



*Eleanor of Aquitaine:
Queen of France and England,
Mother of Empires*

Sara Cockerill

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Eleanor of Aquitaine: Queen of France and England, Mother of Empires. By Sara Cockerill. Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2019. ISBN 978-1-4456-4617-6. 448 pp. £25

A new biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine is perhaps surprising given the substantial amount of previous works on a woman whom, it is often noted, is represented by little extant evidence. With previous biographies each taking a particular focus on Eleanor's life, be it her marriages, sons, or patronage, all in pursuit of the "real" Eleanor, it may be wondered what another biography could add. Cockerill's biography provides a sweeping, accessible, and wonderfully articulated analysis of Eleanor's life. Its accessibility does not mean the work is lacking in academic rigour: the sheer depth of research and reference to the primary material demonstrates that this is the biography that the public, and indeed many scholars, have been waiting for. Readers familiar with Cockerill's work on Eleanor of Castile will be delighted to uncover this latest biography of another, albeit better known, medieval queen.

Cockerill's biography provides an enriching and thought provoking look at Eleanor's life—it re-assesses Eleanor's contribution to the governance of the French and Angevin realms, and allows us a clearer picture of what Eleanor may have been like as a woman who was doubly queen of France and England, rather than depending on the myths and legends that have captured the imaginations of modern readers. Although Michael R. Evans's *Inventing Eleanor: The Medieval and Post-Medieval Image of Eleanor of Aquitaine* (2014) has done much to re-assert the truth from the legend to academic scholars, Cockerill's biography builds upon this foundational work to convey Eleanor to a new audience. Though many may ask what a new biography could bring to light, Cockerill's examination and interrogation of the primary sources provides a far more balanced representation of Eleanor's life, rather than an assessment led by speculation. More attention has typically been paid to the representations of Eleanor by the chroniclers, which has fuelled speculation, rather than counteracting it with an assessment of Eleanor's political activities in addition to her role as wife and mother through an examination of the financial records and charters that remain. That Eleanor's life was compounded by problems is irrefutable, though this could be said of any queen. Few, however, were faced with rebellious sons who ultimately led to their mother's imprisonment! Cockerill's analysis of the 1173 rebellion is perhaps one of the fairest of recent biographers, clearly unpicking the reasons for the Queen's sons' discontent as well as taking the minority view that Eleanor's role was peripheral and reactive rather than central (272).

Despite its engagement with the primary source material, Cockerill's analysis does fall short at points. Cockerill unpicks some of the issues surrounding historical writing in the Middle Ages, but does not fully elaborate as to why chroniclers reached the judgements they did, and indeed how that has clouded the interpretations of many Eleanor scholars. Eleanor, always a remarkable woman but not exceptional when examined alongside many of her contemporary queens, undoubtedly suffered in historical interpretations due to critiques of her power by chroniclers. Many historians have fallen into similar traps in their attempts to provide a portrait of the "real" Eleanor. But the "real" Eleanor cannot be

known to us nine hundred years later, a point that Cockerill acknowledges. Although the strength of this biography lies in its broad, encompassing research of which Cockerill has undoubtedly done due diligence, some deeper engagement with the material would allow the reader to draw some more of their own conclusions regarding the gaps in Eleanor's life.

Cockerill's biography inevitably draws upon Eleanor's relationships with her family and household, as well as the nobles of the Angevin domains to enhance our understanding of her life. Interpretations of Eleanor's relationships with both of her husbands, Louis VII of France and Henry II of England, have often fallen to the verdict of tempestuous to say the least. In vigour and enthusiasm to rule their domains, it can be argued that Eleanor and Henry were well matched, however Cockerill's focus on Henry's "dark side" as an introductory examination to their relationship does much to misrepresent what was, in the early years, a harmonious partnership to rule their sprawling territories (164–165).

Despite the issues noted above, Cockerill's biography looks to be an excellent work for fans of Eleanor and newer readers, as it repositions Eleanor's role in twelfth-century politics and draws upon the wealth of historiography and sources available. By avoiding the pitfalls of examining Eleanor through a singular lens, Cockerill's work provides a better balance to a queen of whom much has been written by modern historians in comparison to the scant extant evidence. This biography would appeal to both academics and a popular audience, as although its targeted readership may be the latter, the research undertaken here demonstrates its usefulness to scholars. Overall, this is a thought-provoking and welcome addition to the historiography of one of the most famous queens of the Middle Ages.

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