Review of *The Household Roll of Eleanor de Montfort Countess of Leicester and Pembroke, 1265* Edited and translated by Louise J. Wilkinson

Darren Baker | 20 July 2020

As the full range of her surnames indicates, Eleanor Plantagenet Marshal de Montfort led a remarkable life. This youngest child of King John, who never knew her father, first appears in the early years of the reign of her brother Henry III (1216–72). She was a child of eight when, for political purposes, she was married off to a grown man, William Marshal II. Still a teenager when Marshal unexpectedly died, she took a vow of celibacy, also for political purposes, but repudiated it to marry the rising star at court, Simon de Montfort. The next twenty years saw relations between her husband and brother deteriorate to the point of open warfare. Simon's victory in 1264 allowed him to appropriate Henry's kingdom, but his own defeat and death a little over a year later forced Eleanor to choose exile abroad. When she died in the nunnery of Montargis in 1275, she had outlived half of her six children.

Little was known about Eleanor's role in her husband's revolutionary regime until five centuries later, when the French Revolution brought an end to the nunnery. The archives at Montargis contained a roll of parchment that Eleanor had apparently taken with her when she left England. The roll noted the expenses of her household, starting in February of 1265, when Simon was at the height of his power, and ending some seven months later, just before her flight to France. In keeping with the records of the times, the accounts were written in Latin. The roll, now in the British Library, was first published in 1841 but without an accompanying English translation. Three years later, William Blaauw provided translated sections of it in his still highly readable if misleadingly named *The Barons' War*. In showing the workings of Eleanor's household, her itinerary and, above all, her response to the downturn in her family's fortunes, Blaauw confirmed the historical value of the roll, but while it has figured in studies of the period ever since, a complete translation of it remained elusive.

The first single biography of Eleanor herself did not appear until 2012. In the preface, author Louise Wilkinson informed readers that she was preparing a new edition and translation of the roll to make it 'accessible to as wide an audience as possible'. The result is *The Household Roll of Eleanor de Montfort Countess of Leicester and Pembroke, 1265*, now available, aptly enough, from the Pipe Roll Society. The accounts are presented here in this very well made volume, numbered chronologically in so far as they allow, with each accompanied by an English translation below it. There are 543 entries in all spread across 135 pages, but the real interest lies in the 135 pages that

precede them. Since uninformed readers are sure to find the accounts as dry as an itemised shopping list, Wilkinson provides a critical analysis that brings all the people, places and material in the roll into political, historical and social perspective. By doing so, she has created not only an extraordinary work of scholarship, but one of the most elaborate and informative introductions to any book ever conceived.

Wilkinson begins with a physical description of the roll and its purpose. It comprises thirteen membranes stitched together, the front side showing the daily outlays for her large household of family, servants and officials, as well as any guests who were present. The entries note how much grain was used to make bread, of what quality, whether it was taken from stock, bought or previously reckoned, how much wine was consumed and what type, if fish, meat, eggs, vegetables and delicacies like raisins were on the menu, what the horses in the stables got, and so forth. Altogether these form the 'diet account'. The reverse side of the roll, called the 'wardrobe journal', typically contains one-off items of business, purchases like shoes and clothing or payments made for gifts or messages, but as Wilkinson explains, items might appear wherever space dictated. The roll was a working document first and foremost.

As for the size of the Montfort household, Wilkinson bases her estimates on a formula used for the amount of grain consumed. When the roll begins, on 19 February 1265, Eleanor is at Wallingford with just under 320 individuals. By the time she moves to Odiham three days later, her household is down to 190. The largest number is 698 on 19 March, when Eleanor's husband, five of their six children, her nephews (and captives) Lord Edward and Henry of Almain and their retinues are present. Edward's escape in late May forces Eleanor to move to Dover to secure that strategic fortress. She arrives there on 15 June with 140. The last entry is for 29 August, nearly four weeks after her husband and son Henry de Montfort are killed at the battle of Evesham. While other wives of leading Montfortians have quickly surrendered their castles, Eleanor is still holding out with a household of nearly 400. Wilkinson calculates that almost three-quarters of the provisions for the entire period of the roll come from castle stock. For the rest, £143 16s. 4¼d. was spent on the diet account. Using the National Archives currency converter, this sum represents purchasing power equal to approximately £105,000 in today's money.

Having established Eleanor's itinerary and residences, Wilkinson proceeds to describe the people who make up her household, starting with the clerks who kept the roll. Two of the three give their names, Eudo and Christopher, and their occasional use of French and English words within the Latin text suggests they were trilingual, not an uncommon occurrence in medieval England. Eleanor and other aristocrats may have been trilingual as well, although their clerks, as Wilkinson points out, would have handled all the correspondence and official documents. Another servant, known only as W. the Clerk, acted as her purchasing agent. We find him in London buying expensive cloth for the

countess or in Sandwich procuring oats for the horses or on another occasion six tuns of wine (1,512 gallons) for £14. One of her senior officials, William of Wortham, left her household in July to come to her husband's aid and died with him at Evesham. Others like Richard of Havering, who entered Eleanor's service after she was widowed the first time three decades earlier, received protection from Edward after assisting royalists in the surrender of Montfortian castles.

The roll reveals the various staff of Eleanor's household, from her personal attendants Christina and Hawise to Petronilla the laundress. Of the lesser servants, most were men like Garbag, a kitchen hand whose duties probably reflected the likeness of his name to our 'garbage'. One of the messengers seems to have been born for the job, because his name Gobithest literally means 'Go-with-haste' in Middle English. Another messenger called Slingaway was dispatched to Simon just as events were coming to a head at the beginning of August. His disappearance from the roll after that suggests he fell victim to the massacre perpetrated by Edward's forces at Evesham. Often the work or capacity of the various servants went unrecorded, nor is anything known of their backgrounds or origins. In the case of John Neirnuit, whose surname means 'black night', Wilkinson speculates that he may have been among the people of African descent who lived in England at this time.

Since the roll is a record, the transactions are typically straightforward. When one of her damsels fell ill, Eleanor paid to have a barber bleed her. The cost of his service and the horse for hire was 2 shillings 8 pence. When he was needed again, she paid to have a groom ride to Reading to bring him to Odiham (34 miles round trip). Nothing, however, explains the wages paid to Lady Isabella de Berkeley on 1 April for three days she spent in the household. She was probably Eleanor's niece, the daughter of Rose of Dover and Richard of Chilham, an illegitimate son of King John, and Wilkinson surmises that Isabella filled the role of female companionship to her aunt during those days. The sum she received, 6 shillings 4½ pence, was quite substantial (the daily wage for an unskilled worker was less than 2 pence) and perhaps an indication that the Berkeley family, like many people during that unsettled time, were in need.

Scholars have long appreciated the roll for the insights it offers into the lifestyle and mindset of the medieval aristocracy. Eleanor paid 7 pence for new table-cloths, but that money would have been for naught had they gone unwashed between meals. Wax was in constant demand, not least for candles, and in one twelve-day period 13lb. of it were consumed in the household and 3½lb. in the chapel. Wilkinson wryly notes the purchase of fennel in the weeks after Evesham. If eaten uncooked, the herb was said to bring a person feelings of happiness, 'an emotion that the countess and her companions may have sorely needed' just then. That's what really sticks out in these accounts, the little things that go into the big picture. Just as a chamber pot might end up broken or

lost in all the movement of the household, so a new one has to be purchased. In July 1265, two could be had for the price of 1½ pence.

Clothes have always figured in the lifestyle of the wellborn and Eleanor was mindful to keep up appearances. One of the accounts has her tailor, Hicque, spending three nights in London to get her robe re-sheared. He's also seen buying a variety of material like skins, silk, thread, feathers and needles for his work. One luxury item, fur of miniver, was purchased for Eleanor's 7-year old daughter who, because she has the same name, is referred to as Damsel Eleanor in the accounts. Wilkinson notes the laws soon to come into force in London about the wearing of fur in public to keep women of lower strata or loose morals from assuming 'the guise of good ladies'. Eleanor's other brother, Richard of Cornwall, was also a captive of her husband's regime. As the titular king of Germany, Richard needed to be maintained in style and Eleanor made every effort to do so. She bought the finest scarlet cloth to have robes and hoods made for him and his son Edmund. Nor did Eleanor neglect her servants. They may not have received extravagant clothing from her, but they were never wanting for shoes. The accounts show the above-named John Neirnuit alone receiving four pairs at different times, along with hose on two occasions.

Naturally the biggest budget item of Eleanor's household was food and drink. As with clothing, the quality of meals was determined by rank and status. Bread was generally baked at the residence, but the flour used was not all the same type. The same went for wine. There was the good stuff (*de bono*) and the other stuff (*de alio*). Lesser members of the household would never know the difference because they only got ale. In a welcome aside, Wilkinson explains the process of brewing in that age, pointing out that it was sometimes done on site because, in the absence of hops, ale soured quickly. The paupers attached to her household were given cider with their meals, which consisted of bread or vegetable pottage, but also meat now and then. The entry for 16 April shows they and the lesser servants consumed three quarters of an ox. Here again Eleanor saw to it that her brother Richard ate like a king. In addition to spices, sugar, almonds and figs, she sent him whale and sturgeon, both considered royal fish, for his table. Eleanor too, it must be remembered, was of royal blood, and Simon signified this by sending her a whole porpoise, which we know of because the messenger who brought it received 6 pence for his efforts.

While the roll remains only a record of accounts throughout this tumultuous period, we can glean the developing political situation from Eleanor's stream of guests, more than fifty of them by Wilkinson's count. Some were longstanding friends or supporters of the regime, some needed cultivation if not for entirely political reasons, as the case of Isabella de Forz shows. She was the richest widow on the marriage market and Simon intended to make his 25-year old son Simon Junior her next husband. If Eleanor's entertainment of Isabella for several days in April was meant to soften her up to the

prospect of becoming her daughter-in-law, Isabella spurned the younger Simon's advances and fled to Wales. Another shady piece of business involved the presence of William de Briouze and his groom in Eleanor's household. William was a boy, a hostage held by the Montforts until his father, a prominent royalist, paid an enormous fine imposed on him by a kangaroo court of the regime. Eleanor employed a carer for young William, as she did another one for her daughter, but as Wilkinson observes, she paid the exact same amount for the shoes of both William and his groom, 4½ pence each. Apparently she was unwilling to splurge for the young nobleman.

A peculiar feature of the roll is the lack of urgency that accompanies the collapse of the Montfortian regime. Certainly Edward's escape was treated with worry. Eleanor left Odiham in the middle of the night, supplies of horseshoes and nails were quickly purchased, as were loads of wood for the defence of Dover, and her flurry of dispatches show she was very much in charge of the war footing on her end. But otherwise life went on. If anything, her entertainment accelerated to ensure supporters remained on their side. In July, Simon and his men were trapped in Wales, yearning for bread because they could only find meat and milk for subsistence. Eleanor's accounts show she had plenty of bread during this same time and enough wine to make gifts of it to others. She even undertook hunting parties with her guests, dividing up the 'beasts' that were taken. Of course they probably didn't believe it would all end in disaster and it might not have but for a few more hours on that fateful morning.

When the news of Evesham arrived, Eleanor went into mourning but remained resourceful as ever. The roll shows she had maintained contact with all the royal captives save one, her brother the king. Now, a week after the battle, Eleanor sent the 'Master of God's House' of Dover to Henry, then again a month later when the king summoned parliament to Winchester. What the master conveyed we shall never know. The greatest frustration with reading these accounts is seeing all this messenger activity going on and knowing exactly how much it cost, but without a clue as to what any of the messages contained. As the roll soon comes to an end after that, we have to rely on official records and chronicles for the rest of Eleanor's story. Wilkinson does us the great favour of going into some detail about the aftermath, even combing the National Archives to discover, where possible, the fate of those who appear in the roll.

Wilkinson brings her introduction to a close and readers can now avail themselves to the accounts, but chances are they have already done so from the start. Every page of her analysis is well documented with footnotes, an incredible 1,233 in all, taking readers exactly where they need to go within the roll or outside it for more information. It's a refreshing bit of scholarly indulgence, sure to be appreciated by anyone with only the faintest knowledge of this era. At the outset, Wilkinson stated that she wanted to make Eleanor's household accounts accessible to a wider audience. If by that she meant taking a 750-year old roll of parchment with the faded scribbling of a dead language on it and

turning it into a delightful and informative book for whoever might pick it up, then she has succeeded beyond measure. Since no price can be placed on such an achievement, her work, in theory, would have never made the roll.

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