

# ◆ Simon de Montfort and the historians

by Daniel Waley

*The career and personality of Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester (c. 1208–1265), the leader of the baronial revolt against King Henry III, provides a striking exemplar of the malleability of historiographical opinion. Montfort has been treated as hero and villain and (misleadingly) as ‘the founder of the House of Commons’. The attitudes of the writers discussed in this article should be interpreted in the light of their own times — for instance, the English Civil War, the Jacobite risings, the French Revolution and nineteenth-century Liberalism. The emphasis in the article is on the importance to the historian of his historical background rather than on his exploitation of new sources.<sup>1</sup>*

Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, is a figure much in the foreground in Lewes. He was the victor of the battle fought in 1264, the event with which Lewes is most generally associated, and street names in the town (Leicester Road, Prince Edward Road and others) commemorate the battle. However, the topic of this lecture is not the life, career or achievements of the great earl, but what historians have written about him; my theme is historiography.

Nevertheless, a preliminary biographical word is necessary. Simon was born around 1208 and he died in 1265. He was mainly French by descent (only one of his four grandparents was English) and he was born in France. In 1230 he came to England and there he was promoted to posts of importance by the king, Henry III. He married the king's sister Eleanor and in 1239 was created Earl of Leicester. A preliminary sentence on Henry III (reigned 1216–72) is also required. Henry was an incompetent ruler, in difficult circumstances, his poor judgement being shown most evidently by his scheme, an absurdly over-ambitious one, for acquiring the crown of the Sicilian kingdom for his son Edmund. Montfort became prominent among the king's many baronial critics by 1258, the date of the Provisions of Oxford which enshrined a constitutional scheme for conciliar control of the royal authority. By 1263 he was the leader of the baronial opposition to his royal brother-in-law. He defeated Henry and his son Edward at Lewes. In January 1265 he was responsible for the summons of a parliamentary gathering, to which a number of borough representatives were summoned, this being an innovation in England. He was defeated and killed at the battle of Evesham in August of the same year. His French background

and his royal marriage need to be borne in mind, also his piety. Friendship with members of the Franciscan Order was important in the formation of his ideas and he was wont to wear a hair shirt. In that he was noted for his piety he had much in common with his royal brother-in-law. To Dante, always a sure recorder of European reputations, Henry III was ‘*il re della semplice vita*’.<sup>2</sup>

In his lifetime Simon was portrayed by chroniclers both favourably and unfavourably. After his death the favourable view prevailed and he was revered in the popular mind as a saint. Songs were written about him, hymns celebrated him as a martyr, and more than 200 miracles were associated with him. One office in his honour begins ‘*Ora pro nobis, beate Symon*’.<sup>3</sup> But there was no early biography, or none is recorded.

An account of the historiography of Montfort must begin with the Tudor period. Since the Tudor writers were continuing the medieval annalistic traditions, the reader learns what Montfort did, and this was not accompanied by any analysis of his motives or of the circumstances. Such chroniclers related and did not judge, and there was no position favourable or unfavourable to the principal personalities. This is exemplified in the *Chronicles* of Raphael Holinshed, now chiefly remembered as a source of Shakespearean plays. In his treatment of Henry III and the barons, Holinshed made use of many 13th-century chroniclers including Matthew Paris, ‘Matthew of Westminster’, Rishanger, Trivet and the annals of Dunstable and Abingdon. Recounting Simon's rise, Holinshed says that ‘he was indowed with such vertue, good counsell, courteous discretion, and other suitable qualities that he was highly favoured, as was supposed, both of God and

man' and 'might right well, as for birth, so also for education and good demeanour be counted (as he deserved) a notable Noble man, for he was so qualified as standeth with the nature of the nobilitie'. He then recounts the earl's quarrel with the Earl of Gloucester, but says that after his death 'the people conceived an opinion, that this earle being thus slaine, fighting in defence of the liberties of the realme ... died a martyr'.<sup>4</sup> Holinshed does not use Simon's personality or career to air his own political viewpoint and in this reminds one of how much was lost when antiquarianism was superseded by history. He lets the sources speak for themselves and by his day serviceable editions had been published of the main chronicles of the 12th and 13th centuries. It is incorrect to believe that this had to await the appearance of the Rolls Series in the 19th century.<sup>5</sup>

We meet a historian, certainly not an annalist, in the author of *A Short View of the Long Life and Raigne of Henry III, King of England*, published in 1627. Who should this be but Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631), most famous and most acquisitive of English antiquarians. Cotton's collection was the principal foundation of the British Museum's manuscript collection, particularly of historical documents, but to him we owe the preservation of Beowulf, the Lindisfarne Gospels and much else. Cotton was a member of parliament and was a parliamentarian in sympathies when disputes arose after the succession of Charles I. As might be expected, his book on the reign of Henry III makes use of many chronicles (he names 16 of them among his sources). Cotton's book is a strange one. He sees Montfort, with some justification, as a royal favourite and surely has in mind the position of James I's favourite Villiers. 'Mountford', he says, 'a French-man became the next Object of the King's Delight, a Gentle-man of choyce blood, education and feature' so that he 'draweth all publike affayres into his own hands'. Cotton's line was critical of Simon, particularly in dealing with the period after the earl's successes; 'ingrossing to his followers the best portion of the spoyle', he 'is become a darling of the common rout, who easily change to every new Maister'. Cotton sees the baronial opposition to Henry III (whose 'improvidence' he criticizes) in the light of 17th-century developments, with the barons occupying the role of the Stuart Commons.<sup>6</sup> Since he regarded Montfort as too democratic, one may doubt whether he would have continued on

the parliamentary side had he lived on into the Civil War, but he died a decade before the outbreak of the armed struggle.

Cotton had departed totally from the annalistic approach, but a later 17th-century writer in some ways marks a return to it. This was William Prynne (1600–1669), the famous Puritan and eccentric whose ears were cut off as punishment for what was interpreted as criticism of royal ladies. Despite his Puritanism, Prynne fell out with the Commonwealth and welcomed the restoration of Charles II, after which he was appointed Keeper of the Records in the Tower (i.e. the embryo Public Record Office). His *The History of King John, King Henry III and the most illustrious King Edward the I* (published posthumously in 1670) made use of the records in Prynne's care and of many chronicles. The main theme of this rather odd book was the 'Intollerable Usurpations' of the 13th-century popes in England.<sup>7</sup> Prynne's *Brevia Parliamentaria Rediviva* (1661), however, was a very different matter. In this volume Prynne printed early royal writs and analyzed them most learnedly. Some of the material from the records which were in his care related to Montfort and his times and, for instance, he published the text of the writs of summons of 20 January 1265 ('Montfort's parliament') addressed to the Cinque Ports, showing the terms in which Sandwich was ordered to send four men '*de legalioribus et discretioribus*' to our parliament '*pro negotiis liberationis Edwardi primogeniti nostri quam pro aliis communitate regni nostri tangentibus*'.<sup>8</sup>

Two able and influential histories of England were written around the middle of the 18th century. That each was unfavourable to Montfort in the author's treatment of the baronial revolt is unsurprising when it is remembered that 1745 had seen a serious threat to the Hanoverian monarchy in the form of the Jacobite rising. Thomas Carte (1686–1754) in his *General History of England* (published 1747–55) reminds his readers that the parliament of 1265 was 'summoned by the arbitrary will of a rebel'.<sup>9</sup> David Hume, the great philosopher (1711–76) spent much of the 1750s on his *History of England* (published 1754–61). He describes Montfort's parliament as being 'on a more democratical basis'; it was 'certainly the first time that historians speak of any representative sent to Parliament by the boroughs'. Nevertheless, he is in the main a critic of Simon, who was 'a bold and artful conspirator'. He had 'great abilities and the

appearance of great virtues' but 'the violence, ingratitude, tyranny, rapacity and treachery of the Earl of Leicester give a very bad idea of his moral character'.<sup>10</sup> A more cautious line was taken by another Scot, the Reverend Robert Henry, in *his History of England* (1771–93). He concludes that Montfort aggrandized his own family but 'whether he did this in order to enable him to establish the liberties of his country on a solid foundation, or only to gratify his own avarice and ambition, is perhaps impossible to be determined'.<sup>11</sup>

With the period of the French Revolution we come to some interesting pro-Montfortian historians. Paul Dunvan published anonymously at Lewes in 1795 an *Ancient and Modern History of Lewes and Brighthelmston*; pages 1–432 of the volume concern Lewes. Very little is known about Dunvan, who was of French extraction, but lived in Lewes and taught there. His book is an original and most interesting one — and copies are rare. Dunvan's main sources for his treatment of the medieval period are the chroniclers. He was opposed to 'monkish bigotry' and he (justifiably) thought Henry III 'weak and unstable'. As for Montfort, 'calumny has added to the unauthentic catalogue of ... Simon's faults that he was not an Englishman ... can there exist a more mean and unmerited prejudice than that against the spot of a man's nativity?' After the battle of Lewes Montfort 'devised a regular and lasting mode of national representation, then hardly thought of in Europe ... Montfort's institution gave every freeman ... that mediate influence in legislation which every citizen ought to enjoy'. But Evesham 'ended the labours of the illustrious Earl Simon, who sacrificed not only his fortune but his life in defending the oppressed poor and in asserting justice and the rights of the Realm'.<sup>12</sup>

Sir James Mackintosh (1765–1832), yet another Scot, was a versatile figure, a philosopher and a judge, best remembered for his retort to Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*. As well as defending the French Revolution, Mackintosh published a *History of England* (1830) in which he wrote enthusiastically but misleadingly about Montfort's parliament. Montfort 'died unconscious of the imperishable name which he acquired ... by summoning a parliament of which the lower house was composed as it has ever since been formed of knights of the shires and members for cities and boroughs. He thus unknowingly determined that England was to be a free country'.<sup>13</sup>

A more influential work than Dunvan's and Mackintosh's suggests that views favourable to Montfort were current and respectable in England at the time of the first Reform Bill. This is the enduring *Little Arthur's History of England* (1st edition 1835). Lady Callcott, the author of *Little Arthur*, was no revolutionary or left-winger. Her first husband was a naval officer, the second a successful painter. Little Arthur was informed that Simon de Montfort was 'a very wise man ... I want you to remember that Simon de Montfort was the first man in England that called the people in the towns to send members to parliament ... The common people loved him so much that, when he was dead, they called him Sir Simon the Righteous'.<sup>14</sup>

With the middle years of the 19th century I come to the heart of my theme and to the most influential myth-maker among Simon's biographers. That myth-maker, however, was preceded by the author of the first and in many ways the best book on the barons' revolt, W. H. Blaauw. The book, Blaauw's only full-length publication, was *The Baron's War, including the Battles of Lewes and Evesham* (1844). Blaauw (1793–1870) was of Dutch descent. Comfortably off, he was able to buy a considerable estate near Newick, whence he could see Lewes and the battlefield of 1264. He was the principal founder of the Sussex Archaeological Society, its first Secretary and the first editor of this journal. His book is thorough, balanced and learned, based on the chronicles and on manuscript records in London and Paris. A posthumous second edition was to appear thanks to the conscientious C. H. Pearson. Blaauw was a Protestant, writing in the confident years between the first and second Reform Acts, he mentions George Washington as a comparable heroic figure, and he ranks as a pro-Montfortian. Montfort, he tells the reader, would have felt proud 'if he could have foreseen that from his personal efforts there would ultimately arise a vital energy, by which the expanding form of English freedom would cast off the slough of ignorance, bigotry and servility, until with unbounded power and domination, physical and intellectual, the nation should present to the world a fresh model of happy government as yet unknown'.<sup>15</sup>

In 1867 there appeared a German work which was to be the most influential element in launching the notion of Montfort as founder of the English parliament. The author was a well-known historian, Reinhold Pauli, who had already written a history

of England and a biography of King Alfred. A biography of Cromwell was to follow. The book on Montfort was dedicated to the illustrious German historian Ranke. The title of the English translation, revised by the author, was that of the German original and it reveals Pauli's principal contention: it was *Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, the Creator of the House of Commons* (1876). Pauli writes of Henry III's 'weakness and knavery', though the English long endured the consequences of this 'with the patience of the Teutonic race'. Montfort's parliament was 'a stroke of daring genius which was to immortalize his memory ... the birthday of the Commons was in that memorable year [1265]', though Simon 'died a hero's death for the national liberties of his country'.<sup>16</sup> All these developments Pauli sees in terms of 'the old Teutonic institutions', 'the legal customs of the Anglo-Saxons' and 'the old German birthright of personal liberty'. The strong racist element in much 19th-century historical writing, English and German (E. A. Freeman would have accepted Pauli's emphasis on the Anglo-Saxon origins of British institutions and society) seems weird and unconvincing today — though one wonders whether more recent historical explanation in terms of class, with 'bourgeois' and 'proletarian' offered in lieu of race, may not come to appear equally ludicrous.<sup>17</sup>

Two biographies of Simon require mention principally as reactions to Pauli's book. Mandell Creighton (1843–1901) was bishop of Peterborough and then of London, the first editor of *The English Historical Review* and the author of a history of the papacy. His *Life of Simon de Montfort* came out in the same year as the English version of Pauli and went part of the way with Pauli. Montfort 'saw the force of the rising national spirit of England and marked out the course for its future progress', he 'upheld manfully the cause of English liberty'. Yet Creighton implies that in some respects Pauli had gone too far: 'we cannot credit Earl Simon with working any great change in the English constitution.'<sup>18</sup> The Cambridge don G. W. Prothero (later professor at Edinburgh and the editor of the *Quarterly Review*) had considered translating Pauli's book, but 'I found myself unable to agree with many of his conclusions.' His *Life of Simon de Montfort Earl of Leicester with special reference to the parliamentary history of his time* was published in 1877. For Prothero Montfort was 'a man of great ideas'; although his constitution died with him, 'England, half

consciously, half unconsciously, has been following the same direction ever since'.<sup>19</sup> But Pauli had exaggerated in styling Montfort the creator of the House of Commons. In his *Constitutional History of England* (vol. 2, 1875) Bishop Stubbs had taken the same line: he saw Montfort's parliament as 'a parliamentary assembly of the supporters of the existing government'.<sup>20</sup> Stubbs was characteristic of English historians in the strong interest he took in the evolution of the English Parliament.

Seventeen years after the first appearance of Pauli's panegyric a new biography of Simon appeared which was objective, calm and professional. This was a Sorbonne thesis entitled *Simon de Montfort. Comte de Leicester. Sa Vie ... Son rôle politique en France et en Angleterre* (1884).<sup>21</sup> The author, Charles Bémont, had sought out manuscript sources in London and Paris and one-third of the book's 380 pages were devoted to the publication of *pièces justificatives*. Bémont was critical of Pauli's exaggerated views on the subject of Montfort and the House of Commons. This biography held the field (though an English translation did not appear till 1930) until 1994. After its appearance it should have been impossible to hold exaggerated and anachronistic views concerning Simon de Montfort's role in the development of English parliamentary institutions, nevertheless this is not quite the end of my story. Though the treatment of Earl Simon by historians may have been less passionately favourable or unfavourable since Bémont's day, the result has certainly not been the achievement of an agreed neutral position. The two most prominent historians of 13th-century England in the 20th century were Sir Maurice Powicke and Professor R. F. Treharne. Powicke, the author of the 13th-century volume in the *Oxford History of England*, saw Montfort as 'litigious, querulous and wayward'. For Treharne the Earl was 'an exceptional and great man'. From these contrasting views one learns more about Powicke's and Treharne's attitudes to authority and their politics than one does about Simon de Montfort.<sup>22</sup>

All historians of the English parliament have long been in agreement that the innovation of 1265 does not mark a significant point in the development of English parliamentary institutions. This is made clear in A. F. Pollard's *Evolution of Parliament* (1912). Hilaire Belloc, not always admired by academic historians, was absolutely right in stressing in his *History of England* that 'towns had always been present in the earlier Parliaments of Europe in the

South' and that this would have been known to Montfort, particularly from his experience in south-western France.<sup>23</sup> The same was no less true of the popes' territories in Italy, where town representatives had been summoned as early as 1207. At the provincial parliament of the Tuscan patrimony in 1298, 49 towns were represented and their 173 representatives comprised some three-quarters of those present at that gathering.<sup>24</sup>

Yet old legends are slow to die in text-books. The influential and long-lived *Groundwork of British History* of Warner and Marten (1st edition 1912) thought Simon 'in essence ... a rebel', but it styles him 'this half-Frenchman who founded our House of Commons'.<sup>25</sup> A text-book yet more influential than this (first published in 1930, it could boast an 18th edition by 1934) refers to 'SIMON DE MONTFORT'S GOOD IDEA': 'Simon de Montfort, though only a Frenchman, was ... a Good Thing and is very notable as being the only good Baron in history.'<sup>26</sup>

Bémont's biography was eventually superseded as the standard life by J. R. Maddicott's excellent *Simon de Montfort* (1994). Maddicott sees Montfort's reform movement as 'the most fundamental attempt to redistribute power within the English state before the 17th century'. For him, Simon was a committed reformer with a 'new political idealism', even though he had private grievances. As for the 1265 parliament, he would define it as a partisan assembly in which ecclesiastics were much over-represented and earls and magnates under-represented.<sup>27</sup>

In concluding, I would emphasize that the baronial opponents of Henry III were fully justified in their criticisms of his rule and that there were selfish elements among Montfort's motives, though his family policy after his victory at Lewes is explained by the Montforts' lack of a powerful territorial basis in England. The notion of Simon as

a significant parliamentary innovator can be dismissed as incorrect and misleading. The crucial stages in the development of modern parliamentary institutions in this country date from the Tudor and Stuart periods.

My theme has been history and the writing of history rather than the life and character of the great Earl of Leicester. I have sought to persuade you that history is not a body of 'facts' which historians mine or 'research' in order to ascertain and then publish the truth; it might be defined, rather, as 'the past as it appears to the eyes of successive generations'. Thus the Barons' Revolt and the constitutional programme it involved have been seen by different generations in the light of the history of their own times, and the differing versions of Montfort that have been offered are not so much the consequence of the historical sources that have been available as of a series of historical backgrounds — the English Civil War, the Jacobite Rebellions, the French Revolution, 19th-century liberal and racialist notions, to mention only the most obvious. It may be particularly true of biography and of historians who have sought explanations (rather than being mere narrators) that they are at the mercy of shifting spectacles. But in any case historical versions shift and move on. An answer to an examination question on the causes of the English Civil War which would have 'satisfied the examiners' 50 years ago would now seem sadly defective — and this on account of new approaches, not newly available sources.

It does not follow that objective history is an idle dream and that hence it is pointless for the historian to strive for the truth of 'what actually happened'. The historian must interpret as best he can the sources available to him, whilst realizing that he or she is situated in the stream of time and is delivering no final verdict.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article comprises the text, with very slight modifications, of the 20th Emil Godfrey Memorial Lecture, delivered at the Town Hall, Lewes, on 14 June 2002.

<sup>2</sup> *Purgatorio*, VII, ll.130–32.

<sup>3</sup> See G. W. Prothero, *The Life of Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, with Special Reference to the Parliamentary History of his Time* (1877), Appendix II (371–81) and Appendix IV (388–91).

<sup>4</sup> R. Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (6 vols, London, 1807–8) 2, 384, 454, 466–7.

<sup>5</sup> M. McKisack, *Medieval History in the Tudor Age* (Oxford, 1971) and D. Douglas, *English Scholars, 1660–1730* (2nd edn, London, 1951), 156–77, are useful on this subject.

<sup>6</sup> Sir R. Cotton, *A Short View of the Long Life and Raigne of Henry the Third, King of England* (1627), *passim* (quotations are from 14–15, 27, 39).

<sup>7</sup> W. Prynne, *The History of King John, King Henry III and the most illustrious King Edward the First* (London, 1670).

- <sup>8</sup> W. Prynne, *Brevia Parliamentaria Rediviva* (London, 1661), 242–4.
- <sup>9</sup> T. Carte, *General History of England* (1747–55), 2 (1750), 151.
- <sup>10</sup> D. Hume, *History of England* (original edition 1754–61): quotations here are from the edn of 1841, 1, 570–88.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert Henry D.D., *The History of Great Britain*, 2nd edn (1788), 7, 38–47.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ancient and Modern History of Lewes and Brighthelmston* (anonymous) published by William Lee, Lewes, 1795, 132–67. For Dunvan see C. Brent, *Georgian Lewes* (Lewes, 1993), particularly 106–8.
- <sup>13</sup> Sir James Mackintosh, *The History of England* (in Lardner's Cabinet Cyclopaedia), 1, 236–8.
- <sup>14</sup> Lady Callcott, *Little Arthur's History of England* (1st edn 1835): quotation here is from the edn of 1924, 80.
- <sup>15</sup> W. H. Blaauw, *The Barons' War, including the Battles of Lewes and Evesham*, 1st edn, 1844; quotation here is from 2nd edn (London & Lewes, 1871), 167. I am principally indebted to the unpublished memoir of Blaauw by John Farrant in the library of the Sussex Archaeological Society.
- <sup>16</sup> R. Pauli, *Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, the Creator of the House of Commons* (revised English edn, translated by Harriet Martineau, 1876: original German edn, 1867). Passages quoted are from 17, 18, 193, 238.
- <sup>17</sup> On Freeman's pro-Aryanism see J. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. P., 1983), 188–92.
- <sup>18</sup> Mandell Creighton, *Life of Simon de Montfort* (1st edn, 1876; revised edn, 1895). Quotations from 2nd edn, 3–4, 178.
- <sup>19</sup> G. W. Prothero, *The Life of Simon de Montfort*, see n. 3 above. Quotations are from 294, 298, 178.
- <sup>20</sup> W. Stubbs, *The Constitutional History of England in its Origin and Development* 2 (Oxford, 1875), 92–3.
- <sup>21</sup> Charles Bémont, *Simon de Montfort. Comte de Leicester. Sa Vie (120?–1265). Son Rôle Politique en France et en Angleterre* (Paris, 1884). Mention should also be made of M. W. Labarge, *Simon de Montfort* (London, 1962, repr Bath, 1972) a scholarly and readable biography which constitutes no fundamental advance on Bémont's.
- <sup>22</sup> F. M. Powicke, *The Thirteenth Century: 1216–1307* (Oxford: Oxford Univ P., 1953), 111–15. In *The Battle of Lewes 1264. Its Place in English History* (Friends of Lewes Society, Lewes, 1964) see the essay by Powicke (posthumous), 1–7, and that by R. F. Treharne, 9–102 (quotation from 63). The contrasting views of Powicke and Treharne (who constantly emphasized Simon's idealism) can be followed best in Treharne's *The Baronial Plan of Reform, 1258–1263* (Manchester: Manchester Univ P., 1932), especially pp. 5, 371, 378 and in two of the papers reprinted in R. F. Treharne, *Simon de Montfort and Baronial Reform. Thirteenth-Century Essays* (ed. E. B. Fryde, London, 1986). These are the 1964 essay cited above (pp. 77–170) and 'The Personal Role of Simon de Montfort in the Period of Baronial Reform' (pp. 317–44; originally published in *Proceedings of the British Academy* 40 (1954), pp. 75–102).
- <sup>23</sup> H. Belloc, *A History of England*, 2 (London, 1927), 298–303, 321.
- <sup>24</sup> See D. Waley, *The Papal State in the 13th century* (London, 1961), 110–20.
- <sup>25</sup> G. T. Warner & C. H. K. Marten, *The Groundwork of British History* (1912), 113–17. This was succeeded by many textbooks by the same authors.
- <sup>26</sup> W. C. Sellar & R. J. Yeatman, *1066 and All That: a Memorable History of England* (1st edn, London, 1930). Quotation is from p. 29 in 18th edn, 1934.
- <sup>27</sup> J. R. Maddicott, *Simon de Montfort* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994). There is a good brief treatment of the literature on Simon de Montfort in C. H. Knowles, *Simon de Montfort 1265–1965* (Historical Association pamphlet, 1965), 5–18.