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INTRODUCTION: THE RECORD OF 1204

Nicholas Vincent

In the early summer of 2004, to mark the 800th anniversary of King John's loss of Normandy, a series of conferences was held, in Caen and Rouen, at Poitiers and Fontevraud, and at the Public Record Office in Kew.¹ The Kew conference, in part financed by a grant from the Pipe Roll Society, itself then commemorating its 120th anniversary, was organized on an altogether less lavish scale than the great jamborees held in France. This was wholly appropriate, given that the French have a great deal more to celebrate than the English from the outcome of the events of 1204. The fact that the present volume is only now going to press, some years after both of the French conferences, held in Normandy and in Poitou, were published, is likewise an appropriate reflection of English ambivalence towards the 'Loss of Normandy'. There are parallels here to the way in which the momentous happenings of 1204 were recorded by the chronicler of Dunstable Priory in Bedfordshire. In his entry for 1204, the Dunstable writer reported first and foremost that King John had granted the canons houses and a garden in Dunstable. Secondly, he reported the taxation of a vicarage in the church of Pulloxhill by the bishop of Lincoln. Thirdly, he recorded the deaths of the bishops of Winchester and Chichester, and of Eleanor of Aquitaine, the king's mother. Only then, rather as if it were an insignificant afterthought, did he enter the fateful words 'and Normandy was lost'.²

The 'Loss of Normandy' (or, from a French perspective, its 'gain'), however parochial the reaction to it in England, was undoubtedly one of the great watersheds in Anglo-French history. In England, it fatally tarnished the military and political reputation of King John and set the Plantagenet kings on the road to harsher taxation, failed attempts to recover the duchy and, in the aftermath of this failure, the breakdown in relations between king and barons that resulted in Magna Carta (1215). King John's road from Normandy to Runnymede was a straight one, albeit that it traversed the Channel, itself now an 'English' Channel or a French 'Manche', rather than a vector of communication within a united Anglo-Norman dominion. To the Capetian king, Philip Augustus, by contrast, and to his Capetian successors, the events of 1204 were apt proof of France's recovery after the dark days of

¹ For the proceedings of the French conferences, see *Plantagenêts et Capétiens: confrontations et héritages*, ed. M. Aurell and N.-Y. Tonnerre (Turnhout 2006); *1204: La Normandie entre Plantagenêts et Capétiens*, ed. A.-M. Héricher and V. Gazeau (Caen 2007).

² *Annales Monastici*, ed. H.R. Luard, 5 vols, RS (London 1864–9), iii (Dunstable), 28 ('et perditā est Normannia').

late Carolingian decline and disintegration. The heirs of Rollo were defeated. The French monarchy was reinvigorated. What had once been a real threat of Plantagenet encirclement of France was now transformed into a real prospect of a Capetian invasion of England. Paris was no longer a frontier city. The Seine became a French river from Paris to the sea, and the frontier for further expansion could now shift southwards to the Loire and the Clain. Philip's victory at Bouvines, in July 1214, merely put the final stamp upon an achievement that had first been signalled at Falaise, Caen and Rouen a decade earlier. Bouvines itself was followed, in 1216, by a cross-Channel invasion led by Philip's son, the future Louis VIII: the second invasion of England from France within 150 years, and to all intents and purposes the last.

Not surprisingly, controversy still surrounds the events of 1204. Were they the outcome of economics, of history, of frontier geography, of propaganda or the manipulation of myth, of war-weariness, of the genius of King Philip or the incompetence of King John? Were they, in short, predestined or accidental, the result of circumstance or of fate? Over the past century, from 1913 and the publication of Maurice Powicke's massive study of *The Loss of Normandy*, through to the appearance, appropriately enough in 2004, of Daniel Power's no less massive *The Norman Frontier*, historians have debated these issues, mapped the geopolitics and counted the costs.³ No doubt they will continue to do so for many years to come. Taking a broader view, it is interesting to note that, despite brief introductions by Martin Aurell and François Neveux, neither of the French volumes published in commemoration of 1204 attempts any grand reassessment of causes or consequences. Rather, the conference at Poitiers laid particular emphasis upon the person and patronage of Eleanor of Aquitaine, the conference held in Normandy upon specifically Norman themes.⁴ Even more remarkably, there is still, despite Powicke, and despite Power, no standard agreed narrative of the day-to-day progress of the French invasion. At the start of December 1203, King John was still established in Normandy. On 6 December, the feast day of St Nicholas of Bari, patron saint of seafarers, he crossed the Channel to Portsmouth. When Château-Gaillard fell, in May 1204, followed by Argentan, Falaise and Caen in May, and by Rouen itself on 24 June, the feast of the Nativity of St John the Baptist, King John was in England, according to his contemporaries indifferent to (in reality powerless to influence) events across the Channel.⁵ John was thus the last English king to have set foot on Norman soil until Edward III blundered

³ F.M. Powicke, *The Loss of Normandy* (first published Manchester 1913; generally cited from the revised second edition, Manchester 1960); Power, *Norman Frontier*. Among an ever-growing body of secondary literature, two other studies stand out: J.C. Holt, 'The End of the Anglo-Norman Realm', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, lxi (1975), 223–65, and J. Gillingham, *The Angevin Empire*, first published (London 1984), now in a second edition (London 2001).

⁴ M. Aurell, 'Introduction: Pourquoi la débâcle de 1204?', in *Plantagenêts et Capétiens*, 3–14; F. Neveux, 'Introduction: Les événements de 1204 dans leur contexte historique', in *1204: La Normandie*, 9–20.

⁵ For the king's itinerary, see the prefatory material to *RLP*. An article by Tony Moore, *EHR* (forthcoming), will shortly present new and significant information on the progress of the Capetian invasion. See also the extremely useful material gathered by Daniel Power and Tony Moore for the online 'Lands of the Normans' website, accessible at <http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/normans>.

into St-Vaast in 1346, at the start of the campaign that was to end in the battle of Crécy. Neither Edward nor his successor, Henry V, whose landing at Harfleur served as prelude to the battle of Agincourt, was to accomplish any permanent restoration of the Anglo-Norman realm. Meanwhile, the events of 1203–4 themselves surely merit a detailed account of the French conquest to set alongside those of the English counter-conquests of 1346, 1415 or indeed of 1944. After 1803, it was the memory of 1066 rather than 1204 that was used by Napoleon to stir up French patriotic fervour for a new Hastings and a new conquest of England.⁶ So far as I am aware, the propagandist uses of 1204 have been largely ignored by the French, as by the English. For example, the D-Day landings, although coinciding with the 730th anniversary of 1204, were deliberately presented as a joint allied, American–British–French endeavour against a common enemy, never as English revenge upon the Normans or the Capetians for 1204. All of this to suggest that, despite three fairly thick volumes of essays issued in commemoration, the events of 1204 may still await their definitive treatment by a modern historian.

In the present instance, the essays presented below may strike their readers as all too reminiscent of the little-Englanderism of the Dunstable annalist. There are studies here of rolls and enrolments, of prosopographical conundrums and of men, and in one instance women, who for a brief period rose from obscurity to command fleeting notoriety. Nowhere, however, is there any deliberate or direct engagement with the events of 1204. Themes Anglo-Norman, and indeed themes very close to the history of King John, nonetheless recur again and again in the present collection. Daniel Power's study of Guérin de Glapion, Norman servant of King John, later turncoat, and even re-turncoat, perhaps comes closest to the causes of Normandy's 'fall', although even here, the real interest of Guérin's story is to be found either some years before or some years after the Capetian invasion. My own essay, on Hugh de Gundeville, servant of King Henry II, concerns a courtier who died in 1181, twenty years before Normandy was lost. It includes, nonetheless, an appeal for the proper examination of all evidences, be they Norman, Poitevin, French, Irish or English, if the lives of such Plantagenet courtiers are to be properly appreciated. A similar cross-Channel focus informs the work of David Crouch, who demonstrates the means, some of them successful, others of them less so, by which the counts of Meulan, truly first-class passengers on board the Anglo-Norman ferry service, sought to control their estates on either side of the Channel.

Closer to steerage class, or perhaps even locked away in an inaccessible part of the vessel, for fear of scandal to other passengers, the subjects of Marie Lovatt's essay are the ladies, and their disreputable offspring, who added spice to the love life of King Henry II. As Lovatt demonstrates, although we may have to approach these royal mistresses via the thorny path of prosopography, when asked the right questions, they can supply the most surprising, not to say alarming of answers. If Lovatt is correct, then Henry II's

⁶ For an introduction here, see C. Hicks, *The Bayeux Tapestry: The Life Story of a Masterpiece* (London 2005), chapters 8–9.

adultery was conducted on a truly regal scale, involving not only the wives and daughters of leading courtiers but, in what may have been a remarkable prefiguration of the exploits of the late Alan Clark, the bedding of a mother and her daughter and perhaps of at least one niece into the bargain. For those tempted to enquire about the relevance of any of this for the study of 1204 or for the reign of King John, there is an easy response. It was King John's crimes against woman and the weak, his abduction of Isabella of Angoulême and his murder of Arthur of Brittany, which paved the way for the Capetian conquest of 1204. What John attempted, but failed to get away with, had been both attempted and successfully achieved by his father, King Henry II. Henry lived down the murder of the most famous archbishop in English history, and was a dominant enough male to make free with the women even of his greater barons. John failed to match him on either score.

All of the essays considered thus far deal with avowedly Anglo-French themes. This is not true of the three essays with which the collection opens. Instead, what is displayed here is the very English march of empirical, document-based research, much of it conducted from within the remarkable resources of the Public Record Office (now The National Archives). David Carpenter opens this English innings. Displaying his customary wit and waspishness, he dispatches to the boundary my own recent attempts to describe the introduction of enrolment and record keeping to the Plantagenet chancery.⁷ What of my account is not here shown to be based upon ignorance or misunderstanding is dismissed as fantasy or simple error. Not only have I smothered the truth, but in my 'smothering', like many others before me, I have misread the evidence. Carpenter demonstrates, to my satisfaction at least, that the distinction customarily drawn between the so-called 'Liberate Rolls' for the early years of John's reign, and the later 'Close Rolls' that survive from 1204 onwards, is an artificial one and that, in reality, all of these rolls deserve to be considered as parts of the same basic series, for ease of reference best known in future as 'Close Rolls'. Here the mountains truly heave. Quite what emerges, however, may be less momentous than supposed.

Having taken a sledgehammer to existing theories on the Close and Liberate Rolls, Carpenter proceeds to nail together a great mouse-house of his own. The enrolment of financial writs, and of writs involving custody of land, he suggests, was already in place in the reign of Henry II if not earlier. Thus far, Carpenter does not actually depart, save for his emphasis and for his insistence upon the continuity between Liberate and Close Rolls, from the 'smothering consensus' to which I am accused of belonging. Only at this point, abandoning the evidence, does he ask that we join him in a great leap of faith. The enrolment of royal charters, he suggests, that today is known only from 1199, might likewise stretch back into the more distant past, as might the enrolment of letters patent, of other types of writ and of goodness what else besides. Certainly, a case can be made against the argument

⁷ N. Vincent, 'Why 1199? Bureaucracy and Enrolment under John and his Contemporaries', in *English Government in the Thirteenth Century*, ed. A. Jobson (Woodbridge 2004), 17–48.

ex silentio, according to which the non-survival of earlier chancery enrolments, from before 1199, is itself taken as proof that no such records ever existed. Had Domesday Book not survived, I very much doubt that modern historians would be convinced that it could ever have existed. It would seem a fantastic notion to such doubters that so massive and so ordered a survey could have emerged from so seemingly a chaotic and understaffed a royal bureaucracy. There is an instructive story for all of us here from the records of Han China. In the years 1069–85, we are assured, at more or less precisely the time that Domesday Book was being made, the Finance Commission of the Song dynasty of China alone occupied more than a thousand compartments of rooms filled with files. Today, not a single fragment of these records survives.⁸

And yet ... those mocked or dismissed by Carpenter were not unaware of the difficulties with which he grapples. They were most of them prepared to allow for the enrolment, or at least the preservation of financial writs from before 1199, and they allowed for this on the very sound testimony of Richard fitz Nigel, whose description of the process of accounting by writ is surely the only sound basis upon which we can proceed to an understanding of twelfth-century Exchequer and chancery practice. In departing from the testimony of the *Dialogue of the Exchequer*, or rather in side-stepping it in order to present his own theory, Carpenter risks fighting his dragons on slippery ground indeed. I, like others, have presented what I still believe to be very sound reasons for supposing that the chancery did not enrol charters before 1199. Most significantly, and despite Carpenter's attempts to dismiss this argument, there is positive evidence that charters were *not* enrolled, in part because enrolment goes unmentioned on all of those occasions for which we have detailed reportage of chancery activity, in part because there seem to have been no chancery rolls against which the king himself could verify royal charters before 1199.⁹ Carpenter runs amok through such reservations and hesitations. In doing so, he risks ignoring the fact that enrolment was, at least to begin with, merely the outcome of a process of financial accounting by writ, not intended to create a permanent historical record. Thus, his surprise at the fact that temporary 'terre date' grants of land were recorded while permanent grants were not, reveals little save for his own uncharacteristically anachronistic mode of thought. The Exchequer, which controlled these processes needed to know about temporary grants, year by year. By contrast, once a permanent grant was made, and provided that a writ authorising this was sent to the Exchequer, the Exchequer itself had no need of any permanent copy of the royal charter detailing the grant. This sort of notification to the Exchequer by writ is precisely the process that we find recorded in the correspondence of David of London, from the 1170s.¹⁰ Carpenter, being himself a very good historian, thinks like a historian here, in terms of permanency and

⁸ Cited by R. Britnell, 'Pragmatic Literacy Beyond Latin Christendom', in *Pragmatic Literacy, East and West 1200–1330*, ed. R. Britnell (Woodbridge 1997), 187.

⁹ Vincent, 'Why 1199?', 36–42.

¹⁰ Vincent, 'Why 1199?', 24–5.

INDEX

The following is intended as a selective rather than a comprehensive index. Nonetheless, a particular effort has been made to index all persons and places in the Latin texts presented as appendices joined to the essays above, many of these documents being printed here for the first time. Place names and toponyms in England are identified according to their pre-1971 counties, and in France, as appropriate, according to *département*, *canton* and *commune*.

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