

# Review of *Henry III: The Rise to Power and Personal Rule* by David Carpenter

Darren Baker | 11 June 2020

I was still waiting for my copy of David Carpenter's *Henry III: The Rise to Power and Personal Rule* to arrive when a review of it by Dominic Selwood appeared. The preface, he tells us, has something about lampreys, together with a video reference on how to eat them. Selwood checks it out and informs us that it's a bloody spectacle, but Agincourt it ain't, and what he sees clearly unnerves him. Given that Henry is best remembered for his taste and cultivation, the thought of the king chomping down on this hideous-looking fish might make us wonder what other surprises are in store for us in the narrative.

Plenty is the obvious answer, for this is a massive biography of more than 700 pages, and it's just volume 1. It's not until halfway through do we learn that Henry and his queen enjoyed eating lampreys because they found other fish 'insipid'. It's one of many revealing anecdotes that bring the little-known king to life. For that Henry can thank Carpenter, who has proved that a reign based on peace and piety can be every bit as exciting and compelling as those seeped in war and bloodshed.

Henry III had the longest reign of any medieval English monarch, and all 56 years of it were well documented, in records, rolls, writs, letters and chronicles, easily 10,000 pages at the minimum. Digesting and organising it all into this supremely accessible biography, complemented by the famous Carpenter wit and crisp writing style, can only be described as a herculean feat. The bibliography alone runs to 26 pages of small type and shows how voluminous the studies of Henry and his reign have been. If no single biography has been produced before that takes in all this material, it's probably because the task looked so daunting. It would take years for such an undertaking.

More like decades, as Carpenter explains in the preface. He's been busy along the way, most notably with *The Struggle for Mastery*, still the finest history of Britain in the first two centuries following the Norman Conquest, and more recently *Magna Carta* to coincide with the 800-year anniversary of the Great Charter in 2015. Since Henry was the first king to rule under Magna Carta or a constitution of any sorts, modern historians have tended to focus their efforts on

how well he did there. None of them, however, has delved into the details to quite the extent Carpenter has done here.

Readers will have to wait before getting an idea what his verdict on the king will be. That's because of Henry's minority, which covers the period 1216–27, almost a fifth of his reign. These are vital years to the political history of England. In 1990 Carpenter published an entire book on it of more than 400 pages. Naturally he can't go into the minority here in the depth he might have liked, but he sets the stage for many of the problems to come, particularly with two phenomena that became entrenched during these early years of Henry's reign: the rise of the parliamentary state and English nationalism.

We're already sixty pages into the book before Henry is an adult and ready to assume full regnal authority. The first issue to deal with is his appearance, namely whether he had the drooping eyelid ascribed to him by Nicholas Trevet writing fifty years after Henry's death. According to Carpenter, the droop is confirmed in a drawing of the king by Matthew Paris, which is indeed the case, but it doesn't appear in any of Paris's other drawings of Henry, nor does he mention it in his extensive, contemporary chronicle. If anything, he complained of the penetrative power of Henry's vision when it came to money. It's an important point, because a drooping eyelid would have been immediately noticed by people coming into contact with the king and perhaps had a subtle effect on their relationship. Carpenter notes that congenital ptosis, the modern diagnosis of the condition, is known to cause psychological problems in children, but he doesn't speculate on how it might have affected Henry (if he had it at all).

The first glimpse we get of the grownup Henry is his ambition to reclaim the continental empire seized from his father King John by the French in 1204. It became an obsession for him, but Carpenter demonstrates that he had all the wrong qualities to make it a success. He was too warm-hearted, too indulgent, he lacked ferocity and a knack for the jugular. His hanging of the 80-strong garrison at Bedford when he was 16 years old is put down to the prompting of his advisers. Perhaps it traumatised Henry, for Carpenter adds that the king did not carry out a single political execution for the rest of his reign.

Carpenter also finds no evidence that Henry attended any tournaments or engaged in hunting as a past time. In short, he has no makings of a warrior king, a fact sure to hurt his introduction to modern audiences, among whom even warrior queens now seem to be the rage. When his invasion of France looked set

in 1230, a poet wrote that the king should forget about his 'love of white bread, good sauce and clear wine' and instead strike a blow to win the hearts of his subjects. He ended up storming only a single castle during his six months on the continent. His failure to give battle to the French or at least to launch the 'ravaging expeditions' so beloved of his descendants left the chroniclers bewildered, and Carpenter brilliantly captures their impatience in the personal tone of the narrative. He does admit, however, that the king's men were lukewarm themselves. They had nothing to gain from the recovery of Normandy and so were content to let Henry try and negotiate his way to victory.

The few gains he did score are mentioned, and it's important, because Henry is a king who needs his due. He's perennially unsure of himself, which shouldn't be surprising given his childhood. Abandoned by his mother, burdened by his father's legacy, surrounded by old men always putting their own agendas first. So great was the impact of his minority that it was hard to forget he was a boy king once. Evidently Henry himself sometimes forgot it. He once annulled a charter because he claimed it had been made under false pretences, adding that he was underage at the time of issue, but as Carpenter points out, the king was already 23. Carpenter doesn't believe that Henry was being deliberately deceitful, because he wasn't clever enough for that, rather he had convinced himself that he had not truly become his own man until his personal rule began in 1234.

It's just one of many examples of Henry's 'simplicity', the catch-all word used by chroniclers to describe what they saw as the king's naiveté and inability to think things through. He was a simpleton, basically, and Carpenter himself blames the problems that beset him and the realm on his lack of maturity and intelligence. Indeed, he rams the point home by declaring that none of Henry's immediate predecessors could ever be called 'simple'. It's the same with the king's contemporaries. They are always wise, circumspect, masterful, visionary, terms never applied to Henry himself. As for why these competent people were happy to serve such a weak and 'pusillanimous' (wimpy) monarch, the answer is why not. Where they led, he followed.

This was apparently the case in the first years following the minority. Henry adhered to the counsels of Hubert de Burgh, formerly his principal regent, and after he was ousted, Peter des Roches, the French-born boyhood tutor and guardian of the king. It's easy to see each man as a father figure to Henry, and perhaps he saw them as such, because he continuously turned a blind eye to their shenanigans and manipulation of his trust. Hubert lined his pockets with the

royal bounty, while Peter pushed Henry to act more authoritarian, to forget about the niceties of Magna Carta. Under future reigns, both men would have faced the grimmest of executions, but it was the nature of the times, and Henry's piety, to forgive and rehabilitate, even if it only worked against him in the end.

This section covers more than a hundred pages and throughout it you can feel Carpenter's exasperation with the king, as if he's telling him, 'You damn fool. Get a grip!' He doesn't need to say what's obvious, that Henry commands no respect, and Carpenter for one isn't going to give him any until he mans up. His writing reflects this. The king, who's famous for his temper, doesn't calm down, he's calmed down. We can imagine minders patting him on the head, whispering words of comfort into his ear. That's it, sire, take a deep breath. Just relax.

Carpenter's opinion of the young king in these dismal years is withering, but what of the men around him? He's contemptuous of Peter and his gang, whose assault on Magna Carta he could only find dangerous and distasteful. Hubert, on the other hand, seems to evoke admiration. Carpenter even presents him as co-ruler. It's always 'Henry and Hubert', and when it's not that, 'Hubert and Henry'. While admitting there's much to be said against Hubert, he feels his long service to Henry in winning the civil war and reclaiming power for the monarchy outweigh his incitement of anti-foreigner hatred and violence or his treasonous sabotage of Henry's dreams of re-conquest. However much these things happened, we should remember that a less 'gullible and grateful king' would have made sure they didn't.

Then there's Richard Marshal, who conducted a guerrilla war against Peter's regime in 1233–34. The latest interpretation of this conflict suggests Marshal blundered his way into it, but Carpenter is having none of it. He follows the line of the chroniclers at the time, who believed Marshal's only motivation was to protect Magna Carta and Englishmen from grasping foreigners. Carpenter does not deny the obvious hypocrisy. Marshal was happy to thumb his nose at Magna Carta when it suited him, and being a recent liegeman of the king of France, he was more the foreigner than Peter. But none of that withstanding, he's a heroic figure fighting against an unjust regime. His spurning of peace offers, his deliberate humiliation of Henry, whom his propagandists derided as 'the boy king', and his horrific depredations in alliance with the Welsh do not move Carpenter to outrage. Rather he eulogises Richard Marshal as a 'precursor of Simon de Montfort'.

The situation is equally problematic for a couple of other English legends Carpenter holds in esteem. There's Marshal's father William, the famed 'greatest knight', whose knighting of the young Henry before his coronation seems to have done him little good, and Stephen Langton, the archbishop of Canterbury, who ensured the enshrinement of Magna Carta in the nation's legal foundation. Both men receive gingerly treatment from Carpenter. In the case of Marshal, he dutifully serves as Henry's first regent and gets rid of crown prince Louis of France, who with the help of rebellious barons (including Marshal's namesake son) had tried to wrest the throne from John, then from Henry.

What we're not told is that Louis got a huge payoff and free pass to go home, ostensibly because Marshal was worried the king of France would seize his family's estates in Normandy if Louis were captured and ransomed. The deal was bitterly criticised at the time, not least by Peter des Roches, because it represented Henry's best chance to get some of his father's continental lands back. Apparently Marshal got Louis to promise to return some of the lands, so when Louis became king of France in 1223, Henry sent Langton to Paris to remind him of it, but the archbishop returned empty-handed.

The back story here is that Langton's brother Simon was Louis's greatest friend and supporter among the English rebels. Neither brother seems to have made much effort to hold Louis to account, and Simon even remained on the French payroll long after Henry acceded to Stephen's pleas to lift his brother's banishment. It can be argued that no one had a chance to succeed with Louis, but important here is what Henry would have thought. Were these men serving his interests or their own? His greatest desire was to get back his father's lands, and the two most powerful men in the realm, Marshal for the barons and Langton for the bishops, failed him here.

Of course, there's no guarantee that such information will help readers understand Henry's motives any better. Whatever brought him to the mess he finds himself in after Richard Marshal's death and martyrdom (in the minds of the chroniclers) he's got to claw his way back, and this he does remarkably well. Carpenter calls this period, the onset of Henry's personal rule, the 'years of success', covering 80 pages of the king reaching consensus with his magnates, passing much needed legislation and carrying out financial reform. The emotionally starved Henry also finds a bride at this time. Craving family life, his marriage to Eleanor of Provence might be expected to add stability to the kingdom. Instead things start to get rocky again.

That's because the foreigners are back. There's his wife's uncle, the first of four brothers from Savoy who found service under Henry, and a papal legate. Carpenter finds both men impressive and skilful, but he attributes their presence in England to the 30-year-old king's fear of going it alone. They would be there to 'succour and solace' him in his uncertainty. No reason is given why Henry's English ministers were unable to fill this role. It could be argued that the king never fully regained his trust in them or the bishops following the recent turmoil, and bringing in these outsiders was his way of undercutting them. Carpenter, however, doubts Henry had the intellectual capacity to scheme in this fashion. He was just a simple guy.

The next decade is a mixed bag for Henry. Carpenter praises his triumph in Wales and Ireland and the lasting peace he achieved with Scotland. He accomplished all this despite his 'lack of martial spirit and love of a comfortable life, qualities not universally celebrated in a king'. A second chance at reclaiming Poitou brought Henry back to the continent in 1242, only to be comprehensively defeated by Louis IX at Saintes. Unlike most historians, Carpenter is not contemptuous of Henry's efforts here. He lauds his 'courage' in pursuing the invasion against the resistance of his barons and credits him for conducting a vigorous coastal campaign. He does, however, indulge in a bit of *schadenfreude* by noting that he and his wife had one of their best meals ever in the same city from which Henry had to flee as he sat down to his own dinner.

It's here that Simon de Montfort got in his famous dig at Henry, declaring that the king ought to be taken away and locked up behind iron bars. He was still nursing a grudge against Henry for publicly ousting him from court a few years earlier. For many historians, this is the height of Henry's weakness, to not only lose the battle but allow his own men to insult him in the bargain. Carpenter takes a different approach. He makes this episode about Simon and his loose tongue, which his friends warned him to tone down before it got him into trouble. Indeed, Simon was the only earl to remain with Henry for the full year afterwards in Gascony. He knew he had some grovelling to do for running off at the mouth but found himself still frozen out by the time they returned to England. In the end, he had to beg the queen's mother to help restore him to favour.

Now more than a third of the way into the book, the next one quarter is devoted to Henry's piety and court. This is where Carpenter lives up to the boast of the jacket flap that we are able to get closer to Henry than to any other medieval monarch. We see the king's itinerary and his life at Westminster, starting with the

route he would have taken arriving by boat or on horseback. We're given a tour of the various governmental and household departments. A surviving roll from the 'buttery', which supplied the wine, records that nearly 1,200 gallons of the French stuff were consumed over one four-day period. As for Henry's other relaxations, Carpenter provides an exquisite portrait of the king's beds, which Henry tested 'as carefully as anyone in a modern showroom'. He was so impressed with the bed he gave his son-in-law Alexander III of Scotland that he ordered one for himself.

Since Henry had no continental empire to hold together, he was able to enjoy a sedentary lifestyle unknown to his predecessors. Carpenter maintains that Henry was 'physically lazy' and there's no evidence that he liked to get his hands dirty and pitch in the way his grandson Edward II did. He was an avid decorator and his endless stream of orders for tiles, wainscoting and whatnot attests to his 'imagination and impatience in matters great and small'. Still, the king might have bonded better with his nobles, says Carpenter, had he showed more interest in manlier pursuits like hunting and tournaments. The only outdoor sport he had any enthusiasm for was falconry, where it was just him and his birds and falconers (with whom he must have conversed in English). Inside the court he might wrestle with his jesters and play jokes on his clerks, but his temper, which he tried hard to control, always dogged his every move. 'But with Henry, what you saw was what you got. He was not a king to feign anger for effect. And like summer storms, the anger was soon over.'

Just as piety informed Henry's character, it was also the most important expression of his kingship. His charity was legendary even among his contemporaries. He fed between 150 and 500 paupers every day, thousands for special occasions. More than 100,000 were fed in memory of his beloved sister Isabella, with 4,000 of them alone crammed into the great hall at Westminster. He also distributed shoes, clothing and washed the feet of the poor in the spirit of Jesus Christ. The king even had a great silver basin constructed so he could get in there with them, 'a beautiful indication of their shared brotherhood', says Carpenter.

The thirteenth century was a time of great repression against the Jews. Henry seems to have shied away from the tougher measures enacted by Louis IX of France, preferring conversion instead. The special home he set up for converts stood on the grounds of today's King's College London, where Carpenter has taught for as long as he has worked on this biography. Henry siphoned off their

wealth with little regard to the ripple effect it had, and he was personally involved in the case of the Lincoln Jews who were executed after being accused of crucifying a Christian boy. He acted from the best of motives, says Carpenter, but his actions made him the first European monarch to sanction belief in such crucifixions. It's a damning pronouncement to make in our own judgemental age, and also a bit unfair because he does not identify William Marshal as the person who ordered the Jews to start wearing badges on their outer garments in 1218. Carpenter only says that the order, the first of its kind in Europe, came from the minority government.

Henry's legacy is safest in what is undeniably his greatest achievement, the rebuilding of Westminster Abbey. He had already been on the throne for nearly 30 years when he began the undertaking in 1245. His reasons were manifold, not least because, as a natural born aesthete, he liked this sort of stuff, but he also wanted a coronation church, royal chapel, royal mausoleum and shrine for a national saint all in one. It was meant to be a political statement as well, both to the French, who were unable to manage their own all-in-one factor, and to his own barons, who were determined to increase the power of parliament at the expense of the crown. The abbey would be a reminder to all and sundry that the Plantagenets were far from finished.

These pages are bound to be the most personal for Carpenter, because a good part of his youth was associated with the abbey, where his father retired as dean. Some of his most heartfelt writing occurs over these 18 pages. He treats us to the intricate details that went into the construction which, since it continued until the end of Henry's life, will also feature in volume 2. Although the design was influenced by cathedral building in France, the abbey was no knockoff. Its Englishness was evident in the use of Purbeck marble and the 'shimmering grey-green framework' it provided. There is, however, a wish that more of the abbey had been built in Caen stone because 'in its slightly pinkish hue, it remains as sharp as ever, whereas the whiter Kentish stone has proved friable like a bad tooth'.

One feature that made the abbey unique for its age was the galleried triforium, which added a huge amount of space at the top. Carpenter believes Henry wanted it not just for the grandeur it offered, but also because he saw the abbey as a people's church (never mind the cost of entrance these days). He wanted to pack them in for coronations and funerals, as well as have the poor attend services, which they would have welcomed, before going down to have their meals in the

great hall next door. As for the people who actually built the abbey, one was a woman named Agnes who 'supplied a great deal of lime'. Perhaps she and other women who worked on it can be seen in the sculptures of the angels 'swinging their censers with easy grace, their beautiful faces full of calm assurance and humanity'.

The centrepiece of the abbey was to be a shrine to Edward the Confessor. Henry had adopted Edward as his mainstay and protector in the aftermath of the Hubert and Peter debacles. He wanted a 'spiritual minister who would always be there, and would never let him down'. Edward was a king Henry could identify with because he too had been criticised for 'foolish simplicity'. Like Edward, Henry aspired to be 'wise and peaceable' and found it reassuring that a successful king did not have to be 'mighty and very bold' in the tradition of Arthur.

The irony, of course, is that Edward the Confessor was Henry's greatest failure. His attempts to make him the patron saint of the kingdom fell on deaf ears, probably because the next few centuries saw England consumed by war. A warrior, not a peacemaker, was wanted as the national symbol. It certainly has to be the bitterest of all the ironies of Henry's reign. He was long criticised for being strangely bewitched by foreigners, but when he went to give the English people a saint of their own, they rejected him and chose George, a foreigner, instead. Just no making these people happy.

That brings us to the final chapters of the book, 300 pages in all, covering the last fifteen years of Henry's personal rule. They begin with the 'years of division', marked by the rivalry between the king's Lusignan half-brothers and the queen's Savoyard uncles. Historical consensus likes to blame the Lusignans and the outsize patronage and favours they received from Henry for much of the ill feeling aroused against foreigners at this time, but Carpenter acknowledges their contribution to the security of Gascony, their acceptance among the ancestral nobility, and the predominance of Englishmen in their retinues. The same cannot be said of the Savoyards, who may have given good advice and worked hard on behalf of Henry's diplomacy, but the costs didn't justify their worth. 'What a dance he had led the king', writes Carpenter of one of them. Another miss with 'foreign aid' was the marriage alliance with Emperor Frederick II. He too turned out to be a blowhard. Other marriage alliances proved far more successful and Carpenter notes the prestige they brought to the nobles houses of England. He also shows us that Henry's council and household in this period, with just one or two exceptions, consisted exclusively of Englishmen.

Other dissension at this time was clearly the king's work. Relations between him and the church were ruptured over the election of bishops. Henry was determined to influence the outcomes and he mostly got his way, but it alienated leading clerics and some of his choices proved provocative or backfired. He couldn't get parliament to grant him taxation because he refused to yield any power. When they sought to impose a constitution on him in 1244, he appealed to their shared sense of destiny. 'You depend on me and I on you, since if I am rich, you are rich, if I am poor, you are poor.' He made other noteworthy speeches, all to no avail. Carpenter demonstrates throughout the book how Henry coddled his magnates as a way of maintaining peace throughout the realm. The peace he got, but the downside was the magnates became little potentates who felt free to oppress their subjects without royal interference. The grievances that led to the revolution of 1258 were as much about them as the king.

Henry was aware of what was going on in his kingdom, but he never went beyond lecturing his magnates and sheriffs to be good lords and officials and to know their Magna Carta. Carpenter bemoans that he never undertook sweeping reforms the way his contemporary Louis IX did, but the different experience and personalities of both men resist easy comparisons. The discerning Louis used patronage to command obedience, the open-hearted Henry believed there was plenty to go around, if not today then tomorrow. Unlike Louis, Henry felt no need to make restitution to his subjects to atone for his sins. Louis could eat frugally, wear a hair shirt, and treat his wife abysmally all he wanted, but Henry was going to continue rolling out the sumptuous feasts, slipping into the silkiest of robes, and taking delight in his family. If Louis wanted to sit under an oak tree and dispense justice, that was fine, Henry was content to rely on his own judges. Carpenter remarks on the many learned men who sat on the king's bench, as well as the corruption scandal that engulfed one of them.

The king did get involved in cases that came before him while on tour or when they demanded his personal attention. When a highway robbery racket was exposed near Winchester in 1249, he was doubly furious because Winchester was his home town and some of the perpetrators were said to be part of his household. In the memorable scene described by Carpenter, Henry herded the jurors into the great hall and ordered them to name the masterminds of the racket. When they demurred, he told the guards to close the doors and warned the jurors they had just one more chance to sing. They did.

The greatest crisis Henry had to face in these years was the threat of losing Gascony, the last English province on the continent. He sent Simon de Montfort there to restore order, but Simon's heavy-handed tactics soon sparked an all-out rebellion. Henry was forced to sack him and go there himself to clean up the mess. This, the king's third attempt at leading troops abroad, proved successful and Gascony was saved to England for the next two hundred years. Carpenter superbly recounts the tension of this expedition in 1253–54 and the war footing with Castile. Needing money, Henry asked the queen, serving as the regent, to summon parliament to request a tax. The result was the first election of local representation in parliament, but Carpenter credits this innovation to Henry's brother Richard of Cornwall and not to Eleanor of Provence. The paper trail suggests it could have been either one, if either one, but Eleanor was the regent and, as Carpenter admits, she authorised far more letters than Richard did despite being pregnant and giving birth during her regency. Richard, moreover, was late by weeks coming to the assembly, suggesting aloofness or little interest in this democratic experiment.

Richard of Cornwall is another admirable character in Carpenter's book, called a 'pillar of the regime'. He took over the regency after Eleanor sailed to Gascony and ran the government 'with remarkable vigour and perception, giving a striking demonstration of how different his kingship would have been from his brother's'. Carpenter feels his knowledge, shrewdness and mental ability is 'Henry painted in much broader and more emotional strokes'. What we're not told, however, is that Richard wasn't the first choice to succeed Eleanor as regent, apparently because others found him vain, boastful and all about himself. Carpenter's assertion that Richard, after three rebellions, was steadfastly loyal to the king is also easily challengeable. Certainly Henry would have had more success with parliament had Richard truly worked on his behalf, and the one assembly where Henry needed him the most, in 1255, Richard openly opposed him.

We're talking, of course, about the Sicilian business, the controversial plan conceived by the papacy to put an English or French prince on the throne of Sicily in place of the German imperial family. Richard had turned down the offer, judging it to be too expensive (he later got a better price for the empty crown of Germany) but Henry eagerly accepted it for his second son, who was a boy at the time. The English church hated it for the taxes they had to pay to fund it and the barons resented not being asked their advice on it. According to Matthew Paris, it was simple Henry at his foolish worst and Carpenter couldn't agree more. Indeed,

he goes out on a limb and declares that the king ‘signed up to the most ridiculous agreement ever made by an English monarch’.

It’s a stretch to say the least. We only have to look into the next reign to see Henry’s son Edward I being duped into giving Gascony to the French on their promise to give it back, which they didn’t. That blunder precipitated the greatest political crisis of Edward’s rule and the costs of retrieving Gascony far exceeded the Sicilian business. Carpenter is not like most people, however, who register their disgust with Henry for being a tool of the pope. He shows that Henry had every reason to be grateful to the papacy, who laboured hard to save his throne, indeed his very life. Had the French-backed English rebels won in 1216, they would have surely made King John’s sons Henry and Richard disappear.

What offends Carpenter is that Henry had several chances to back out as the conditions became steadily worse. Unlike previous examples of the royal determination and doggedness, Henry gets no sympathy here. We can sense it in Carpenter’s tone, his earlier exasperation now infused with contempt. His criticism at this point becomes almost personal, as if carrying around Henry with him for forty years has engendered some latent hostility. Certainly the king deserves a lashing if, as Carpenter suggests, he had come full circle and returned to the foolish simplicity of his youth. And yet there’s no denying that Henry got belated consent to go forward with the venture from some very able councillors, the majority of whom had no vested interest in it, and that he may have been on to something from the perspective of European politics in the 1250s and the fulfilment of his crusade vow. And this is not to mention that the Sicilian business resulted in the long hoped-for peace treaty with France, one of the greatest political achievements of the age. Nope, the weight of opinion then as now has found nothing good about it. By itself, it did not provoke a political revolution as commonly believed, but it did help push the realm over the edge as other problems, including famine, factionalism and revolts in Wales and Scotland, began to pile up.

This is where we come to the end of volume 1. It’s April 1258 and Henry has made another request for a tax for Sicily. The usual scenario has the barons fed up with his rule and intimidating him into handing over the government to their safe keeping. The king is reduced to a figurehead and we will have to wait until volume 2 to see how that turns out. This bit of high drama is based on a single account that appears in the annals of Tewkesbury. ‘Although one may question some of the details’, says Carpenter, ‘the gist is perfectly believable’. Believable

maybe, but for me, too problematic for belief (Latin pun, biblical quote, tax to be based on one-third the value of the entire realm). In my view, there was certainly intrigue going on at court, a plot hatched by the queen to get rid of her Lusignan in-laws because of their growing influence over Edward, but the trap wasn't sprung until the reforming parliament at Oxford was well underway. Even afterwards Henry was a willing partner in the reform government, although he suspected early on that Simon de Montfort might be up to no good. Sure enough, within months Simon had sprung his own trap.

Sticking with a palace revolution, Carpenter ends the narrative on this cliff-hanger. All that's left is an assessment of Henry and his reign up to that point. His accomplishments get a little over a third of the 16 pages. In addition to rebuilding the abbey, there is Henry's conscious effort to rule a kingdom at peace and to respect 'the spirit and letter of Magna Carta'. His failures, however, are more numerous and make for some rather bleak reading. Suffice it to say that for Carpenter, Henry could never measure up to his friend and brother-in-law Louis IX. It's not for nothing that Louis is a saint and Henry ain't, but everything could have been different, Carpenter laments, had the English king imitated the French king, had been of a 'different mettle and mentality'. He then adds, however, that Henry would have needed 'far more determination and imagination than he possessed' to actually make it happen. The problem, it seems, was in the man himself.

Carpenter nevertheless feels that a negative conclusion would be all wrong, and well he should, because this is an extraordinary book, sure to become a milestone in the history of biographical writing. Forget the inspired research, organisation and presentation, here we see a rather unknown historical figure suddenly appear before us like an explosion out of nowhere, a new nebula, if you will, in the night sky, the brilliant light illuminating all the drama, joy and heartbreak that defined this one individual and his times. To continue the metaphor, it's a truly stellar achievement.

And yet the bleakness persists to the end. After finding some balance for Henry's failings in his piety, Carpenter questions whether it wasn't in fact compromised by his miscues. That all the feedings and fancy celebrations fooled no one about his true ability, character or intentions. It foreshadows what lies ahead, because Henry, after more than 40 years on the throne, has the fight of his life in front of him, and no other medieval king of England faced an opponent quite as tough and talented as Simon de Montfort. By the looks of it, Henry hasn't got a chance,

but Carpenter chooses to go out on a bold note. It will be that piety, that reputation for being a 'most Christian king', that ultimately saves him and the monarchy.

Darren Baker is the author of *Henry III: The Great King England Never Knew It Had*