Review of *The Song of Simon de Montfort*
by Sophie Thérèse Ambler

Darren Baker | 15 August 2019

For those familiar with his name, Simon de Montfort is usually remembered as the founder of Parliament, an oppressor of the Jews, and for the dismemberment of his corpse. Biographies of him continue to appear because fixtures like these, whether true or not, add pizzazz to his story, as well as to an age often considered dull. It was a time of peace, of feeding the poor, of developments in art, education and government. It took an outsider like Simon to stir things up, upturn the existing order. That he did remarkably well. The men who chopped up his body ushered in a new age, one dominated by resentment, vengeance and bloodshed, the kind of pizzazz that makes English history so popular today.

The subtitle of the latest biography of Simon suggests all this – *England's First Revolutionary and the Death of Chivalry*. Sophie Ambler's stated intention is to show how it all came about as the result of hijacking crusade ideals for political purposes. She begins with the Albigensian Crusade, which was conducted against other Christians to devastating effect. She does not whitewash the role of Simon's father in it, but sees him as the son would have, as an exemplar of knighthood. It's a refreshing portrayal of Senior, a man too often condemned outright, and it gives hope that here is a biography of real people. Alas, not to be.

Take William Marshal. He is presented as most people know him, the greatest knight. But the Marshal of sharp practice and questionable loyalty is nowhere to be found. When Ambler notes that England was the first country in Europe to institute a law requiring Jews to wear badges on their outer garments, she makes no mention that it was Marshal, as the acting regent, who sealed the order. Perhaps she wants to avoid sticking him with the same problem Simon has in the history of English Jewry, plagued by singular episodes. In Simon's case, Ambler handles what is understandably a prickly subject about as well as anyone could. As for his role in the history of Parliament, basically the rest of the book, here she stumbles and never regains her footing.

A lot of it has to do with her style. Early on, she sacrifices a comprehensive timeframe in favour of the thematic approach, leaving her bogged down in details and repetition. She constantly reminds us 'as we have seen'. She will then just as suddenly swing the other way and provide a spoiler. Peppered throughout her narrative are asterisks, constantly drawing our attention to the bottom of the page for another explanation. It's like watching a play with constant asides, from a narrator who wants to be helpful but doesn't know when to go away.

Whole chapters suffer on account of this lack of discipline. Ambler devotes twenty pages to Simon's governorship of Gascony, but all of it is given over to the complaints of the locals against his rule and to the king putting him on trial for it. It's excruciating detail, better served up as an appendix. The more personal aspects of this time receive no mention at all. How Simon returned for the royal wedding in York, how his wife Eleanor and the queen strove hard to reconcile him and the king. Even the daughter lost to him and Eleanor in Gascony is a brief afterthought.

In telescoping her narrative in this fashion, Ambler loses the wide sweep of what was an exciting age. The first great strides in the evolution of Parliament occurred in the 1240s. Here they amount to a single asterisk with no reference at all to the groundbreaking 'paper constitution'. The Sicilian business of the 1250s is given cursory treatment. There is nothing about the schemes of the king's brother Richard of Cornwall to buy himself the throne of Germany. She only says he went overseas to 'pursue his career'. These matters and more disappear in the events leading up to 1258 and what she describes as 'the seizure of power'.

By this point, the reader is familiar with the king, Henry III. He is, in Ambler's book, a pathetic creature. He cuts no knightly figure, doesn't man up like a real king. Her chapter 'Exemplar of Defeat' has Henry failing to retake Poitou in 1242, with Simon calling the king a fool who should be locked up. Three years later Henry is making a mess of things in Wales. What Ambler neglects to mention is that the king forced Scotland into submission at this time and was mostly successful with Wales. The same goes for his later policies with Castile and France.

Ah, yes, France. The king Ambler admires and respects is Louis IX, *Saint* Louis. She even includes an outlandish picture of him in battle, showing him as a heroic, chivalrous king. The picture of him missing in her book is the self-righteous mama's boy whose catastrophic defeat and imprisonment in Egypt imposed more misery on France than all of Henry's missteps ever did on England. That singular failure forced him to undertake reforms to root out corruption at home, but here it is presented as the 'acuteness of conscience' of the 'mightiest of Christian kings'. There's a point to Ambler worshiping Louis and belittling Henry in this fashion, one that reflects the common attitude of British academia. Just as King John faced rebellion in 1215 for being openly contemptible, so it must be for Henry in 1258.

That contempt has nothing to do with Henry's character. Even his detractors will admit he was worlds apart from his father John. In order to justify seizing power from such a nice guy, Ambler offers Robert Grosseteste, the bishop of Lincoln. Together with Simon and Louis, Robert forms the trinity of admirable figures in this book, but he also had his dark side. He tried to run an inquisition (until shut down by Henry), stirred up anti-foreigner sentiment, and was a notorious bully. He constantly harassed his monks and in one reported incident demanded an abbess grope her nuns to test for their chastity.

This unseemliness doesn't make it into the book, rather long and distracting discourses on Robert's philosophy. Ambler even goes as far as to credit him for the big-bang theory, although she and others can see it for themselves in the Cosmati Pavement commissioned by Henry in Westminster Abbey. Taking his cue from Aristotle, Robert declares that being a good lord is more than about not being a tyrant. He should know how to husband his resources. If not, out with him. Few monarchs could ever live within their means, hence 'taxes', and Robert had his own archbishop in mind here, not the king. But 1258 was about revolution and this seems the best way to explain it.

The problem is the revolution was consensual. The reforms undertaken by the king and barons that year were part of a compact, as borne out in the chancery rolls and by Henry's willing participation the whole way. There was certainly intrigue. The queen's faction at court, the Savoyards (mentioned for the first and only time on page 247), conspired against the Lusignan faction led by the king's brothers. Simon and six other barons, these too mentioned here for the first time, joined the league against the Lusignans, who were eventually ousted. And that was it. Reforms were undertaken and England would not see anything like it again for 400 years.

This is not the story in Ambler's book. She relies on a single source, against the weight of all other evidence, to show how Simon and his confederates, their hearts bleeding for the poor man of England, intimidated Henry into following them into reform. They somehow cow him to the point of silence, until he was a mere puppet watching them issue charters in his name.

To be fair, Ambler's thesis is nothing new. It first arose during the Victorian age out of a feeling of national inadequacy. Somehow the march to democracy in England had lacked the glory and drama of revolutionary France, so British historians concocted their own villain king overthrown by a working-class nobility. It explains why there have been multiple biographies of Simon and not a single one of Henry until this very decade.

But it's a notion as ludicrous as is the statue of Richard the Lionheart that now stands outside Parliament, also thanks to the Victorians. Barring the imaginativeness of this one source (Annals of Tewkesbury), Simon and his six confederates had no hope of carrying through such a plan. The other factions would have come together to crush them and rescue the king.

Ambler is not deterred and ploughs on. This is where her contempt for Henry reaches astronomical proportions. One of the pressures on the kingdom at this time was famine brought on by bad weather and poor harvests. No other aspect of kingship was more important to Henry than feeding the poor. Although Henry had already undertaken minor reforms himself a year earlier (not mentioned), he clearly needed help and turned to his barons. According to Ambler, Henry gave up on the poor long before that, her only evidence being that he cut back on household expenses. It was the barons, out of their own innate goodness, who stepped in to help the destitute.

We are now beyond the realm of fake and into deep fake. The relief ships brought in from abroad, carrying wheat and corn, were Henry's work. There is nothing in Simon's background prior to 1258 to show he had a generous or charitable spirit. He was just another oppressive landlord, whose constant demands for money forced the sheriffs to get high-handed in their collections. The reforms of 1258 were revolutionary because the grievances were aimed at all members of the upper class, not just the king. The barons were out to save their own skins.

And so, as reforms began to stall, a group of young knights marched on Westminster in October 1259 to demand the barons show their good faith as the king had already done. Here was the threat of violence, only it was aimed at Simon and his coterie. Not only is this episode completely ignored by Ambler, but the legislation that resulted from it, which had the greatest impact on the land, gets the briefest of notice.

By this time, Simon has had an epiphany and decides he must do right by the poor people of the land. This we know from the will he drew up. He was certainly more the idealist than his fellow confederates, who had already had enough. In large part their disgust was due to him. Simon had used the elevated position of the council to rob the king of dignity, having his revenge for Gascony and all the other feelings of injustice he felt he had suffered. His culminating audacity was to hold the peace treaty with France hostage until his wife Eleanor was given a huge chunk of money they felt were owed her by the crown. Fed up, Henry deftly outmanoeuvred Simon and took back all power. When the barons followed the king, Simon was left seething and alone.

His answer was to team up with other aggrieved factions and plan a military strike. Ambler does not try to mask the effects of their undeclared war on Henry's regime. The strength of this book are in anecdotes not commonly found elsewhere, as in the case here of Simon's men despoiling the priory at Barnwell and mocking the prior who, when ordered to provide their captain John de Burgh with a fresh horse, offered them a nag instead. Interestingly, she fails to identify Burgh to the reader as the son of the former regent so famously maltreated by Henry. Burgh's adherence to (and later betrayal of) Simon highlights the number of characters in this story with axes to grind.

It all comes down to the battle of Lewes, which Ambler examines from the point of view of a Roman military historian. It's another unwelcome diversion, better served up as an appendix if at all. Edward's unfortunate impetuosity allowed Simon to win and become ruler of the land. He installs a constitutional monarchy, which is indeed revolutionary, but when it comes time to make it official, he intentionally humiliates Henry and Edward. Ambler allows Simon's friends to reprimand him for acting this way, but she herself takes every opportunity to rub Henry's nose in it.

Finally we get to the Parliament that made Simon famous. Because he was the first ruler on record to summon the towns together with the clergy, barons and knights, he is considered the founder of the House of Commons. Parliament by then had already undergone major innovations. In 1254, while the king was in Gascony cleaning up the mess left behind by Simon, Queen Eleanor summoned the first Parliament to have a democratic mandate. In Ambler's book, it's another afterthought and the queen isn't even given credit for it.

In fact, apart from Simon's mother Alice and wife Eleanor, women are given no role to play in these events. We hear a lot about Charlemagne, but only one brief mention of the most powerful woman of the age, Louis's mother Blanche of Castile. English baronesses don't exist. There is nothing, for example, about Isabella de Forz, the countess of Devon and Aumale, whose marriage Simon tried to purloin for his namesake son.

Ambler is being disingenuous by suggesting that Simon's Parliament was also innovative because there was no tax on the table, that the assembly would discuss 'the business of the kingdom'. As the writ of summons clearly states, there was only one item of business, and that was the release of Edward. What's more, the makeup of this Parliament suggests more a convocation of religious houses than Commons. The record shows that 120 churchmen received summonses as opposed to just over 20 barons. It was more of a theocracy than democracy. And of course it didn't last. Within months Edward escaped and wiped out Simon and his court at Evesham in August 1265.

It's that slaughter and fiendish dismemberment of Simon that marks the death of chivalry in Ambler's title. It can be argued that chivalry had in fact died in England 40 years before that. In 1225 Henry was in danger of losing Gascony. When his barons and clergy were informed of this, none of them stood up and said, 'The lord king's rights are in peril, I gladly give my land and sword to protect them'. Instead they offered to fund an expeditionary force in return for Henry issuing Magna Carta under his own seal. They wanted insurance for their own rights as well. Forget King Arthur and the Roundtable, all government from now on would be quid pro quo.

And so it was. Chivalry died in England on account of Magna Carta.

In these pages, chivalry and crusading go hand in hand, and both are in their twilight. It's hard not to feel a sense of loss and sentiment for the family that embodied them or the man extinguished alongside them. Simon de Montfort was an extraordinary character and we can only wonder what might have been had he succeeded in the end. There's a heartfelt quality in the admiration Ambler expresses for him, but it lacks all balance and perspective. Her Simon is imbued with an idealism completely out of proportion to his actions and suggests none of the force of his personality that allowed him, almost single-handedly, to push the reform period through to the bitter end.

This problem is compounded by her judgement at the opposite end of the scale. Her denigration of Henry III is misplaced and does Simon no favours in any case. By not giving the other major player in this drama his due, she is denying Simon a worthy opponent, making it all too easy to see him the way many people do, as a mean-spirited opportunist.

A final note of interest is the cover of Ambler's book. It shows Simon de Montfort's coat of arms, the famed fork-tailed lion. This particular shield can be found today in Westminster Abbey, which on the face of it would seem very strange. His and the other coat of arms were installed in the abbey sometime during the reform period. Whose idea it was is a source of debate, but what is clear is that Henry considered Simon a traitor for his actions and would have been within moral authority to remove his shield.

But he didn't. For all the pain and humiliation Simon caused him, the king would have remembered that he had been his friend once, a member of the family, and there is no greater sense of Christian obligation than forgiveness.

Chivalry, it seems, was not completely dead.

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