

## **The Reign of King John**

Sorcha Rush

Dickson College, ACT, 2003

Few Kings have left behind them such an unfortunate reputation as King John. He is chiefly remembered for malicious exploits from the Robin Hood fables and movies, which have tainted him as a 'bad man'. It was said that after his death he haunted and ravished the country in the form of a werewolf. This harsh folk judgement probably originated from his unsuccessful conflicts with other powerful interests. The origins of John's bad reputation can be traced to his quarrels with King Philip of France, with Pope Innocent III, and, perhaps most importantly, with his own barons. As well as this, his reputation has suffered from comparison with that of his father Henry II and his brother Richard Coeur-de-Lion, particularly his failure to defend the empire so carefully constructed by Henry.

The loss of the Plantagenet lands in France is arguably the major event of his reign, *Magna Carta* notwithstanding. Although it can be said that John was, on the whole, a good politician, he showed poor judgement on several occasions. His marriage to the Hugh's betrothed not only led to Hugh's rebellion, but also gave Philip II a chance to intervene. In response to Hugh's plea, Phillip set forth a trial for John, as he was bound to do by feudal practice, since John held Normandy as a fief of the French king. However, John, as King of the English, refused to attend. He continued the dispute with Hugh. King Phillip, finally fed up with the harassment of his vassals, demanded that John should present himself in Paris to explain his actions. John refused again, resulting in the nobles of France holding a court discussion regarding the English King- "*At length the French court assembled and judged that the King of England should be deprived of all his lands which he and his predecessors had held from the French King, because they had done scarcely any service owed for a long time, and had refused to obey their lord.*" (Ralph of Coggeshall)

Therefore, John is thought to have been the cause of the downfall of Plantagenet land ownership in France. This is not entirely true. Phillip II was known for his ambition to regain all lands occupied by the English crown. He in fact was the mastermind behind the fall of the Angevine Empire. The French king had manipulated John into this position, Years before John's time in power, Phillip had been turning the Royal family against each other, especially John's older brother Richard. John was merely an excuse for war and a victim of Philip's ambition.

One of the most memorable events during the reign of King John was his clash with Pope Innocent III. With the death of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Walter Hubert, Pope Innocent declined John's candidate for the said position and appointed Stephen Langton. John, arguing for the traditional rights of the English Crown like his father before him, defied the Pope's decision and refused to admit Langton to the See. But John cannot be blamed entirely for his decision. According to the Chronicles of Gervase of Canterbury,

*“The King, led on by evil counsellors, refused to consent.”* so the decision was not wholly his own. The monks of Canterbury accepted the Pope’s decision. Despite the refusal of their candidate; they told John they would never defy Langton or the Pope. Saying this, the monks were dismissed by the King and their goods confiscated. John’s decision to disobey the Pope may have had something to do with his stubbornness in his belief of the King’s divine rights and his will to be yielded to by all. Negotiations between the King and the Pope broke down. Innocent placed an Interdict over England, preventing the administration of the sacraments and certain church rites to take place on English soil. The King’s response was to further victimise the Clergy by expelling all monks, seizing all goods from churches and privately owned belongings of the clergy, and *“Impressed heavy taxes on their lands and resources.”* (Ashley, 1972). To prevent John from continuing down his current path Innocent threatened excommunication. This only seems to have hardened John’s resolve.

John eventually made peace with Pope Innocent. He accepted Langton as Archbishop, reinstated all exiled Clergy and compensated the Church for its losses. But it must be mentioned that John only reconciled himself with the Pope because of rebellion from various Barons. In theory, Excommunication releases Vassals from their oaths of fealty to their Lords. A rebellion did not occur till 1212, three years after he was excommunicated. During his quarrel with Innocent, John amassed approximately 100,000 pounds from the church alone. He also succeeded in his aim to obtain the Papacy as a firm ally in his fight against his Barons and the King of France. At the same time, he conducted highly successful expeditions to Ireland, Scotland and Wales. *“There was now no one in Ireland, Scotland or Wales who did not bow to his nod, a situation which, as is well known, none of his predecessors had achieved.”* (Anonymous Barnwell Chronicler in *Class Notes*).

After making peace with the Pope, John then attempted the re-conquering of his lost French provinces. During John’s reign there is no doubt that he mistreated his Barons, but so did plenty of other medieval Kings. Lands were stolen, heirs disappeared, money demanded, Nobles were thrown in prisons unjustly without reason, but this had been happening for years to the peasants. Why should the Barons suddenly start to care now? From his military campaigns to other parts of the British Isles John had demanded military service or ‘scutage’ constantly over some five years. The Barons began to feel the full cost of John’s ambitions. Now with John demanding more military service and scutage from his Barons, the question was raised among them: “how many times a year can the King command this?”

The Barons finally revolted (the majority of the Barons were from the North) and civil war broke out. John was forced to sign Magna Carta.

Although Magna Carta is only concerned with various freedoms for the Barons and Noblemen in England, it was still an establishment of some sort of common law. The laws contained within its pages laid the basis for English constitutional liberties, and ensured that the King was beneath the law, not greater than it.. But the King didn’t lose all his rights of kingship; the Nobles just had the ability to judge him. The King could not simply do as he pleased without the consent of his Barons. The *“Government of England*

*had to be accountable to the sovereignty of the law” which meant the “King could be brought to book for violating it (the law)” (BBC History of Britain, 2002),*

The problem with John was his inability to deal with individuals. This may have been due to childhood memories of his father’s betrayal by Thomas A’Beckett, or his parent’s constant hostilities, and his family’s fratricidal struggles. These things must have inflicted on him a lack of trust in others from a young age . This would explain John’s treatment of people, especially his Barons: *“John assuming disloyalty ended up guaranteeing it. Blackmail and extortion, threats to Barons instead of promises” (BBC History of Britain, 2002).* Since John wholly believed in the King’s absolute power he pressed his position harder upon people than would be wise. He expected his every will and whim to be carried out unquestioned and had little time for people who failed to follow out his orders. When John passed laws he was there to enforce them. This had not happened during Richard I’s rule when Barons and Nobles had free reign over England, which could explain the Barons reluctance of John’s firm ruling. *“The fact alone that John, unlike his predecessors on the throne, spent most of his time in England made his rule more oppressive.” (Britannica 1984)*

King John had a lot of opposition and dealt with it well. His reign lasted 17 years. He held together his bickering dominions under pressure from the French and the Papacy. Although it is true that he contributed to the loss of the Angevine provinces in France, quarrelled with the Pope and abused his Royal and Feudal privileges,. John was only unpopular because he had to fix the depleted treasury left by Richard I. It would be unfair to judge him from what the monastic chroniclers have written, because their writings are based on rumours and gossip aimed at a Monarch who had estranged the Church and dismissed the clergy. King John was a stubborn man who lacked a level head, but was in no way a tyrant King. He was a clever man who simply was not endowed with good diplomacy or people skills.

### **Bibliography:**

W. L. Warren, 1978, *King John*, Eyre Methuen, London.

A. L. Poole, 1955, *The Oxford History of England: From doomsday Book to Magna Carta 1087- 1216*, Oxford University Press, Ely House, London.

J. Dahmus, 1967, *Seven Medieval Kings*, George Allen and Unwin Ltd, London.

M. Ashley, 1972, *The Life and Times of King John*, Wiedenfeld and Nicolson Ltd, London.

R. Bartlett, 2001, *Medieval Panorama*, Thames and Hudson, London.

*Collins Dictionary: British History*, 2002, HarperCollins Publishers, Great Britain, pp 252- 253, 239, 286, 379.

*Dictionary of World History*, 1994, Chambers, Great Britain, pp 795-796, 574, 87, 482, 453.

*Encyclopaedia Britannica Macropodia*, 1984, Hemingway Benton, 15<sup>th</sup> Edition, Volume 10, pp 236-238.

*Encarta Encyclopaedia Deluxe*, [CD-ROM], 2000, Microsoft, Lernout and Hauspie Speech Products N. V., America.

*A History of Britain*, [Video], 2002, BBC Worldwide Ltd, England.

\*Sheets from class.