thirty-two years from his birth to his accession to the English crown alone. Asbridge's thematic approach alleviates this problem somewhat, but the dominance of the crusade is still noticeable. It is undeniable that the events of the Third Crusade were crucial to Richard's reign and his historical reputation, but a greater amount of attention needs to be directed towards these other areas of his life to provide a more nuanced image of the Lionheart.

Overall, Asbridge and Bartlett have produced two enjoyable and very accessible popular histories of Richard the Lionheart, allowing readers to firmly comprehend the man, his kingship, and the world in which he ruled. Richard may be a controversial king, but both works amply demonstrate that he was also a highly complex figure, and will remain as such in the popular consciousness for some time yet to come.

STEPHEN DONNACHIE

Swansea University