

King Stephen

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The study of the unhappy reign of Stephen (1135–54) is as old as professional history in England, and indeed the problem of Stephen was one of the early concerns of William Stubbs, the midwife of the Oxford History Schools and founder of the constitutionalist approach to English history. The reign of Stephen makes up a substantial section of the first volume of his *Constitutional History of England* (1874) and it was Stubbs who inspired (but did not use) the much-debated term for the civil war, the ‘Anarchy’.⁽¹⁾ It is no surprise then to look back and find that Professor King’s is the 8th monograph dedicated to the reign (which is not to mention two substantial collections of essays on the same subject). This makes Stephen arguably the most written-about medieval king of England, with the exception of John. Why the interest in such an unsuccessful king? The reason lies in the very lack of success. In the constitutional approach to English medieval history, Stephen’s reign was a problematical blip between two giants: Henry I (1100–35), the architect of the Exchequer and justiciarship, and his grandson, Henry II (1154–89), the jurist-king, founder of the common law of England. It was incumbent on constitutionalists to explain how it was that the inevitable progress of England towards constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy, its chief contribution to world culture, briefly faltered and yet recovered. Later generations of historian found other reasons to fixate on the problems of this mild and pious monarch. Historians who embraced the legal approach to medieval history pioneered by Frederic William Maitland at Cambridge were deeply interested in the origins of property law and legal writs. Might it not be, some wondered, that the violence of Stephen’s reign was not a constitutional crisis triggered by savage, secessionist barons? Might it in fact be the birth pangs of property law, as barons struggled to establish their rights to succeed to estates withheld from them by capricious kings, and so they made a victim of poor Stephen? This apparent anomaly still draws historical attention. The recent study by Thomas Bisson on European medieval society devotes a large amount of space to Stephen’s reign, attracted by the anomalous violence of the reign, a violence Bisson sees – like

Montesquieu – as characteristic of a sort of medieval lordship.[\(2\)](#)

Any historian shouldering the reign of Stephen therefore takes on a crippling burden of historiography as well as a large and (amazingly) still expanding body of primary sources. Some historians (such as Bisson) have their own tale to tell and ignore the context. Others grapple with the problem directly, which does not perhaps always make for readable prose or a strong narrative. Professor King is one who prefers to tell his tale and block his ears to the distracting interference on his frequency from the 19th century. Whether or not he is doing us a favour by that is a moot point and one to which I will return. The only indication that it is a conscious strategy on his part comes as he opens his stall with the brief announcement that, ‘this book is a biography of King Stephen not a “life and times”’ (p. xi). Since in fact he has a great deal to tell us about the times in which Stephen lived, I must assume that Professor King’s gnomic utterance is intended to account for the lack of much reference in his book to the massive and deeply-rooted historiography on what precisely went wrong with Stephen’s rule of England. He would thus appear to have cleared his decks to present the narrative history of the life and lack of achievement of an unfortunate king, yet he cannot escape so easily from the past. He must himself present arguments as to why Stephen failed in the royal duty of preserving the peace of his realm and in doing this he must align with one school of thought or other. But at least the fact that the book contains no reference whatsoever to an ‘Anarchy’ of Stephen’s reign or its ‘tenurial crisis’ indicates that he believes those historical phantoms have been laid to rest once and for all. For that strategic silence I for one am sincerely grateful. It does indeed make for a more readable book on the reign than most.

Professor King’s own contribution to the bibliography of the reign has already been considerable. While in 1974 the ‘tenurial crisis’ was still being touted and debated as the dominant theory in studies of the reign, he dared to suggest otherwise in a brief but telling article, which explained the behaviour of the barons in terms made familiar by the late medieval school of McFarlane: the barons were looking for ‘good lordship’ from their king. Disorder was not therefore inevitable and socially determined, it was down to the incompetence of a vacillating monarch.[\(3\)](#) Then in 1980, in what I believe to be one of the most dazzling displays of historical detection ever published, he laid bare through a rigorous analysis of charters and settlements a private baronial war between the earls of Chester and Leicester in the 12th century ignored by historians of the time.[\(4\)](#) It was a precious insight as to what was going on in mid 12th-century England at the local level, and it mightily terrified me as a graduate student as to the level of expertise which would be demanded of me by the academic world.

The ability to surprise the reader is still much in evidence in this book. Professor King is the first to make anything of the fact that the order for the second coronation of King Richard in 1194 apparently employed an order used for Stephen’s re-coronation at Canterbury at Christmas 1141, thus giving us a credible reconstruction of the state liturgy of a solemn crown wearing of the Norman period (pp. 176–7). Professor King also produces new evidence that the powerful Warenne earldom was already promised to the king’s younger son, William, before the departure of the third Earl William on Crusade in 1146. Before he went, the earl betrothed his only daughter and heir to the king’s son. Since the earl was killed in Cappadocia on the way to Jerusalem, this provision became a major coup for Stephen, making his younger son one of the great landowners of England at no expense to him (pp. 238–9). This son did not however, become Earl William IV de Warenne, as Professor King suggests. Stephen’s son took no surname, and the charters of Lewes priory reveal that it was Earl William son of Earl Hamelin (died 1240) who took that ordinal in his own acts. Professor King also makes the curious assumption that the Warennes took their comital title from the Norman village of their surname (p. 130). But they enjoyed the English earldom of Surrey from 1088, a title they often used for all that (like the Giffard earls of Buckingham) they usually linked their Norman surname to their title.

Professor King’s strength has always been in the close reading of texts he uses. He deploys his knowledge of the contemporary authors to great effect, time and again making arresting observations about their individual perspectives and links to events, which adds to the freshness and liveliness of his treatment. Some authors are less well served than others. He passes by the vexed question of the authorship of the *Gesta Stephani* though, even if it was not written by Bishop Robert of Bath, as R. H. C. Davis maintained, it is a productive suggestion that it derived from his household. The nature of the important Canterbury source that lies behind

Gervase's earlier passages is given equivocal treatment. At one point (p. 304) it is assumed to be a first hand account. But on p. 43 it is a 'late but local source'. We are diffidently offered one suggested new source, a manifesto or newsletter supposedly issued by Stephen's council to the political community of England in December 1135 to justify his assumption of the throne. It is seen as lying behind a later 12th-century Ely source describing Henry I's death. Though it is not unlikely that such bulletins were issued (they may have already been a feature of Henry I's circle) I would not have thought the suggestion rated more than a footnote. As it is the novel notion displaces due consideration of the known justification for Stephen's seizure of the crown preserved in Pope Innocent II's 1136 confirmation of Stephen's kingship, a much more telling source (pp. 48–51).

In the end this book needs to be assessed as the narrative that the author tells us he intends it to be. If it is a biography then we must expect it to set forward a compelling reconstruction of the personality of the king. We have had several earlier Stephens. Famously he was to R. H. C. Davis a weak, treacherous man, whom no one trusted. To J. H. Round, labouring under an unaccustomed fit of charity, Stephen was a good king and brave soldier at the mercy of events no man could really have mastered. To me, Stephen was a much more complex person. His successful career at Henry I's court more than hinted at an accomplished courtier trading on a naturally affable disposition. There is abundant evidence also of a profoundly religious side to him. He embraced the confessional and penitential regime which was very much the fashion at his uncle's court, even to point of accepting discipline for sins which could not be otherwise expiated. His fault was his ambition, which to be fair to him he pursued as much for his family's as his own sake. But he was not a man with the ability to manipulate and rally the political community of his realm. He had no political vision towards which to lead his people. He had little grasp of the geopolitics of his day. He had a fatal weakness for trusting the judgement of men he found impressive, which is the dark side of the otherwise attractive trait of personal modesty. His personal bravery, strong affections and doggedness nonetheless ought to command some respect for Stephen as a human being, for all that he was not a king for troubled times

What is Edmund King's Stephen? Due weight is given to the religious Stephen. He observes that the epithet of most pious (*piissimus*) was the one most often applied to him by commentators on the reign. In medieval terms, that was a very positive legacy to leave behind him. But Professor King goes further, along the lines pursued in his unsatisfactory 1984 study 'The anarchy of Stephen's reign'.⁽⁵⁾ Stephen appears as clergy-ridden, and the bishops as a proactive and aggressive group in society, none more so than the king's younger brother, Bishop Henry of Winchester. That Henry was important in orchestrating Stephen's accession and in advising him in his first 18 months as king seems to me a sustainable view. Bishop Roger of Salisbury's importance in those months is also clear. The collapse of their influence thereafter is equally evident. But in this book ecclesiastical events and personalities dominate the account of 1138–9 (p. 94ff). As with the author's treatment of the defence of his rights by Bishop Hilary of Chichester later in the reign, there is a willingness to take the importance that clerical writers give clerical issues at its face value. But they were not the major players of the day. They were auxiliaries not principals, their importance being their occasional willingness to irritate the political community by offering it a moral dialectic it did not want to accommodate. The result is to underplay the significance of Stephen's all-important relations with the lay magnates. Absent here entirely is R. H. C. Davis's considerable contribution to the historiography of the reign in his detection of aristocratic interest groups at work, notably that focussed on the flamboyant and aggressive magnate, Count Waleran II of Meulan, a man so important to the new king that he married him to his daughter Matilda within months of coming to the throne. The fact that Matilda was only two years old at the time raised the eyebrows of the commentator, Orderic Vitalis. To me it seems evident that the Norman campaign of 1137 inaugurated an ascendancy at court of the Meulan group which dominated the politics of the reign till the battle of Lincoln, and I agree with Davis that the ascendancy accounts most satisfactorily for the alienation of the rival group headed by Earl Robert of Gloucester in 1138. Noted but barely commented on is Waleran's part in the ruin of Bishop Roger of Salisbury in 1139. Evidence for the personal animus of Waleran and Robert of Gloucester is ignored and Waleran's highly significant departure from England after Lincoln in 1141 is barely noticed. Similarly passed over is the evidence for Stephen's subsequent reliance on an aggressive group of curial officers, the men who incited him to catastrophic and self-destructive feuds with Geoffrey de Mandeville and Ranulf of Chester.

Professor King has his story to tell, and even the most recent historiography on the reign is ignored if it gets in the way of it. Though the ideas mentioned above are very relevant to his professed aim to write a biography of Stephen, they are not discussed. The result for anyone who knows the academic background is therefore an evasive book, which, if it is not going to intimidate the tender reader by dense references to an impenetrable mass of past publications, is perforce going to portray its view as the only one in the field. One might sadly reflect that there is just too much historiography in the particular case of this much-studied reign, and that a return *ad fontes* is a valid strategy. But such historiographical Protestantism robs the book of depth and authority. Undergraduate students will value the book less because of its solipsism. The process of history is supposed to be a debate.

The end result for me is a jejune treatment of Stephen the man, who becomes a cipher: ‘nothing’ without his brother, Henry of Winchester, relying for his strength on his loyal and enterprising queen. Professor King credits her curiously as being responsible for Stephen’s signal achievement in collecting around himself a very capable retinue of household officers and justices some of whom, such as Richard de Lucy, Henry of Essex and Richard de Canville, were to continue their careers under his successor, Henry II. As Professor King himself says (p. 305), too much can be made of apparent links between characters. Men close to the king were likely to forge links also with the queen, as in the telling example of the sheriff, Gilbert of Surrey, in the previous reign. To sum up Stephen as simply weak is not enough of a conclusion to this biography. Weak characters are not attractive, but Stephen patently was an attractive man. He had personal courage and dignity and was not without sense. What he lacked was the sort of intellect which understood human systems and could formulate plans, so he relied on those who apparently could. In one of those contemporary parallels of which Professor King is so fond: Stephen was an ambitious middle manager promoted beyond his ability. But to say he was merely ‘acting a part’ (p. 339) is a harsh conclusion on Stephen the king, for all that the author does his best to be fair to Stephen the man.

Notes

1. The first capitalised use of Anarchy in this context occurs in J. H. Round, ‘Danegeld and the finance of Domesday’, in *Domesday Studies*, ed. P. E. Dove (2 vols, London, 1888–91) pp. i, 112.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. T. N. Bisson, *The Crisis of the Twelfth Century: Power, Lordship, and the Origins of European Government* (Princeton, NJ, 2008).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. E. King, ‘King Stephen and the Anglo-Norman aristocracy’, *History*, 59 (1974), 180–94.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. E. King, ‘Mountsorrel and its region in King Stephen’s reign’, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 44 (1980), 1–10.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. E. King, ‘The anarchy of Stephen’s reign,’ *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 34 (1984), 133–54.[Back to \(5\)](#)

Edmund King does not wish to comment.

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