KING JOHN

There can be no doubt about it: King John has had a bad press. From his earliest monastic biographer Matthew Paris (who was not even born when John came to the throne), through Shakespeare, down to the juvenile verses of A.A. Milne and the writings of popular historians, he has been painted black. Modern historical scholarship fortunately redresses the balance somewhat. While not denying that John often acted ruthlessly in what was, after all, a ruthless age, it portrays him as possessing the administrative ability of a great ruler who was sadly denied the opportunity of peaceably governing his vast domains - stretching from Scotland to Spain - for more than short periods, because of the jealous encroachments of his many opponents.

John was born at Oxford on Christmas Eve 1166, the eighth and last of the "Devil's Brood", as the children of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine have been dubbed. A short man, no more than 5ft 5ins tall (as was shown when his tomb was opened in 1797), there is no record of his physical appearance apart from his effigy in Worcester Cathedral, and that was made some fifteen years after his death. All we know is that, in common with several of the Angevins, he probably suffered from cyclothymia - alternate bursts of irrepressible energy and depths of depression and inertia.

Little is known on his childhood except that it was almost certainly peripatetic - as was the fashion of the Angevins - and that the majority of it was probably spent with his exceptionally energetic father, since his parents were soon to be estranged, his mother retiring to hold court at Poitiers in her duchy. What can be substantiated is that when he was only six a family quarrel broke out over his lack of extensive landed property - an essential medieval status symbol - and that even when he became King of England he never fully lived down his nickname of "Lackland". His other nickname, "Softsword", was also somewhat unjustifiably earned in 1200 for preferring peace to a ruinous war with his neighbour, King Philip of France.

As a Crusader, in a crusading era, John clearly was frustrated, though he must at some stage have pledged his life to the cause. In 1185 Heraclius, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, accompanied by the Grand Masters of the Hospitallers and the Templars, personally pleaded with Henry II to allow John to accept the position of heir to the childless King Baldwin IV of Jerusalem, who was dying of leprosy; but Henry refused and instead sent John to quell Ireland, a military adventure that went badly. Again, in 1189 his father refused him permission to join the Third Crusade - subsequently to be made famous by the exploits of his more military elder brother Richard - because John was his favourite remaining son and he wanted him to be his successor rather than his wife's favourite, Richard. Partly in revenge John rebelled against his father, and the knowledge of this is said to have made the latter's death later that same year especially bitter. Immediately on his accession Richard set out for the Holy Land, leaving John behind in effect as regent of England, a post he was to hold for the next five years. He acquired the earldom of Gloucester by marrying its heiress, Isabel (this marriage was subsequently annulled in 1200 on grounds of consanguinity to enable him to marry another Isabel, of Angouleme) but, faced with turbulent barons, John acquitted himself poorly and even joined their rebellion; he was therefore surprised on being forgiven when his brother returned from his Austrian captivity. He then reformed and served Richard well until the latter's unexpected death on 6 April 1199.

John was not actually heir by birth to Richard's inheritance - his elder brother Geoffrey of Brittany's posthumous son Arthur was - but primogeniture was not yet established, Arthur was a minor, and Richard had nominated John on his death bed. John accepted after great debate, secured the royal treasure at Chinon, was invested with the Duchy of Normandy, crossed to England, and was crowned in Westminster Abbey on Ascension Day, 27 May. He then spent the next two years touring his dominions; indeed, it has been said that no other monarch, even including his father, did so to such an extent nor devoted himself so keenly to the job of ruling his disparate subjects. He was always on the move, either in France or England - one of his favourite hunting lodges was at Feckenham in this county - and was a most able administrator and dispenser of justice. One of his contemporaries summed it up when he said that John "ruled indefatigably". Amongst other achievements he can be credited with establishing the country's first national archives, an essential adjunct of orderly administration; and with reviving the royal navy leading to the first great English naval victory over the French off Damme in 1213.

But John's reign is, unfortunately, indivisibly linked in the layman's mind with his loss of Normandy, his struggle with the Church, and his submission to his barons at Runnymede. In all three, however, he emerges with greater credit and less stain on his character than has generally been supposed.

The loss of Normandy, 1203-4, was militarily inevitable. The Angevin possessions in France, more than doubled by his parents' marriage, were too extensive and their major subjects too independent for one man alone, who was also King of England, to control. And at the same time the King of France - such as France then existed - was increasing in power. Richard's extended absence on the Third Crusade saw the first decline, and it was John's misfortune to preside over the collapse.

John's argument with Innocent III was but one of several examples of the medieval struggle between temporal and spiritual rulers for control of the clergy, sparked off in this instance by his opposition to the Pope's consecration of Stephen Langton as Archbishop of Canterbury. It led to the Interdict placed on England from March 1208 to July 1214 and to John's personal excommunication between November 1209 and July 1213. But despite being thereby automatically relieved of their allegiance to their sovereign, it is instructive to observe that the vast majority of the barons sided with John in the struggle; their opposition only gathered momentum after his reconciliation with the Pope which placed the latter's authority behind the king. And it is of particular interest to record that, while assuming the administration of ecclesiastical property during the Interdict, John treated the Knights Templar very leniently and actually allowed the Knights Hospitaller to administer their own estates. He also used the Templars as emissaries between himself and the Pope, and it was at the Templar manor of Ewell near Dover that he finally made his peace with Innocent.

But perhaps the most famous and the most misunderstood event of the reign is Magna Carta, negotiated beside the Thames between Monday and Friday, 15-19 June, 1215. This great document in fact said very little against John's personal rule, but was more a condemnation of half a

century of Angevin government. And it should also be remembered that the Charter to which the opponents of Charles I so frequently referred in the seventeenth century was not that of 1215, but a different version promulgated by John's son, Henry III, in 1225. Furthermore, John's Charter lasted no more than ten weeks, being first broken by extremists on both sides, and then annulled by the Pope on the specific ground that the Lords Spiritual, Langton among them, should have protected the king as a crusader and not sided against him. It was the barons turn to be excommunicated.

During this last rebellion and the invasion of England by the French, John fell ill (probably with dysentry) and died at Newark Castle on 18 October 1216, six days after trying unsuccessfully to prevent his entire regalia, personal treasures, and other baggage from being sucked down into the quicksands of the Wellstream (now the Nene) estuary near Swineshead by the advancing tide. He remained lucid to the end and just before he died dictated a brief but dignified will, amongst the provisions of which he ratified and confirmed his executors (thirteen of them, fourth of whom was "Silvester Lord Bishop of Worcester") "in making satisfaction to God and Holy Church for the wrongs I have done them, sending help to the Holy Land, rendering assistance to my sons for the recovery and defence of their inheritance, rewarding those who have served us faithfully, and distributing alms to the poor and to religious houses for the salvation of my soul". Above all, his particular veneration for his patron saint, St. Wulstan, led him to "desire that my body be buried in the Church of the Blessed Virgin and St.Wulfstan at Worcester" as near to the shrine of the saint as possible. His body was accordingly borne across the country by armed escort to Worcester Cathedral and there laid before the altar of St. Wulstan as he had requested; and for long the monks kept his memory fresh by the observance of an annual fast on the anniversary of his death. He was not quite fifty.

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It seems to me most appropriate that a new preceptory, especially when based in Worcester, should commemorate King John. No other on the roll of Great Priory bears this name, and this province already commemorates his more famous elder brother in the Richard Coeur de Lion Preceptory No. 212. In addition, the three saints particularly associated with Worcester and between whom he was buried have already given their names to Masonic institutions in the province: the Royal Arch Chapter of St. Wulstan No. 280, the Rose Croix Chapter of St. Dunstan No. 12, and the Red Cross of Constantine Conclave of St. Oswald No. 278.

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Malvern College, April 1981. Registrar, St. Amand Preceptory No. 68