

The Historians of Angevin England

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Author: Michael Staunton

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Reviewer: Colin Veach

The late 12th century has long been recognised as a ‘golden age’ of medieval English historiography, and in many ways Michael Staunton’s *Historians of Angevin England* is a study of that age. To be more precise, it is an examination of the flowering of contemporary history writing in the period between the Great Revolt of 1173–4 and the loss of Normandy in 1204. According to Staunton, earlier historians such as William of Malmesbury, Henry of Huntingdon, and Geoffrey of Monmouth ‘established a narrative of English history that was accepted for centuries, and transformed the nature of historical writing in the process’ (p. 362). Staunton does not quite say that his own subjects were ‘like dwarfs sitting on the shoulders of giants’ (1), but says that theirs was a ‘silver age’ following a ‘golden’ one of the previous generation. Accepting the English histories of their predecessors, writers such as Ralph of Diss, Roger of Howden and William of Newburgh were free to record and make sense of events from their own lifetimes. It is refreshing that a historian might play down the significance of their subjects, and by doing so Staunton signals a subtle change in emphasis from previous scholarship. Modern historians tend to approach these medieval authors for what their works can tell us about the events they describe (which is, after all, the reason that most were produced). (2) In that sense the contemporary reportage of Roger of Howden is invaluable. Yet in *The Historians of Angevin England*, Staunton is more interested in the thought processes that lay behind the writing of history, because, as he shows (and as we all should recognise), an author’s perspective exerts an editorial quality on their writing. It is only by understanding the intellectual paradigm in which these historians wrote that we can approach their works critically.

The Historians of Angevin England is therefore a monograph on the nature of historical writing in Angevin England, not a handbook or a comprehensive survey of its subjects. Staunton’s approach to each source is forensic, not simply synoptic. Because of this focus, Staunton is able to confine the bulk of his analysis to a group of ‘nine writers who lived in England and wrote about recent English history’ (pp. 1–2): Roger of Howden, Ralph of Diceto, William of Newburgh, Gerald of Wales, Gervase of Canterbury, Ralph of Coggeshall, Richard of Devizes, Walter Map and Richard de Templo. Most of these authors are obvious choices, though characterising Walter Map and Richard de Templo as contemporary English historians might raise a few eyebrows. Some exclusions are perhaps also contentious, since in order to maintain a manageable and broadly-comparable test group, Staunton has chosen to exclude hagiographers, anonymous

monastic annalists and historians writing in the vernacular. Nevertheless, in a study that focuses so much upon literary precursors, the decision to focus on a selection of Latin writers has allowed for more coherence.

Having read the medieval works in their entirety, Staunton identifies slight variations in each historian's approach to the same events, and mines them for insights into the writers' thought processes. He also draws upon a working knowledge of the corpus of historical works available to 12th-century intellectuals – whether Biblical, Patristic, Carolingian, or near-contemporary – to uncover instances in which allusion silently enters the works. This reveals a degree of allusiveness that I had not entirely expected. From Staunton's work, it is clear that the only way that we can understand medieval historians' presentation of events relating, for instance, to kingship, warfare, or outsiders, is to recognise that they wrote as part of a centuries-old discussion about these topics. But they also lived in a vibrant literary world themselves. As Staunton says, 'unless we understand where, how and why these writers are drawing on tradition, or responding to contemporary language and ideas, their works transmit to us little beyond what a modern eye immediately recognises and finds important' (p. 6). The resulting insights have significant ramifications for our approach to the historical record for Angevin England, and they have only come to light through an intense focus on these nine writers.

Following a detailed introduction (chapter one), Staunton organises his study in two parts. Part one looks at the historians themselves: their individual careers and historical works. This highlights the great variety of historical writing that was produced in Angevin England, as well as the often-blurred lines between fact and fiction, and Latin and vernacular writing. Chapter two provides the context for the flourishing of contemporary history writing in Angevin England. Staunton argues that the early-12th century focus on national history was initially followed in the 1150s by a rising interest in the dynastic background of the new King Henry II. In this period, writers such as Aelred of Rievault and Wace explored Henry II's genealogy, whether to explain his right to the throne, to promote the nobility of the house of Normandy, or simply to understand the origins of such a forceful prince. However, the murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket by four of Henry's knights in 1170 made eulogies to the king more difficult, and the family rebellion of 1173–4 made dynastic histories just as problematic. Staunton argues that the historians who began writing contemporary history in the aftermath of these events did so because of a fascination with the events themselves. The historians were motivated by an 'interest in and curiosity about their subject, the desire to make sense of things, and the urge to tell a good story' (p. 365).

Chapters three and four look at Roger of Howden and Ralph of Diceto, two historians who are commonly referred to as 'administrative' or 'civil-service' historians because of their positions in royal and ecclesiastical administrations. This is not to say that either was an 'official' historian, though both have been called the next best thing to one (p. 67). The distinction is important, however, because while both men had a view of the world conditioned by their experience in government, and seem to have shared an interest in upholding the established order to which they belonged, neither composed anything like the pro-Capetian propaganda produced in France. These English writers wrote for their peers, and are therefore useful mirrors of widely-held political views and interpretations of the English elite.

Standing in contrast to Howden and Diceto are William of Newburgh (chapter five) and Gerald of Wales (chapter six), whose works were often designed to shape opinion rather than simply to reflect it. It is often said that William judged events as he wrote, making his work a commentary on recent events. Gerald generally took longer on his compositions, and Staunton accentuates the various influences that this medieval polymath brought to his work. Opinionated though they might have been, Staunton challenges the view that either writer was especially concerned with teaching moral lessons. Instead, he argues that lessons from the past – the terrible fate of rebellious sons or the rewards for endurance in a righteous cause – were merely used to make sense of recent events, in much the same way that a modern historian might draw diachronic comparisons in their own work. Staunton therefore argues against seeing their systems of association as analogues to typological interpretations of the bible. The pro-Capetian writer William le Breton might have presented King Philip Augustus as the perfection of Charlemagne (as Christ was seen as the perfection of Adam), but Gerald did not do the same when he compared Henry II to the biblical King

David (p. 106). In England, the relationship tended to be one of analogy, not typology.

Chapters seven and eight focus on groups of historians. Both Gervase of Canterbury and Ralph Coggeshall (chapter seven) were monks, but their works show how different monastic approaches to contemporary history could be. Gervase wrote in a tradition of describing the history of the see of Canterbury within the wider context of English history, while Ralph's history ranged from the crusade, to royal politics, to the supernatural. The emphasis on different approaches to history is continued in Chapter eight, where the works of Richard of Devizes, Walter Map and Richard de Templo pose questions about their literary intentions and audience. Richard of Devizes is a favourite of modern historians, since his history of England and the Holy Land can be worldly and satirical. Staunton argues that Richard's irony makes it difficult for us to fully grasp his sympathies and intentions, and suggests that his work may have been written for multiple audiences. By contrast, it is difficult to determine whether Walter Map had *any* intended audience, since Staunton can find little evidence of a 'contract' between Walter and his readers. Map may be an odd inclusion in a group of historians, yet he was part of their milieu (Gerald of Wales writes of him as a friend and competitor), and the blend of history and fantasy in his works hints at their close association in Angevin England.

Staunton rounds off Part I with an examination of Richard de Templo's *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi*. Upon first glance, this seems an odd inclusion. The *Itinerarium* is not about England, was not composed until after 1216, and is largely a translation of an earlier French verse narrative '*Estoire de la Guerre Sainte*' by the Norman poet Ambroise. Nevertheless, Staunton's handling of the source makes it an invaluable contribution to this study. The connection between the *Itinerarium* and the *Estoire* is used as a window onto the relationship between contemporary Latin and vernacular histories, including Jordan Fantosme's *Estoire, The Song of Dermot and the Earl*, and the *Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal*. Richard de Templo shows how a Latin writer could not only duplicate the conventions of vernacular literature in translation, but also compose new elements in Latin that still conformed to those conventions. It is also a reminder that English history was (and is) not only concerned with events in England, but also with the dealings of the English abroad.

Having explored the historians themselves in part one, in part two Staunton turns to their handling of the most prominent topics in their works. Chapters nine to 11 focus on Henry II, who seems to have fascinated all of these writers. Staunton shows how earlier writers such as Suetonius, Sidonius Apollinaris, and Einhard provided frameworks for some 12th-century characterisations of royalty, while also suggesting that the famous descriptions of Henry as a stocky redhead perhaps owed as much to literary traditions as they did to the writers' personal familiarity with the king. Other contemporary historians chose to provide coherence to their works by portraying Henry's life as an arc of precipitous rise and humiliating fall, with the Becket scandal as its turning point. Descriptions of the various familial rebellions against Henry's rule tend to ignore the topics most favoured by modern historians, including the tradition of rebellion in post-Conquest England and the structural integrity of the Angevin empire, and instead set them in frameworks derived from the Bible and earlier histories. Success showed God's favour, while failure pointed to problems at the heart of the royal dynasty.

Divine agency also plays a part in chapters 12–14, which deal with the various themes in King Richard's life, including the Third Crusade (chapter 12), representations of the king in war (chapter 13) and his failures (chapter 14). Staunton finds that contemporary clerics showed an appreciation for the realities of war and its conduct, and sympathy for those who took part. These historians also saw the battles that they recorded as being fought by both Richard and God, which helped to explain the crusaders' miraculous victories against the teeming and arrogant multitudes arrayed against them. Nevertheless, when warriors of God themselves appeared arrogant, they too could suffer defeat, and Staunton shows that Richard's capture and imprisonment following the crusade were interpreted as a testing ground for his virtues. Just as Henry II was shown to have failed the trials set against him – which led to his ignominious death – so Richard was presented as having been proven through adversity.

While most of the historians profiled shared broadly-similar attitudes towards Henry II, Richard I and the Crusades, in chapter 15 Staunton shows how different their approaches to the Church and government could be. One difference was clearly that not all churchmen had the same profession. Staunton's selection of historians included two Benedictines, two Augustinians, a Cistercian, and four secular clerks. The monks wrote history as part of their communal religious lives, and were more likely to focus on the difficulties with which they were familiar. The clerks lived more in the world, and could openly mock their monastic counterparts. Ultimately, however, individual approaches seem to have been influenced greatly by personal relationships. For instance, Gervase of Canterbury championed his own community, Roger of Howden praised his patron Bishop Hugh of Durham, and Walter Map castigated Archbishop Geoffrey of York, whom he found distasteful. Nevertheless, self-preservation meant that historians tended to be much less critical of authorities who were still alive.

Staunton's study shows just how much the historical literature of late 12th-century England was conditioned by a shared position among the literate elite, and it ends by looking at how these historians portrayed those who were different from themselves. Chapter 16 looks at the 'others' within Angevin England: women, the urban poor, heretics and Jews. Staunton is more constrained here than elsewhere, because the general medieval historiographical approach to these groups was to ignore them. Nevertheless, the remarkable example of Eleanor of Aquitaine is used as a window onto more general perceptions of powerful women, and the revolt of William Longbeard in London as a glimpse of attitudes towards the urban poor (both of which are unsurprisingly negative). Accounts of heretics and Jews reveal deeper undercurrents. Although there was only one reported case of heresy in Angevin England, these historians explored and condemned continental heresies. Their attitude towards the Jews was more ambivalent. The pogroms and blood libel accusations of late-12th-century England had to be set against the royal and ecclesiastical hierarchy's willingness to protect and support the small Jewish communities. As a result, these historians tend to be hostile towards the Jews, but critical of violence against them.

This ambivalence can also be found in the descriptions of England's pastoral neighbours. In Chapter 17, Staunton challenges the prevailing narrative of wholesale English bigotry towards the Welsh, Scots and Irish. For instance, in a nuanced analysis of the English invasion of Ireland, Staunton shows that the famous works of Gerald of Wales were loud arguments against a more general disapproval of the endeavour. As John Gillingham and Robert Bartlett have shown, Gerald evoked earlier Classical representations of barbarians in his description of the Irish, as Anne Duggan has convincingly argued, he falsified the text of papal documents supposedly blessing Henry II's conquest on the grounds of religious correction. Yet Staunton shows that Gerald's civilising mission was not accepted by most writers (or even Gerald himself). Instead, while the Irish were regarded as barbarous by most of these writers, descriptions of the English conquest tended to evoke criticisms of earlier violence by Christians against their fellow Christians. I found this argument especially compelling, particularly because, in line with Staunton's overall point about the intersection of Latin and vernacular histories, I have come to similar conclusions by looking at contemporary Latin and French literature concerning Ireland. It is a reminder that those most prominent in the historiography are not always the most representative.

As I hope I have made clear, *The Historians of Angevin England* comprises an impressive array of themes and topics, all explored with precision and care. It should prove invaluable to a wide variety of readers. That said, a consequence of Staunton's self-imposed limitations (which are what make the study so successful) is that not every angle is covered. For instance, there is no room for one of the most enduring historiographical themes to come out of Angevin England: the black legend of King John. The inclusion of Richard de Templo's *Itinerarium* and Gerald of Wales's *De Instructione Principis*, both published safely after John's death in 1216, perhaps opened the door for the retrospective histories of John's reign written in the 1220s (including those by Roger of Wendover, the Crowland/Barnwell chronicler, the Anonymous of Bethune, and William Marshal's biographer). It would have been very interesting to have compared their characterisations of John to the generally more-sympathetic descriptions by historians who died before the Magna Carta crisis of 1215 (including William of Newburgh, Ralph of Diceto, Roger of Howden, and

Gervase of Canterbury). If nothing else, such a comparison might have shown the degree to which historical writing reflected the shifting political order in England, the relative (un)importance of John's insular triumphs and French defeats, and the growing influence of the Capetian court on English historiography.

Such complaints are all but impossible to avoid in a study of such magnitude, and in this instance are little more than the grumblings of a historian hoping to see more of his own favourite subjects represented. Make no mistake: Staunton has produced an excellent study that will influence the way we approach medieval English historiography. *The Historians of Angevin England* is essential reading for anyone working on the history of the Angevin dominions.

Notes

1. As John of Salisbury tells us Bernard of Chartres described the achievements of the earlier 12th century. John of Salisbury, *The Metalogicon of John Salisbury: A Twelfth-Century Defense of the Verbal and Logical Arts of the Trivium*, ed. and trans. D. D. MacGarry (Berkeley, CA, 1955), p. 167. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Two notable exceptions are John Gillingham and Robert Bartlett, with whose work Staunton is in constant conversation. [Back to \(2\)](#)

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