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The Bigod Earls of Norfolk in the Thirteenth Century

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In his seminal Ford Lecture in 1953, K. B. McFarlane argued that the 'real politics' of the later medieval period were inherent in the 'daily personal relations' between king and magnates. (1) He went on to discuss in more detail what he saw as the nature of those daily personal relations and to define them in terms of a 'community of interests' between king and magnates by which later medieval England (defined as from around 1290) could be governed effectively if the personality of the king permitted, calling for more studies of the period, and particularly of the nobility. McFarlane's observations have since indeed prompted, amongst other crucial research, a number of detailed, skilful and informative studies of individual magnates, which have now begun to reach back into the thirteenth and even the twelfth century, and which include J. R. Maddicott's *Thomas of Lancaster* (Oxford, 1970) and *Simon de Montfort* (Cambridge, 1994), J. R. S. Phillips's *Aymer de Valence* (Oxford, 1972), and David Crouch's *William Marshal* (Harlow, 2002). It is in this tradition that Marc Morris's *The Bigod Earls of Norfolk in the Thirteenth Century* stands.

The aim of his book, Morris tells us, is to provide 'full-scale' studies of Roger Bigod III (c.1209?70) and Roger Bigod IV (1245?1306), which examine not only the roles they played respectively in the political crises of 1258?67 and of 1297?1301, but also their 'private affairs', including the management of their estates and the affinities they constructed, as well as their relationships with friends and relatives. It is a large and impressive brief, and Morris makes excellent use of a wealth of source material, from chronicles to charters to official government records, to produce an in-depth narrative within a chronological structure.

First to be explored is how the earldom of Norfolk came into being ? how the fortunes of the Bigod family

were made. By 1107, Morris shows, the Bigods had become 'barons of the first rank' (p. 1) and by 1166 were the fifth richest family in England. Although Roger II had to rebuild the earldom after Hugh Bigod's rebellion against Henry II in 1174, by the time Roger III inherited it as a minor in 1225, the Bigods were again extremely well placed to play a major role in central politics and in local society in East Anglia. Thereafter, an interesting picture emerges of Roger III from Morris's narrative, thanks in particular both to the author's painstaking reconstruction of events from 1228 (the year of the attainment of Roger III's majority) onwards, and to the very 'memorable images' (p. 184) of the earl presented to us by poets and by the chroniclers of a warlike and quick-tempered man, a 'vir bellicosus', who jealously guarded his private affairs from 'royal and foreign interference' (pp. 184-5).

In many ways most interestingly, we see a man who was not regularly a key player in the arena of central politics: despite his early involvement in the Marshal rebellion of 1233 against Henry III's favourite Peter de Roches, and brief periods when he seemed to be closer to the king, such as 1235-6 and the mid to late 1240s, overall the earl played only a minor role in the years before 1258; he was, Morris declares, 'something of a political outsider, even a backwoodsman' (p. 59). Indeed, there were long periods during which he was rarely seen at court, if at all, 1236-41 being one such interlude. All this coincided, naturally enough, on the negative side with periods when Henry was surrounded either by the Savoyards or by the Lusignans, and on the positive side when he was trying to curry favour with his magnates following the crisis of 1244 or when he needed support for his foreign policies. In other words, Bigod's absence from or presence at court reflected the times when Henry III's rule was respectively least and most friendly to his magnates. Morris has therefore provided an excellent illustration of the way in which the volatility of Henry's rule affected one of his greatest English subjects, and in the process has shone a still brighter light on the politics of this troubled reign.

No years were more troubled during Henry's majority rule than the period between 1258 and 1267, when Morris shows how Bigod took a very active role in the reform movement, a result of provocation by the king and his Lusignan relatives throughout the 1250s. In that decade, Morris notes, 'Roger watched as injustices which touched him directly, if not personally, began to pile up' (p. 51): for example, his sister's complaint about a wardship of which she had been deprived, the denial of Humphrey de Bohun's rights as constable during the Gascon campaign of 1254, Roger's inability to secure justice against Aymer de Valence, one of the king's Lusignan relatives. Once the servants of John fitz Geoffrey, Bigod's brother-in-law, had been attacked by Lusignan servants in April 1258, Roger's role in the crisis that followed became inevitable. He may also, Morris postulates, have faced pressure from below, in East Anglia, to act as a spokesman for the grievances of the men of the shires who had similarly suffered under Henry III, especially in recent years.

What of Bigod's behaviour during the crisis itself? Here Morris is sympathetic to the earl's changes in allegiance in the years 1258-67. When Bigod made an alliance with Prince Edward and the earl of Gloucester in autumn 1258, for example, Edward being clearly against the Provisions of Oxford and Gloucester standing opposed to having his private courts investigated by the recently appointed panels of four knights, Morris concludes that Bigod was still a 'highly credible' reformer; it was many of the magnates, he argues, 'who succeeded in persuading Gloucester to submit' (p. 76). Bigod himself, Morris declares, had very little to hide where his private courts were concerned, and so an optimistic reading of his actions seems plausible. He did, of course, gain some advantages from his involvement in reform, favours from Henry III and his council, for instance, and, as marshal, the profits of the special eyre, but Morris argues that, on balance, 'Roger was a committed reformer' (p. 80), who believed in 'arbitration rather than armed conflict' (p. 91), and was, as a result, frequently caught between the king and his opponents after 1258. His actions are discussed in this context to create a picture of an earl committed to reform, and also perhaps under pressure from knightly members of his own affinity, who successfully steered a difficult course between loyalty and rebellion, good lordship and self preservation, during an extremely tumultuous period.

Soon after the conclusion of the civil war came the end of Roger III's active time as earl, and his death followed in 1270. Leaving no direct heirs, he was succeeded by his younger brother's son, the fourth Roger Bigod in the line, and a man who was similarly to play a key role in political reform under Henry III's illustrious successor, Edward I. Morris's portrait of Roger IV is necessarily less rounded than that of his

uncle, a result of the paucity of really good chronicle sources for the period. However, in politics, conclusions can, Morris argues, be reached. The new earl of Norfolk, he maintains, was certainly a good citizen, especially during Edward's absence in the years to 1274 and in Wales and Scotland, for example. He was placed under pressure by the king's quo warranto campaign and by demands that he pay back his debts to the Exchequer, the sum of which he disagreed with on more than one occasion. Yet, where Prestwich has argued that the issue of the earl's debts in particular prompted long-term discontent on Bigod's part, Morris maintains that

it is difficult to see the earl simmering with discontent during the 1280s. The demands being made on his pocket by the king were not unreasonable ... and far from excessive (p. 136).

Further, even in the early 1290s, Edward's behaviour was 'far from threatening' (p. 159). 'It was', Morris notes, 'arguably as embarrassing for Edward to have one of his magnates querying in public the legitimacy of demands made by his Exchequer' (p. 160) as it was for the earl to have his debts to the crown discussed in the same forum. Similarly, he argues, what might be construed as attacks on Bigod's rights as Marshal in the early 1290s should perhaps not be seen in this light, for Roger may in fact have been the recipient of 'lenient and favourable treatment' by the king (p. 160).

There was not, then, in Morris's view, a long-term background to Bigod's involvement with the political opposition to Edward I in the late 1290s. Rather, 'good relations', he says, 'were preserved right up to the eve of their confrontation in 1297' (p. 160). The question we should therefore ask, he says, is what went so badly wrong thereafter. From Morris's narrative of events between 1297 and 1301, the conclusion we are encouraged to reach on this is simple: Bigod's opposition to the king was wholly associated with Edward's demands in this period, both for taxation and prises, and for unprecedented military service, which would have taken large numbers of magnates out of the realm when Wales and Scotland remained unsettled. In producing this explanation of events, Morris's work is at odds with that of some other historians of the period, who have been more inclined to see long-term and personal divisions between king and earls as lying at the heart of the crisis. (2)

One thing that should be noted as particularly interesting in what Morris has to say is the fact that, even allowing for the faction-ridden nature of politics during Henry III's reign, neither Roger III nor Roger IV seems to have been expected to play a role in government beyond providing advice at the centre in this period; it seems to have been in war that their services were most in demand by the crown. This was, of course, very different from the situation by the late fourteenth century. Thus, Morris's work indirectly augments our sense of changes that took place between the thirteenth century and the late fourteenth. The question still at issue, of course, is why such a change took place, and Morris's work is undoubtedly a useful tool in historians' search for the answer to that question.

As we have already noted, however, Morris's own brief for this book extended beyond the confines of the roles that Roger III and Roger IV played in politics and government in this period, even if discussion of this constitutes its principal concern. We are also provided with personal information about the two earls. Having produced an estimate of Roger III's wealth via clever use of the available sources, Morris is able to conclude that it was really from the time of the death of his mother in 1248 that Roger III moved from being 'comital small-fry' to being 'a big fish' (p. 42). His 'affinity', as Morris terms his following, similarly underwent a minor transformation in the 1240s, though this does not seem to have been connected with Bigod's inheritance of his mother's dower lands. Throughout the years Roger held his earldom, his 'affinity' comprised both feudal tenants in East Anglia particularly, and men with no tenurial connection with the earl but, from the 1240s, it also came to include men who had, Morris tells us, 'risen from further down the social spectrum' (p. 65). Furthermore, 'considerably fewer' in this new generation of 'affinity' members were feudal tenants of the earl (p. 68), though at the same time very few were royal officers. So, where previously men active in local government in East Anglia had been prominent, now the 'affinity' was composed of people who were not regular royal officers, but who represented what Morris calls 'the bedrock of county society'

(p. 72). As for the size of the 'affinity', it was, he argues, in line with those of earls with similar wealth and incomes.

By the time Roger IV came into his inheritance, he was, then, what one might call an earl in the second division. With his marriage and the death of his own mother, Roger IV was able to add significantly to his lands and wealth and he consequently became one of the greatest English magnates. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that Bigod should have signed away his earldom to the crown in an extraordinary deal made with Edward I in 1302. This is something Morris rightly takes time to examine, arguing that it is a combination of Roger's debts and his deeply religious nature that provides the best explanation of his motivations for entering into the arrangement with Edward I. Morris declares that Bigod, acutely aware of the Church's attitude to debt, wanted to do his 'utmost' (p. 182) to discharge his own financial obligations before his death. Thus, an earl who, like his uncle before him, had previously worked hard to preserve and augment his estate now surrendered it as he neared the end of his life.

In sum, at the same time as providing us with greater insight into the politics of the thirteenth century and the role of the nobility at the centre, Morris has also contributed to our knowledge both of the construction of noble followings at this time and of the landed wealth of the king's greatest subjects in the period. His observations on the presence of tenurial and non-tenurial links in Bigod's affinity, for example, fit neatly with conclusions that J. R. Maddicott reached in his consideration of the following of Simon de Montfort and which David Carpenter reached in a recent article. (3) Both feudal/tenurial and 'bastard feudal'/non-tenurial connections were therefore important in the relationships magnates had with the men of the localities. At the same time as reinforcing these conclusions, however, Morris's work calls others into question. Recently, a number of historians of the thirteenth century have argued that the increasing retention of gentry local royal officers by magnates played an important role in local government in this period. (4) Yet, like Maddicott's study of Simon de Montfort's following a decade ago, Morris's study of the Bigod following now suggests that such links were remarkably limited. How we should therefore see local government in this period is a matter of debate to which Morris has made a valuable contribution.

This book is, then, without doubt important to our understanding of the thirteenth century on a number of levels. However, it does in my view have some limitations. First, it would have been very helpful if the study had included some sort of contextual introduction which highlighted the historiography of the period, especially where the nobility is concerned. Although Morris acknowledges in his preface the debt of his work to Maddicott's *Simon de Montfort* and Crouch's *William the Marshal*, for example, he does not illuminate the longer-term historiographical debt it owes first to K. B. McFarlane, and further back to the work of Lewis Namier. This would have been useful in enabling the reader to make comparisons between Morris's methodology and conclusions, and those of historians who have produced similar work. More historiographical discussion throughout would also have been extremely informative. There are vital questions which are left unaddressed during the course of the narrative: how, for instance, have Roger III and IV been seen by historians, particularly in 1258?67 and 1297?1301? What role have historians hitherto assigned to the nobility in government, central and local? How has discussion of noble affinities and followings developed in recent years? This would have helped with the contextualisation of the very important information that Morris conveys here, enabling a clear sense of how his work contributes to the study of the thirteenth-century nobility, politics and government. In the same manner, more explicit analysis throughout would have sharpened Morris's arguments about the two earls; often the reader is left to put together for him/herself what Morris is arguing. His discussion of Roger III's role in politics during Henry III's majority rule, and of Roger IV's motivations during the major crisis of Edward I's reign, for example, could usefully have been summarised fully at the end of each discussion, with perhaps some broadening out to tell us what light this sheds on each king and his reign too. Both are important missed opportunities because Morris really does have some very interesting points to make about these men.

Overall, however, *The Bigod Earls of Norfolk* is the product of extremely thorough and painstaking research and makes an illuminating and very important contribution to our understanding of thirteenth century politics and government, the great crises of 1258?67 and 1297?1301, and, more specifically, of the lives of

two of the king's greatest subjects in a troubled century.

Notes

1. K. B. McFarlane, *The Nobility of Later Medieval England* (Oxford, 1973), p. 120. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For example, M. C. Prestwich, *Edward I* (1997), pp. 413-4. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. J. R. Maddicott, *Simon de Montfort* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 59-76; D. A. Carpenter, 'The second century of English feudalism', *Past & Present*, 138 (2000), 30-71. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. For example, P. R. Coss, 'Bastard feudalism revised', *Past & Present*, 125 (1989), 27-64; P. R. Coss, D. A. Carpenter and D. Crouch, 'Debate: bastard feudalism Revised', *Past & Present*, 131 (1991), 165-203; H. W. Ridgeway, 'Mid-thirteenth century reformers and the localities: the sheriffs of the baronial regime, 1258-61', in *Regionalism and Revision: The Crown and its Provinces in England, 1200-1650* in ed. A. Gross, P. Fleming and J. R. Lander (1998), 59-86. [Back to \(4\)](#)

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