

Review of *Joan, Lady of Wales:  
Power and Politics of King John's Daughter*  
by Danna R Messer

Darren Baker | 15 October 2020

Say what you like about King John, he had an impressive crop of children. Henry succeeded him as king of England, Richard was elected king of Germany, Joan was queen of Scotland, Isabella Holy Roman Empress, and Eleanor was the mother of the last authentic princess of Wales. And these were just his legitimate brood. Before becoming king, John's relationships with various women produced a dozen offspring, the most famous being another Joan. In 1205 he married her, this first Joan, to Llywelyn ap Iorwerth in an attempt to draw the supreme Welsh ruler at that time closer to the English crown. The king sought to consolidate his control over the British Isles so he could focus on getting back Normandy and other continental possessions he had recently lost to the French.

Very little is known about Joan and even less about her background, but Danna R Messer has taken what there is and turned it into a complete, and first, biography of her, *Joan, Lady of Wales: Power and Politics of King John's Daughter*. She accomplishes it by adhering to the task which she sets out in her Introduction:

Joan and queenship go hand-in-hand. Both stories are one. As such, the position of the queen, in particular, is discussed in relation to Joan's own narrative throughout this book. This is a helpful approach to better understanding both subjects when many of the pieces remain lost due to the silent nature of sources.

Indeed, this 'helpful approach' is largely responsible for the many biographies now appearing about women long cast into the shadows but who were in fact co-rulers by default. This is not, however, the portrait of a woman deprived of her historical due, and nowhere does Messer imply this of Joan. In medieval sources, she was first and foremost the daughter, wife and sister of royalty. Messer explains that the classification of a woman's lifecycles is what defined her social status, and this in turn formed the basis of her power. Readers worried that the men around Joan are going to shoehorn their way in and dominate all the action can feel at ease. This is not so much a singular biography as it is a sweep of the Welsh kingdom at its height before the fall. Joan was very much a part of that story.

Before examining the pivotal role played by Siwan, as Joan was called by her adopted countrymen and women, Messer devotes the first chapter to the longstanding question of who her mother was. Since the search is largely dependent on the only reference to her by name, 'Queen Clemencia', Messer explores the meaning of 'queen' in this context before making a solid case for two women, both of whom met Joan in her adulthood and survived her. At the time of Joan's birth in Normandy, reckoned in the late 1180s, illegitimacy was no obstacle to the advancement of the wellborn. Llywelyn was happy to marry the daughter of the king because it legitimised his supremacy among the other Welsh princes. That's not to suggest the question of her birth was never an issue in her new homeland. Messer introduces us to the native laws and customs that dealt with marriage and concubinage, like the distinction between 'nine rightful couplings'. She usually includes the original Welsh, in this case *nau kynywedi teithiauc*, and in doing so gives us an immediacy to the language Joan must have learned to some extent over the course of her three decades in Wales.

Llywelyn's rise to prominence among the politically fragmented kingdoms of Wales is detailed next by Messer. She shows that Joan was not the first Anglo-Norman bride offered to a Welsh leader for their support. Her great-aunt Emma of Anjou preceded her by a generation. Emma not only assumed an active role at the court of her husband, but like Joan after her, she too took the title of 'Lady'. John was not merely following precedent by marrying Joan to Llywelyn. He aimed to venture back across the Channel and needed a strong hand to maintain peace along the notoriously unstable Welsh frontier. This is where Joan first enters the historical records. What little there is suggests she might have been reared at a nunnery near Rouen before she was escorted to England in 1203. Messer notes that young girls in nunneries were taught more than weaving and good manners. Their learning might also include Latin, music, geometry and other subjects that comprise a wholesome liberal arts education. If Joan was instead raised in a great household, a common destination for many highborn girls, the focus would have been on practical skills for their futures as wives and estate managers. She adds:

They were also educated in more refined accomplishments such as the art of playing chess, verbal repartee and music, skills which helped girls learn how to conform to idealistic gender constructs that women of the upper echelons of society in particular faced; constructs, by this time, dictated by the popular and social and cultural phenomenon of courtly love – a genre notably at its apex during Joan's lifetime. Girls

were also cultivated to be good at sports, especially hawking, which was a common and favourite pastime for many aristocratic women.

What became of Joan after she first arrived in England is a mystery. She might have lived with one of her two possible mothers, perhaps even with her widowed great-aunt Emma. Her wedding to Llywelyn is also speculative, but Messer's own conclusions seem to have nailed it. She finds John at Kenilworth, a castle in Warwickshire then held by Robert of Vieuxpont, for three days in March 1205. Inasmuch as Joan was brought to England under Robert's care, the teenager may have been his ward at this time. Messer reckons that John went to Kenilworth to pick up Joan and accompany her to Worcester, where the king is to be found all the next week. There he gave his daughter away in the cathedral, which incidentally was the venue for the wedding of Llywelyn's namesake grandson and John's granddaughter Eleanor de Montfort in 1278.

By the time Joan makes her next appearance in the records, six years have passed. To fill in the gap, Messer describes what her new life would have been like at court, or *llys*. Like any foreign consort, Joan first had to establish her position, no easy task when all that she heard around her was a language like no other. Entertainment and hospitality were the hallmarks of any court, but especially so, it seems, in Wales. Messer reminds us that a queen holding out a cup of peace is one of the prevailing images of the Middle Ages, and Joan would have been expected to assume the role of intercessor with her husband. Where she performed her ceremonial functions, if openly in the great hall or in the privacy of her chamber, is debatable. Official business was often conducted in royal chambers, although Joan, as we shall see, took it to a whole new level.

Joan's first years at court were preoccupied with pregnancy and childbearing, five children in all that are known. Her father's gamble seems to have paid off. In the summer of 1209, Llywelyn joined John on his campaign against Scotland and later that autumn he renewed his homage to him at Woodstock. If her health permitted it, Joan would have been expected to accompany her husband for his journeys to England. We can imagine she wanted to in any case. The evidence suggests father and daughter had a close and affectionate bond, but their relationship was put to the test the following year when Llywelyn made a bid for independence. When his insurgency was crushed, Llywelyn sent Joan to her father to seek peace. The terms she brought back were humiliating. The treaty cost Llywelyn 20,000 head of cattle and the surrender of 28 hostages from noble families, including his older, illegitimate son Gruffudd. According to Messer, it

was the first and only time the thirteenth-century Welsh chronicles noted Joan's role as a political mediator. She adds the suspicions of later Welsh historians that she had in fact fixed it this way deliberately. Finding herself pregnant at the time, Joan wanted to get Gruffudd out of the way to pave the succession for the boy she hoped to have.

She was heavily pregnant when she accompanied her husband to her father's court at Cambridge to make personal amends. At a rate of 10 miles per day, it would have taken them a month and a half to make the 450-mile round-trip journey. After their return, it was the birth of Dafydd in the spring of 1212 that likely stirred Llywelyn to rebellion again, this time with the backing of other Welsh lords and the French. John was just then putting together his invasion force for France. Furious over the betrayal, he had some of the hostages tortured and hanged and planned to march his army westward to stamp out his son-in-law. It was then that he received two letters, one from Joan, warning him of an attempt on his life by his own barons. The argument that she and Llywelyn concocted the letter to get John to stand down, which he did, is plausible enough, but since the plot against the king at this time was real, there's no reason to doubt Messer's suggestion that Joan was also genuinely worried for her father's safety.

Following his defeat on the continent in 1214, John's position at home deteriorated. Joan successfully petitioned him for the release of six of the surviving hostages, a move that could only have increased her stature at court. Forced to accept Magna Carta, John met Llywelyn at Oxford to negotiate separate terms for Wales. As the mediator between them, the archbishop of Canterbury was credited with the concessions made by John, but Messer convincingly shows that it was more Joan's work, an indication that she too was at the conference. Civil war soon broke out after the king repudiated Magna Carta and insurgent barons begged the French to invade and seize the throne. John's demise and death in 1216 undoubtedly affected Joan on a personal level, but she did not attend his funeral in Worcester, nor the coronation of her half-brother Henry in Gloucester, both within easy reach. Llywelyn had ignored John's pleas for help, certainly having his revenge for all the earlier humiliations, but the turmoil next door represented his best opportunity to impose his rule beyond his stronghold of Gwynedd. Joan's claim to the title of 'Lady of Wales' dates from their ascendancy during this period.

Although the new king of England was twenty years younger than his sister, Henry III was an even more avid family man than John and cultivated close ties

to the royal Welsh pair. The first years of Henry's minority saw Llywelyn's territorial gains and elevated status confirmed by the Treaty of Worcester. Marriages were also arranged for his and Joan's three eldest daughters to the most powerful English baronial families in the region. Joan's agency in all this is mostly speculative, but as Messer notes, 'the invisibility of women's names in medieval charters does not necessarily preclude inactivity, lack of responsibility or even their presence when charters were drawn up'. Put more bluntly, there's the record, and then there's common sense. Messer informs us that Joan's charter confirming the marriage agreement of her daughter Elen in 1222 is the only surviving document where she and Llywelyn appear together as a ruling couple.

But Llywelyn overplayed his hand with repeated incursions. In 1223, William Marshal II, the earl of Pembroke and soon to be brother-in-law to the king, inflicted a heavy defeat on his forces. In the negotiations that followed, Llywelyn found Henry greatly displeased by his recent conduct. It was up to Joan to repair the damage, which earned her a lucrative manor from her grateful half-brother. It's at this point, says Messer, that Joan becomes identified in chancery records first and foremost as the sister of the king. In 1226 her status improved further when her birth was granted legitimacy by the pope. Llywelyn tossed Gruffudd in prison for the next six years (this before he later fell to his death at his next prison, the Tower of London) and Dafydd, now designated the king's nephew, was recognised as sole heir.

By this point, Henry's minority is coming to an end. With his sights set on winning back his father's lands on the continent, he foolishly put too much trust in his unscrupulous justiciar, Hubert de Burgh, who set out to build a lordship for himself in the Welsh March. His encroachments led to war and it was again up to Joan to win the peace. Messer calls her efforts in these years her 'busiest in terms of her political career'. Henry made it clear to Llywelyn that he could thank his wife for whatever royal favour he might enjoy following the conflict. A price they had to pay was the surrender of their youngest daughter Susanna as a hostage for good behaviour. She was placed in the care of Clemence Verdun, one of Messer's two finalists for Joan's mother. The clue is that Joan, now referred to as the king's 'beloved sister', asked for her specifically, presumably so that her daughter might be fostered by her grandmother. Joan accompanied Susanna to London and Dafydd went with them to receive formal recognition as Llywelyn's successor. Messer emphasises that she attended the ceremony of Dafydd's homage at

Westminster in October 1229 not just as his mother or the king's sister, but as an ambassador for Wales. It marks, she says, 'a pinnacle of Welsh queenship'.

To say it was all downhill from there is an understatement. Llywelyn had thoroughly thrashed Hubert in the late war, capturing a leading English baron William de Braose. To gain his freedom, Black William, as he was known, had to pay a steep ransom and promise his daughter in marriage to Dafydd. Sometime during his captivity he and Joan stole away for an amorous encounter. Rumours of their affair reached Hubert, who made sure Llywelyn found out. When Llywelyn confirmed the affair from a court officer who stumbled upon it, he took advantage of William's presence at his Easter feast of 1230, not to mention Henry's departure for the continent, to have the paramour seized and hanged from a tree in front of 800 onlookers. After explaining that hanging can induce a 'death erection' in men, Messer wryly observes that 'if Joan was made to watch the spectacle, all would have been witness to the chastening mockery surrounding William's last erection for her'. Once he went limp, she was taken away and imprisoned.

The sketchiness of details about this affair invites all kinds of speculation and Messer looks at it from every conceivable angle, from the possibility of sexual assault to entrapment. For example, why were they caught in her husband's chamber and not her own? Llywelyn's fury at being cuckolded was a reflection of Welsh laws, which declared that 'the infidelity of a wife was the greatest disgrace a ruler could face', but he couldn't repudiate her because that might have jeopardised Dafydd's position as his successor. Joan spent two years incarcerated and it may be that she was only released because relations with England had again deteriorated. Hubert was back, now trying to insinuate himself into the Braose lordship, and Llywelyn needed Joan to act as his intermediary with her brother. It was in this capacity that Joan wrote the only known letter of hers to survive, a heartfelt plea to Henry to reconcile with her husband. She addressed herself to him not as Joan or his sister, but simply as Lady of Wales. Says Messer: 'With her change of title to Lady of Wales, Siwan became the paragon and embodiment of full and complete Welsh power.'

By then, only a few years were left to her, but Messer notes that Joan finally 'experienced a peace that had largely evaded her for the majority of her life'. She died on 2 February 1237, not quite 50 years old, and was buried in Llanfaes on the isle of Anglesey. Her grief-stricken husband ordered a monastery built around her tomb, but shortly afterward became incapacitated by a stroke and

ceased to actively rule until his death in 1240. As they had hoped, Dafydd succeeded him, but he embroiled himself in conflict with his uncle the king of England. In the end, it was up to another Llywelyn, Gruffudd's son, to revive Welsh power and strength. We might wish that Messer went into more details about this subsequent history and what became of Joan's other children after her death. This is, after all, a work where no stone is left unturned. Messer herself evidently doesn't feel this way, for she says of Joan in her conclusion that 'her person, her actions, her relationships and her life overall have remained a mystery for 800 years and will continue to remain so forever more'. This book is guaranteed to challenge that assumption.

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