

Review of *Ladies of Magna Carta* by Sharon Bennett Connolly

Darren Baker | 02 June 2020

Following her *Heroines of the Medieval World* and *Silk and the Sword*, Sharon Bennett Connolly throws much needed light on the lives of the high-born women of thirteenth-century England. Calling them *Ladies of Magna Carta* is not a suggestion that they played any particular role in the drafting of that famous charter, nor are they to be found prowling on the edges of Runnymede and shouting out to their men, 'Make sure you get that in there too!' As Connolly points out in the beginning, the original charter contained only a single clause that mentioned the word woman (*femina*) and that was to restrict her right to accuse anyone of the death of anyone except her husband. The men at Runnymede were out to protect their own rights, in this case their right to face an accuser in trial by combat, which was denied to them when the plaintiff was a woman. They were certainly not indifferent to the stake of women in the charter and made sure to safeguard their inheritances and dowers and the right of widows to remain single or to marry whomever they wanted. The reason was simple. These women were their wives, mothers, sisters and daughters. Whatever affected them affected their menfolk. In this sense, it's more useful to see Magna Carta as the product of disgruntled families squaring off against the king.

The *Ladies* then are the first generation of aristocratic women whose lives in some way influenced or were influenced by the charter. That means, inevitably, that there's some man not just lurking in the shadows of this impressive compilation, but stealing the show in some instances. If this moves certain readers to complain 'Him again?', they will just have to get over the fact that it was a man's world, written by men about other men for the most part. It wasn't fair, but to isolate these women within the chronicles and writs in which they appear would make some very light and dull reading indeed.

Connolly even goes out on a limb by deciding to put the ladies on hold to give an account of the events that lead up to Magna Carta. There's King John's rise to power and the abuses of his reign, as well as that hopelessly dysfunctional family he grew up in. It's a well-trod story, but of course not everyone is familiar with it and there's nothing more frustrating than a historian who cannot be bothered to

indulge newcomers. Connolly's version of the first Plantagenets is superbly concise. No distractions or detours, hitting all the right nails on the head, until John, having repudiated the charter in 1215, has to defend his kingdom from rebellious barons in league with the French royal family, and he dies in the midst of it. The regents for the new king, Henry III, reissue the charter, which takes on the name Magna Carta the following year, and now Connolly can delve into the lives of the women of that age.

The first, Matilda de Braose, is remembered for the cruel manner of her death, starved to death with her son in the dungeons of Windsor. Certainly their fate figured into Clause 39 of the charter, which stipulates that no one was to be 'destroyed in any way without the lawful judgement of his peers or by the law of the land'. There is more to Matilda here than victimhood in Connolly's portrayal. We hear the legend of her carrying stones in her skirt to build a castle and of her stout defence of Paincastle against the Welsh. Her sister Loretta, who became a renowned recluse, had been deprived of her dower by John. Clause 7 sought to end that injustice, at least in theory.

In terms of heroics, few of the ladies, men for that matter, can match Nicolaa de la Haye. She had inherited the post of castellan of Lincoln from her father and was still in command of the castle thirty years later when the French and rebels began to bombard the walls. In one of his last acts, John named Nicolaa sheriff of Lincolnshire, the first woman to hold that office in England. The injustice inflicted on her came after Magna Carta, when turncoat William Longespee wanted Lincoln for himself. He was the husband of our next lady, Ela of Salisbury. She was a great heiress, given in marriage to Longespee because he was an illegitimate son of Henry II, and she is one of the first women on record to invoke the protection of widows from remarriage and heiresses from disparagement. This occurred when Longespee was presumed lost at sea and the all-powerful justiciar sent his nephew, an ordinary knight, to seek Ela's hand. Not even shining up his armour helped. 'Get lost', she told the much embarrassed younger man. In her widowhood, Ela served as the sheriff of Wiltshire and in a much larger capacity than Nicolaa did in Lincolnshire.

Most of the ladies presented here have no overt connection to the specific clauses of Magna Carta, for example the five daughters of William Marshal. On the other hand, Marshal's son Richard violated the charter when he denied his brother's widow Eleanor, sister of Henry III, her proper dower. As for the king himself, his opponents constantly grumbled about his lack of adherence to the charter and

Connolly offers us the case of Isabel d'Aubigny, who famously upbraided Henry for being a 'shameless transgressor' of Magna Carta after she was deprived of a quarter knight's fee. The fact that Isabel too remained a widow without any pressure to remarry might suggest otherwise, but the official record does verify that she used intemperate words during her interview with the king. Fortunately for her and the other ladies, Henry was, unlike his father, a conscientious and forgiving sort. He not only restored the quarter knight's fee to Isabel, but waived a fine imposed on her for later making false claims.

Important as Magna Carta is in all this – and Connolly includes the charter in full as an appendix – it is the lives of the ladies themselves that proves the most interesting. Long before the Lusignans came to England and stirred up a fuss, we see Alice Lusignan litigating to recover property in Yorkshire as part of her cross-Channel inheritance. There's plenty of sadness: the fate of the Scottish princesses Margaret and Isabelle, held hostage to the marriage market for more than a decade, and John's first wife Isabella of Gloucester, whom he divorced on the eve of his coronation. He refused to jettison her person and property, however, and kept tight control over both until his death. At one point he even had his ex-wife acting as a surrogate mother to his new wife, another Isabella.

Because there are too few names to go around here, Connolly makes every effort to tell everyone apart by using their family origins or other forms of the same name (Isabella, Isabelle, Isabel). This potential for confusion likely led her to tell their lives individually instead of in parallel, although the pitfall here is that repetition becomes unavoidable. Ordinary women also don't figure in these stories at all. Despite its widespread publication, Magna Carta was very much a charter for the ruling class. It was not until the Provisions of Oxford (1258) and subsequent revolt of Simon de Montfort did the peasants and middling folk begin to assert their rights and power.

Interestingly, one of the last ladies Connolly presents is Simon's daughter Eleanor, princess of Wales, although the circumstances are ironic in the least. Three decades after Isabel d'Aubigny confronted Henry III, Eleanor's brother Amaury was being held in prison without trial, an egregious violation of clause 39. Given that Isabel had reproached the king over a paltry quarter knight's fee, Eleanor might be expected to give the new king, her cousin Edward I, a frightful tongue-lashing over his unjust and illegal treatment of her brother. But it was a different ball game now, a much harsher age, and Eleanor knew better than to even mention Magna Carta. Instead she begged and beseeched Edward 'with

clasped hands, and with bended knees and tearful groanings...'. He remained unmoved.

It's an instructive example. *Ladies of Magna Carta* begins with a quote from Winston Churchill declaring that the charter of liberties is 'a law which is above the King and which even he must not break'. It ends with a king doing just that, and an aggrieved woman, as in the days of old, getting on her hands and knees and pleading for mercy. This is not to imply that the charter was for nought, just that its effectiveness depended on the political landscape, the spirit of the age, and ultimately on the will to enforce it. Connolly's book is an informative and delightful read about women aspiring to control their destiny against this backdrop, but their success or failure had less to do with Magna Carta than with the timeless principles of resourcefulness, determination and knowing how to skilfully handle the big guy. It's these qualities that make their stories inspiring.

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