



*The Growth of Royal Government
under Henry III,*

David Crook and Louis J. Wilkinson
eds.

(Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2015).

Review by: Benjamin L. Wild

The Growth of Royal Government under Henry III. Edited by David Crook and Louise J. Wilkinson. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2015. ISBN 978-1-78327-067-5. xiv + 288 pp. \$99.00.

When Michael Prestwich remarked that the government of medieval England was “precociously bureaucratic”, he was reflecting on the difficulties this posed for the historian (Michael Prestwich, *Edward I*, 1988, xi). During the thirteenth century, the implications of England’s sophisticated and centralized royal bureaucracy posed more urgent and ‘real’ challenges to the crown and its subjects, for the development of administrative kingship was very much a double-edged sword. Whilst it may have enabled England’s Angevin rulers to harness the financial and manpower resources of their kingdom with greater efficiency to support their ‘empire’, there is little denying that the routinization of royal administration and the centralization of royal justice provided legal and political emancipation for their subjects. Free subjects of the crown learned of judicial procedures through their involvement with the burgeoning Common Law and became cognizant of what was equitable and, crucially, what was arbitrary about the methods of royal governance. If Henry II’s possessory assizes strengthened royal authority in the short term, in the longer term – during the reigns of his son John and grandson Henry III – they helped to nurture a more expectant and critical public whose voice was heard loudly, if not entirely coherently, in Magna Carta.

By the beginning of Henry III’s reign, the precocious bureaucracy of medieval England thus created challenges and opportunities for all. Through a forensic study of the records produced by England’s thirteenth-century government, *The Growth of Royal Government under Henry III* provides a series of case-studies that demonstrate how crown and community harnessed their kingdom’s administrative apparatus for individual and collective gain. The contributors to this book look broadly at the work and impact of royal government across the British Isles but of all the records analyzed the Fine Rolls feature most prominently; they are the focus of six of the book’s fourteen chapters. The emphasis on these rolls is understandable – the book is the product of a conference convened by the Henry III Fine Rolls Project in 2012 – and necessary, for before their translation and publication by the AHRC-funded Fine Rolls Project, they were among the most under-studied of the records of England’s thirteenth-century government.

As David Carpenter explains in the opening chapter, the Fine Rolls survive from the start of the reign of King John. Ostensibly, they record the

sums of money that were offered to the king to secure his pardon – if a transgression had been committed – or to seek his preferment – if a specific favour was sought. The Fine Rolls grew enormously in content and length during Henry III's reign, as did their duplicate, the Originalia Roll, which is discussed in a separate chapter by Paul Dryburgh. Much of the 'new' material that appeared on the Fine Rolls relates to the crown's financial affairs in the localities. According to Carpenter, the Fine Rolls can therefore be used to show how English society changed in the "hinge period" (9) between the acceptance of Magna Carta and the development of the parliamentary state. Through a comparison of two surviving Fine Rolls from the reigns of King John and Henry III in 1207-8 and 1256-7, respectively, Carpenter shows how the rolls changed hugely in this forty-nine year period – they grow in length and record much smaller amounts of money – because Magna Carta induced the king and his government to rule in a way that was accountable rather than arbitrary. However, if Magna Carta made royal government amenable in some areas, Carpenter uses the Fine Rolls to show how Henry's need of money led him to be aggressive in others, chiefly regarding the increasing distraint of knighthood, which did much to anger his subjects.

Where Carpenter considers the opportunities created and obstacles posed by Henry III's government, chapters by Paul Brand and Tony Moore show how the Fine Rolls reveal an increasing demand for royal justice during his reign. In many respects, the development of Common Law was a boon to the king's free subjects, but it placed extra demands on the kingdom's sheriffs whose judicial responsibilities were more closely monitored and supervised by royal justices. The office of sheriff and other regional positions remained politically and socially beneficial, however, particularly for women, as Louise Wilkinson explains in her chapter. In practice, female sheriffs and local office holders were few in number and they never exercised the authority of their male counterparts. There were exceptions, of course. Wilkinson highlights the example of Lady Nicholaa de la Haye, a twice-widowed sexagenarian and the castellan of Lincoln castle, who repulsed an attack against Lincoln by the French prince Louis in 1217. The example of Nicholaa is interesting for showing how closely England's kings intervened in local affairs; Nicholaa had wanted to resign her position, and told the King as much, but John refused, no doubt cognizant of her tenacity. The intervention of the king in local affairs was not always so effective, as Scott Waugh notes with regard to Henry III's meddling in his chapter on royal escheators.

The ability of government records to demonstrate the personality and motivations of England's medieval rulers is questionable, but several chapters demonstrate how ideologies are discernible in the Chancery's ink. Nicholas Vincent's chapter, which analyses an inventory of royal gifts from 1234-5, presents an opportunity to consider the psychology of Henry III, in particular, his fear of thunder. Articles on enrolment practices in Scotland and Wales by Alice Taylor and Charles Insley, respectively, show how the adoption or repudiation of English Chancery procedure heightened political and cultural distinctions. These articles, along with those by Nick Barratt, David Crook, Adrian Jobson and Scott Waugh, which focus on periods of financial and judicial reform and readjustment in Henry III's reign, reveal how decisively the practice of politics and governance changed following the acceptance of Magna Carta and its implicit demand for a "new monarchy" (9), to borrow David Carpenter's expression.

Few volumes on English government have so well captured the sense of political transition that was patent during Henry III's long reign. There are some minor issues, however. The book's bipartite structure – 'Records and their Uses' and 'Government in Action' – is unnecessary. All chapters are rooted in close studies of the record evidence and, to varying degrees, consider the human and administrative implications of England's bureaucratic precocity. Readers will probably dip in and out of chapters, as their interest takes them. More disappointing is the lack of coverage on the royal wardrobe, which became an important office of government during Henry III's reign, as remarks by Carpenter and Vincent make plain. Moreover, a study that emphasizes England's bureaucratic sophistry cries out for continental comparison and it is a shame that room was not available for this. That said, in raising anew the question of England's bureaucratic uniqueness and the extent to which this affected English political discourse, the book demonstrates how the Fine Rolls, in particular, will be a key source of information for all scholars who seek to grapple effectively with these themes. More fundamentally, this book will serve, deservedly, as an authoritative, and reasonably accessible, introductory guide to the major offices and records of England's thirteenth-century government.

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