

Was Richard de Clare a 'true vassal' of Henry II?

Jess

Richard de Clare, Earl of Pembroke, known to history as 'Strongbow' was one of the Norman conquerors of Ireland during the reign of Henry II. His actions show him to have been a loyal vassal of Henry II, although Henry does not seem to have trusted him at first. There were a number of times when Richard seemed to be making himself too powerful, and King Henry took action to assert his authority. In the later part of Henry's reign, when he faced rebellion from his sons and Eleanor of Aquitaine, his wife, Richard de Clare showed himself to be loyal and dependable, a 'true vassal'.

Richard was the son of Gilbert fitzGilbert de Clare, a Welsh Marcher lord and the first Earl of Pembroke. The FitzGilberts traced their origins back to the conquest in 1066. Richard claimed the right to his father's title in 1148, at the age of eighteen. Before this, he and his father had supported King Stephen in the civil war against Matilda (Henry II's mother) and her supporters. According to Armstrong (1999), Stephen took FitzGilbert's lands and castles from him in 1141 on the suspicion that Gilbert was about to join the barons on the side of the Empress. His son Richard must have kept Stephen's confidence, since he was given the title seven years later. However, when Henry became king in 1154, he refused at first to recognise Richard's right to the lands and title of Orbec and Bienfait in Normandy, claiming that the fief was a 'Stephen creation' (Armstrong) Clearly, Henry regarded Richard de Clare as untrustworthy at this time.

Events in Ireland gave Richard de Clare an opportunity to gain more power. In 1160, the high king Turlough O'Connor overthrew the king of Leinster, Dermot MacMurrough, who then travelled to Normandy and asked Henry II for assistance in regaining his kingdom. According to both Armstrong and World Book (p336), Henry gave him permission to recruit Norman soldiers from his lands in Wales. In 1168, Dermot MacMurrough approached Richard, who welcomed the opportunity. He was yet unmarried, due to lack of royal favour, and his prospects in Henry's kingdom must have seemed limited. Orpen (p. 23) gives the terms of the agreement between Richard and Dermot MacMurrough. The Earl of Pembroke was to collect a force and travel to Ireland in the following spring (1169). In return, Dermot promised Richard the hand of his eldest daughter Eva and the lordship of his kingdom after his death. Other Norman barons were promised a share of land if they assisted in the reconquest of Leinster.

Henry gave his permission to this arrangement, but then withdrew it, claiming that 'he had given it in a jesting manner' (Armstrong 2). Richard seems to have continued with his preparations in defiance of the king, however, because William of Newburgh (in Orpen, 192) says that Henry later sent messengers to Richard forbidding the expedition. This was not enough to stop the earl, who sailed forth from Milford Haven with a force of two hundred knights and about one thousand other troops, including archers. Richard was certainly not behaving like a 'loyal vassal' at this time, and Henry took action. He claimed Richard's lands in Wales and did all he could to hamper adequate supplies and reinforcements reaching Ireland in the spring.

Richard was surprisingly successful in Ireland. According to Brit.Com., his Anglo Norman force landed near Waterford on August 23, 1170 and took the town on St Bartholomew's eve, five days after their arrival. Richard then concentrated his forces against Dublin, quickly defeating the combined force of Ostmen and Irish. On August 29, Richard married Eva

McMurrough in Waterford Cathedral. Dermot had kept his word. (Armstrong 2) However, he died in the following year, leaving his new son-in-law to succeed to the throne of Leinster. This did not take place without opposition. Orpen says that the arrangement between Dermot and Richard was 'entirely unknown in Irish legal custom' (p.223) Richard was forced to fight against a number of rebellions, the most serious led by Rory O'Connor. By the end of summer, 1171, Richard controlled the three principal seaports of Dublin, Wexford and Waterford.

His success alarmed Henry II, who ordered all the Welsh Border barons to return to their lands in England or risk losing them. (Armstrong, 2). According to Orpen (p248), Richard met with Henry in Gloucester, acting on the advice of a baron who had travelled to England to gain the royal favour. He did homage to the king, and reaffirmed his loyalty as a royal vassal. To 'appease the royal outrage' (Armstrong, 2), he surrendered Dublin, its adjacent lands, the maritime towns and castles, and his own lordship of Leinster. Henry retained Waterford, Wexford and the castles, but granted Richard the remaining lands and left him as lord of Leinster. The king then travelled to Ireland in 1171 to ensure that the barons remained loyal and, according to World Book, to prevent Richard setting himself up as an independent ruler. The Norman barons, including Richard, did homage to Henry as his vassals.

Richard had been a loyal vassal, it seems, only because of the threat of losing his Welsh lands. However, in the later part of Henry's reign, Richard was to remain loyal and was rewarded by Henry with lands and responsibility. In April 1174, King Henry's sons rebelled against him in Normandy. He summoned his leading Irish knights to help him, and Richard travelled to Normandy, where he showed his military skills at Gisors, Breteuil and Verneuil. He was rewarded for his loyalty when Henry granted him the governing of Ireland, the city of Wexford, the castle of Wicklow and the constableness of Waterford and Dublin. As governor of Ireland, Richard served Henry well. He put down a revolt that had begun in his absence, and managed to control the warring factions in the land. (Armstrong, 2,3) By the time of his death, Richard de Clare held all of Ireland in the king's name.

Richard had experienced obstruction and hostility from Henry in the early part of his career, especially during his involvement in the affairs of Leinster, but went on to prove his loyalty in Normandy and as governor of Ireland. On the whole, he was indeed a 'loyal vassal'. He remained honourable to Henry and upheld his oath of fealty and homage.