Louis: The French Prince Who Invaded England

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Louis VIII, king of France from 1223 to 1226, is not a monarch who has drawn significant attention from historians. His reign of just three years stands trapped between the nearly 43-year reign of his father, Philip Augustus, and the nearly 44-year reign of his son, Louis IX (later Saint Louis). Louis VIII inevitably draws somewhat unfavourable comparison with his predecessor and his heir. This does not mean that he has not generated attention. Charles Petit-Dutaillis' *Étude sur la vie et le règne de Louis VIII, (1187-1226)* was published at the end of the nineteenth century, not only captured Louis' deeds but also catalogued his *acta*.⁽¹⁾ More recently Jacques Choffel's *Louis VIII le Lion* (subtitled 'roi de France méconnu, roi d'Angleterre ignoré') was published in 1983, Gérard Sivéry's *Louis VIII Le Lion* was published in 1995, and Ivan Gobry's *Louis VIII: Fils de Philippe II* was published in 2009. Nevertheless, as Catherine Hanley notes in her introduction (p. 1), 'Today, few people in Britain have heard of Louis'. Despite his short reign, Louis was of fundamental importance, not only for France but also for Britain, when he was invited by barons in revolt against King John to take the throne. Given this, it is fitting that Louis should be subjected to fresh scrutiny from an Anglocentric perspective. It says a great deal that Hanley has decided to address her subject not (as is traditional) by analysing his reign as king of France, but by focusing primarily on his 1216–17 expedition in England, and on his life and upbringing prior to that; indeed, Louis' upbringing and 'invasion' of England account for 178 pages of this 247-page (excluding chronology, bibliography and index) book.

This is a very fine work. It is obvious from the outset that it has been very carefully researched, and written by someone with a keen eye for the finer details which bring the character and person of her subject to life. This is no two-dimensional portrait of a distant medieval ruler, but a rounded portrait of a man whose very presence in England epitomised the fragility of the relationship between England and Europe in the opening decades of the 13th century. Appealing to the reader's ability to envisage Louis' character is difficult in writing a biography of a medieval subject, since the surviving source material makes it hard if not impossible to determine what a monarch thought and did beyond their political acts. Throughout her book, Hanley makes Louis both personable and even familiar to the reader. Louis is a man small in stature but big in achievement, being described variously as 'small and thin' (p. 13) but also 'fit and strong' (p. 101). His mental stability and temperament are also given attention: on p. 175, for example, 'we may imagine him with his fists clenched' following the defeat of the French fleet at the Battle of Sandwich in August 1217; the description of Louis as 'impetuous and eager to get the talking over and done with' (p. 77) certainly

matches similar descriptions about Louis from contemporary sources, and gives the reader a clear sense of Louis' character and personality when the Assembly of Melun was held to discuss supporting the English barons' payment of homage to Louis for the crown of England.

In structure, the book opens with an introduction which provides an excellent outline and overview of the main sources of Louis' reign. On the chronicle sources in particular, Hanley shines, and it is obvious that she has excellent knowledge and understanding of the main narrative accounts. She is rightly critical of some of the sources; Nicholas de Bray, whose epic was dedicated to the bishop of Paris, is described as 'very fond of both hyperbole and obscure references' (p. 198). It matters little that some of the other sources that could have been used to elucidate Louis' later reign as king of France, such as charter material, are covered in less detail: the audience for whom Hanley's book is primarily aimed would not need more than she provides. It is also important that the book does not become bogged down too much in minutiae; detailed analysis of the charters and other documentation which would have shown how the English baronage were attracted to (and rewarded for) service to the French prince would detract from the portrait which is created.

Following the splendid introduction, each of the chapters focuses on a specific relevant theme: from discussion of Louis' upbringing and his relationship with his father, Philip Augustus; through the invitation to take the throne of England by barons in revolt against King John (arguably the most contentious issue); the death of John and Louis' subsequent failure to capitalise on the minority of Henry III; then Louis' return home, tenure as king of France, and finally his legacy. Such an approach, and the revival of particular themes at different points in the book, mean that there is inevitable repetition. On p. 209, for instance, we are treated to a discussion of the need for Louis' wife, Blanche of Castile, to bear children (here in relation to the birth of Isabella, born in 1224), when this has already been discussed earlier in the book in relation to Louis' other children. Such comments are timely, and serve to remind the reader that Louis was as much responsible for the preservation of his dynasty (something to which the Capetian monarchs in particular dedicated significant attention) as he was for the military successes (and failures) which characterised his life.

In a book which adopts a broad chronological approach, Hanley cleverly interweaves discussion of salient political and military events with details of Louis' personal life (such as can be determined from surviving source material) in a way that is refreshing and intriguing. She has a knack of making complex political events sound simple, and this will appeal greatly to her intended audience. The book also offers some excellent, concise overviews of some of the most important aspects of Anglo-French history in the early 13th century. The background to Magna Carta is handled well, as is the complex relationship of England and France with the Holy Roman Empire. There is some very good focus on the aborted French invasion of 1213, providing essential context to the events of 1216–17 which are the main focus of much of the book. In cases, the reader is left wanting more: when describing the failed invasion of 1213, Hanley asserts (p. 51) that 'the world of the thirteenth century was a very different place' when describing the retaliations Louis exacted against Ferrand of Flanders. Knowing quite how difficult Ferrand proved to be for both the French and English royal houses would have been of interest here, and further elaboration would have added rather than detracted from the main narrative.

There are occasions where the drive for a broad picture makes the chronology as it is presented confusing. Asserting (p. 60) that it was the assumed murder of Arthur of Brittany at John's hand that led to John's claim as duke of Normandy being declared forfeit, Hanley does not fully investigate the fallout from John's marriage Isabella of Angoulême, already engaged to Hugh IX de Lusignan. When fighting broke out in La Marche following the marriage, the Lusignan household appealed to Philip as John's feudal overlord, causing Philip to summon John to answer for his conduct at the French court. John, as king of England, refused. It was this refusal which led to John's forfeiture of his continental possessions, and ultimately to the discontent which was to characterise the relationship between the English king and his barons. Hanley had already (p. 53) outlined that John and Isabella's marriage had created discord, and so could easily have continued this discussion to explore more fully the context for not only the forfeiture of John's continental territories, but also for the fractured and ultimately fatal relationship between John and the Anglo-Norman baronage, and for Louis' subsequent invasion in 1216. Such discussion would have formed a useful

springboard from which to consider the invitation given to Louis to become king of England.⁽²⁾

Similarly, Hanley's comments about the loss of cross-Channel landholding, an essential consideration of the ongoing relationship between England and France after 1204 which explains why a French prince was invited to take the throne of England in 1215, is oversimplified. It was not the case, as Hanley states, that all those who held cross-Channel estates before 1204 were forced to forfeit one after John's loss of Normandy, nor is it correct to state that 'only one lord [William Marshal] managed to retain his lands in both locations' (p. 61). While cross-Channel landholding did become more difficult after 1204, to suggest that Marshal was the only person who retained cross-Channel estates gives a misleading picture of the extent of the impact of 1204 and of Marshal's influence over subsequent events. The fact that an order was issued in 1244 for landholders to make a final decision about where to consolidate their landed interests shows that the uncoupling of the 'Anglo-Norman realm' was a more extended process than Hanley suggests here, and historians such as Daniel Power have shown that even some minor landowners continued to hold cross-Channel estates well after 1204.⁽³⁾ While this number was small, it was significant, and shows that England and its continental possessions did not immediately disconnect when John's lands were declared forfeit. As a result, there are times when a confused picture of Anglo-French relations emerges which makes the connection between England and France after 1204 appear less extensive than it actually was, which in turn overplays assumed peculiarity of a French monarch being invited to take the throne of England.

With such close focus throughout the book on Louis' actions and achievements in England, Hanley explicitly adopts an approach to explore Louis' 'influence on the course of English history' (p. 3). Although Hanley navigates this very well, she perhaps overplays the success which Louis enjoyed on this side of the Channel. Hanley recognises the fragility of Louis' hold over England, describing him as 'a guest for the throne of England' (p. 246). Confirmation of Magna Carta in 1216 is, though, attributed solely to Louis' intervention (p. 247), with Hanley arguing that this 'would not have happened had it not been for Louis'. English annalists recorded that some of those who had been in rebellion against John deserted Louis upon John's death, 'preferring to have a king from their own land rather than from a foreign'; it was primarily hatred for John, rather than love for Louis, which had promoted the call for Louis to take the throne in 1215, rather than any charismatic ability of Louis to rally English barons to his perceived legitimate right to the English throne.⁽⁴⁾ In this context, it is important to recognise that Louis would almost certainly not have pushed to take the English throne without a request from the English baronage, and once John was out of the picture, for some English barons the reason for opposition began to fade (indeed, for some it had already begun to even before John's death). While it is undoubtedly true that many English barons remained loyal to Louis despite his absence from England for part of 1217, it is also the case that John's death created a new political situation upon which Louis failed to capitalise effectively. In this context, the portrayal of Louis as a charismatic leader around whom rebel barons were able to congregate is perhaps to give him too much credit for being reactive to the demands of the English baronage.

These are minor points, and are relevant only to those coming at this work with existing knowledge of the period. For the general reader, it will be frustrating that there are no references throughout the text, which is even more unfortunate in a book which is so well-produced and well-researched. The bibliography is extensive, and will surely serve as a useful reference point for future scholars, but only those already familiar with the source material are able to appreciate the full value and legitimacy of some of the conclusions Hanley reaches. There is unfortunate dismissal of some types of source material; the important fragment of accounts covering 1212–13 is dismissed as 'dull' (p. 43), thus relegating a record which shows the actions of the king more intimately than many other sources below the partisan narrative sources. This would not be so frustrating were it not for the fact that these records would have augmented so well the interesting vignettes which Hanley gives, which in turn are essential to the three-dimensional portrait which she successfully creates

As a whole, then, the book is a valiant attempt to reflect the mindset and personality of Louis, which in places reads more like a narrative account of the context in which his life sits, rather than an analysis of his life itself. The minimal coverage of Louis' governance in France would be less of a difficulty if this book

was not entitled 'Louis'; although the subtitle makes it clear that it is a focus on 'The French Prince who invaded England', Hanley states in her acknowledgements (p. viii) that she had set out to write 'a biography of Louis'. The story itself – a French prince who came to control large parts of England at the invitation of an English baronage in revolt against their king – is interesting enough. However, Louis' ultimate failure, and the subsequent successes enjoyed by Henry III, explains why Louis is so little-known in Britain. To attempt to look at Louis' full influence would require not only more space, but also an approach which is neither adopted nor required here. Aspects such as his rule in France, and his crusading in the Albigensian Crusades, would need considerably more attention to the French source material, and they can be given the short focus they are because this book is explicitly intended to investigate his campaign in England. Hanley would perhaps have been better to focus exclusively on this, using the material she has collected on Louis' reign in France in a separate volume, rather than suggesting that three years as king is too short 'to offer a proper assessment of Louis's reign in France as a whole' (p. 232), when so much of this book concentrates, very effectively, on an even shorter period of time.

Hanley is undoubtedly right that Louis 'had a much greater influence on English history than he is generally given credit for' (p. 246). It is splendid that, through her work, he is at last going to be drawn to the attention of an English audience, one not necessarily familiar with the primary source material or indeed the context in which Louis' brief 'reign' in England existed. She has shown that it is possible to overcome the difficulty many biographers of medieval subjects face: making personable a distant subject for whom surviving source material is reflective at best. On the broad context of the period of Louis' early life and his English campaign, this book is excellent. It will not replace those biographies already in print, but will complement them nicely. In so doing, it makes the character and personality of Louis more explicit, and draws to the attention of readers in Britain the exploits in this country of this most fascinating of French princes.

Notes

1. Ch. Petit-Dutaillis, *Étude sur la vie et le règne de Louis VIII, (1187–1226)* (É. Bouillon, 1894).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See for instance D. J. Power, 'King John and the Norman aristocracy', in *King John. New Interpretations*, ed. S. D. Church (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 117; N. Vincent, 'Isabella of Angoulême: John's Jezebel', in *King John. New Interpretations*, p. 172, on the marriage being the cause of John's loss of Normandy.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. D. J. Power, 'The Treaty of Paris and the aristocracy of England and Normandy', *Thirteenth Century England*, 13 (2011, for 2009) p. 143. On the seizure of 1244, Matthew Paris, *Chronica Majora*, ed. H. R. Luard, *Rolls Series*, iv, p. 288.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. D. A. Carpenter, *The Minority of Henry III* (London, 1990), p. 29.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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