

# Like father like son

## September 12th marks 800 years since the Battle of Muret, the turning point of the Albigensian Crusade and precursor of Lewes half a century later

Darren Baker

In the spring of 1264, after nearly six years of trying to undo the reforms imposed on him, Henry III finally had his great adversary Simon de Montfort on the ropes. The civil war that had been raging for the past few months had turned against the reforming party, leaving Montfort and his troops bottled up in London. Although outnumbered by as many as three to one, Simon decided to take his forces south to confront the royal army. On 14 May 1264 he won a spectacular victory at the battle of Lewes. He captured the king and ruled in his name until Henry's son Edward defeated and killed Montfort at Evesham.

David Carpenter has called Simon's decision to leave London the mark of his courage and confidence. Bravado in the face of adversity was typically his style. When informed in March of that year that the royalists had overrun the rebel stronghold of Northampton, he merely shrugged and said that in the fortunes of war, sometimes the advantage goes to these, sometimes to those.

But the army he led out of London had never fought a full-scale engagement, and many of his troops were London irregulars, young apprentices and street urchins armed with nothing more than a sling or stick and the desire to teach the royal family a lesson. It was foolish to think he could win against a vastly superior army that was now in a position to mop up wherever it went.

Montfort marched to within ten miles of Henry's encampment in and around Lewes. So confident were the royalists of victory that they placed one meagre watch on the heights overlooking the town and spent the night before drinking and wenching (except for Henry, one of England's few monogamous monarchs). Meanwhile Montfort put his men into position and, after inscribing white crosses on their garments, stood ready to call the king to account once and for all.

Before battle, soldiers typically looked for a way to identify themselves to each other. Here, the white cross was also meant to represent the rebellion as a crusade. The king had sworn an oath to God and the reformists were intent on making him observe it. For Montfort, crusades ran in the family. He, his brothers and uncles had all been on crusades.

And there was, of course, his father, *the* Simon de Montfort, before his son and namesake had risen to such renown. In fact, it might have been from the father that the son made his decision to seek out the king 'with all for all.'

It was because of his father that Simon de Montfort came to England at all. In 1204 this first Simon de Montfort, the third in the family line, stood to inherit the earldom of Leicester through his mother, but war



**The sack of Béziers by Paul Lehugeur**

between England and France gave King John the excuse to seize the land and titles of his French barons. Leicester had long been in the hands of a different noble family when the younger Simon arrived in 1230 to ask for the earldom.

Henry knew all about the elder Montfort, one of the most famous men of his generation, and the chance to have his son as one of his barons certainly influenced his decision to make him an English peer. It goes without saying that he would come to regret it.

But who was this Simon de Montfort and why is he rather pilloried for his role in the Albigensian Crusade that flared in southern France at the beginning of the 13th century? Although the crusade spanned two decades, it is largely remembered for the first onslaught unleashed against the heretics in 1209. The entire population of Béziers was massacred, supposedly on the order 'kill them all, God will know his own.' A quick check in Wikipedia, the online encyclopaedia by and for the masses, identifies Simon III as the leader of this singular carnage.

It doesn't matter that the assault was led by one Arnaud-Amalric, whose boastful account of it was probably in the head of the chronicler who noted the kill-them-all order years after the event. The idea was to show that this was no ordinary crusade. It was more like an anti-crusade, with a fiendish horde of opportunists marching under pious hypocrisy. Simon III was one of those who answered the summons to the crusade, but wasn't elected overall commander until after Béziers, a job he didn't want but nobody else wanted, either. One look around and it was clear why not.

Heretics were everywhere during the Middle Ages but the Church of Rome found the Cathars of Languedoc especially odious. Their complicated scheme of the universe, with elements of dualism and reincarnation, declared that good and evil came down to spirit and matter. As part of the physical world, people were evil, mere skins that imprisoned the good within. What literally got under the skin of the Church was their assertion that Jesus could only have been a spirit, never a man. All relics associated with him, whether holy blood, holy grail or the cross itself, were material substances and therefore instruments of evil.



The Church had spent nearly a century trying to win them back into the fold. When in 1208 a papal legate was murdered by a Cathar sympathizer, Pope Innocent III launched the crusade to wipe them out and found no shortage of volunteers. To be a crusader was a big deal during that devotional age, but many shied away from a long sea voyage that stuck them in the middle of a desert fighting against highly skilled warriors. Here, the service was for forty days only, including the march, and soldiers

received automatic absolution for the pillage and plunder that formed another incentive.

The crusade, named for the heretic-infested city of Albi, has often been portrayed as a regional conflict, with the uncouth barons from the windswept, hardscrabble environs of the north envious of their more illustrious brethren of the sunny and rich provinces of the south. Simon III was one of these northern barons, the lord of a small fief situated between Paris and Normandy. He had earlier made a name for himself during the hijacked Fourth Crusade, when he refused to join in the sack of Constantinople and other Christian cities. And this was the problem that confronted the crusaders now. Most of Languedoc was full of Christians, whose only crime, it seemed, was that they tolerated the heretics.

Of course, it wasn't as simple as that. There were many Christians in the south who were also offended by the way the Cathars stigmatized their symbols of worship. And while Languedoc is often portrayed as the land of courtly love and troubadours, it was also full of banditry and petty wars between the overlords, most of them named Raymond. They kept mercenaries in the field to settle their scores,

inflicting misery on the common folk. In this light, the crusade was business as usual, only on a much larger scale.

In fact, it was these mercenaries that proved the undoing of Béziers. The image of well-trained, well-equipped soldiers of fortune, ready to go into action once the silver changed hands, was years into the future. These crusading mercenaries were barely clothed or armed at all. They had no possessions, no families, no faith. They were a mob who enjoyed bloodlust because that's all they knew. So when some defenders of Béziers came out to pick a fight in front of the city walls, they turned on them with a fury. Once inside the gates, it would never occur to them to ask who they should kill.

The crusade was bungled from the start by this massacre, which included far more Christians than heretics. It was clear that a soldier was needed instead of a bishop to command the army, one who would have to be given complete possession of the lands under his control as a way of keeping him there and ensuring he did a thorough job.

All the leading nobles begged off, officially because they didn't want to be dishonoured by disowning a fellow peer. More likely, they saw an arduous slog ahead for any man who took the job. Simon III, perhaps enticed by his own sense of piety or the chance to play a bigger role, eventually accepted and became the leader for the next nine years, a period long enough for him to be identified with all that was terrible about it.

The Raymonds made sure of that. They consistently portrayed this foreigner as a usurper out to get their lands, which in all fairness had been usurped somewhere along the line by their ancestors. The sources of the period are split about him, which stands in contrast to the almost universal support his son received from the chroniclers of his day.

Some found him gentle and gallant, others mean and vicious. All of them praised him for his courage, prestige, and the phenomenal energy that allowed him to be everywhere at once. It's no exaggeration to suggest that the crusade would've been over much sooner had anyone else been in command.

He began by taking oaths from all the petty overlords to support him. For him, much like for his son later on, an oath sworn to God was sacred. The attitude of the lords of Languedoc was much more casual. Theirs wasn't so much a region as a turf, where loyalty and swapping sides went hand in hand. That was going to change with Montfort. Those leaders caught double dealing were pitilessly dispatched. This had the effect of turning a war against heretics into a war against insurgents as the Raymonds now united against him.

It became guerrilla warfare, with the taking and retaking of strongholds, overrunning the same plot of earth time and again, where every reprisal upped the ante. Brutality became the only tool of diplomacy for both sides, and Montfort didn't shy away from maiming and hanging his enemies, either. Those heretics he caught he burned alive, as did everybody, though he made an effort to convert them. In the end, the heretics became an afterthought as he and the Raymonds slugged it out.

At one point they had Montfort cornered and outnumbered at Castelnaudary and still he chased them off. For all their talk about his greed and cruelty, what clearly bothered them was his better ability and more inspired leadership. Even worse, he wasn't content with merely displacing them. He was intent on changing their whole way of life.

Theirs was a feudal structure, a social, political and economic hierarchy that gave little hope of a better life to the peasants that formed the majority of the population. For them, every day was a matter of toil and hunger, made worse by all the banditry. In 1212, having secured most of the region, Montfort summoned an assembly that drew up the Charter of Pamiers, a new code of laws for Languedoc.

Beyond trying to impose order, they set out to protect the common people from their overlords. Now he had gone too far, particularly since he didn't even mention the Raymonds in the charter, as if to suggest they were now irrelevant. A similar situation would later arise in June 1264 after parliament,



**Simon de Montfort by  
François-Louis Dejuinne**

under the younger Simon's leadership, passed the Ordinance of Westminster, which basically gave England a constitutional monarchy. From that moment on the leading barons, fearing they too would become irrelevant, were drawn back to the royal family and would eventually help Edward defeat Montfort.

The Raymonds felt especially aggrieved because they professed to be Christians. They denied any sympathy with the heresy, but the Church knew better. The count of Foix told an audience of bishops that his Cathar wife and sister were evil, but he sure didn't lift a finger to burn either of them at the stake. He was notorious for a long list of atrocities, even bragged about them when he wasn't accusing Montfort of them. Simon had become their obsession and would remain so until they found someone who could match him in the field. It just so happened that he was next door in Aragon.



**Innocent III at the cloister  
Sacro Speco**

As Simon III was preparing the Charter of Parmiers, King Peter II was whipping the Moors in Spain. His part in the victory at Las Navas de Tolosa in July 1212 made him the darling of the papacy, so much so that Innocent, now thoroughly unsettled by the turn of events, wrote Montfort a letter that could have been written by any of the Raymonds.

‘You have spilled innocent blood, you have invaded domains that were not suspected of heresy, and you are denying the rights of the king and overlords. You should restore them unless it be said that you are working for your own advantage and not for the sake of your faith...’

Related by family and feudal association to many of the overlords of Languedoc, Peter began putting an allied army together to crush the northerners. Just then, however, Innocent completely reversed himself, probably because he didn't want to admit that he was wrong in summoning the crusade in the first place. He ordered Peter to desist forthwith from invading. If not, ‘we feel obliged to threaten you with divine wrath and to take whatever steps necessary to ensure you suffer

grave and irreparable harm.’

As if to pour salt on the wound, Innocent even forbade him to bring divorce proceedings against his wife. Although a devout Christian with no qualms about burning heretics, Peter was now as much fed up with the Church of Rome as his displaced friends from Languedoc. He took his army of 2000 knights and 40,000 foot soldiers and marched on Montfort's position at Muret.

The military and diplomatic incompetence of the Raymonds had allowed Simon III, with a much smaller force, to dispossess them one by one. Now he was about to face a real general, a giant of a man with immense strength and matchless courage. Peter too was looking forward to the struggle, because for him it was all about chivalry. The French knights were picking on weaker opponents. Just wait until they faced his Spanish knights, they would show them. And if he swallowed up Languedoc in the process, that would be all right, too.

For Montfort, it was another brazen display of disloyalty. Peter was the overlord of some of the lords he had displaced and Simon had shown himself ready to be loyal to him in their place. After initially hesitating, Peter accepted his homage and even agreed to marry his son and successor James to Simon's daughter Amicia as a way of cementing their relationship. He even sent the boy to live with the Montfort family.

Now he was going back on his word, allowing these cowards and scoundrels to talk him into betraying that trust. He could put all the men in the field he wanted, Simon and his French knights would show him.

The bishops who accompanied Simon were not so confident and attempted to negotiate. The Raymonds had nothing but contempt for them and discouraged Peter from listening to them or their threats. It would be the same fifty years later when the bishops closest to the younger Simon went to Lewes to negotiate with Henry in the days leading up to the battle. Henry was of a mind to compromise, but his son Edward persuaded him to reject their proposal. Edward made it clear where he stood when he announced that Simon could only have peace if he came to him with a halter around his neck.

Henry was never a warrior to begin with, but Peter was full of martial ability and zeal. When the count of Toulouse recommended they maintain a defensive position before Muret and starve Montfort out, Peter and his men scoffed that he was a coward. The French had been ravaging his land for the last four years and he didn't want even a little revenge on them? He was ordered back to his tent, lest he cast a pall on their troops with his long face.

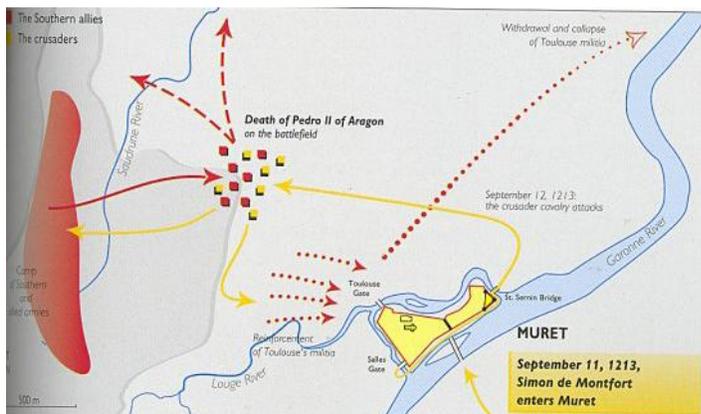
The Albigensian Crusade has long been a favourite among commercial writers, and not just because it offers ample evidence of mysteries, codes, heretics, corrupt officials and so forth. The medieval fare rampant in films and games suggests modern audiences enjoy, if not watching these acts of brutality, then at least the spectacle of good and evil battling it out. But if Simon de Montfort is the antichrist here, who is the saviour? Peter is out for what's about to happen next, but there's this count of Toulouse, a Raymond of course, who succoured the heretics, protected them, and willingly humiliated and sacrificed himself for their right to choose.

All very true, but if Raymond didn't order the murder that launched the crusade, he didn't do a thing to make amends until it was at his doorstep. He even joined the crusade as an act of good faith, in time to watch Béziers burned, but the Church long since stopped believing any of his protestations. He was a sneak who could talk all he wanted about being a martyr. He employed mercenaries like the others, plundered churches, even hung his own brother.

The difference between him and Montfort, and here he was completely like Henry, was he lacked the steeliness of purpose. Naturally feeble and weak, he could not have conceived of raising an army to defend his people when the crusaders first marched on Languedoc. And so, when he suggested the allies maintain a defensive posture despite their superiority, the others could only shake their heads and sigh, 'Same old Raymond.'

Peter, of course, was made of steel, and like Edward, he relished the chance to face his enemy on the field. This would be a battle between the two best warriors in Christendom, both described as tall, strong and inordinately courageous. To be sure, Peter exchanged his armour with another man so he might face his foe not as a king but man to man. When the day dawned and Montfort marched out to meet him, he no doubt cast a look of contemptuousness at Raymond and snarled, 'Behold, a real man.'

It was September 12, 1213, and the battle of Muret began. Since he was outnumbered, Montfort's strategy was to deploy his divisions in lightning strikes, designed to keep the lines as equal as possible on



any given part of the field. His main concentration was on the Aragonese, doubtlessly hoping to engage Peter in battle and bring him down. The assault was furious, with Raymond's own son later likening it to a whole forest being chopped down at once.

Peter naturally was in the thick of things. One of Montfort's knights noticed the royal arms of Aragon and felled the man wearing them. Surprised how easy it was, he shouted that it couldn't possibly be the king. Cocky, and a tad bit stupid, Peter

rushed to the spot and exclaimed that he was the king. The French knights couldn't believe their luck. They closed in on the king and killed him and his entire entourage.

And just like that, the saviour of Languedoc was dead. The Spanish knights fled, spreading confusion and panic in the ranks that had yet to see action. Whether spurred on by Raymond, most likely not, the



**Peter II by Manuel Aguirre Monsalbe**

soldiers from Toulouse attempted to storm Muret, only to take it in the flank from Simon's cavalry. They were driven to the river where many of them drowned. In all, maybe 20,000 allied soldiers met their doom that day.

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Montfort had Peter's body retrieved from the battlefield and given all due honours. He could afford to be magnanimous. Clearly his victory had all the signs of divine judgement, much as Lewes would have fifty years later.

The pope, however, had mixed feelings, as well he should about any victory in what was now a Christian civil war. Anxious to stay on good terms with Aragon, he insisted that Simon return little James. Perhaps remembering how the pope had been ready to betray him, Simon took his time but eventually handed the boy over the next year. He would go on to a stellar reign as James I, fostering poetry and literature but scrappy and always angling for more domains.

While in the Montfort family, his most likely playmate would have been the boy Simon de Montfort. Alice de Montfort had spent most of the crusade close to her husband, recruiting and raising funds for him while attending their six children. Simon was one of their youngest, and the best educated guess gives him and James the same year of birth, 1208, when the crusade was launched.

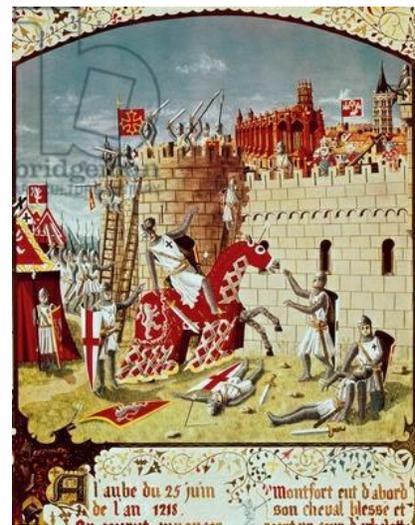
These two boys would have been about five years old when their fathers squared off at Muret. Not for another thirty years would their paths cross again. In 1242, Henry and Raymond's son, his successor as count of Toulouse, were coming off an inglorious defeat at the hands of Louis IX and had retreated to Bordeaux. There they met up with James, who had his own beef with Louis.

The younger Simon was also there. He had just returned from a crusade in Palestine, in time to hold off the French long enough for Henry to make good his escape. Henry was grateful, but James and the new Raymond kept whispering that Simon was no better than his father and Henry would be wise to be rid of him. But Henry needed a Simon de Montfort to keep Gascony, his last province on the continent, from slipping away, and so appointed him to govern it.

It was a fateful decision. When Simon used harsh measures to put down a series of uprisings, James and the new Raymond were almost certainly gloating, 'Told you so.' Henry, as waxen as Raymond's father, turned against his man, at one point calling him a maker and lover of strife and hoping he would get his in the end. 'Go back to Gascony and reap its reward like your father before you,' he hissed.

That was an obvious parting shot, for everyone knew that the elder Montfort had fallen before the walls of Toulouse in 1218, struck on the head by a stone supposedly launched by a group of women. He no more hit the ground off his horse when the people on the city walls began cheering and singing, 'Noblesse and honour have returned, Montfort is dead!'

His fortunes had been in reverse and now the people knew victory was theirs at last. When Raymond returned to Toulouse, they fell to their knees and wept for joy. The crops were ruined, the town destroyed and the population on the verge of starvation, but never mind, they had their Raymond back. When he died in 1222, his son tried and failed to get him a Christian burial. The body of this most pathetic figure of the crusade, chivalrous for some, sneaky for others, was eaten by rats in the end.



The death of Simon de Montfort

The crusade itself would carry on for another decade, more of 'gone by the sword, gone by the stake', until an uneasy peace was reached in 1229. The monarchy of France was involved now, eager as it was to gain control of Languedoc. The loss of a civilization was bemoaned, but the nobility continued to throw lavish banquets for each other and write poetry. Even Catharism survived into the next century. It was the Raymonds, however, who were finished.

But not before they saw to it what history's verdict of their Simon de Montfort would be. He was a scourge who at best was indifferent to all the horror and misery he inflicted on the region. There are writers today who insist that his name still invokes terror in Languedoc, as if the events played out 800 years ago were only yesterday. With their hints of reincarnation, the Cathars might agree.

The Anglo-French Simon de Montfort would have been about ten years old at the time of his father's death. No doubt he remembered him, much more than James did his own father. Perhaps the old man, who was already in his fifties at the time of his death, took a respite from all the troubles to tell his son what they were all about, why they were down in these foreign parts instead of at their home in Ile-de-France.

Whatever he told his son, the younger Simon de Montfort came to see his struggle with Henry as a crusade in itself. The king had taken an oath to reform for the sake of better government and Simon was determined to make him observe it. Although vastly outnumbered, he could look to his father's situation at Muret and feel secure knowing that, no matter what the odds or strength of your foe, faith and firmness in the right will always carry the day.

And so Simon de Montfort left London 'with all for all.'