

King John and the Road to Magna Carta

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From Reader Review King John and the Road to Magna Carta for online ebook

Nicole says

I was inspired to pick this up after reading a biography of William Marshal, since the Marshal's life and career were intertwined with the Angevins, including King John. And of course, everyone knows Prince John as the mean and evil ruler from the Robin Hood stories.

I appreciated this book for its attention to detail - the author certainly did his research. It was a somewhat dry read, never hooking my interest beyond a general desire to learn about the subject matter. It was a good read for lovers of history, but I'm not left raving about it.

Susan Jo Grassi says

Most of us are familiar with King John and the Magna Carta, the beginning of democracy. The book is an historical biography of King John and his efforts to retain his lands in France, which he lost, and his endeavors to hold on to the throne of England in the face of civil war due his incompetence, greed, and treachery. He had angered the Church of Rome to the point of being excommunicated, later to be reinstated, and treated his barons and subjects with such disdain as to create rebellion. Truly the prime example of a bad ruler.

History books can be very dry and good for insomniacs but I do have to confess that, for the most part, it moved along very nicely and added a lot of information of which I had been previous unaware.

Veronika Elde says

Interesting, but hard to read notes on a phone in the e-book. Very well researched and disputes the notion that he lost the crown jewels in the crossing before dying of dysentery.

Louise says

He had lost all of England's land in what we now call France. As he died England was in a civil war and fending off a foreign invasion. From the distance of 8 centuries, it may be impossible to determine what went wrong. On the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta, King John's accidental achievement, Stephen Church gives us some tools to try.

Church shows the power of a medieval king. John held between 20-33% of the Kingdom's money and through taxation and confiscation could take more. As is demonstrated in the end, he had the power to disinherit anyone, to take their lands and give them to someone else. He had the power to create what sound like forest preserves, which would render land useless, not only for its owner but all who worked it on his behalf. It was an act of remarkable bravery or foolishness to defy the king.

He lost British lands on the continent, some believed by not showing up. He began a feud with the Pope over an Archbishop appointment and got himself and most of his kingdom excommunicated. He taxed in every way possible way: the 13th tax; tax on movable goods, taxes on the clergy; special taxes on the Jews, and creating forest lands. He took on his own appointees in Ireland and Wales. He brutally killed his nephew and caused terrible suffering for those who's loyalty he questioned.

He was so not trusted by his constituents that they risked all to force the Magna Carta, a document that John set out to destroy, into being.

Since this is about the famous document and the political events leading up to it Church does not explore John and how he came to destroy himself as he did. He does describe the power of the office; Can it be concluded that John saw no limits to his power? There is some reference to his family, but no discussion of how dysfunctional it was how it might have fostered John's distrust as world view.

The book has an abbreviated (but clear) genealogical chart, four abbreviated (somewhat clear) maps and extensive footnotes. There are no plates and the sole illustration is that of an effigy carved shortly after his death.

Neeuqrazil says

This was well written, with thorough (but not intrusive) end and footnotes.

Church takes John without prejudgement, and looks at his reign, as well as his life before his reign, without considering what happened later - basically, trying to take events as they came, rather than looking at them with the judgement of hindsight.

It works.

Caroline says

The reign of King John marks a watershed in English history in more ways than one. Known largely as the 'Bad King John' of Robin Hood fame, whose disastrous kingship gave rise to Magna Carta, John's reign marks the point when the kings of England truly became English, kings *only* of England. His predecessors spent more time across the Channel in their continental lands than in England, and most did not even speak English - John's son Henry III was the first to speak English fluently, and even then it was not his native tongue. Many of the nobility held lands on both sides of the Channel, and few would have considered themselves English - Anglo-Norman, at best.

Under John's rule the continental empire of the Angevin kings of England that had once stretched from the borders of Scotland to Spain, including more than half of France, was lost - and it was in an effort to regain those lands that John taxed his subjects relentlessly, demanded men and matériel for his army, appropriated Church possessions, and so alienated his barons that they eventually rebelled against him and invited the son of the French king to invade and take the crown. As Stephen Church so ably demonstrates in this book, you cannot separate this period in English history from French history, you cannot look at events in England without reference to the wider context. John's actions in England, so memorably recounted and vilified in

Robin Hood stories, were in direct response to events in France, in Wales, in Ireland. His tyranny was prompted by a harried king's desperate need for cash, men and arms to fight for the reconquest of his ancestral lands.

This is a scholarly yet thoroughly readable history, and Church manages to condense a tangled, complex web of conflicting loyalties, politics, betrayal and abuse of power into a clear and comprehensive account. John is one of the most complex and enigmatic of English monarchs, and Church portrays him here with a clear eye and no judgement. As the author himself says, it is important to tell John's life as though we did not already know how it ended. As with Richard III, we tend to let the final outcome colour how we view an entire reign. John was not destined to be a failure, any more than Richard III was destined to be a usurper and lose his kingdom.

John was a product of his place, time and family, and in many respects inherited much of his difficulties from his father and brother. The Angevin empire was never really any such thing, there was never any unity or indeed any real stable overarching authority; it was a collection of independent polities who swore lip-service to the idea of the English king as their overlord, but real authority on the ground remained with the local rulers. Perhaps a more subtle king or a more dominant king may have held them in line, but it is entirely possible that his revered brother, Richard the Lionheart, himself, may have struggled had he lived long enough to reap the consequences, instead of John.

Orsolya says

King John doesn't have the best reputation. He is known as the "Bad King"...The bad seed as opposed to his brother, Richard the Lionheart. So 'bad' that his actions pushed his subjects and barons to compose the Magna Carta—the predecessor of many modern-day constitutions (so perhaps it is a good thing that John was unqualified!). Stephen Church attempts to explore the foundation building up to the Magna Carta in, "King John: And the Road to the Magna Carta".

Church's aim with "King John" is not to rehabilitate John or condone his actions. Rather, the target of the text is to explain the events which led to the Magna Carta and how/why John acted the way he did. "King John" succeeds in this by presenting an even-paced text that is academic but not dry and works as a solid introduction into King John's reign but with enough detail to satisfy those familiar with the topic. Church's prose is strong and his writing lacks biases and assumptions making "King John" quite compelling.

There are, however, issues with Church straying from the topic and going into detailed tangents losing his hypothesis begging the reader to ask what he is trying to prove. Sometimes, Church tries too hard to be unbiased and thus "King John" simply reads as a recitation of events a la, "This happened and then that".

The amount of research is clearly justified in "King John" as Church alludes to documents and household books brimming with detail (although this may be "too much" for some readers). Uniquely, Church stipulates when sources quoted are secondary or written long after the fact which helps the reader gain a well-rounded view but with a grain of salt. Church also employs occasional detective work and cunningly works out how, when, or why an event occurred.

As "King John" progresses, a 'point' is seemingly lost as Church *does* explain events that disgruntled subjects (and thus led to the Magna Carta); but none of this seems dire or that 'bad'. There have been worse kings before and since King John. Although, perhaps this indication is precisely Church's goal (even though

he says he does not aim to rehabilitate King John). There is also an issue with some repetition and backtracking which momentarily stalls attention.

There is a disconnect between the former portions of “King John” discussing events leading up to the Magna Carta and the sudden jump into exploring the various doctrines. The path is not cohesive and is quite abrupt. This effectively “throws off” the reader in some ways. This can similarly be said about the conclusion of “King John” which lacks emotion even though Church suddenly ties to enforce that John was a tyrant when the entire book never appeared to necessarily agree with that notion.

Some stylistic comments should be noted: “King John” contains various maps; however, they are coded per color shade which is a bit tricky when the map is black-and-white/grayscale. Color plates would also have been welcome (there is an absence of photos). However, the abundance of sources and length of bibliography will satisfy fact-checkers; as will both foot and end notes.

“King John” suffers from some flaws and doesn’t per se achieve Church’s aims. Yet, it is well-researched, detailed, and strong academically while being very readable and not dry. There is ‘something’ about “King John” which makes it quite a good read. “King John” is recommended for all readers interested in English history and I would certainly read more from Church in the future.

Daniel Kukwa says

It has a great deal of what I like in a history book, particularly its ability to be concise in analysis & writing style. However, I was disappointed by the conclusion -- it takes the book from concise to abrupt. I wanted a longer analysis of John's legacy, particularly from the viewpoint of his heir & his later actions as king. I wanted to see an analysis of the fallout in France, post-John. I wanted to read more about John's legacy in the centuries after his death. The sudden conclusion just leaves a disappointing taste in my mouth, but in overall terms, this book is truly a how-to guide in how to lose an empire.

Andrew says

Written for the 800th anniversary of the Magna Carta in 2015, Church day-to-day correspondence of the Chancery clerks in King John's reign to look at how royal government was conducted. This correspondence, as well as the Close rolls tracking official correspondence, gives an insight into the mind of the king and what preoccupied him. King John's reign was the first in which correspondence was routinely recorded by the king's administration.

There are interesting contrasts with modern practices:

"Letter writing in the late twelfth-century northern Europe was a vigorous habit, and letters were sent with the expectation that they would be widely circulated and play their part in shaping public opinion. There were no 'private letters in the modern sense of the term.' Until the widespread use of ciphers emerged in the later Middle Ages, secret messages were transmitted by word of mouth."

Stephen Church would do well to write a description of a day in the life of the royal court during this period

because many of the complexities of administration are lost in the last 800 years. Indeed it is unclear what functions seneschals, castellans and others performed; what hereditary rights were; how money flowed during scutages, tallages on towns, "Thirteenth" levies, forest eyres or special taxation on Jews.

Jason Cecil says

Interesting book considering the thin historical record. I wish I had more of a sense of John as a person than as a ruler. The best part was the whole build up to the Magna Carta, and I never knew how influential pope innocent III was in the events of John's life. Three stars because the characters were always too cardboard with little to make them come alive.

E says

This book wasn't as good as I was hoping it would be. For one thing, the subtitle is misleading. It is a straight biography. Magna Carta doesn't appear until the last chapter (fair enough, considering John died a year later), but it is not placed in context, its effects are not mentioned, and in fact the reader hardly saw it coming.

Church agrees with the assessment that lists John as a terrible king, but he does a poor job of showing why. Taxation problems? Who doesn't have those? Issues with the pope? Naturally. Trouble holding on to land in France? Understandable. Competition from energetic nephews and cousins? Hard to blame them. But somehow this coalesces into the opinion that John was a horrible king, and I'm not sure I buy it. If we're going to swallow that diagnosis, our writer needs to do a better job of backing it up.

Kara says

The thing about John of England is he is so relatability *human*.

He tries – and he fails, more often than not, like so many of the rest of us. And he keeps trying, because he wants to show he is just as good as the rest of his family. And he fails, spectacularly, but by God, he never stopped trying to live up to the legend of his parents and brother.

John was a man of many, many insecurities, with a lot of blame that can be laid on Eleanor and Henry more concerned with each other and their kingdoms than any of their children, but even when John was the last of that insane, blazing, dramatic family left, he had an almost uncanny knack for doing the exact right thing to make as many people as possible mad at him.

This book exams John's life through the lens of how all his actions lead up to the Magna Carta, showing how John's insecure ego accidentally created one of the building blocks of modern government.

Rosa says

OMG. SO.MUCH.INFORMATION. It was a lot of fun to read, especially since what little medieval history I read in college was by Geraldus Cambrensis, who was one of the official chroniclers from the early years of King John (specifically, of his journeys in his youth to Ireland, of which he was a lord.) I knew a few of the falsities that Church was trying to disabuse his readers of beforehand (most of which are spurious judgments brought about by common mis-telling of the Robin of the Wood folk story.) Some of this information was 100% new to me though, which made for a fascinating read. I would recommend it to any person with an interest in medieval English history (especially if you're into pre-Hundred Years War land entailment rights/the relationship between royalty and baronships/lordships.)

However, be prepared for a lot of French (as the Angevin kings are from the line of Norman succession, so they are of French descent and owned significant lands there). And be prepared for a lot of backstabbing/bribery. It's a lot like Game of Thrones, to be honest. Only better, because it actually happened.

Kevin Moynihan says

Great book. Well written. Anyone that can spank 'modern historians' like this is fantastic (p.87) —

“The production of these illegitimate children has given many modern historians — many still languishing under the delusion that our hang-ups about sex are the same as those held by our medieval ancestors — the opportunity to heap opprobrium on the heads of monarchs who bedded women other than their wives.”

Bob says

King John usually tops the list of despised English monarchs. And Stephen Church does little to dissuade you of that idea. John was a greedy and insecure man. He was not the man portrayed in the Robin Hood legends, but he was plenty bad enough.

The book is interesting but does get bogged down a little in French-English relations. But that was John's problem.

The Magna Carta, in Church's view, was not a revolutionary document as much as it was a reassertion of an earlier charter issued in 1100. The terms of it were negotiated between John and the barons. Some barons remained in rebellion against John and wanted to put the French king, Philip, on the throne. But before that happened, John died. The war would be fought later.
