

Zitierhinweis

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Many clerics had a low opinion of Henry the Young King of England in his own lifetime, but infinitely more damaging to his long-term reputation was how his memory was damned in 1875 by the Regius Professor, and eventual Anglican bishop, William Stubbs.

The rebellious son, on whom much empty sentiment has been wasted, was a showy and ambitious man possessed of popular accomplishments and professing sympathy with the baronial party which his father was constantly employed in repressing. He had some gifts that his father wanted, or did not take the pains to exhibit, and either by these or as a result of his father's unpopularity won from the annalists of the time the character of a popular favourite. His conduct however was that of an unprincipled, ungrateful son, a faithless brother and a contemptible politician. He was in fact a puppet in the hands of his father-in-law, of his mother or of the feudal party in England, Normandy and Aquitaine.(1)

The luckless Young Henry, associate king to his father from 1170 till his premature death in 1183 attracted this withering Victorian verdict for several reasons. He was for Stubbs the accomplice of the barons in their wilful refusal to support Stubbs's jurist-king, Henry II, in his foundational work on which was erected (as far as Stubbs was concerned) the Victorian parliamentary state. But Young Henry's character traits were also against him: he was feckless and faithless; too dim to realise he was being used as a pawn by others cleverer than he was. His danger to his father lay in his appearance of good nature which won him popularity amongst the masses and baronage, whom he misled. One can imagine he fitted all too well for Stubbs into the same box as those disruptive, scandalous but popular Princes of Wales who had since the 1730s plagued (and in his day continued to plague) the House of Hanover.

So it is as an ineffectual wastrel that the Young King has generally appeared in subsequent studies of his day and age. His career has been thought worthy of only one slim and indifferent monograph in English before the publication of Professor Strickland's study reviewed here.(2) In the still-unchallenged 1973 biography of Henry II by Lewis Warren the author summarised the Younger Henry's character in a string of pejoratives: he was 'shallow, vain, careless, empty-headed, incompetent, improvident and irresponsible'.(3) Warren's was an influential verdict which I adopted in my 1990 study of the Young King's master-at-arms, William Marshal. But with time has come doubts as to such a superficial characterisation. In its third edition, which has appeared this year, I found plenty of material to take issue with Warren's sweeping verdict.(4) Professor Strickland's new biography of the Young King now gives many more reasons to reassess the king. For such a brief career the book is a thick one. This is because the study is rather more ambitious than a simple biography of a king who lived just 28 years and ruled no land.

To reassess the Young King Henry properly the author has taken on the considerable task of setting his career within a new narrative of a large part of the reign of his father the elder king, Henry II; something which is undoubtedly long overdue. The task is carried off with thoroughness and an enviable mastery of the chronicle and literary sources. Strickland makes good use of the chronicle of Ralph of Diss, dean of St Paul's London, an astute author with many good contacts who gets less attention than he deserves from modern historians, as opposed to the 'official' Angevin court chronicler, Roger of Howden, whose opinion of the Young King's conduct in the mid-1170s gave plenty of grist to Stubbs's mill; Stubbs was the editor of Howden's historical works. Two innovative areas of the Strickland narrative are particularly worthy of note. He devotes three chapters (and indeed a quarter of the book) to the events of 1173–4, the civil war which Young Henry led against his father, and for which he was damned by his contemporaries and Bishop Stubbs alike. It is now given the impressively-detailed military debriefing which the sources make possible.(5) The second is the war in northwestern France in which Henry marched in support of King Philip II of France against a rebel alliance headed by the count of Flanders in 1181–2, from which Henry comes out with more credit than he usually gets. The book that results is – it should be said – almost entirely a narrative account of the Young King's life, without the sort of thematic

chapters that distinguishes Lewis Warren's still formidable biography of the elder king. But then, apart from his prolonged cultural engagement with the northern European tournament circuit, there is little in the Young King's brief career which could generate chapters on the nature of 'empire', 'justice', 'administration' or 'Britain'.

What emerges in the end is not a complete exculpation from Stubbs's malediction. Professor Strickland is too good and balanced a historian to be seduced by the glamour and poignancy of the Young King's story. The young man's faults are never ignored, they are simply contextualised and explained better than any previous author has done. What does seduce the author is his personal enthusiasm for military history, which is responsible for the often congested detail of the book. But in the circumstances this is by no means inappropriate. If Young Henry's career has none of the broader social and legal significance that would have inspired the study of a more conventional reign, he cut a fine figure on a horse and both mastered and exploited the military culture of the aristocracy of his day. Still, there are times when one would have wished for the sake of his narrative that this particular enthusiasm of the author had been checked by a friend or editor. One example is the question of when the boy Henry was knighted. Two contemporary and unimpeachable sources say it was by his father before his coronation in 1170; the *History of William Marshal*, composed in the mid-1220s says it was on campaign in 1173 by its hero, then one of the king's retained knights. Another author would have discounted the latter source as unlikely and dismissed it briefly, but if he felt he had to, would have weighed up the arguments in an extended endnote. Professor Strickland lingers over the question for three pages of text (pp. 82–4) supported by a further page of notes, yet fails to come to any conclusion either there or when he returns to it yet again on p. 154. The author is not one of that genre of military historians which has been characterised, indeed caricatured, as taking a 'staff college' approach to medieval warfare. Even so, he does on occasion diverge onto shifting sands of military speculation on the basis of a map and the evidence of 'what I would have done were I in charge', not least in his ideas about the strategy of the northern campaign of 1174 (pp. 185–6). But these are thankfully uncommon aberrations.

The recent turn in historiography towards analysing the aristocratic tourneying culture of the mid-12th century on its own terms, rather than as a charming Romantic set piece, aligns nicely with a reassessment of the Young King's career, as does the appearance of an academic edition and translation of one of its principal sources, the biography of the Young King's tourneying mentor, William Marshal.⁽⁶⁾ Professor Strickland has the skills and sympathy to make the most of this opportunity. Rather than offering Young Henry an opportunity to live an expensive and wasteful existence on the northern circuit of the tourneying world across northern France and the western Empire, the author sees more positive benefits. Henry was placing himself at the centre of that cultural milieu which was in his lifetime beginning to generate a 'chivalric' movement within its aristocracy.⁽⁷⁾ A reassessment of Henry's educational interests and training has to be offered alongside this, and Strickland finds that Henry's personal educational attainments were likely considerable, while his court had some academic pretensions, being home to the intellectuals Ralph Niger and Gervase of Tilbury, both men who would carry high opinions of their sometime lord into later life. For myself I feel the author falls short here. He notes that the Young King's court produced little in the way of literary works (the exception being Gervase's lost *Liber Facietarum*), but in the Marshal edition I make a case that the *History's* narrative of the events from 1175 to 1182 is based on a (now lost) chronological French language account of the Young King's tourneying achievements. Furthermore, Ralph Niger's intriguing Latin work *De Re Militari* is one of the earliest hyper-moral chivalric treatises, discoursing – as the more famous *Ordene de Chevalerie* would do – on the items of a knight's equipment to frame the idea of a moral aristocracy. It may or may not have been written while Ralph was at the Young King's court, but it certainly shows the mark of his residence there, from which we can suggest along with Martin Aurell that the chivalric turn was a more Plantagenet than Capetian moment. This, and

the obvious diplomatic benefits Henry's cultural pre-eminence would give him, provided a tangible return for all the expense Henry II went through to fund it.

Any revisionist assessment of the Young King cannot avoid his performance in the civil war he sparked within the Plantagenet realms which raged from the north of England to the Loire valley from April 1173 to September 1174. The elder king had to survive the combined onslaughts of not just the younger Henry and his other sons, but the kings of France and Scotland and the mighty count of Flanders. Young Henry was 18-years-old when it began, so it is right to ask what really was to be expected of him in such a complex strategic mess when he had to work with warrior leaders older and more experienced than he was, one of them being his father-in-law, Louis VII of France. The many misfortunes of the rebels and the collapse of their disjointed campaigns can be put down to Henry II's financial ability to hire mercenaries, the quality of his loyalist captains and sheriffs in England, the military alliance with the southern Welsh, and the inability of the rebel captains to unite on and pursue any objective, whereas the elder Henry had the ability and strategic sense to base himself in Normandy, maintain communication with England and deflect the uncoordinated strikes at his heartland. So one can easily go along with Strickland and absolve the Young Henry of blame for the subsequent fiasco; for the greater prestige of Louis VII was not matched by any strategic gifts to provide the leadership required to foil the Old King.

A better question the book's study of the civil war raises for me is how it was that there came to be so formidable a party willing to topple Henry II from his throne and unite behind his eldest son and associate king. Neither Strickland nor the other recent study of the war by Paul Latimer address it, though Strickland remarks in passing on the alarmingly extensive degree of support the greatest amongst the Anglo-Norman aristocracy (Leicester, Meulan, Chester, Derby, Eu, Alençon, Norfolk) offered the rebellion, and we have to ask as a result whether they were fighting for the Young King or against the old one. Latimer does point out that the greater earls had cause to resent the 1170 Inquisition of the Sheriffs which was directed at breaking their local influence. Despite the earls' often vehement support of Henry II during his struggle against Thomas Becket, 1170 marks an unaccountable breakdown in the former commitment of the king to rule in consultation with his aristocracy, which he had respected since 1153. So was the perception in 1173 that Henry II was abandoning his natural counsellors and falling into the ways of a wilful tyrant? If so, it is no surprise that the greatest earls and counts of the realm would seize on the Young King's grievances as a way of countering and curbing the father. In these circumstances the Young King's own resentments and actions were an irrelevance, and his father's eagerness to restore their relationship tells us that he regarded his beloved eldest son as only a cipher, and easy to forgive.

The later problems in their relationship likewise can be laid at the door of the Old King, not least the point made by contemporaries and subsequent historians alike that Henry II never fully resolved the problem of what to do with his adult sons while he still lived. It was a problem compounded by a crippling character defect, which was obvious to all and mercilessly exploited by his enemies. He would not surrender control of the heartland of his empire: England, Normandy and Anjou, those very provinces where Young Henry had a reasonable claim to some degree of lordship. Peace then depended very much on the Young King's willingness to live in humiliating tutelage during the period 1175 to 1182, dependent on his father's generous expense account to support his dignity. Strickland does justice to the Young King's attempts to rub along with the impossible situation he was in, not least in his responsible as well as successful period as surrogate lord of Normandy in 1181-2, where he conducted a successful and accomplished campaign in alliance with his brother-in-law, Philip II of France, against a coalition of aggrieved French magnates headed by Philip of Flanders. Here Strickland finds the evidence that the Young King did have real weight as a military leader, and a capacity to act with decision when the objectives were clear and his authority respected. But of course his father's wilful opacity on the subject of his intentions as to the disposal of his lands was to undermine even this profitable interlude, and in launching a

campaign to undermine his brother Count Richard by allying with the dissident aristocracy of Aquitaine, the Young King came into armed conflict with his father once more. So Henry met a demeaning death on campaign not by sword or spear but by the agency of the vicious enteric bacteria shigilosis, which one day would be the death also of Henry's youngest brother, John.

So how does the Young King Henry come out of this revisionist study? There is every reason to go along with Professor Strickland and see him as a victim of circumstances. He may not have been the great captain that his brother Richard had already proved to be by the 1180s, but when set a clear objective without distractions, the Young King was a competent commander enough. It was oddly to his credit too that he was vacillating and easily outflanked when fighting against his father, and his emotional outbursts and mental agonies when he blundered into war with Henry II once again in 1183 reveal that he was not a conscienceless rebel; that he feared his contemporaries' verdict on his actions and was destabilised by a real emotional attachment to his difficult father. His early death means we cannot know what sort of king he would have proved to be had he survived his father. Strickland cannot resist the speculation that he would have inevitably come into conflict with his brothers and would have been tried in a very hot furnace as the integrity of his father's domains crumbled around him. There is in my view little evidence that he would have proved any more successful than his predecessor Stephen or his brother John in such a scenario. But that he was 'shallow, vain, careless, empty-headed, incompetent, improvident and irresponsible' is no longer sustainable as a verdict on him as a man. That his judgement was poor enough to allow himself to be used by others to no one's benefit, which was Stubbs's particular charge against him, remains standing I think, but as Professor Strickland would say, we don't know whether his growing experience would have steadied him politically had he lived on to be recorded in the dynastic list as King Henry III.

Notes

1. William Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England*, vol. 1 (Oxford, 1875), pp. 490–1.
2. O. H. Moore, *The Young King Henry Plantagenet, 1155–83*, in *History, Literature and Tradition* (London, 1925).
3. W. L. Warren, *Henry II* (London, 1973), p. 580.
4. D. Crouch, *William Marshal* (3rd edn, London, 2016), pp. 42–5.
5. Another account of the war as it concerned England was published independently of Strickland's at much the same time, P. Latimer, 'How to suppress a rebellion: England 1173–74', in *Rulership and Rebellion in the Anglo-Norman World, c.1066–c.1216*, ed. P. Dalton and D. Luscombe (Farnham, 2015), 163–77.
6. *History of William Marshal*, 3 vols., ed. A. J. Holden and D. Crouch, trans. S. Gregory (Anglo-Norman Text Society, Occasional Publications Series, vols. 4–6, 2002–6).
7. For my criticism of Professor Strickland's loose usage of the term 'chivalry', see 'Courtliness and Chivalry: Colliding Constructs', in *Soldiers, Nobles and Gentlemen: Essays in Honour of Maurice Keen*, ed. P. R. Coss and C. Tyerman (Woodbridge, 2009), pp. 32–48.