

Chapter Eleven

THE END OF AN EMPIRE

HENRY II had left a great empire but within twenty-five years virtually all of it had gone. That loss was to haunt the Plantagenet kings for three hundred years. Time and again they tried to recover it, for, to them, the continental territories were in many ways closer to their hearts. Like their Norman predecessors, the Plantagenets had their roots not in England but in France, in their case in Aquitaine which they were to retain. This was an age when there was no sense of any national or cultural divide. The ruling classes were united by a common language and culture. The only divide was the feudal one of fealty either to the king of England or France. If the abilities of Henry's heirs had been different England could have remained the power-base of a lasting Angevin empire. As it was, their short comings precipitated its collapse.

Nothing is more striking than the stability of England with its strongly centralised government established by the Normans. So strong was it that it could withstand the fact that the new king, Richard I, who ruled for a decade, only visited the country twice, once for three months and a second time for only two. Richard I remains the troubadour monarch whose adventures were to make him the romantic hero of legend. He combined his father's shrewdness and physical strength with his mother's grandeur and passion. Homosexual by nature, he was both a poet and a musician, even conducting his own chapel choir. His knowledge of every aspect of warfare and of the art of fortification was universally recognised. Dubbed *Coeur de Lion* or Lion-hearted, in tribute to his dare-devil bravery, he was also known as Richard Oc e No or Yea-and-Nay, meaning that whatever he said, that he did, never breaking the word he gave. But he was selfish. England was looked upon as little more than a source for money to pay for the Crusade upon which he embarked in August 1190. Travelling via Italy, Sicily and Cyprus to the Holy Land, each port of call gave him an opportunity to act out to the full his role as the valiant crusading knight. Disaster struck,



however, for, on his homeward journey, he was shipwrecked and eventually fell into the hands of enemies, firstly the Duke of Austria and then the Holy Roman Emperor. Once again it was to be England which was to be the loser, for the enormous sum of 150,000 crowns had to be raised in taxes as a ransom.

When he had left the country the provision he had made for its government had not been satisfactory. His instincts were right in trusting neither of his two brothers. The youngest, John, he showered with lands. Geoffrey, who was illegitimate, he caused to be elected Archbishop of York. Simultaneously he banished both of them for a period of three years, in this way hoping to avert any mischief making. Unfortunately he chose the wrong man to govern the country in his absence. William Longchamp, Bishop of Ely, was made royal justiciar, chancellor, besides being papal legate. He was one of those administrators of humble origins who had risen to eminence as one of the officials who ran the Angevin empire. But he was tactless and very unpopular.

Richard relented, and allowed John to return to England, with the result that the inevitable happened and the barons turned to him. In 1191 Geoffrey defied his banishment and landed in England. Longchamp promptly had him seized at the altar of

Two mid-thirteenth century tiles celebrating the victory of Richard I over a turbaned Saladin who drops his curved sword as his horse collapses. It is likely that these tiles were made for a royal palace, possibly for Henry III.

the priory in which he was staying. This gave John precisely the opportunity he needed and he summoned Longchamp to stand trial at a council of bishops and barons. Longchamp dared not go and the meeting promptly excommunicated him and ordered his immediate arrest. Eventually he fled the country. On 8 October, at the same meeting, John was made regent 'by the common deliberation of the king's vassals'.

In fact this was to mean government by the council itself. When news reached England that the king was a prisoner, John attempted to seize power but failed. Although the king's absence had put a tremendous strain on the system of government inherited from Henry II, it was able to withstand such an attempt and remain loyal. When Richard returned in 1194 he wisely did not reinstate Longchamp but this time selected a man of quite outstanding abilities, Hubert Walter.

Like Longchamp, Walter's background was service in Henry II's government. He had accompanied Richard on the Crusade and was elected Archbishop of Canterbury in 1193 and made justiciar. When the king left England for the last time in May of the following year Walter was left as virtual ruler of England until his death in 1205. From the king's point of view his main task was to raise money to pay for war. But his real achievements lay elsewhere. In 1196, for example, standard weights and measures were introduced. Before then they had differed according to each region of the country. He used the itinerant justices for the first time, not only as judges but as an arm of government charged, while they travelled, to inquire as to whether royal policy had been carried out or not and to report back their findings. For the first time too the knights of the shire, those knights that is who were landholders, began to be used as instruments of government. They were called upon to act in all manner of local disputes such as quarrels over boundaries.

But perhaps the greatest revolution of all was the advent of keeping government records. By the end of the twelfth century more and more people could read and write. Government was also becoming more complicated. The long absences of the king made it necessary for records to be kept of what had been done. In 1199 the chancery, which was the administrative headquarters of government, began to record its annual activities on pieces of parchment made from sheepskin. These were sewn together and kept not as a book but in the form of a huge roll which was the direct ancestor of our modern filing system. Documents henceforward became an accepted part of business. Soon the judges followed suit in the law courts and then the bishops began to keep records in their dioceses. From the beginning of the thirteenth century the history of England can be written from such records.

Richard meanwhile was engaged in defending his continental empire against the

French king, Philip Augustus. In the south there stretched a network bound together by family connection. His queen was Berengaria of Navarre, his sister was queen of Castile and his widowed sister Countess of Toulouse. Richard's nephew was the new Holy Roman Emperor and a new pope, Innocent III, was also his ally. As a consequence of this and his own military skill, he was victorious in his wars against Philip Augustus. And then, in his forty-ninth year, as a result of a misplaced fit of bravado, he was killed. In a dispute over the ownership of some treasure he besieged the small town of Châlus in the Limousin. A crossbowman took aim at him. Richard paused to mock him a moment too long. The bolt pierced his left shoulder. Gangrene set in and he died of blood poisoning on 6 April 1199.

The king of legend was childless and the Angevin Empire passed to John. This time it was a far from glorious legacy: war with an increasingly potent French king, financial breakdown in an England sucked dry of money to pay for it, plus the late king's Crusade and ransom money. To that can be added years of famine. Whatever Richard's shortcomings had been he was respected and evoked loyalty. No one, however, quite trusted John. His father had nicknamed him Lackland, for, as the youngest son, at first he had no share in the family inheritance. He was spoiled and wayward, in love with the good life: rich clothes and jewels, good food, abundant drink and women. While the word of both his father and brother had been taken as law, with anything John promised, men began to look for confirmation in writing.

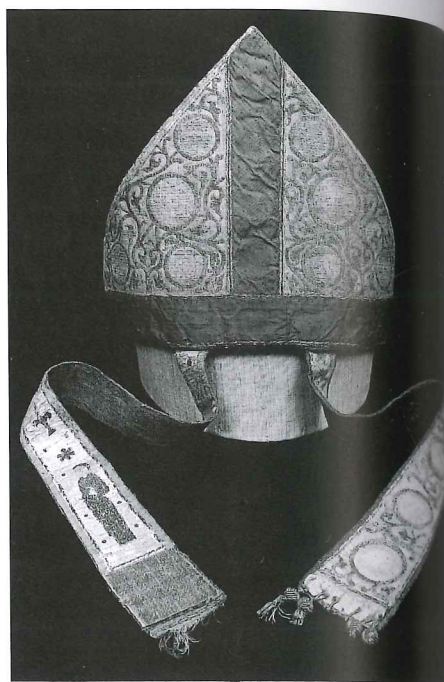
Nothing, therefore, boded well in the new reign. It was not helped either by John breaking rules of conduct which feudal society regarded as sacrosanct. The first was to take as his bride a woman who was already betrothed. In 1200 John had his marriage to Isabella of Gloucester annulled in order to marry the heiress of Angoulême, another Isabella. The man to whom she had been betrothed appealed to his overlord, Philip Augustus of France. In this instance the French king was overlord of John too. The court condemned the English king to the forfeiture of all the lands he held as a vassal of the French king, the Angevin Empire minus England. Normandy, Anjou and Brittany soon fell into the hands of Philip Augustus. During the war John had captured his brother Geoffrey's son, Arthur, whom Richard had once designated his heir. Once again John offended the feudal code of correct conduct by having him covertly murdered. To kill a foe in open single combat would have been acceptable but to dispose of him secretly was quite another matter. All that was now left of the Angevin Empire was Aquitaine, commercially held fast to England by the wine trade.

These disasters were followed by a seven-year struggle with the pope over the choice of a new Archbishop of Canterbury. When Hubert Walter died in 1205 the monks went ahead and elected a new archbishop with no reference to the king. They

left for Rome to seek the pope's confirmation of their choice. John, enraged, forced the monks who remained to elect his choice and they also proceeded to Rome. Pope Innocent III declared both of the elections void and the monks under his direction went on to elect an Englishman who was a member of the papal court, the theologian Stephen Langton. John was furious and refused to admit the new archbishop. The pope in reply excommunicated the king and laid the country under an interdict. For seven years the churches remained closed except for infant baptism and deathbed confessions. Only when John was preparing for a major offensive to recover his lost continental lands did he make peace with the pope and admit Langton to England. In 1214 John reopened the war against Philip Augustus but the campaign was a total failure.

He returned to find not only an empty treasury but an enraged baronage who could take no more of the king's endless excuses to extract money from them. The Angevin system of government was breaking down. John was faced with rebellion and, in May 1215, he was forced to admit that he was beaten. A month later he put his seal to what is still looked upon as a landmark, the Great Charter or Magna Carta.

The Great Charter contained over sixty clauses putting into writing an agreed body of laws covering every aspect of government and of the relationship of the king to his subjects. What it really represented was the fact that under the Plantagenets government had developed



Bishop's mitre of white silk embroidered with silver thread made some time between 1160 and 1220, an example of medieval English embroidery, *opus anglicanum* whose fame was European.

The opening lines of Magna Carta presented to King John at Runnymede in 1215.

without consultation, piecemeal as expediency demanded. That development was not rejected but put down accompanied by guidelines which both sides should observe. This was the beginning of the idea that people ought to be consulted and in the long term it was to lead to Parliament. For the first time the king was beginning to be seen as answerable not only to God but to the law.

The Charter's most famous clause implied such a view:

'No freeman shall be arrested, or kept in prison, or disseised [of his freehold], or banished, or in any way brought to ruin . . . unless by lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.'

In short, every man should be tried before sentence was given. Other clauses guaranteed the freedom of the church from royal interference and the privileges of the newly emerging boroughs, above all the City of London.

That the Great Charter was to be such a landmark only emerged over the centuries. No sooner was it agreed than John got the pope to declare it invalid and, gathering his forces, the king took to arms against the barons. They, in turn, called in the heir to the French throne, the dauphin, and it was in the midst of this chaos that John died in October 1215 and was succeeded by his son, Henry.

After these momentous changes the thirteenth century opened with a very different perspective. With the loss of virtually all the continental empire in 1214, for the first time since 1066 the monarch became firmly based in England. For a hundred and fifty years the kingdom had been ruled by peripatetic kings who often spent more of their time on the other side of the Channel. England had been one piece of a larger mosaic. After 1214 that ceased with tremendous consequences. The Channel was no longer a river dividing the same country, far easier to cross than the Alps. It had to become instead a moat of defence and John indeed established a navy, realising that henceforth there would be great battles fought at sea. England was set on the path to become the inviolate island kingdom, no longer a part of, but set apart from, Europe.