

Richard Coeur-De-Lion

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Sir Steven Runciman profiles a fabled Englishman, concerned with the political and military relationships between East and West.

Depiction of Richard (l) and Saladin (r), c. 1250–60. Photograph by Ealdgyth (Own work). Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

It is remarkable that the two medieval English kings whose glory has shone brightest down the ages are the two who most eagerly sacrificed the interests of their kingdom for grandiose foreign wars. Neither Richard I nor Henry V concerned himself much with the welfare of England. Both regarded the country as a source of wealth and power to be expended upon battles abroad. During a reign of ten years, King Richard spent less than six months in England. His wars and their consequences involved his subjects in costs that could only be met by heavy financial exactions; and the chief merit of his reign was that it tested the administration developed by his father Henry II and that it enabled one of the ablest of English statesmen, Hubert Walter, to improve and strengthen the governmental system. Richard's own contribution was negative, and but for Hubert Walter would have been disastrous. Yet to Englishmen of his own time, and ever afterwards, he has always been accepted as one of the most splendid and romantic of English heroes.

Richard Plantagenet was born on September 8th, 1157, the third son of Henry II, King of England, Duke of Normandy and Count of Anjou and Maine, and of Eleanor, heiress of Aquitaine, and the second son to reach manhood. His heredity was sinister. His father's family, the Counts of Anjou, were famed for their fierce temper. Henry II's mother had been heiress of the ruthless and capable line of the Dukes of Normandy, with Scottish and Anglo-Saxon blood coming in through her mother. Eleanor's family, the ancient house of Poitou, though it traditionally patronised poetry and the arts, had a reputation almost as terrible as that of the Angevins. Both Henry II and Eleanor were restless and high-tempered, with abilities above the average; but while Henry was a wise and conscientious administrator, Eleanor was irresponsible, and she spent her days in unscrupulous intrigue. One husband, King Louis VII of France, had already divorced her with a sigh of relief; and her marriage with Henry soon became a long, snarling dog-fight.

Of all her children Eleanor loved Richard the most. As the second surviving son and his mother's favourite, he was enfeoffed with her inheritance of Aquitaine, whose Duke he became in 1172, when he was aged fifteen. Henry had not been popular in his wife's Duchy; and its nobility was unruly and insubordinate, with a dangerous rival claimant in the person of the Count of Toulouse. Yet before he was twenty Richard had reduced his vassals to obedience, in spite of the distraction of a war against his own father, fought at his mother's instigation. It was during these years that his reputation was made. He was a splendid young man, tall and well-built, with red-

gold hair and the fine features and the charm of manner that characterised his mother's family. There was never any doubt of his genius as a soldier, and his thoughtfulness towards his men made knights from all over France eager to serve under him. Troubadours were welcome at his court and sang his praises widely. Bertrand de Born, the most famous of them all, had thought him at first an insufferable youth, but soon fell victim to his charm. Indeed, Bertrand so eagerly encouraged him against his father that Dante placed him in Hell for it.

Richard needed little encouragement. He was always ready, with his mother's support, to take up arms against Henry II, either with or without the alliance of his brothers. The climax came in 1185, when Henry decided to deprive him of Aquitaine and give it to the youngest of the princes, John, who was still loyal to his father. But to make the transference legal, Queen Eleanor had to be released from the confinement in which her husband tried to keep her; for the Aquitainians would accept no arrangement in which she did not visibly concur. Richard's elder brother Henry had died in 1183, and he was now heir to his father's lands; but he saw no reason why he should therefore lose his Duchy; and his mother, once released, gave him all her sympathy. The next four years saw a series of wars and short-lived reconciliations between the old king and Richard. The only beneficiary was the young King of France, Philip, later surnamed Augustus, Queen Eleanor's stepson, a serious, inscrutable boy with a precocious talent for intrigue.

While these quarrels dragged on, news came to the West that on July 4th, 1187, the army of the Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem had been annihilated by the Saracens and that on October 2nd the Saracen commander Saladin had entered Jerusalem itself. The Kingdom of the Crusaders had been founded by the heroic effort of the First Crusade not quite a century before, it was known that in recent decades things had not been going well there. But no one expected so overwhelming a disaster. To every prince and nobleman in Europe the loss of the Holy City and the True Cross, the most sacred relic of the Faith, came as a bitter shock and almost as a personal reproach; they were conscious that all their subjects were horrified to see them fighting with each other while the fate of the Holy Places was at stake. Richard, young, vigorous and famed for his skill in warfare, seemed the ideal leader for the army that must be sent to rescue Eastern Christendom; and Richard himself lost no delay in making a response to the call. In November 1187, before the actual fall of Jerusalem was known in France, he solemnly took the Cross. Next January his aged father and the young King of France followed his example; and all over France and England men prepared themselves to go on the Crusade.

But then there was delay. None of the three great potentates seemed eager to fulfil his vow. A war broke out between Richard and King Philip. King Henry joined in against the French. Then Richard treacherously joined Philip against his own father. The Pope sent a legate to order the kings to make peace; the Archbishop of Canterbury tried in vain to mediate. The Count of Flanders ostentatiously set out for the Crusade without waiting for his dilatory superiors. Peace was restored when King Henry died, in July 1189, and Richard succeeded to all his vast dominions. It was thought that the delays would now be ended. Richard and Philip were allies. Surely they would both now start on the great expedition. But still they hesitated. Neither king trusted the other sufficiently to leave his own kingdom exposed by his absence unless his rival came too. Richard had to go to England to be crowned and to raise money by the Saladin Tithe and other devices, and to arrange for its administration while he should be away. These duties, which Richard could well claim were necessary, involved six more months of waiting. Then, when both kings were ready to start, the Queen of France died, and Philip had to postpone his departure, and Richard would not leave without him. It was not until July 1190 that the two kings met at Vezelay with their armies and began their eastward journey.

Even to his contemporaries Richard's dallying seemed irresponsible. His early wars against his

father had been forgiven. But that after taking the Cross he should pause to fight his father again, and then to bargain endlessly with his brother of France, caused men to question his sincerity. In fact, Richard was sincere in his faith. He genuinely desired to fight the infidel. But he was always more ready to promise than to fulfil. He loved to reorganise and rearrange his affairs, but was quickly bored and distracted. Equal blame might have been laid for the delays on Philip of France. But Philip was sparing of extravagant promises, and he always made it clear that he put the interests of his kingdom even before those of the Crusade. It is possible that neither recognised the urgency of the need for help in the East. It was known that Saladin had been held before the walls of Tyre and that in 1189 the knights of Outremer had themselves taken the offensive against the infidel and marched to recapture Acre. It was known, too, that a greater army than either Philip or Richard could raise had set out in May 1189, from Germany under the western Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa; and it is possible that neither Richard nor Philip was in a hurry to join an expedition whose chief figure would not be either of them. As it happened, the great Emperor was drowned in a river in southern Asia Minor a month before the kings set out from Vezelay, and his army gradually dispersed. It was more than ever urgent that help should come quickly to the East.

Even so, Richard did not hurry his journey. His fleet had already left England, to sail through the Straits of Gibraltar and meet him at Marseilles. From there some of his ships, and a few of his men, went direct under the Archbishop of Canterbury to Syria. But Richard himself decided to stop in Sicily. His sister Joan, the only woman besides his mother for whom he had any affection, was Queen-dowager of Sicily and was being harshly treated by her husband's successor, King Tancred. He not only withheld her dowry but also refused to pay a legacy that the late king had left to Henry II of England and his heirs. Sending his army by sea, Richard journeyed by land to Sicily. Whether from a tendency to sea-sickness or from fear of the elements, he always avoided sea-travel as best he could. After nearly losing his life in a brawl on the way, Richard arrived in Sicily in September 1190. He remained there until the following April. By seizing the town of Messina he forced Tancred to disgorge Joan's dowry and Henry II's legacy. Then he changed his policy and made a close alliance with Tancred, who discovered how quickly Richard's friendship could be bought by gifts of money. As Richard stayed on in Sicily, King Philip stayed too, unwilling to leave his powerful colleague alone in a country so strategically placed. He had hoped to hold the balance between Richard and Tancred, but their alliance upset his plans. There was outward friendship, however, between the kings; and Philip released Richard from his long-standing engagement to marry the French Princess Alice. Instead, Richard decided to marry the Princess Berengaria of Navarre, whose candidature his mother had long urged because of the value of the Navarrese alliance to Aquitaine. Queen Eleanor came in person with the bride to Sicily.

During his sojourn in Sicily, Richard went to visit the ancient Calabrian mystic, Joachim of Fiore; and the record of the interview gives a vivid picture of his personality. He was able to follow with intelligent comment the saint's exposition of the Scriptures. He was profoundly comforted by the prophecies that were given him of future victories over the Saracens. But he was not averse to cracking cynical jokes, as when he declared that, if Joachim was right, the reigning Pope, Clement III, must be Antichrist.

It was only in the spring of 1191 that the Kings of France and England left Sicily. Philip made a good passage to Syria; but Richard, starting twelve days later, met with bad weather. His fleet was for a time dispersed and re-assembled off Limassol in Cyprus. The ship containing his sister and his fiancée arrived there a week before him. Cyprus was ruled by the self-styled Emperor Isaac Comnenus, a rebel from the Byzantine Emperor; and Isaac hoped to use the royal ladies as hostages. As they refused to put themselves in his power, he forbade them to send ashore for

fresh water. When Richard arrived, his temper exacerbated by a narrow escape from ship-wreck and from sea-sickness, he was furious and at once landed troops. Apparently almost without reflection, he set about the conquest of the island. Once he had started on this course, its advantages became clear. Possession of Cyprus would be of immense strategic value for the recon-quest and retention of land in Syria, just across the sea. Isaac was an incompetent general, and his exactions had lost him the support of his subjects. Richard had little difficulty in over-running the whole island, and its inhabitants suddenly found themselves under new masters whose financial extortions were no smaller and whose disregard for their native church far greater. The Cypriots were never to be ruled by fellow-Greeks again.

Having arranged for the government of Cyprus, Richard sailed across the sea and arrived at the Crusader camp at Acre on June 8th, 1191. Nearly four years had passed since he had taken the Cross; and that the Crusaders were still able to defy Saladin and keep up the offensive at Acre was in no way due to him. But his coming made all the difference to the Crusade. His fame had gone before him. Every Crusader knew of him as the most brilliant general in Christendom; and even the Moslems, though they sagely noted that Philip was his superior in rank, remarked that he was unequalled among the Christians in wealth, valour and fame. His prestige was, indeed, tremendous. His personal domains were the largest and the best organised in western Europe; and though he owed the French king allegiance for his French dominions, his overlord could not hope to control so mighty a vassal. He had proved himself a fine soldier, adored by his men. His recent triumphs in Sicily and Cyprus added to his repute. No one could see the weaknesses in his position. The Angevin Empire was not as invulnerable as it might seem. Its French vassals were always ready to respond to the blandishments of their ultimate overlord, the French king. In England the Crown was in control, but Richard's hasty arrangements left far too much scope for his intriguer brother, John. Richard's Sicilian policy and his alliance with Tancred won for him the enmity of the greatest potentate in Europe, the Emperor Henry VI, Barbarossa's son, whose wife had a better claim to the Sicilian throne than Tancred and whose hereditary enemy in Germany was Richard's brother-in-law, Henry of Saxony. Even his conquest of Cyprus caused offence to the leading German prince now in the East, Leopold of Austria, whose mother had been Isaac Comnenus' cousin and friend.

The story of Richard's Crusade has often been told. Its first triumph, the capture of Acre a month after his arrival, was not his achievement alone, though it would have been impossible without his army; and his presence gave new vigour to the besiegers. In spite of a severe illness he was always in the forefront of the fighting. After the capture of Acre, King Philip, who had been consistently ill since his arrival in the East, insisted on going home. Richard protested, but was not sorry to be left unquestioned leader of the Crusade. It was not an easy role. The Frenchmen left behind by Philip did not gladly obey his orders, nor did the Palestinian Frankish barons, though they played their part bravely when there was actual fighting. Nor did Richard's natural arrogance help to smooth things down, but his military prowess was admitted and respected.

Richard's first action as supreme commander was one which has cast an indelible stain on his name. Saladin had not been able to relieve Acre, and on its fall he sent to the Christian camp to make arrangements to redeem the Saracens captured in the city. His terms were accepted; but Richard complained that the first instalment of the payment was incorrect. He was impatient to get on with the war, and the presence of nearly 3,000 captives with their wives and children was an embarrassment to him. Refusing to accept Saladin's reasonable explanation, he ordered the cold-blooded massacre of all the prisoners. It was an unparalleled breach of faith and of charity.

When the slaughter was over, Richard led his army southward for the recapture of Jerusalem. In this terrible march in the height of summer down the Palestinian coast, Richard's genius shone at

its brightest. He chose his camping-grounds with care. He saw to it that the day's march was never too long. Moslem light cavalry hovered round him and picked off many of the French troops straggling in the rear, but Richard's ubiquitous presence preserved the discipline and the morale of the bulk of the army. After a fortnight, Saladin forced a battle on the plain of Arsuf. Richard's dispositions were excellent. His success in holding back his counter-attack until the force of the Saracen assault was spent gave him at last the victory. It was not a decisive battle, but it showed the world that the great Saladin was not invincible; and it enabled the Crusaders to continue their march and to reach Jaffa, the port of Jerusalem. There Richard hesitated. His experience had shown him the difficulties of a campaign in Palestine. He tried to see what he could obtain by negotiation. There began a series of interviews between him and Saladin's brother al-Adil, known to the West as Saphadin, which continued for a year before a settlement was reached. In the course of them Richard and Saphadin became close friends, and Richard quite seriously suggested at one moment that his sister Joan should marry the Moslem prince and the two of them should own a mixed Moslem and Christian kingdom in Palestine. Joan's love for her brother was not great enough to make her welcome his idea, nor did Saphadin take it seriously. Between the negotiations fighting was resumed. Twice Richard led the army up almost to within sight of Jerusalem and then retired, to the bitter disappointment of his men and of himself; his military sense told him that the capture of the city was far too risky an enterprise. But he strengthened the Christian hold all down the coast, building huge fortresses at Jaffa and Ascalon and capturing Daron, down on the Egyptian frontier.

Almost single-handed Richard defeated a sudden Moslem attack on Jaffa in July 1192; and the last battle of the Crusade, fought near Jaffa that August, was a victory for the Christians. So superbly did Richard fight in it that, when his horse was killed under him, Saladin in admiration sent two horses with a groom through the thick of the battle as a gift to his gallant enemy. By that time Richard was eager to be home. His health was bad; he had news of trouble in England; and he despaired of doing more for the Holy Land, whose political problems he never understood. The peace that he arranged restored to the Christians the whole coast-line of Palestine, though his fortress at Ascalon was to be dismantled. The Christians were given the right to make free pilgrimages to Jerusalem; and many of his followers availed themselves of the chance. But Richard could not bring himself to see the city that he had failed to rescue.

Among the pilgrims who went to Jerusalem was Hubert Walter, Bishop of Salisbury and future Chancellor of England. He was granted the honour of an interview with Saladin himself, and they discussed Richard's character. The Bishop credited him with every virtue, but Saladin, while paying tribute to Richard's courage, thought that he lacked wisdom and moderation.

Saladin was right. Richard's Crusade would have been far more effective if his behaviour had not been so unwisely arrogant. He offended the Duke of Austria, who was the leader of the Germans, by refusing to allow his banner to fly with the king's over conquered Acre. He let the French see that he despised their king, a man far cleverer, if less heroic, than himself. Worst of all, he lost the sympathy of nearly every baron in Outremer by giving his full support to the discredited ex-King Guby of Lusignan, whose family were his vassals and whose folly had been a prime cause of Saladin's conquest of Jerusalem, and by showing enmity to Conrad of Montferrat, the saviour of Tyre from Saladin and the husband of the next heiress of Jerusalem, whom the majority wished to see as their king. Richard climbed down, with bad grace; but soon afterwards Conrad was murdered by an Ismaili assassin, with the result that Richard was held by some, without justification, to have inspired the murder. Fortunately, Count Henry of Champagne, whose mother was half-sister both to Richard and to Philip of France, arrived to marry the widowed heiress and reconcile the factions. But Richard's dislike of Conrad was remembered against him; and his supporters even found it advisable to forge a letter from the head of the

assassins, the Old Man of the Mountains, declaring Richard innocent of any complicity in Conrad's murder.

With the Moslems Richard's reputation remained higher. The massacre of the prisoners was forgiven him as just another example of Christian perfidy, and his courage and military brilliance were held in respect. Moslem nurses would frighten naughty children by telling them that King Richard would snatch them away; while Saphadin felt so great an admiration for him that he allowed him to knight one of his sons, though presumably the Christian elements in the ceremony were omitted on this occasion.

Richard sailed from Palestine on October 9th, 1192. His wife, Berengaria and his sister Joan had left ten days before and had a pleasant voyage to France. But Richard's luck was out. Bad weather forced him to put in at Corfu; and he so feared that the Greeks might try to detain him, remembering his aggression in Cyprus, that he disguised himself as a Templar knight and took passage with four attendants in a pirate-ship that was bound for the head of the Adriatic. This boat was wrecked near Aquileia. Richard then hurried with his attendants, still in disguise, intending to reach the lands of his brother-in-law, Henry of Saxony. But his arrogance belied him. He was recognised while at an inn near Vienna, and taken before his old enemy, Leopold of Austria. Leopold at once accused him of the murder of Conrad of Montferrat and threw him into prison. Three months later, in March 1193, Leopold handed him over to his suzerain the Emperor, who equally disliked him. Henry VI kept him confined for a year, then released him on the payment of a huge ransom and an oath of allegiance. The confinement had not been severe. The legend of his favourite troubadour Blondel discovering him by singing under his window was a later fabrication. His whereabouts were well known. Indeed, he was visited by envoys from England and conducted business with them throughout his imprisonment. In his ample spare time he composed two poems that won a certain renown.

The five years of Richard's reign after his return from captivity have the appearance of an anti-climax. He found his lands in a bad condition. His brother John's intrigues had upset the government of England, and in his French dominions King Philip's bribes had weakened the loyalty of his vassals. The need to raise money to pay for his ransom did not add to his popularity. But even before his return, Hubert Walter restored order in England, and his own presence there for two months soon after his release put the government on a firm footing. He then concentrated on the re-establishment of his authority in France. King Philip was defeated in an encounter at Freteval, near Vendome, in the summer of 1194; and by a peace made at Louviers in January 1196, and reaffirmed the following year, Richard recovered all the ground that had been lost. Meanwhile, profiting from his knowledge of mili-architecture acquired in the East, he re-fortified his frontiers, culminating the work with the magnificent pile of Chateau Gaillard, on a rock above the Seine, which rose with almost miraculous speed during the winter of 1197-98.

Richard was now at the height of his power. Philip of France had been humbled. The friendship of his chief enemy in the south had been obtained by the marriage of Queen Joan to the Count of Toulouse. His old enemy, the Emperor Henry VI, died in September 1197; and Richard's influence largely helped to secure the election of his own nephew, Otto of Brunswick, the son of Henry of Saxony, as King of the Romans and Emperor-designate. More than ever before he appeared to be the leading monarch in the West. But he himself seemed tired and embittered. His private life gave rise to scandal. He had never lived with his wife since his return from captivity; and the presence of too many gay and vicious young men about his court provoked reproachful comments from the Church authorities. The popular preacher, Fulk of Neuilly, went so far as to accuse him to his face of being a slave to pride, avarice and lust. Characteristically,

Richard replied that he would make suitable marriages for these three daughters of his, giving pride to the Templars, avarice to the Cistercians and lust to all his bishops. The end came in the spring of 1199. Lured by a false report of treasure that had been withheld from him, Richard went to attack the small castle of Chalus in the Limousin; and there an arrow shot at random gave him a mortal wound. He passed ten days in agony, while the castle was captured and its garrison hanged, except for the knight who had shot the arrow. Richard ordered his life to be spared, but his followers flayed him alive. Queen Eleanor came to her son's death-bed, and it was said that Queen Berengaria arrived to see him once more. He died on April 6th, in his forty-second year, and at his own wish was buried by his father's side in the abbey of Frontevault, where in time his mother and his sister Joan would join him.

From the mere chronicle of his achievements it is a little difficult to understand the extraordinary glamour that from his own day onwards has been attached to Richard's name. The surname of Lion-heart was given to him in his lifetime, probably because of his unquestioned personal bravery, though a later legend told of his single combat with a lion and of his wrenching of the heart from the living beast. As a person there is no doubt but that he was arrogant, avaricious and cruel, treacherous to his father, callous to his wife and neglectful of his subjects. The only portrait of him that exists, his funeral effigy at Fontevault, shows a man of fine physique and handsome features but with a narrow, ungenerous mouth. Yet he must have had great charm for such diverse persons as Bertrand de Born and Saladin to fall unwillingly but wholeheartedly victim to it. He showed a liking for poetry and music and the trappings of chivalry, and his conversation was not without wit. The writers in his entourage were devoted to him and found excuses for all his misdeeds. The main secret to his renown lay partly in his gallantry and courage, and partly in his military genius. His soldiers worshipped him; and, indeed, their welfare was always his concern. For all his political unwisdom he was the greatest soldier of his time; and however fashionable pacifism may be, there is always a special glory that clings to military prowess. He was a supreme soldier in an age when soldiering was the noblest of professions. His contemporaries thought him great in spite of his faults; and though his faults loom larger now in the harsh light of history, we cannot deny him some elements of greatness.

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