



John: An Evil King?

Nicholas Vincent

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Review by: Sean McGlynn



John: An Evil King? By Nicholas Vincent. London: Allen Lane, 2020. ISBN 978-0-141-97769-0. xxi + 117 pp. £14.99.

The 800th anniversary of Magna Carta in 2015 was marked by a slew of books on its conceding monarch, John. Surprisingly, given his eminent position as a leading scholar of the King, there was no biography from Nicholas Vincent; his focus around that time was more on the actual charter itself. That said, his short introduction to Magna Carta for Oxford University Press in 2012 was as much about John's reign as about the charter. Here, in this brief volume in the Penguin Monarchs series, Vincent finally affords John a dedicated treatment. The first challenge he faces is to compress his vast knowledge into a little over 100 pages of text. Not only does he succeed in doing so, but he also manages to include a good deal of original research into the process. The result is a gem of a biography. Interestingly, despite all the recent scholarship, he still holds Sidney Painter's *The Reign of King John* from 1949 to be the best "modern" account of the period.

In his introduction, Vincent indicates that his biography is about much more than "the road to Magna Carta" and the culmination of John's rule: "John's reign involved rather more than a summer's morning at Runnymede" (x). That is very true; nonetheless, all roads did lead there after John's loss of Normandy and other Angevin territories in France in 1204. Vincent starts by suggesting that John, as the youngest of four surviving sons of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, was bound for the church, pointing out that while the name "John" had no royal associations, there had been nineteen popes named thus. Any child brought up in the spectacularly dysfunctional Angevin royal family was likely to have what modern observers would call "issues"—these seemed to cascade down to the youngest son.

John witnessed his brothers in an all-out rebellion against their father in 1173–1174, a formative episode from which Vincent says John possibly learnt that "in an extreme situation, defiance was always preferable to appeasement" (11) and that provoking one's opponent to come out into the open, as Henry had done, was a sensible, pre-emptive option. A consequence of the revolt was, Vincent opines, that Henry could no longer spare John for the Church, the suggestion being that he needed him to play his part in family politics. He became his father's favourite, earning the enmity of his brothers. Nonetheless, it would be a while before John acquired substantial territories (although his paucity in this area might be exaggerated), hence his enduring nickname of "Lackland." His position improved in the 1180s, with the deaths of his father-in-law, the Earl of Gloucester, and his brothers Henry and Geoffrey. As Lord of Ireland, he made a reputedly disastrous expedition to Ireland in 1185 at the age of eighteen, revealing his tactless and offensive side to Irish nobles. Vincent contests this popular view, writing of John's "competence" (16) during his expedition and subsequent management there; although it should be said that Ireland later twice rebelled against John when he was king. He does ponder, however, whether it was here that John learnt to treat hostages in the brutal fashion for which he

later became notorious, and whether John's training in Ireland made his style of kingship "too Irish for his French or English subjects" (18).

The extent of John's loyalty to the crown was exposed in his rebellions against his father in 1189 and his crusading brother Richard I in 1193–1194. Richard dismissed John's efforts as those of a mere child and humiliated him (John was twenty-seven at the time) while otherwise treating him with untoward leniency and generosity. Vincent makes it clear that John came to the throne in 1199 with an already disreputable standing. After an initially promising start, he compounded that shady reputation, first with the shocking killing of his nephew Arthur of Brittany, and then with the loss of Normandy. Compensating barons in England who had held land in Normandy with the lands of those in England still adhering to the King of France did little to help; in fact, as Vincent points out, it created a positive disincentive for them to wish to fight anymore in France. His inability to win lasting victories in the field meant few excuses could be made for his myriad of other failings. He did gain a new sobriquet, though: *molle gladium* ("Softsword"). It was well deserved.

From here on in, we can never stray far from that road to Magna Carta. It is a path well-trodden: financial impositions on, and maltreatment of, his barons and their families; the complete failure of John's grand plan to regain his French territories at the near-run Battle of Bouvines in 1214; and his submission to the Church in 1213. Vincent tells the story well, always with perceptive observations and well-placed insights. Oddly, at this point, before a final chapter on Magna Carta, he devotes twenty pages to the question of whether John really was evil or not. While better serving as a conclusion, it is nonetheless a fascinating analysis of John's cruelty and lechery. Here, Vincent's extensive knowledge of official records reinforces contemporary writers' deeply negative view of John to reaffirm a disturbing psychological profile. Repeatedly in the book, Vincent returns to arguably John's greatest flaw: that he was a known oath-breaker. Thus, all parties saw the supposed peace treaty of Magna Carta as merely an excuse for a temporary pause in hostilities between John and many of his barons. "John died as he had reigned, a failure," judges Vincent, and while the author does not directly answer the question of the book's subtitle, he concludes that John's "political intelligence, like his personality, was warped by cruelty, dishonesty and mistrust" (101–102).

In so short a volume, some readers are bound to have quibbles over Vincent's treatment of different issues. This reviewer would have liked to have seen the French invasion and occupation of England at the end of John's reign—his greatest failure by far—given fuller attention, not least for its implications for England, and because it was this event that secured Magna Carta's place in history. Overall, this is the perfect, authoritative introduction to a deeply unpleasant king.

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