

## Chapter Ten

# THE FIRST PLANTAGENET

WHEN Henry II came to the throne in 1154 a new era began, for he was the first of thirteen kings, the Plantagenets, who were to rule England for three hundred years. Their name by tradition came from the sprig of broom which his father, Geoffrey of Anjou, wore in his hat, in Latin: *planta genista*. They were an extraordinary family with a deep love of power, people of compelling fascination and charm but, at the same time, often unattractive and strangely unnerving. Subject to wild and unpredictable rages, they were yet endowed with remarkable application. Whatever they did, whether good or evil, was done with their whole might. All these traits were present in the life of perhaps their greatest member, Henry II.

Henry was that rare figure in English history, a man of European stature. That he owed not just to the extent of the empire over which he ruled, but to the fact that he was universally respected for being a just and wise king. So much so that twice he was called upon to act as judge and mediator between his fellow rulers, once in 1173 between those of Toulouse and Aragon and again in 1177 between the kings of Navarre and Aragon. Through his children's marriages his family connections spread through the whole of Europe. His daughters became queens of Sicily and Castile and Duchess of Saxony. Two of his grandchildren were Holy Roman Emperors, Otto IV and Frederick II. For half a century England was to be part of the greatest territorial empire seen in Western Europe since Charlemagne four centuries before, one held together almost solely by the strength of character of its king.

Henry II would have been an extraordinary figure in any age. Grey eyes darted out from a freckled fiery face framed by short red hair. Red hair and fits of temper often go together, and Henry was the first of a long line of Plantagenets noted for their irrational outbursts of rage. His head was large, hinting at the formidable brain power within, for he was a noted linguist able to understand all the many languages used in his domains: English, North French, Provençal, Welsh and Latin. He was also the

first post-Conquest king to be literate, being able both to read and to write. Henry knew a great deal about law and even sat himself as a judge. He was a man blessed with a phenomenal memory, never forgetting a face. Stocky and athletic in build, he was frugal in his diet and unostentatious in his dress. His energy was unmatched and he was constantly on the move across an empire which stretched south to the foot of the Pyrenees and west to the Atlantic seaboard. Most of modern France was ruled by him. To his contemporaries he was restless and cunning but at the same time trusted and feared.

Peter of Blois, secretary to the queen, gives a vivid picture of what life was like with the king. If he said that he was staying somewhere 'you may be sure that the king will leave the place bright and early, and upset everyone's calculations in his haste . . . But if the prince has announced that he is setting off early to reach a particular place, beyond doubt he will change his mind and sleep till noon.' If he indicated what his route was to be he was sure to change it 'to another place, where there may be a single house, and no food for anyone else. And I believe our plight added to the king's pleasure.'

For thirty-five years Henry II held together the enormous empire which he either inherited or which came to him through marriage: England, Normandy, Brittany, Anjou and Aquitaine. Modelling himself on his grandfather, Henry I, he set out to restore the power of the crown and in so doing not only reactivated and recaptured that king's achievements but went on to lay the foundations of a system of government which was to last for centuries. These developments came about partly because the king, having always to be on the move, needed to leave officers he could trust behind him, who could run this or that part of his empire while he was somewhere else. So successful was he in the case of England that he was able to absent himself for several years at a time, and yet order and justice were maintained. This he also owed to the fact that he had a genius for choosing the right men, all, that is, except one—Thomas Becket.

When Henry came to the throne his main aim was to turn the clock back to 1135, the year Henry I died. There was a vigorous campaign to restore royal power. Castles illegally constructed by the barons were demolished. Those they had taken from the crown were returned. The towns and lands granted away by Stephen were taken back by the king. The reign thus opened with this dramatic return to order. Later Henry was to build and expand on this. In 1166 an act of government called the Assize of Clarendon laid down provisions for the maintenance of public order in a way hitherto unknown. Ten years after that the role of the itinerant royal justices was greatly extended. Six groups of three justices each became responsible for four to eight coun-



Bronze knocker dating from c. 1180 from the sanctuary door of Durham Cathedral. By grasping it a wrongdoer sought the protection of the church, accepting whatever penalty was imposed.

ties. Henceforward royal justice was a reality. As a result law and order replaced disorder and lawlessness.

This gave the peace and security which brings prosperity. The king never overtaxed his subjects and throughout his reign the royal revenues rose steadily. Men at the time realised the magnitude of Henry's achievement. As one chronicler, William of Newburgh, wrote:

'In his exalted position in the state, he was most diligent in defending and promoting the peace of the realm; in wielding the sword for the punishment of evildoers, he was a true servant of God.'

That is how Henry II would have been remembered if it were not for one man, Thomas Becket. When the king came to the throne he had appointed Becket to the major administrative post of chancellor. Becket had been archdeacon of Canterbury and the right-hand man of the archbishop. But he was not a priest. He and the king became great friends. Becket was a smart young man-about-town, witty, extravagant, even flamboyant. He combined glamour and efficiency. Riding through London one cold midwinter's day the king spotted a beggar freezing in rags. Turning to Becket, who rode at his side, he said, 'Would it not be a meritorious act to give that poor old man a warm cloak?' The chancellor assented, not guessing what was to follow. 'Yours be the merit then,' said the king, seizing Becket's splendid fur-lined cloak and throwing it to the man.



In Becket the king saw a means of tidying up relations between church and state. He believed that with his friend as Archbishop of Canterbury the situation could return to how it had been just after the Conquest, before the church had embarked on its campaign to free itself of lay control. In 1161 the opportunity came with the death of the existing archbishop. The king asked Becket to take on the role. 'How religious and saintly is the man you want to appoint to that holy see!' Becket exclaimed, pointing to his rich dress. The king persisted, and in doing so made the one fatal misjudgment of his entire reign.

On 2 June 1162, Thomas Becket was ordained priest and on the following day he was appointed Archbishop of Canterbury. No one has ever been able to explain the total reversal of character which then took place. Becket at once resigned all his secular offices and suddenly changed his style of life from one of indulgent splendour to one of self-denial and humility. The scene was set for a tremendous clash of wills when Henry set about re-establishing his authority over the church, failing to recognise not only that times had changed but that his old friend had been trained in the new canon law in which the clergy were exempt from lay interference.

Henry gathered all these 'royal customs' into a document known as the Constitutions of Clarendon presented to a meeting of the great council in January 1164. The king's intention was a reasonable one, to improve the standards of justice, in this instance in the ecclesiastical courts. Five of the provisions, however, were seen by Becket as infringements of the rights of the church. Attention was focused especially on the one whereby a clerk was to be brought first of all before a lay court, where he pleaded what was called 'benefit of clergy'. This meant that the case was then transferred to the bishop's court. If the man was then found guilty he was handed back to the lay court for sentencing. The worst sentence the church court could give was to defrock the clerk which meant that murder could be got away with. Becket, however, stood firm on the ground that 'God judges no man twice in the same matter.' He therefore refused to put his seal to the document.

The king was enraged. Nine months later Becket was summoned to be tried for contempt. Henry set out to humiliate the archbishop in every way he could. In a terrible final scene, when sentence was about to be pronounced on him, Becket, holding his processional cross in his hands, defied the court: 'Such as I am, I am your father, and you are magnates of the household, lay powers, secular persons. I refuse to hear your judgement.' He swept out of the room, fled the same night, and took a boat into exile.

For six years there followed endless attempts to bring

The murder of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral on 29 December 1170 from a thirteenth century manuscript.





about a reconciliation. The quarrel was made worse by Henry having his eldest son, also Henry, crowned as his successor by the Archbishop of York. Becket had already excommunicated many of the king's supporters, cutting them off from the sacraments of the church; now he threatened to put the country under interdict which meant closing all the churches. As a result of this, in July 1170 Henry was forced to give in, and Becket returned to England. His first act was to excommunicate all the bishops who had taken part in Henry's son's coronation. When the king was told, one of the bishops said, 'My lord, while Thomas lives, you will have no peace, nor quiet, nor prosperity.' The king was seized with fury: 'What idle and miserable men I have encouraged and promoted in this kingdom, faithless to their lord, who let me be mocked by a low-born clerk.' At this four knights slipped out of the room, crossed the Channel and made their way to Canterbury. On the afternoon of 29 December they murdered the archbishop in his own cathedral. When the news reached the king he gave way to a paroxysm of grief, neither eating nor speaking for three days.

Henry had lost. The shock waves crossed Europe. Becket's tomb became a shrine at which miracles occurred and, soon after, the pope canonised him. On 12 July 1174 the king himself did penance, walking barefoot through the streets of Canterbury and after that gave himself over to being flogged by his bishops and monks. The Constitutions of Clarendon became a dead letter it seemed, but in reality most of what the king wanted was implemented.



Box or Châsse containing relics of St. Thomas Becket. Over forty-five of these survive, mainly dating like this one from the thirteenth century. Such relic boxes were exhibited on a beam over the altar. They were enamelled with scenes from the life and death of the saint.

The tragic story of Henry II and Becket cast a shadow over the reign. So too did another incident which fell over its closing years, for the king's love of power was so great that he could part with none of it. The result was a dynastic quarrel in which Henry's queen sided with his sons. Eleanor of Aquitaine was a remarkable woman in her own right, a child of the warm south, impetuous and passionate. She presided over a court of troubadour courtiers at Poitou. They contributed to a new cultural milieu which centred on the idealisation of the knight's relationship to his lady, something which accorded women a far more important status in society. But when, in 1173, she joined her sons in rebellion against her husband, Henry II shut her away for fifteen years.

The king had four sons: Henry, Richard, Geoffrey and John. They were fated to disagree. 'Dost thou not know,' Geoffrey once wrote to his father, 'that it is our proper nature, planted in us by inheritance from our ancestors, that none of us should love the other, but that ever brother should strive against brother, and son against father?' For over a decade there was sporadic war between them, all attempts at reconciliation failing. Then, in 1183, the eldest son died and Henry redivided his empire: Richard was to have Normandy, Anjou and England, Geoffrey Brittany, and John Aquitaine. But Richard refused to let John have the latter and the war was renewed.

Henry died in the castle at Chinon on 6 July 1189 during a war in which his sons had taken sides with his deadliest enemy, Philip Augustus, king of France. The king's last words were: 'Shame, shame on a conquered king.' The truth was far different. Henry II was the greatest of all the Plantagenet kings. His bequest was good government in terms of peace, law and order on a scale unknown to any other country in Western Europe at the time. It was a splendid inheritance.



Pilgrim souvenirs of St. Thomas Becket. Visitors to the saint's shrine would have purchased one of these badges to wear. They were mass-produced from moulds.

