

Graham E. Seel, *King John: An Underrated King* (London: Anthem Press, 2012), ISBN: 9780857285188, 230 pp. £12.99.

This most recent addition to the Anthem Perspectives in History series offers readers an examination of the life and reign of King John (1169-1216), the controversial English monarch whom historians generally perceive to be one of the country's most despised sovereigns to date.¹ However, far from merely paraphrasing historical commentaries already available to condemn the figure of John further, it is instead the contention of Graham E. Seel's text to offer a rebuttal to the oft-unquestioned 'ill-repute' (p.5) of the ruler. Building on the recent work of similar, like-minded medieval historians, the present edition thus strives to 'develop [such] sympathetic treatment[s] of John' (p.9), and therefore to provide a continuation of this revaluation of the monarch's rather disastrous reign, basing its various conclusions on important contextual elements which might have compromised the sovereign's seventeen-year rule.²

Seel's volume commences with an outline of the monarch's sovereignty, which those unfamiliar with King John will undoubtedly find useful. Illustrations of the Angevin family and also of the Angevin empire at the time of John's ascension are provided (similar illuminations appear throughout the text), and concentration in this opening chapter centres on the current historical reception of the figure as a 'Maligned King' (p.4). Seel broadly accounts for the affluence of this understanding of the monarch, showing how '[t]he image of King John as an evil tyrant' (p.7) developed from the late Middle Ages, and has continued to flourish in twentieth and twenty-first century popular culture. Channel 4 documentaries, Seel notes, have located John alongside the likes of Adolf Hitler, Attila the Hun and Vlad the Impaler;³ and even the *BBC History Magazine*

¹ See Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Monsters: History's Most Evil Men and Women* (London: Quercus, 2008), which places King John alongside some of the most decidedly (and unarguably) 'evil' figures in Western history.

² See Ralph V. Turner, *King John: England's Evil King?* (Stroud: Tempus, 2005).

³ The series of documentaries, titled *The Most Evil Men in History*, aired on Channel 4 in the 1990s. The second episode ('Bad King John') addressed the medieval monarch, whilst Attila the Hun, Adolf Hitler and Vlad the Impaler were the subjects of the first, fifth and thirteenth episodes, respectively. Idi Amin, Joseph Stalin and Rasputin also made appearances, aptly indicating how the seemingly nefarious John is understood both within the academy and in popular culture.

has, in recent years, fronted its publication with the uncontroversial declaration that John was, indeed, a ‘bad king’.⁴ Though some historians of the past century have leant towards a more balanced and, in some cases, sympathetic understanding of the monarch,⁵ our collective understanding of King John, as Seel shows, is nevertheless rather decidedly negative.

In embarking upon his converse argument proper, Seel’s second chapter (‘John in the Shadows, 1167-1199’) addresses the life of Prince John ahead of the death of his brother, King Richard I. Specifically, the author addresses the potential that John’s behaviour during these years can be read as a manifestation of his inherently poor leadership qualities: ‘that John’s actions before he became king provide evidence that he was ill-equipped to govern’ (p.19). His discourse is three-fold, addressing the Irish Campaign of 1185; aspects of the prince’s ‘unfettered ambition’ (p.21) during the years 1189-1194 (which, some allege, hastened the death of his father); and John’s attempts to usurp his brother’s authority whilst the king was absent on crusade. All chapters addressing the life of John include a timeline of the period of focus, a narrative on the events discussed, and a series of subsequent ‘interpretations’; this clear, repeated structure makes for fluid reading and quick, efficient referencing.

Seel continues to address the state of England before John’s reign in his third chapter (‘An “Imperial” Inheritance?’), in which the nature of the Angevin empire is discussed at length and in considerable detail. Scholarly opinion regarding the collapse of the empire under John’s reign is somewhat divided, and interpretation has the potential to partially pardon or to further condemn the king: it has been argued either that forces outside of John’s control resulted in the subsequent collapse of the empire in 1203-4,⁶ or instead that the empire’s collapse ‘is significantly the responsibility of John’ (p.28).⁷ As a final preliminary discourse before addressing the reign of

⁴ See *BBC History Magazine*, June 2010. The publication carried the following headline on its front cover: ‘Bad King John – how he saved England from a French invasion ... by dying’.

⁵ See John T. Appleby, *John, King of England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959).

⁶ See W. L. Warren, *King John* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 90 and p. 99.

⁷ See John Gillingham, *The Angevin Empire* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2001), p. 100.

King John, it is the intention of Graham E. Seel here to provide his reader with a discussion of such an interpretative binary.

The remaining chapters in Seel's volume (four to eleven) concentrate on the actual reign of King John, which commenced with the death of Richard I in 1199 and concluded with John's own death in 1216. Focus centres mainly upon England's fraught relationship with France, and with the emergence of the Magna Carta; however, Seel also brings John's relations with the Papacy, contemporary judicial practices and economy, and the Civil War of 1215-6 into discussion chronologically as he offers readers a wide-reading interrogation of the nature of King John's sovereignty. Conclusions offered by the text naturally fulfil its original intention: broadly speaking, 'that John was not the literally diabolical character' (p.169) that previous recovery of the monarch has led students and scholars of medieval history to believe. Admittedly, the author notes also that '[the] quest to determine the nature and attributes of any historical personality is never straightforward' (p.169), and the title of Seel's conclusive chapter ('Conclusion: Will the Real King John Please Stand Up?'), whilst tongue-in-cheek, also betrays the problematic nature of historical biography itself. Nevertheless, Graham E. Seel's text eloquently shows how the conventional perception of King John, both within the academy and in modern popular culture, is something of a widespread misconception: far from being an inherently evil, devilish rogue, the present volume dynamically asserts the complex multiplicity of John's character – including both the unconventional good, and the necessary evil.

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