



Richard and John: Kings at War

Frank McLynn

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Legend and lore surround the history of kings Richard and John, from the ballads of Robin Hood and the novels of Sir Walter Scott to Hollywood movies and television. In the myth-making, King Richard, defender of Christendom in the Holy Land, was the “good king,” and his younger brother John was the evil usurper of the kingdom, who lost not only the Crown jewels but also the power of the crown. How much, though, do these popular stereotypes correspond with reality? Frank McLynn, known for a wide range of historical studies, has returned to the original sources to discover what Richard and John, these warring sons of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, were really like, and how their history measures up to their myth. In riveting prose, and with attention to the sources, he turns the tables on modern revisionist historians, showing exactly how incompetent a king John was, despite his intellectual gifts, and how impressive Richard was, despite his long absence from the throne. This is history at its best-revealing and readable.

Richard and John: Kings at War Details

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From Reader Review Richard and John: Kings at War for online ebook

Kari says

This was an interesting read about a subject I previously did not know much about. McLynn goes into great detail, challenging historian's theories and offering his own interpretation of the events that dominated the lives of King Richard and King John. At times however it didn't always feel like McLynn was being truly objective in his account, with him strongly portraying Richard as the brilliant brother and John as the bad one. Whilst the evidence of John's cruelty and Richard's successes do show this largely to be the case, it did feel that McLynn took this feeling too far at some points. The history portrayed is mainly concerned with the military and politic aspects of the period. This is not normally the type of history that interests me and the book did lose me sometimes as the detailed battle accounts and lists of movement do get quite tedious. McLynn also had a love of certain phrases, such as 'raison d'etat', that seemed to appear too frequently and became slightly annoying as a result. His frequent comparisons to Napoleon also bothered me and seemed misplaced within the context of the book. Overall it was a good, detailed book but in concentrating almost wholly on the military and political aspects, I felt something was lacking. I feel I am still largely in the dark about the social aspects that shaped the period and the problems they faced, and the other key players within both inner circles, who I feel I only know by name alone. If you are looking for a military biography of Richard and John then this one will certainly fulfil that wish.

Kate says

I was so excited for this book- so excited! A revisionist look at Richard the Lionheart and John Lackland. I always suspected John got the short end of the stick!

The introduction indicated, however, that Richard was THE NEW KING ARTHUR, OMG and John is pretty much a blight on Richard's reign. McLynn was pretty heavy handed about his love of Richard and his disdain for John. But after a while, I got tired of this bromance (and nothing further, because of course, Richard simply couldn't have been gay!), so I could not finish it. Halfway through is pretty respectable, right? Right?! I also didn't enjoy the brush off of Geoffrey, my favorite of the Devil's Brood.

Jason says

Very interesting look at these two brothers. The first chapter or two are rather boring, setting up the climate until Richard (and John) come into view. I learned a lot about these two I did not know. The writing is good, but not great as it can be a little dry at times. The author isn't a huge fan of John, but he gives his reason and it does seem that John was way over his head and inspired no loyalty. My biggest disappointment is that there is a conclusion though I don't feel it concludes and wraps up the book as a whole, looking at the two more as individuals instead of comparing them as brothers. There are some boring parts and the author clearly loves Richard, though hard not to love Richard, the books is a good book.

Jo-anne Atkinson says

Born into the great Angevin dynasty and with Henry II of England and Eleanor of Aquitaine as parents, neither Richard nor John were expected to rule the Empire. John was his father's favourite, Richard most beloved of their mother and whilst each were given some responsibilities, the heir was Henry the Young King. However the family fall-outs and rebellion meant that Henry died before ascending the throne and Richard became King of England and Aquitaine. Richard the Lionhearted is a heroic figure, talented at war he was successful on crusade and despite being captured whilst returning he survived to fight the old enemy, France. Dying as he lived at war, Richard was succeeded by his younger brother John, who quickly disposed of rightful heir Arthur and set himself up as a despotic ruler who lost much territory in France and almost lost England as well.

McLynn's book is excellent, he shows deep research and understanding of events in England and France as well as their implications on a Europe-wide scale. The contexts of the time mean that historically Richard is regarded as a hero and John as a villain but it is not so simple. Richard used England as a cash cow to raise money for war and crusade, he spent as little as six months in the country as king, preferring his domains in Aquitaine. John inherited an empire on the verge of collapse and history has not been kind to a generally unsympathetic figure. McLynn's talent is to bring both characters to life. Only one quibble, the absolutely tiny font!

Ryan Groesbeck says

Ok so I suppose I am at fault because it WAS warned in the jacket but: the author professes to a new approach which will reexamine all of the evidence about whether history has unfairly championed richard and villified john, etc., only to come to the conclusion that: no, it wasn't unfair, richard was good and john WAS bad so no new conclusions, sorry folks. If it were an introductory text on the subject, I guess I would give it a pass. But as something billed as a re-examination, I find it hard to justify reading it if the conclusion is the same as it always has been...what new are you adding to the debate? About the only point of any significance (I thought) that he made was along the lines of "Historians have been gaga-ing over any straw to redeem John b/c he was a pedant who left tons of records for historians to pore over and they want to repay the favor by remaking his image into a good guy even though he wasn't". It's a sum-up, but I agree. I wasn't aware of recent scholarship drifting into the pro-John camp, but I haven't followed the meanderings of historical opinion on the subject so I defer to the academics *shrug*. But generally my impression of John has remained unchanged ever since I saw the Disney version of Robin Hood, so I guess this book Won by reassuring me that I should not, in fact, change my mind...still, that's a big chunk of 500+ pages to sit through for basically nothing. Give me Warren on the subject anyday...it's the foundation of all research for this period and it's as true today as it was in the 70s...sorry, revisionists.

Matt says

Really interesting history and well told, but there is something about the times of the crusades that fascinates me, so if you are not a fan then you should probably stay away.

The soap opera-esque beginning with Henry II fighting to maintain his empire by fighting 4 of his sons (Richard and John included) at the same time is reason enough to check out this book. And once Richard becomes king and goes on Crusade and fights Saladin, this book is like an even more amazing adventure story than most writers can come up with now-a-days.

However, once John becomes king the story lags quite a bit. It is pretty much a long description of how he screws up his kingdom in every way - how he abuses the tax/mulct system, hijacks the forestry registrars, abuses the church and only gets out of it by bribing the pope, cronyism, etc. and actually results in the barons becoming so angry they draft the Magna Carta. If you want to read about one of the worst leaders in history then give his section some extra attention.

Overall, if this kind of time period interests you then this is a great read.

Caroline says

It took me a long time to get around to reading this, mainly because McLynn 'sets his stall', so to speak, right from the start as regards his opinions of Richard and John. Good King Richard, Bad King John could sum up this entire book, and I was looking for something with a little more historical impartiality. That said, McLynn is a good writer. He has a real feel for the medieval era and this book never flags or fails. But as history, I have to hesitate in recommending it.

McLynn makes a ridiculous number of definitive pronouncements on Richard and John's characters than can in no way be supported by historical record or sources. He announces things as 'fact' when in reality there is no such thing - his description of Eleanor of Aquitaine is pure fancy, as there are no records of her personal appearance or looks.

A good historical biography, as this purports to be, presents the facts as they are and allows the reader to draw their own conclusions. McLynn makes it clear right from the start that Richard is the all-conquering hero, the golden boy of the Angevin empire, and John is the black sheep in every sense of the word - and boy, does he repeat this, ad infinitum. Good King Richard, Bad King John. I get it.

If you're looking a balanced historical assessment of the reigns of King Richard and King John, this is not the place to find. If, however, you are actually looking for a hagiography of Richard and a polemic against John, then by all means, buy this book.

Sarah - All The Book Blog Names Are Taken says

Finally finished this beast of a book. I suppose it is well-researched, but it truly is such a bore in various places. The amount of detail is sometimes too much. Make no mistake about it, according to the author, Richard is the greatest king ever and John is the worst. This is actually sort of accurate without going to extremes, but sometimes it is hard to take McLynn seriously as he continues to take shots at Henry III (an 'ogre', among other things) and JFK.

All in all, I learned more about John than I thought there was to know. It's a pity that he is one of the only children that Eleanor of Aquitaine didn't outlive, as she must have been rolling in her grave with all the

stunts John was pulling left and right.

Abigail Hartman says

"In riveting prose, and with attention to a wide range of sources, [McLynn] turns the tables on modern revisionist historians, revealing exactly how incompetent a king John was, despite his intellectual gifts, and how impressive Richard was, despite his long absence from the throne."

The sentence from the dustjacket flap pretty much sums up the book, so I'm glad I didn't read it until I was too far in to reasonably quit. It isn't that McLynn's arguments or sources are bad (although I'm going to have to quibble with calling his prose "riveting"); it's just that, well, I guess it's kind of hard to be an exciting anti-revisionist. I came away feeling that his overall thesis of Richard-was-a-better-king-than-John held water and that he made some particularly reasonable points - for instance, that while some historians complain that Richard wasn't even in England more than six months out of his reign, in fact the breadth of the Angevin empire and the insignificance of England at the time made that logical. And yes, I think it's hard to try to refurbish John's image: he sounds like a total piece of work. (Really, sometimes I think historians just want to be revisionists because they're bored with the status quo. Nobody likes saying the same thing for the 101st time.) But despite the rationality of McLynn's points, I got tired of hearing him make them. Again, I believe this had more to do with the style than the content: his very strong, opinionated, almost in-your-face way of writing leaves little room for uncertainty or alternative possibilities (except in the occasional sense of "the chronicles are unclear here and we're not positive what happened"). By the end I felt that I had already gotten his point a few times over and didn't need for them to be rehashed in the concluding analysis - although that conclusion summarizes his arguments well and could perhaps be read before/instead of the rest of the book.

In the end, I don't at all think "Richard and John" is a bad history: obviously I haven't read the sources and thus can't comment definitively, but McLynn's research makes it clear that this isn't just an opinion piece. I don't even know that it's reasonable to pass him off as being "biased"; he simply has a thesis and makes his argument while also narrating the facts, and that's fine. It's just that I personally found it a little too heavy-handed - a little too prone to glorify Richard, a little too exasperated with defenders of John. I don't believe it's a one stop shop for a biography of the two kings or a history of the period (pretty sure there is no such thing in history, anyway); it's the sort of book that you read and weigh against other works, probably including the ones McLynn dismisses.

Joel says

This was a great book made even better by how easy it reads.

My only complaint is McLynns apparent man-crush on Richard the 'genius' which is evident through his total bias to John the lecherous 'embodiement of the seven deadly sins' but if thats what the evidence points to then the boot probalby fits.

An area of contention dominating much of the book is Richards sexualality (something i had not thought of until reading this) which has apparently been in hot debate in recent years.

Again McLynn defending his hero who couldnt possibly have been gay under any circumstance it seems.

What what would be so unusual about a medieval King taking who he wanted when he wanted?
Johns taking of his barons wives and daughters is well documented, why couldn't Richard have the stable boy or the kitchen maid if he desired? Who would stop him or talk against him?
A bisexual king (a word not mentioned at all in the book) wouldn't be the strangest scandal in the English royal family.

Owen says

A really well written and more engaging telling of the shitstorm that was the collapse of the Angevin 'Empire' after the death of Henry II. McLynn writes far more informally than the rigorous academic standard, and thus is much more easily read. He does have the propensity to use a lot of obscure and archaic words in his prose, but the context of the writings is sufficient to understand most all of them.

Clearly, CLEARLY biased against King John, but still manages to make a compelling argument against him, citing known atrocities and the likelihood that many more were unrecorded. A popular defense of John, as retold by McLynn, is that his advocates claim that the charters and rolls of the reign contain no records of the tortures and depredations he inflicted. It is not hard for an astute reader to glean that some one as paranoid and possibly bi-polar as King John wouldn't record his bad behavior, and contemporary chroniclers and gossip must have some bearing on the truth.

The strength of this book is the focus on Richard, whose skill and statecraft was so impressive even the Muslim chroniclers of the time lauded him for his skill on the field. An extremely precise picture of the Lionheart is painted through copious descriptions of his actions and referencing multiple perspectives to demonstrate just how 'good' he was for a feudal king.

For me this was a great follow-up to Warren's Henry II, but without the context of the Angevin wars and knowing the political landscape of the era, it might be a bit confusing to most readers. There is a lot of assumed knowledge of feudal customs and practices, and how they dominate behaviors and motivations. Definitely better than the standard public school histories, as revealed by the bombshell that 'Magna Carta' was essentially worthless at the time and quickly shelved and forgotten, till centuries later it was resurrected as propaganda and cited as the ancestor of the US Constitution.

Pete daPixie says

We are taken into the ruthless Angevin dynasty of Henry II and on through the successions of Richard and John. Very readable history of late 12th and early 13th century Europe and the middle east.

Bev says

Excellent, readable, well researched, exciting. Sadly current historians have rewritten history, made Richard

the bad king and John the good king, whereas Richard was one of the greatest heroes of the middle ages, recognized by his peers and historians of the age. Historians since 1960 do not deem history written at the time of Richard and John credible because it was written by Monks, who were biased by a religious viewpoint of "Victorian Morality." McLynn says that King John was an example of the Bible's seven deadly sins plus one: wanton cruelty (and sadism) but is considered by modern historians as a good king because he worked with the people and that King Richard was a poor one because he couldn't speak English and lived in Aquitaine (France). Under Richard and his father Henry II the Angevin empire included England and all of western France to Spain and was a more powerful empire than France or Germany at the time. King John in his bungling lost everything but England. To reign in his abuses English barons created the Magna Carta which John signed and ignored causing a civil war. The Barons were joined by the King of Scotland and Prince Louis of France with troops who nearly overthrew John—when he died of a heart attack. Robin Hood was not a historical figure and most of the story is fiction. The only thing the same was that King Richard did go on a crusade leaving his kingdom to his meddlesome brother Prince John. It was John's cruel and unethical dealings with the people that are the "truth" of the story.

Elia Princess of Starfall says

We all know and love the legend of Good King Richard "the Lionheart" and that of his devious and treacherous brother King John "Lackland", right?

King Richard I "the Lionheart" - warrior, crusader, king of England and Duke of Aquitaine and Normandy - a valiant, pious and intelligent king and knight or a grasping, hardhearted, arrogant and proud medieval warmonger?

Which is the myth and which is the reality?

King John "Lackland" - schemer, administrator, king of England and former Duke of Aquitaine and Normandy - a duplicitous, vengeful, lecherous and traitorous king or a misunderstood, pragmatic, clever and determined medieval prince?

Recent revisionism into the historical accuracy of these differing accounts of these two very famous and complex medieval kings has challenged long held perceptions and prejudices about these long dead monarchs. For centuries, the Lionheart has been lauded as medieval England's very own King Arthur reborn - his crusading exploits, his capture by the Holy Roman Empire and his subsequent battles in securing the the Plantagenet homelands in France were the stuff of legends. This allowed the myth of the Good King Richard to endure so long. Nowadays we recognize a more nuanced and subtle portrait of this near legendary figure, recognizing that he was capable of great cruelty, avarice, arrogance and a somewhat ironic flair for family loyalty.

In the case of King John, he who signed the momentous Magna Carta in 1215, it needs to be noted that he has suffered from appallingly bad and vicious press before he even ascended to the throne in 1199. John was not noted as a religious or even vaguely benign man in terms of the Church and its holy creed. In the

religiously saturated world of medieval England, John's blase and somewhat atheistic streak caused no end of horror for the church and its monkish writers. These monks were alas the main chroniclers of the day and did all they could to blacken John's name, his military experience and his legacy while making Richard's reach near biblical proportions. However, it must be recognized, however reluctantly in some cases, that John was inclined towards murderous and treacherous acts towards his brother and his subjects with the probable murder of his 16 year old nephew Arthur looming large.

Now where does Frank McLynn stand on this?

This author has done a 180 on recent revisionism regarding Lionheart and Lackland - instead he firmly believes that the old fashioned view of Richard=Good and John=Bad is strongly borne out by the available historical evidence. McLynn has an unshakable belief in his interpretation of the facts regarding the trails, triumphs and tragedies of these two kings. Richard is the knight errant of the story while John skulks around as the Devil in the disguise. Now this is a rather simplistic and biased opinion. McLynn is a journalist not a historian so I've gotten the feeling that his personal prejudices and biases bleed far too often into this book to make it fair or non biased. Reading through this book and repeatedly seeing the heavy handed saint Richard and demon John constantly can get rather tiring and aggravating. Also, he exhibits a condescending attitude towards 12th century society going so far as to call it "primitive". This man is no way impartial. He believes the best of Richard and the worst of John.

However, despite the evident bias and patronizing attitude towards 12th century life, McLynn has written a well researched, evenly paced and detailed book on Lionheart and Lackland. The writing style is, at times, dry and dense that may be bore more casual readers and serious readers may be put off by the authors blatant prejudice and infuriated by his stance on Richard's brilliance and John's spiteful cruelty. The books does provide an excellent and well-rounded overview of the reigns of kings Richard and John and their management of the vast, unwieldy Angevin Empire.

I would recommend this book but with reservations.

P.S McLynn is vehement that Richard I was not gay and from my own reading of the rather scant and ambiguous evidence used to support this recent theory (only proposed in 1948!) i'm inclined to agree with his conclusions.

Anna Small says

OMG this is the hardest book to read, and so dry! But filled with anecdotes and tidbits of medieval life that make it interesting. I've already fallen in love with one historical character - can't remember his name just yet, but he was a devilishly handsome machiavelli who had his nose in the young Richard the Lionheart's business and was important as a troublemaker! And, oh, did you know that if a paid mercenary didn't fulfill his duties on the battlefield or tried to run away he would be hanged? And you were also ex-communicated, since putting yourself in a position where you could die was a form of suicide in the Church's eyes. So, lots of interesting things but I think I've managed to read 2 or 3 pages a day! That's all I can take.
