Royal Letters, Writs and Chronicles: their Value for Interpretation of the Reigns of King John and his Predecessors in the light of the work of Sir James (Jim) Holt

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Royal letters and writs have always been treated as 'official' records regardless of how they have survived the centuries, whether in government archives or in letter collections and chronicles. In the early twentieth century their evidential value *came* to be increasingly appreciated. In 1963 Jim Holt highlighted what he saw as the fundamental shift this had caused in the way medieval English historians operated. 'Stubbs and his contemporaries', he wrote, 'relied mainly on chroniclers; modern writers rely mainly on records.'[1] To illustrate 'the modern canon', he quoted Doris Stenton:

> No chronicler should be believed who is not strictly contemporary, and is not supported by record evidence when he makes extravagant statements about the King's evil deeds.[2]

As her choice of words implies, the shift had in part been driven by a distaste for what John Prestwich, Holt's undergraduate tutor – both men had just returned to Oxford after war service – called 'the language of the pulpit' in the works of Stubbs, whom he criticised for having ignored evidence 'of great weight since it came from the out-trays of King John and his administration.'[3] V. H. Galbraith (Holt's graduate supervisor) also disliked the Victorian tendency to use moral or religious criteria in order to classify kings as 'good' or 'bad', and saw record evidence as a powerful tool in the hands of those who

instinctively felt reluctant to regard as evil villains those kings who had received a bad press from medieval chroniclers.[4] Records had, of course, been used before. Indeed, Holt was generous to a Victorian historian, Kate Norgate, praising her 'great biography', *John Lackland* (1902) as 'a synthesis of royal writ and contemporary narrative.' But it was one, he continued, 'in which the chronicler was very much the chief element. Today this is no longer so ... the fact is the record evidence is now the main force and the narrative simply reinforcement ... chronicle evidence unsupported by record is viewed with suspicion.'[5]

Nearly sixty years on few, if any, would now take so binary a view. Nor indeed did Holt himself forty years later (see p.58 below). But it is important to bear in mind that he had been grappling intensively with the whole range of the bulky records of King John's government, and that the first fruits of that remarkable work of interpretation had only recently been published in *The Northerners*.[6] He was acutely aware of the problems this shift had created. 'It is one thing to use the record evidence for the history of the administration of which it was a direct product; it is quite another to use it to comment on the personality of the king ... It is not necessarily invalid to use it in this way, but it requires a degree of imaginative reconstruction which may be far less solid than the documentary evidence on which it is based.'[7] Record sources by their formulaic nature tend to flatten out personality differences between kings.[8] Rather than avoid this problem by turning to more structural matters, in 1963 he chose instead to provide several examples of the 'imaginative reconstruction' of individual items of record, most famously of the offer recorded in the Fine Roll of 1204-05 in which the wife of Hugh Neville offered John 200 chickens so that 'she may lie with her husband for one night.' His reconstructions were based exclusively on the records, and more than once he regretted the insufficiency of studies of the language and diplomatic practice of the chancery which might have made them more compelling.[9] Only at this point, after 'two separate discussions of the record sources', did Holt turn to an evaluation of the chroniclers.[10]

Timothy Reuter would later identify this order of priorities as characteristic of English historians. 'On the whole we're still inclined to treat literary texts as low-grade archives which can be mined for

"facts".' Hence 'one of the standard tropes of English medievalists: narrative sources unreliable, back to the archives.'[11] That English medievalists should have been impressed by government records is hardly surprising. By the standards of European history – if not of Chinese – English government archives contain great riches, and from a remarkably early date, principally Domesday Book in 1086 and the Pipe Roll of 1129-30 with a run of Pipe Rolls from the 1150s onwards. They contributed to what Rees Davies identified in 1979 as 'the informing principle of much of English historiography, the belief that strong centralized government is a prerequisite of civilized life and human progress.'[12] Yet these records, however impressive, remained too isolated and too distant from the daily activity of itinerant kings to shed much light on English royal government in the round. Only with the survival of chancery rolls from the beginning of John's reign onwards are historians able to see something approaching a government at work.[13] It was this which enabled Holt to come to a resounding judgement about John. 'His reign produced or extended administrative experiments and developments which set the course for the rest of the century ... all this was done efficiently ... the total achievement was enormous, fit to stand alongside that of Henry II and Edward I. Together, these two and John represent a standard which was never again equalled.'[14]

Given the fact that John, unlike those two kings, had no reputation at all as a legislator, it is a remarkable judgement. Moreover, in his final paragraphs, Holt came to a devastatingly critical assessment of the king's political performance. 'He had failed to manage the great noble houses of the land ... failed in the primitive tactical leadership of medieval warfare ... this, like his failure to control and lead the aristocracy was a crucial failure.' This meant that only on the basis of a narrow focus on administrative achievement could a judgement that put John on a par with his father and grandson be sustained. Nonetheless Holt held to it. To do so he relied on what he described as the 'wonderfully convenient' but also entirely appropriate keyword in any assessment of John's character: 'inconsistency'.[15]

Although Holt clearly showed that such was then the 'modern orthodoxy' on John, not everyone continued to accept it. In 1945 Galbraith too had believed that John, re-interpreted in the light of

what he called 'the hard facts' revealed by research in the records, would emerge as 'a king capable of a consistent policy of state-building, better in conception than in execution, but nevertheless still in the true line of Henry II'. But by 1964 he had changed his mind, as he made explicit in a letter to Jim. 'For some years I followed Green [J. R. Green, d. 1883] in thinking of John as not only the ablest, but the greatest of the Plantagenets – but dropped him like a hot brick after reading the Life of the Marshal ... He was the worst of all our bad eggs, so that even when he acted justly or generously – well, his enemies just didn't believe it.' Galbraith expressed this view in a letter urging Holt to say much more about John's 'moral stature' in the book on Magna Carta which he had just finished writing, but the advice was not taken.[16] Holt's view of John long remained much as it had been in 1963: a king who had his failings but also such qualities as a 'genius for political negotiation' and 'an interest and ability in governing'.[17] He never again wrote a book as political as *The Northerners.* Writing *Magna Carta* (published in 1965) marked the beginning of a life-long preference for matters of law and judicial and governmental structures. Only in one of his last essays did he return to the murky world of politics, in so doing achieving a Shakespearian view of King John: one which contained not a single word on Magna Carta and concluded with the words 'Arthur had been John's albatross and he knew it.'[18]

In writing this essay I have been conscious of the fact that I too was an undergraduate pupil of Prestwich – although about fifteen years later than Jim. It was this that led the three of us to enjoy the surreal experience of lecturing on Richard I in English to an Italian audience in the palatial premises of the Accademia dei Lincei in Rome.[19] But I am conscious too that I, prompted by Prestwich to take this step, had become a pupil of Karl Leyser. In the absence of records other than charters, students of early medieval German history had little choice but to write history almost entirely from narrative sources. In England Karl was the supreme master of this art. Like Karl, I have never seen the need to spell out in a theoretical or systematic way what he made seem obvious: that in order to evaluate what authors, who were mostly ecclesiastics of one sort or another, wrote about men and women of power, it was necessary first of all to understand those authors' own assumptions, often revealed by an incidental detail or casual

comment.[20] John Prestwich too had, in his son's words, 'above all an extraordinary knowledge of the chronicle sources, and an ability to read them in a new way, deducing new conclusions from the way events were reported.'[21] I was surely influenced by them when I concluded my article on King John for the ODNB by asserting that 'judgements on John's record as king are increasingly returning to contemporary opinion as voiced in both English and non-English narrative sources.'[22] Given that Jim knew that my approach was very different from his, it was generous of him to approve of my commission to write it and then not to cavil much at my draft, except to say, in a letter written immediately after he left hospital in July 1997, that it needed more on Magna Carta – which it did.

On record sources my own view has always been much closer to that espoused by Colin Richmond. 'The records of government are all very well, but on issues that matter they do not tell the truth.'[23] Plainly much depends upon what we see as the 'issues that matter'. Equally plainly there are no correct or incorrect views here. The issues that matter are those relevant to the questions being asked. I take the view that when thinking about government and politics in times when kings ruled as well as reigned, questions about the personality of the king are unavoidable. Holt thought so too in *The Northerners,* where he described 'the Angevin empire' as 'above all else a world in which kingship was personal and in which the personal relations between the king and his men were of paramount concern and interest.'[24] But the emphasis changed as he became increasingly absorbed in questions of the administration of law and systems of government. He was influenced by Milsom's *Legal Framework of English Feudalism* (1972). Milsom set out to exploit legal sources such as plea rolls telling us 'what people said and did' in order 'to make out what did not need saying and what it was not thinkable to do'.[25] This was precisely what Karl Leyser had been doing for chronicles, but in Milsom's case the upshot was a study of the law *c.*1200 so determinedly apolitical that the name of no king later than Henry I (d. 1135) appears in its index. By 1980 Holt was ready to write that 'the young historian in England learns from his textbooks that the temper of a reign was set by the character of the king'.[26] Already the implication was clear that now, having moved on from textbooks, we realise that other things matter.

In 1992 in the second edition of *Magna Carta* he added a substantial new chapter entitled 'Justice and Jurisdiction'. In this he wrote 'The king's personality mattered. The inadequacy of jurisdictional structure and legal procedure mattered much more.'[27] As Timothy Reuter put it, 'English political medievalists are particularly state-fixated: the importance of the state in our history becomes self-reinforcing, so that real substance is seen to lie in administrative practice and innovation rather than in the relations between the members of the political community.'[28]

While Holt acknowledged the centrality of the king's character, he also acknowledged the value of chronicles. In *King John* he not only noted that the king 'had failed to manage the great noble houses of the land', but immediately went to say, 'At this point the chroniclers bring us to near to the truth.'[29] By the yardstick of chroniclers' opinion John failed. Whereas many contemporaries were impressed by Henry II and Edward I as rulers, even when they didn't like them, there was very little about John's rule which they found impressive, apart from the brief period during which, as one author noted under the year 1211, there was 'no one in Ireland, Scotland and Wales who did not obey his nod, something which, as is well-known, none of his predecessors had achieved.'[30] This author, long known as the 'Barnwell chronicler', but recently unmasked as Roger of Crowland, was undoubtedly more favourable to John than any other.[31] He was the 'most valuable and intelligent', 'most balanced' and 'most intelligent' of all contemporary observers.[32] Yet even this monk never applauded John without almost immediately undercutting that praise. His positive assessment of John's position in 1211, for instance, continued with the words, 'he would have appeared successful if only he hadn't lost his continental possessions and been excommunicated.'[33] As Holt acknowledged, his last words on John were critical.

> He was a great prince, but hardly a successful one; like Marius, he experienced both kinds of luck (*fortunam utramque expertus*); he was generous and liberal to foreigners on whom he relied more than on his own people, whom he plundered; before his end they abandoned him.[34]

Even an author who had good reason to praise John's generosity to knights and his lavish hospitality to those who came to court, was emphatic that 'he was a very bad man, more cruel than all others; ... whenever he could he told lies rather than the truth, and set his barons against one another'.[35] Yet for Holt, 'the near unanimity of surviving contemporary opinion is the main difficulty in interpreting John's activities as king and the chief obstacle to any assessment of his character.'[36] Only to a historian inclined to give much greater weight to record evidence might it have occurred that so much unanimity of chroniclers was itself suspicious.

I have not, I fear, changed my views since I spelled them out in the preface to *Richard I.*

> Charters and other chancery documents can help us to reconstruct the ruler's itinerary and his entourage; they can tell us where a king was, identify some of those who were with him, and to whom he is dispensing favours; but whether it made sense for him to spend time in England, or in his continental dominions, or on crusade, whether he chose his advisers well and rewarded them properly - all these were matters of opinion. Fiscal records can sometimes tell us how much revenue a ruler collected, and how; they also throw light on how much he spent, and on what. But whether he was generous or miserly was a matter of opinion. Kings could be very rich, as records show Edward II to have been in 1326 and Richard II in 1399. It did them little good. A king's glory, as the Exchequer expert Richard FitzNigel, promoted bishop of London in the first council of Richard I's reign, put it in the preface to *The Dialogue of the Exchequer*, 'lay not in hoarding treasure but in spending it as it should be spent'. But how should it be spent? That too was a matter of opinion. Kings were sustained politically, or brought down, by contemporary opinion.[37]

As is plain from this, the man whose views I follow is David Hume, the historian who would go on to write by far the best history of England ever written by a Scotsman.[38] 'Nothing appears more

surprising to those who consider human affairs with a philosophical eye, than the easiness with which the many are governed by the few; ... when we enquire by what means this wonder is effected we shall find that ... the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. It is therefore on opinion only that government is founded'.[39] My approach to chroniclers' opinions, in other words, is not Victorian, it is pre-Victorian.

That kings would do well to understand the records kept by their servants is clear and was clear at the time. The Norman poet Wace (d. *c*.1180) portrayed Duke Richard II of Normandy (d. 1026) as an ideal ruler – 'Richard the Good' – and represented him retreating to a quiet place every year in order to spend a week going over his accounts.[40] But that John's 'total achievement' was enough to outweigh the loss of Normandy, Anjou and inland Poitou is far less clear, even though by the 1970s Holt was at least half-inclined to argue that it was. He did not deny that John had been humiliatingly defeated; yet this only meant that 'in the years after 1204, the system became compact and efficient, even inventive.' Before those immense territorial losses Henry II and Richard 'could not but try to hold delegated authority together by supervision from afar and personal visitation. These were to prove inadequate.' To the obvious retort that under his father and brother they had not been inadequate, his reply was that financial records showed that the rapidly improving Capetian financial position under Philip Augustus meant that John faced, unlike his predecessors, by a wealthier enemy, was simply unable to meet the costs of defence.[41]

In 1984, in response to something I had written, he developed the argument further, insisting that it would not be right to compare estimates for total revenues of both sides, but only those resources which were available on the Norman frontier.[42] Given that Angevin dominions were something like four times more extensive than the Capetian, this was a wise move.[43] It is certainly plausible that Philip, in command of the interior lines of communication, was the better placed to concentrate his spending in the war zone. That John in 1199 was not as rich as his predecessors had been ten years earlier is likely, and that Philip was much richer than he had been ten years earlier, is clear. But was John now poorer than Philip?[44] The evidence of the

fragmentary fiscal records, both Angevin and Capetian, is far from clear. As long ago as 1913 Edouard Audouin had noted that both John and Philip customarily paid their knights 6 shillings a day, 6 shillings *angevin* for John's men and 6 shillings *parisis* for Philip's, but that owing to the rate of exchange a knight cost John less than it did Philip. As Nick Barratt has emphasised, in real terms John could get a knight to fight for him for only two-thirds as much as Philip had to pay.[45] How was this possible?

Given the huge sums John was able to extract from England alone after 1204, it is plain that his island kingdom was not suffering from financial exhaustion. But was this true of Normandy? Or had the 'inordinate financial demands' which Richard made to pay for his ransom and in fighting to recover the losses sustained while he was a prisoner in Germany resulted in his successor being landed with an impossible task? Whether demands were inordinate or not was a matter of opinion. Records too can reveal opinion. If, for instance, Vincent Moss was right to argue, on the basis of records showing how much Richard spent on building works, wages and arms manufacture in the later 1190s, that warfare stimulated the Norman economy, then it is far from clear that Norman opinion would have resented his rule.[46] The records that reveal that two of the most powerful magnates of northern France, the counts of Flanders and Boulogne, made treaties of alliance with John in August 1199, hardly suggest that at that time they thought he was likely to lose. Is this why John could employ knights at only two-thirds of what Philip paid? No matter how unimpressive a leader John was, he may have begun with rates established while Richard held the upper hand and had, in consequence, been able to offer his troops better prospects of sharing in the profits of war than Philip could. If Moss is also right to argue that John's difficulties in raising money from Norman sources did not begin until late in 1201 and the steepest decline coincided with the time of Arthur of Brittany's disappearance, then, once again, opinion would be central.[47]

As it happens, the evidence base for Norman opinion has recently been significantly extended as a result of Gregory Fedorenko's analysis of the manuscripts of the *Chronique de Normandie*. He has shown not just how popular this work was, but

has also thrown light on its early stages, i.e. before it was extended and elaborated by the Anonymous of Béthune. One version of the *Chronique* ended in 1202; it did so in phrases which portrayed John fearfully giving Philip the concessions he demanded.[48] What is clear from all versions is that Richard remained until his death and beyond it, a much admired ruler, certainly more popular than John's conqueror, Philip Augustus.[49] The evidence of the over three hundred charters John issued before 1199, shows that, despite his title as count of Mortain, he had tended to neglect both Normandy and Normans.[50] The evidence of the *Chronique de Normandie* reveals the price he had to pay for this in the minds of the French reading and speaking Norman elite. It is hardly surprisingly that the old argument that John lost Normandy because he was defeated by a richer king is not one which has been deployed in the most recent full-length biographies.[51]

II. The Plantagenet *Acta* Project

Holt had long recognised that if the record evidence for John's reign were to be convincingly given the prominence it deserved, then it was essential to have a firm grasp of the practice of the chancery. For this a necessary preliminary was to analyse the products of Henry II's and Richard I's chanceries. And to achieve that the necessary first step was to bring together all the relevant documents which could be found. Thus, it was only natural that he should have seized the chance to inaugurate the Plantagenet *Acta* project as soon as an opportunity came, as it did in the early 1970s, during his time as 'a creative and energetic head of department' at Reading. It was, he later wrote, a project 'about which he had dreamed for many years.[52] It was and is, as he always knew it would be, a mammoth task, one only now, forty years on, being brought to completion by Nick Vincent, both in the edition and in a raft of exemplary studies. But by the mid-1990s Holt himself was ready to offer preliminary conclusions on the basis of some 2,500 letters and charters issued in Henry II's name. This he did in an essay written, as he said himself, in response to 'something between an invitation and a challenge "to tell us about all those charters you've collected"'.[53] It is his most quantitative work, full of numbers and percentages which became especially fascinating when

used comparatively, as he did in comparing the newly emerging corpus of Henry II writs and charters with the documents contained in the charter roll for 1 John, a record which although it had been in print since 1837, had never before been subjected to ordeal by arithmetic. He calculated that whereas 88% of Henry's acta were for ecclesiastical beneficiaries, only 33% of the documents registered in the charter roll were. This enabled him to demolish the well-known 'fact' that in the 'Middle Ages' the written word was the preserve of the clergy. Only the existence of the charter roll makes it possible to see that the better interpretation is, exactly as Holt noted, that a higher proportion of Henry II's acts in favour of lay people have been lost.[54] This is by far the most important conclusion to be drawn from this comparison, one that applies not just to the survival of documents from English royal records, but also to those from all medieval European kingdoms. Another important conclusion, based on both the Henry II material and the first charter roll, was the reinforcement he gave to a point he had made earlier: nearly all surviving documents were issued in response to requests from petitioners. 'The whole system as it is reflected in the surviving charters and writs was demand-led.'[55]

But these two conclusions were not, he felt, the most important of the inferences to be drawn from this exercise in comparison. 'The most important conclusion of all', he wrote, 'is simply this: there was no such thing as an Angevin Empire stretching in a homogenous *regimen* from the Cheviots to the Pyrenees.'[56] He argued this because of the 887 writs of Henry II which he then had on file, 81% concerned England, 15% Normandy, and only 4% the rest of the dynasty's French possessions (Gascony least of all). The first charter roll revealed a similar distribution, despite the fact that John spent nine months of his first year in France. What these figures undoubtedly demonstrate is that the king's English subjects, far more than any of his French, Welsh or Irish subjects, looked to the king to obtain a written authorisation of their property rights and privileges.[57] But does this mean that England was the best governed part of the empire, Normandy the second best and Gascony the worst? Normandy was lost in 1203-4; John's government provoked rebellion in England; while Gascony, though invaded by the king of Castile, was held. Not

until the 1450s did Gascony finally succumb to the forces of a king of France. The fact is that Henry II, Richard I and John ruled over a commercial and seaborne empire that was held together much more by the mutual interests of several complementary economies than it was by bureaucratic structures.[58]

While it is true to say that the system, as reflected in the surviving writs and charters, was demand-led, it is equally true to say that they do not reflect the whole system. Indeed, they are exactly the records I would not prioritise if I were trying to assess the role of kings within the system. Not only are they the products of demand, necessarily reflecting the political ambitions of beneficiaries more directly than those of the kings, they also are records which show kings as 'yes men', granting petitioners, at least in part, what they have asked for. At least as revealing, and arguably more so, would be records showing the king denying or significantly modifying the benefit that was sought. This, after all, was what Walter Map identified as an irritating (*tediosus*) aspect of Henry II's political style, keeping those who wanted something from him hanging on in hope. Famously, he attributed this to Henry's mother's advice, together with the parallel of the hawk made more attentive and obedient by having meat often offered to it and then snatched away.[59] Not surprisingly this model of rulership tends not be illuminated by the platitudinous arengas of royal charters.

Yet astonishingly one such record does survive, although it took a bold piece of detective work by Nick Vincent to discover it. This was a writ sent by Henry to William Marshal in July 1188, ordering William to come as quickly as he could, bringing with him as many knights as he could get, in return promising to give him the great honour of Châteauroux in Berry. There is much of interest in this document. It is, as Vincent pointed out, 'possibly the first genuine writ of military summons to a tenant-in-chief to have survived in all of Anglo-French history', one remarkable for 'its failure to demand or specify any particular quota of service'. It can also be regarded as 'part of a wider strategy by the king, to introduce loyal courtiers to the farthest-flung corners of the Plantagenet dominion.' But most relevant in the context of this paper are the few words that reveal Henry's habit of only grudgingly and belatedly acceding to requests, even when made by a

man as talented as William Marshal. *Persepe te mihi planxinsti quod de parvo feodo te feffavi.* 'How many times have you moaned to me about the small size of the fief that I have enfeoffed you with.'[60]

In normal circumstances neither grants of property, whether by charter or letter patent, nor routine administrative writs sent to officials and enrolled on the close rolls, are the kinds of record that throw much light on a king's ambitions and political priorities.[61] Just occasionally grants were, as when a king or would-be king made a grant of swathes of territory, especially if it related to land he did not possess, as with Henry II's grants of the kingdoms of Cork and Limerick in 1177.[62] Few grants can be more revealing than the agreement in January 1194 by which John granted Philip lands he did not possess: the whole of Normandy east of the Seine apart from Rouen itself, and a number of strategic strongholds west of the Seine, the town of Evreux, and the castles Le Vaudreuil and Verneuil, as well as Tours and Loches, key points in the Touraine. As John Baldwin pointed out, John's charter was 'carefully preserved in the royal archives.' But the archives in question were the French royal archives.[63] The fact that John, to whom Philip then gave command of Evreux, surrendered it to Richard soon after his brother's return to Normandy in May 1194, only ensured that the king of France held him in contempt.[64]

In most circumstances other sorts of royal documents are more revealing, among them treaties and diplomatic correspondence. In all likelihood, copies of such 'state papers' would have been kept in the itinerant household for a while, at least until they could conveniently be sent to one of the more permanent repositories such as the treasury archive accessed by Alexander of Swerford and a colleague when they compiled the Exchequer Red and Black Books in the 1230s.[65] Unfortunately for historians hungry for records throwing light on royal policy, few survived this process. But the earliest known chancery roll, the charter roll for 1 John, reveals that while the king was in France his clerks used its dorse, its outer side when rolled up, as a convenient place to keep a record of diplomatic, military and political items, such as the texts of treaties and agreements with counts Renaud of Boulogne, Baldwin of Flanders and Aimeri of Thouars.[66] This roll contains about 50 such items.[67] Since a roll's dorse inevitably suffered

more damage than its face, presumably records were copied there only as temporary memoranda, and during a brief period of experimentation in the early years of John's reign.[68] As a means of storing records, rolls had the great advantage for an itinerant household in that, lacking bindings, they were much lighter than books or registers; from a policy-maker's point of view, rolls had the disadvantage of being harder to search. This may well mean that, as Vincent concluded, 'it is the French registers which supply the model of administrative efficiency rather than the Plantagenet rolls.'[69]

III. Chronicles and Newsletters

One type of royal letter, the newsletter, as a rule survives only in chronicles or ecclesiastical letter collections; it was probably thought to be too ephemeral to be worth registering or archiving. An exception to this 'rule', the long letter, composed in late 1210, in which John both narrated and justified his treatment of the Briouze family, was retained in the treasury, probably because its elucidation of the *lex scaccarii* was thought likely to be useful in the future for disciplining the insufficiently loyal.[70] Occasionally a widely circulated letter patent, such as the one John sent from La Rochelle in March 1214 asking for a loan, might also contain news, in this case of a minor military success and the arrival of a papal messenger bringing news of the interdict, presumably in the hope of finding a more favourable hearing for his request for money.[71]

Letters in which news was circulated and slanted in order to influence public opinion in the king's favour, were an old device.[72] The more 'literate ways of thinking' became habitual and chancery resources available – the theme of Michael Clanchy's *From Memory to Written Record England 1066-1307* (1st edn., 1988) – the more likely newsletters were to make an impact, and in this process the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were crucial. One of the oldest to survive in England is Henry I's letter announcing his victory in the battle of Tinchebrai (September 1106), copied into Eadmer of Canterbury's *Historia Novorum*.[73] Like this one, most newsletters announced military triumphs, but not all. A letter in which Henry II described how the Young King had prostrated himself before him at

Bur on 1 April 1175 represented a promise of peace after civil war. Ralph of Diceto's description of the letter being read out, in the presence of father and son, at an assembly at Westminster in May 1175, provides a revealing indication of how some letters might be received and performed.[74] The king who used newsletters most effectively was Richard I. The texts of five sent by him, three relating to his crusade, written between August and October 1191, and two, in 1194 and 1198, relating to his wars in France, were used in some way, either by copying the text in full or by borrowing phrases from them, by no less than six contemporary English historians: Roger of Howden, Ralph of Diceto, Richard of Devizes, Gervase of Canterbury, William of Newburgh and Ralph of Coggeshall. The letter in which the king celebrated his victory over Philip of France at Gisors in September 1198 made its way into the work of no less than five of them.[75]

By contrast, only two such newsletters survive from John's longer reign. Ralph of Coggeshall included the text of the letter in which John triumphantly announced the capture of Arthur and two hundred barons and knights at Mirebeau on 1 August 1202.[76] Roger of Wendover included the letter sent from Parthenay in Poitou in May 1214, claiming success in bringing the Lusignans to submit.[77] Other known letters failed to leave their mark on any chronicle, neither the letter setting out the course of John's quarrel with the Briouzes, nor the news-bearing letter patent of March 1214. Why so few? It has, of course, long been recognised that of those historians active in Richard's reign, only Coggeshall continued beyond 1202.[78] But those who died might have had successors. It may be that those interested in writing king-centred chronicles found little in John's reign to celebrate, although Roger of Wendover, of course, was happy to celebrate the king's failures. He copied the text of the letter patent of May 1213 in which John announced his abrupt U-turn, the decision to submit to the papacy. The Crowland chronicler, while sharing Wendover's opinion that John had taken this step only because he was desperate, found it difficult to believe that a king would so publicly proclaim what many people saw as an ignominious servility.[79]

The main reason for the smaller number of newsletters may simply be that such successes as John enjoyed tended to be followed

by disaster within a few weeks. In 1214 the apparent success of May was followed by humiliation at La Roche-au-Moines in July. In 1202-3 it would probably have been impossible for John to issue a written statement setting out in detail his condign punishment of that rebel Arthur. In all probability contemporaries would have been even more unimpressed by that than they evidently were by his later attempt to provide a credible history of his treatment of the Briouzes. Of course, Arthur's disappearance meant that something had to be done. According to Coggeshall, Hubert de Burgh did his best by spreading fake news which only made things worse and soon had to be contradicted by more news, also false. By the time he came to compose his narrative of 1215, he assumed that John was responsible for a campaign of forged letters.[80] That John could indeed be responsible for documents which were not what they seemed to be, is demonstrated by chancery records revealing that he devised a system of countersigns enabling him to issue written orders which he intended should not be obeyed.[81]

No doubt all kings had men who would produce forgeries on their behalf. In January 1192, on his return from crusade Philip presented a chirograph of the treaty of Messina (March 1191) to the seneschal of Normandy and demanded that he hand over the Norman Vexin. But, in the absence of any instructions from Richard, who was still in Palestine, the seneschal and Norman barons refused to comply.[82] They evidently suspected that what purported to be a document in Richard's name was nothing of the kind. Philip's early return from the crusade had resulted in a catastrophic loss of reputation, as his own envoy to the curia later admitted.[83] The Europe-wide campaign conducted in 1192-3 by Philip's men, chief among them his cousin, Bishop Philip of Beauvais, trying to blame Richard for every setback that occurred during the crusade, only served to increase distrust of the king of France throughout the Angevin empire. He too became a king whose word was suspect. Richard, by contrast, was able to oversee the forging, successfully, as far as we can tell, of letters in the names of Pope Celestine and the 'Old Man of Mountain'.[84] English and Norman contemporaries sympathised with his aims and applauded his conduct in the wars against Saladin and Philip of France. They saw no reason to be suspicious.

All letters, fake and genuine, copied into chronicles or letter collections have to be subjected to a double process of 'imaginative reconstruction'. We have to think not only about the intention behind them being written but also about the chronicler's or compiler's purposes in choosing to include them.[85] Eadmer, for example, had included Henry I's newsletter because it enabled him to claim that God rewarded those who respected Archbishop Anselm. And if, as Galbraith pointed out, John was the object of 'active misrepresentation by the chroniclers', there was equally no doubt that he had a partner in crime: William II (Rufus). These two were the 'evil villains' of medieval English chroniclers and Victorian historians.[86] In the case of Rufus, why did Eadmer, the man chiefly responsible for William's poor reputation – and also the first English historian to copy texts of royal letters into his work – both say that Rufus wrote to everyone who could make trouble for Anselm and yet choose not to include texts of any of those letters? Why did he insert the texts of five of Henry I's letters, three of them so curt and business-like to be quite as much writs as letters, but none earlier than October 1105? Why those five when he had access to Anselm's letter collection, which contains copies of 13 letters sent in Henry's name?[87]

Or take Henry II. Those modern historians who bracket him together with Edward I, tend to do so, not because both kings pursued aggressive policies towards their neighbours in Britain and Ireland, but because over time they both acquired great reputations as legislators. As Holt established more clearly than anyone before him, Henry owed this reputation to Roger of Howden. Roger's historical work contains 'all but one of the texts and all the critical variants.' Thus the fact that those texts 'survive at all is a tribute not only to the work of Henry II but also to those like Roger of Howden who comprehended its importance.'[88] But there were no historians quite like Roger of Howden.[89] Not only is it possible to question the extent of Henry's personal involvement in the business of legislation, it is also clear that by the criterion of texts copied by Roger, Richard I too was a great legislator.[90] Had Roger survived for longer, even John might have become 'a great legislator.'

As a clerk who served three kings, Henry II, Richard I and John, and three prelates, an archbishop of York and two bishops of

Durham, as well as being a canon of Glasgow and the most widely travelled of all medieval English historians, Roger parson of Howden was not quite what we think of as a 'civil servant'.[91] In England he would have observed, first-hand, what Holt saw as 'a vast increase in the demand for justice' between 1154 and 1200. He would have witnessed too measures taken which helped to meet and stimulate that demand, notably the organisation of eyres in conjunction with a branch of the chancery being permanently settled at Westminster so that routine writs of justice could be fairly easily obtained no matter where the king or justiciar happened to be. Few can have known the chancery as well as he did during the reigns of Henry II and Richard I when it was, in Nick Vincent's words, 'a place of frequent novelties', many of them stimulated by the long absences of the king on the French side of the Channel.[92] But even before he died (in 1201 or 1202), Roger had formed a poor opinion of the way assizes were implemented under John's rule.[93]

Jim Holt's own formation as a historian occurred in the 1940s and 1950s, towards the end of a long period during which the editing and publication of records had been at the cutting edge of research into English medieval history. By contrast, it had seemed then that the work of editing and understanding chronicles had long since been completed, signposted by the abandonment of the Rolls Series in the 1890s. That this was not so, was first effectively seen by none other than Galbraith – who had indeed, only half-humorously, identified himself as 'late vintage Victorian'. He set a new movement in train by establishing a new series, Nelson's Medieval Classics, in 1949 and this, transferred to Oxford in 1965 and re-named Oxford Medieval Texts, has continued the work of re-thinking and re-editing narratives ever since.[94] Holt himself recognised the significance of this development, and it influenced his own re-thinking. In his last two, inter-linked, essays on Angevin history he returned to the most political of all law, the 'law' of royal succession, and to the dispute between John and Arthur.[95] In 1963 he had regarded the St Albans monk, Roger of Wendover, as a scandal-monger. He quoted him with approval only when he seemed to provide evidence that Pope Innocent himself, 'the keeper of the conscience of Christendom', did not condemn John for Arthur's death.[96] But by 2000 he was prepared to accept not only

Wendover's veracity on the subject of the destruction of the Briouze family, but also that the chronicler's version of Innocent's words had been nothing more than 'a rhetorical exercise'.[97]

Notes

1 J. C. Holt, *King John* (London, Historical Association, 1963; reprinted as 'classic' in 2010), p. 4. In writing this essay I owe a great deal to George Garnett's help and advice.

2 Doris Mary Stenton, *English Society in the Early Middle Ages* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1951), p. 46. In an interview in May 2008 Holt recalled the 'Stenton atmosphere' still perceptible at Reading when he arrived to take up a chair there in 1966.

3 Although this is taken from the typescript of a talk given at the request of the college chaplain in 1973 (quoted with Michael Prestwich's permission), it represented views long held.

4 V. H. Galbraith, 'Good Kings and Bad Kings in English History', *History* 30 (1945): 119-32

5 Holt, *King John*, p. 5.

6 J. C. Holt, *The Northerners A Study in the Reign of King John,* Oxford, 1961. In its preface he noted that 'this book could scarcely have been written without the ... aid of the great series of pipe rolls edited by Lady Stenton', but whereas her focus had been on those records that illuminated the working of the judicial system, his had been distinctly wider. In 2008 he called it 'in some ways my best book I think', and many would agree. It was David Carpenter's choice when he was asked which history book had had the greatest influence on him, *History Today,* 70, July 2020: p. 112.

7 Holt, *King John*, 6. He later described Sidney Painter's *The Reign of King John* (1949) both as 'the first book thoroughly to exploit the record sources' and as merely 'bad King John wrapped up in the Close Rolls', J. C. Holt, 'English History 1066-1272', in *A Century of British Studies*, ed. Alan Deyermond (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007), 27-49 (p. 40).

8 Hence it is to records that historians turn when they wish to counter hostile opinion. See, for example, Paul Webster, *King John and Religion* (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2015).

9 Whereas Jolliffe, in his *Angevin Kingship* (1st edn., 1955), – NB 'kingship', not 'kings' – had preferred to avoid the problem, noting in the second edition, 'Especially I have refrained from expressing strong