Review of *Rebellion Against Henry III* by David Pilling

Darren Baker | 18 June 2020

Even by modern standards, the reign of Henry III is a long one, 56 years between 1216 and 1272. Perhaps not surprisingly, he had to deal with a few rebellions along the way. The most serious broke out in 1263 under Simon de Montfort, resulting in his victory at the battle of Lewes the following year. He established a constitutional monarchy, with King Henry as a figurehead and his son Lord Edward securely confined with other royal hostages. A year later Edward escaped, raised an army, and wiped out Simon and many of his cohorts at Evesham, the first thorough slaughter of the English nobility since the Norman Conquest. Henry disinherited the survivors of their ancestral lands and this act led to a prolongation of the conflict for two more years.

Thus forms the background for this new book on the Disinherited by David Pilling. In fact, it's the only book dedicated to them. Simon de Montfort and his rebellion have received plenty of attention, but they invariably end with his corpse strewn in so many pieces across the battlefield. The most ambitious study of the Disinherited can be found in a much lauded thesis from the 1950s, but it remains published. Pilling has visited the Disinherited before in his historical novels of the period, but never in a comprehensive work of non-fiction. He has to forgo the imaginative dialog and descriptive storytelling that have made his earlier books popular, but his novelist skills give the narrative here a brisk and informative pace that literally doesn't let up.

Pilling starts off with a quick survey of the reform period that began in 1258, a consequence of many factors that brought an end to Henry's personal rule. He picks up the action with Simon's rebellion in 1263, introducing some of the future Disinherited like northerner John Deville, and ends this opening chapter with Simon trapped by Edward's forces. We then get the full treatment of Evesham in the next chapter. Pilling makes good use of contemporary sources, although some of it seems a little overboard. For example, if Simon's son Henry, named after the king, was indeed sliced in two by a broadsword, Edward must have had a wood troll or Goliath of enormous strength in his ranks. Elsewhere the slaughter was relentless, particularly of the Welsh, whom Edward targeted, suggests Pilling, because of his 'bitter memories of past defeats' at their hands. He doesn't speculate whether the slaughter of numerous Montfortian knights was part of a preconceived strategy of disinheritance, but killing the landowner would make it that much easier to seize his lands afterwards. Certainly the race for spoils, which dominates chapter three, was on before the king regained control of his seal.

As Pilling indicates, the fate of the surviving Montfortians hung on the surrender of all their fortresses. The inability or unwillingness of Simon junior to hand over Kenilworth sealed it and disinheritance was proclaimed by the king in Winchester, where Henry always seemed to go for a fresh start. Royalists scrambled like hyenas to grab as much as they could before the semblance of order set in. The first out the gate was Gilbert de Clare, the earl of Gloucester, whose betrayal of the Montfortians led to their downfall. He had his men seize only money, not land or equipment, perhaps thinking he was still on the high road that took him back to the king's side.

What follows is a series of examples of how messy the process was destined to become. Land was seized on the basis of dubious writs, royalists joined forces in the evictions, sometimes the women got their hands on the loot. Pilling offers an amusing anecdote of the chancellor Walter Giffard, himself one of the most self-seeking men of the age. He sealed a charter to a confiscated estate that had already been doled out to Robert de Bruce, grandfather of the victor of Bannockburn. During the protracted court case that ensued, Giffard blamed the mix up on the chaos of the times, not of his own administration. Edward and other leading councillors are presented as opponents of disinheritance, but having failed to stop it, they weren't about to get left behind. He did quite well out of it, as did his wife.

It was Edward who led the fight to reduce pockets of Montfortian resistance. First he got his aunt Eleanor de Montfort to vacate Dover Castle with no bloodshed, then sped north to deal with rebels in Lincolnshire, then back down to the south coast to stamp out the piracy of the Cinque Ports. Pilling uses surviving payroll accounts to give us the scale of the resources needed for these assaults. Kentish baron Roger Leyburn took 106 horses and 79 grooms into action against Sandwich. He claimed compensation of £200 for the 39 horses lost. Edward's private policy was clemency and he won the Cinque Ports over by exempting them from disinheritance. This was easy to do since none of their properties had been seized, and the ports remained loyal afterwards, but of course it only exacerbated resentment among the Montfortians who had been booted out. Clemency also didn't work in the case of one pirate Edward wanted to hang but was let go after Clare interceded for him. The two later teamed up after Clare withdrew from court.

Now it's the spring of 1266 and the Disinherited have put together a small army at Chesterfield under Robert de Ferrers, the earl of Derby. Never an ardent Montfortian but a fierce foe of Edward, Ferrers had missed both Lewes and Evesham and was restored to favour for 1,500 marks and a gold drinking cup 'richly decorated with stones, pearls and emeralds'. There seems to be no good explanation for his drift back into rebellion, although Pilling might have left sympathy for the Disinherited off the list. Nothing in Ferrers' career suggests he was motivated by anything other than greed and stupidity. Impaired by gout, he tried to hide in a woolsack when royalists under the

command of Henry of Almaine, the king's nephew, stormed his position. As the first and only attempt by the Disinherited to put a force in the field, Chesterfield was decisive but it is little remembered today because of a wrestling match that took place at the same time in the south.

In these pages Pilling explores whether the figure later used for Robin Hood might be found among the Disinherited. An obvious candidate is Adam Gurdon, whose life is traced in the chapter aptly named 'The Outlaw Knight'. A freebooter who gladly helps himself to another man's breakfast, he and his large following of brigands, mostly peasants, have set up camp in Alton Wood north of Winchester. Edward and his men track them there and he captures Gurdon himself after engaging him in personal combat. The peasants are all strung up on the surrounding trees, but Edward spares Gurdon, so he says, so Ferrers will have somebody to keep him company in the dungeon. Pilling reminds us that this quip was very much in keeping with Edward's coarse and sarcastic humour.

The background and exploits of John Deyville occupy the next chapter. He might be better known today, and likeable, were it not for his horrific depredations, including the slaughter of 160 Jewish men, women and children at Lincoln. Setting himself up at Ely, he was able to terrorise the countryside at will because the king concentrated his forces on taking the Montfortian stronghold at Kenilworth. That siege, which forms the next chapter, is striking for two features: The Disinherited grow only bolder and Henry assumes full command of the war against them. Indeed, Edward takes furlough for the next six months after his wife gives birth to a boy they tellingly name John. Let there be King John II someday! Pilling admits Henry hasn't got the best reputation as a soldier, but then reminds us of his successful campaigns in Gascony and against the Montfortians at Northampton. In any event, the king was in a sour mood. The garrison at Kenilworth mutilated his messenger and nothing infuriated him more than the maltreatment of his servants. When twenty years earlier a marcher baron made one of them eat the actual message he brought him, wax seal and all, Henry slapped him with the enormous fine of 1,000 marks to pay.

Despite the intense bombardment, the castle held out. On 28 October 1266, Henry would celebrate 50 years on the throne and didn't want to mark the occasion stuck in the mud with rebellious subjects lobbing projectiles at him. He softened his stance on disinheritance and both sides hammered out an agreement that allowed the Montfortians to redeem their properties at a value anywhere from 1 to 7 times the annual income of their estates (10 times was considered full market value) depending on their role in the rebellion. This Dictum of Kenilworth was issued on 31 October, but the garrison, on some vainglorious ego trip, waited until December to emerge. Pilling quotes a contemporary source who remarks on the foul stench that greeted the king's men upon entering the ruins of the castle.

Some of the garrison simply moved to Ely to carry on the fight with Deyville. Screw redemption, they wanted their lands back period. They argued that they weren't even rebels. They were fighting under the king's banner at Evesham. The real traitors were Edward, Clare and their men. Reminding the king of his captivity under Montfort was precisely not the thing to say to win restoration. Pilling does not mention here that, in legal terms, the start of the rebellion was dated to Northampton in 1264, when Henry first called on the Montfortians to surrender. Anyone still in rebellion since then was liable to forfeiture and Clare for one made sure to secure his own pardon from the king. Henry summoned parliament to nearby Bury St Edmunds as the prelude to reducing the holdout at Ely. Pilling writes how he went into it with 'great energy and determination' and that he 'got his sword wet' when he and his men fell on one raiding party.

There was just no dislodging Deyville and his insurgents from their marshy hideout, but Edward no sooner returned to the action when he had to be dispatched north to deal with a new uprising. The lord of Alnwick, John de Vescy, was so devoted to Montfort that he brought home one of his severed feet from the battlefield. He gave it to some monks, who encased the foot in silver and turned it into a shrine. The Dictum of Kenilworth made it a crime to venerate Simon in this fashion, but his cult continued to flourish, especially at Evesham, where even Clare's mother sought a cure. Edward had no trouble suppressing Vescy and was commended for freeing him afterwards, but Vescy was still stuck with a huge redemption fine of 3,700 marks to pay.

Pilling recounts how Edward, in one case, had to keep his own men from each other's throats. A certain William Douglas, called Longleg because of his height (Longshanks knew all about that), accused Gilbert de Umfraville, the earl of Angus, of torturing his family. Umfraville was a former ward of none other than Simon de Montfort. He grew up in the Montfort household and was the same age as Guy de Montfort, about whom we hear more later. He had been quick to make his peace with the king after Evesham and therefore avoided disinheritance. The case went to trial after Edward left, but naturally Umfraville, as the richer, more powerful party, got off.

Edward returned with troops recruited in Scotland and they were sorely needed, not for Ely, but London itself. This new chapter was a long time coming. Gilbert de Clare's shadowy game with disinheritance had earned him the contempt of his former partners at Evesham, Edward and the reputed slayer of Simon de Montfort, Roger Mortimer. When Edward took off north, Clare marched on London and easily occupied it thanks to a gullible papal legate and a commune that was still Montfortian in spirit. Deyville slipped away and joined him there, and Henry found himself back at square one. He was so rightly fed up that when Deyville challenged him and his men to open combat, he showed up for it but Deyville didn't. Pilling attributes this to Clare holding him back, because to attack the king would remove all ambiguity about disinheritance, and this little stunt was meant to win them better terms. In fact, Clare eventually threw over

Deyville as he threw over everybody else, but it was agreed that the Disinherited would get their lands back in order to make the money to pay off their redemptions. Not a total victory, but a solution everyone could live with. All it took then was for Edward to flush out the remaining insurgents at Ely and it was over.

Pilling devotes most of the remaining chapters to the style of warfare used by the Disinherited and to the causes of the violence that continued to plague the realm. One might like to think that these years of rebellion were all about the defence of constitutional principles and fight against tyranny, but it seems that what Simon de Montfort had really tapped into was a wellspring of grievance and opportunism. We meet many of the insurgents at the lower end of the scale, poor peasants with little else to lose in life. We see personal quarrels and vendettas. Simon had his own vendetta against the king, and his son Guy avenged his dismemberment at Evesham by tracking down Henry of Almaine, the victor of Chesterfield, to a church in Italy and hacking him to death at the altar. It was all very violent or unseemly, oftentimes both, as in the case of royalists hiring out members of the Disinherited to rough up and intimidate other royalists.

The notoriety ran all the way to the top. John de Warenne, the earl of Surrey, was ready to fight Henry de Lacy, the earl of Lincoln, over some pasture land, and the next year, in 1269, Warenne was embroiled with Alan de Zouche, a royal steward, over the spoils of disinheritance. He settled their suit in the king's court with a sword, leaving Zouche mortally wounded on the floor. That same year the royal family connived in swindling Ferrers out of his earldom of Derby in order to give it to Edward's brother Edmund. It was all done very legally–even the chancellor was in on it–but naturally Ferrers felt victimised, and when Edward took a host of nobles out of the country on crusade, he reignited his feud with the crown. This is where a third Robin Hoodish character, Roger Godberd, makes his appearance. The king had to deal with this lot all the way to the end. Only two months before his death in 1272, he went to Norwich after a riot there saw the cathedral burnt to the ground. It had nothing to do with his rule or disinheritance, just a squabble between the priory and townsfolk that got out of hand.

It can make some depressing reading, all this fighting and bitterness. The never-ending grappling has to end somewhere and Pilling puts it at Edward's return and coronation in 1274. Whichever year marks the true end of the War of the Disinherited, it was one of the most tumultuous periods in English history. Whether disinheritance had been the right call or not is easily debatable, but one thing is clear: it was inevitable. Too much anger and hostility had been engendered by the Montfortian years to suggest anything otherwise was in the offing when Edward and his men mowed down their opponents at Evesham, nearly taking the king out in the process. Many laments have been expressed about the disorderliness that followed, but without offering a better way on how to have managed it. Finally, there's the complaint that too few got too much, but then that was

the same charge thrown at Simon de Montfort and every other person who came to power or resumed power after a violent overthrow. The spoils never get doled out evenly. If Mortimer did better than Clare, that's because Clare tried to have it both ways, all the while betraying everybody who ever came into contact with him. It wasn't for nothing that Montfort called him 'the red dog'.

Pilling concludes with the historical context of Robin Hood and his association with the Disinherited. Many readers will doubtless welcome it, but he might have also developed something noted in the chapter preceding it, which looks at the endurance of Simon's cult. There he describes how Robert de Vere, the earl of Oxford, redeemed his estates from Mortimer after the two of them hashed out terms acceptable to both. It shows there was little about disinheritance and redemption that was cut and dried. Deals and ransoms were being made all over the place, before and after the dictum, and this willingness to sit down and reach a compromise offsets much of the disturbing violence we read about. More about this aspect, and the humanitarian policy pursued towards the wives and widows of the rebels, could have taken the edge off the tension that grips *Rebellion Against Henry III*. For all that, it is a page-turner and a much needed one for this inexplicably neglected part of medieval history.

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