



1215: The Year of Magna Carta

Danny Danziger, John Gillingham

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From bestselling author Danny Danziger and medieval expert John Gillingham comes a vivid look at the signing of the Magna Carta and how this event illuminates one of the most compelling and romantic periods in history.

Surveying a broad landscape through a narrow lens, *1215* sweeps readers back eight centuries in an absorbing portrait of life during a time of global upheaval, the ripples of which can still be felt today. At the center of this fascinating period is the document that has become the root of modern freedom: the Magna Carta. It was a time of political revolution and domestic change that saw the Crusades, Richard the Lionheart, King John, and—in legend—Robin Hood all make their marks on history.

The events leading up to King John's setting his seal to the famous document at Runnymede in June 1215 form this rich and riveting narrative that vividly describes everyday life from castle to countryside, from school to church, and from hunting in the forest to trial by ordeal. For instance, women wore no underwear (though men did), the average temperatures were actually higher than they are now, and the austere kitchen at Westminster Abbey allowed each monk two pounds of meat and a gallon of ale per day. Broad in scope and rich in detail, *1215* ingeniously illuminates what may have been the most important year of our history.

1215: The Year of Magna Carta Details

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From Reader Review 1215: The Year of Magna Carta for online ebook

Siobhan says

In 1215 in a place called Runnymede, a beleaguered king signed his name to what was originally called the Charter of Liberties. We know it better as Magna Carta, the Great Charter. Its impact is with us today, and not only in England. It is a document that enshrines liberty, that provided the world with the first glimmers of the freedoms we treasure today. Words of the U.S. Constitution echo Magna Carta.

At the time, though, the stirring words about freedom, found among the latter clauses, weren't considered that important. The earlier clauses, with their emphasis on how the king would treat his barons, were of much greater moment to those who witnessed John's signature.

If John hasn't gone down in history as England's worst king, it's a mistake. He inherited a kingdom that stretched from the Scottish border to the Pyrenees and managed to lose most of it. In the process, he earned the enmity of just about everyone, which is what brought him to Runnymede that day. It wasn't his love of liberty that prompted him to affix his John Hancock – or, more exactly, his John Plantagenet – on the great charter.

This book sets the scene for that dramatic moment in political history, describing in detail daily life and court intrigue, the reigns of the Plantagenet kings and the power of the church. And it does so in a style that's accessible and easy to read.

In 13th century England, few men – and no women – possessed rights that we take for granted. The men gathered at Runnymede that day changed history in ways they could not have imagined. Those barons gathered around John that day weren't actually lovers of liberty either. This is their story – and it's a good one.

Athena says

This is a great book but I can only do one chapter a month ... it's hard to get too involved with the 13th century when I know the catastrophic 14th is waiting in the wings to wipe it all out. Plague! Cold! War! Famine! I'm watching all these sweet busy little people in the 13th century knowing there's a giant 'oh HELL no!' headed right for 'em. Kinda depressing in all its 'The 13th Century was GREAT' cheeriness.

Elisse says

1215 is not so much a book about the Magna Carta as it is a book about the years leading up to it. It covers an entire range of topics on life then, from the church to royalty to science to home life. It's full of interesting facts. However, I did have a few problems with its organization. It addressed the years topic by topic, and often I would find I had forgotten entirely about the Magna Carta and why it was written. The chapter about the actual writing of the Magna Carta is not preceded by the chapters that talk about why it was written, which made it more difficult to remember for me. The chapters on the Magna Carta were fine. This would be

a great resource for a project on the Magna Carta, as it does provide fine context on all aspects of life then.

English says

Generally, a great introduction to the social context and the 'world' of the Magna Carta, everything from Political Culture, to Law and Order, rural and social life.

An era that saw the birth of the English Legal system, and the establishment of Europe's Great Universities and centres of learning- of which one was said to have been home to the legendary female physician, Trotula.

Only the chapter on the 'Wider World'-which inevitably includes the Crusades did I have some argument with. Saladin was not always the honourable man he is often hailed as in the West- and as the book often presents him to be. No mention seemed to be made of his duplicity, especially in the matter of the siege of Acre.

Also, there is evidence of trade with far flung regions such as the Middle East and even India long before the eleventh century- Byzantine Coins have been found in England dating from the Seventh century, as well as Lapis Lazuli stones which hail from Afghanistan.

Overall though, a useful and interesting book, which seems to make good use of contemporary sources, and co-authored by a renowned historian,

Arminius says

The book 1215 is more than just a book about the Magna Charter. It is history of the time period between 1200 and 1300.

The Crusades had a good write up on how Richard the Lion hearted captured Palestine and Cyprus however he failed to capture Jerusalem. He did however negotiate a free passage for Christians to visit the holy city. Richard became a legend. So did Saladin the leader of the Muslim cause. He was known for his never breaking a promise. He also invented the "jihad" (holy war against nonbelievers) to unify a fractious Muslim world.

In that period Europeans became more mobile through Europe and the Middle East. Prior to the year 1215 a person could easily be identified by which country he came from by their name. Afterwards names became entangled among the countries. For example, the name "Blanche" is a French name but became popular in England.

In 1215 the English Barons produced a list of grievances to King John and forced him to sign it. This document is known as the Magna Charter. The Magna Charter had been used by lawyers of the time to prove fundamental laws that govern their country.

Sean DeLauder says

Magnificent look at ~13th century England, nicely compartmentalized into palatable headings (e.g., Hunting in the Forest, The Church, King John, etc.) describing each and their influence on the creation of the *Magna Carta* or how the document influenced them. Fascinating to see nascent attempts to put checks on monarchic power, perhaps used as the inspiration for separation of powers hundreds of years later, and some aspects lifted for use in our most cherished documents.

Clause 39. No free man shall be taken or imprisoned or disseised or outlawed or exiled or in any way ruined, nor will we go or send against him, except by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.

Fifth Amendment to the US Constitution. No person shall be ... deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law.

Excerpts of the document are often featured in each section to emphasize the relationship to the chapter's subject--a full rendering is available at the end.

A really terrific, grand outline of the era for anyone considering writing a book about Robin Hood or someone who is myself, or possibly both of these things, which I am.

Monica says

Have wanted to read this since I listened to the wonderful *The Year 1000* as an audiobook. It did not disappoint. The early chapters especially demonstrate what it was like actually to live in England during the time of the Magna Carta. Castles, villages, education, the church, all with myths exploded. For example, love indeed was considered to be important in a marriage. Not everyone was religious, many people were literate, speculation existed that plenty of agnostics and even atheists were around. The educated knew the world was round, and knew the circumference of the Earth that had been calculated in ancient times. Toward the end of the book the authors leave social history and get into the history of political events. It has perhaps the most accessible portrayal of King John that I've seen. Even during the time when England was under an interdict from the Pope and mass could not be celebrated, the country people got along just fine by making some modifications and did not complain. Also, the Magna Carta, at first, was a complete failure. The Pope annulled it and the civil war it was meant to stop went on. In later decades, however, the charter was looked to as a foundation of liberty. The chapters on the beginning of the legal system, something I normally would find dry, were enlivened by descriptions of some actual criminals and what happened to them.

But mostly, this is a really interesting portrayal of life in England in the middle ages, one of my favorite topics, along with the usual political history. I'm looking forward to a few more books on this subject! This one filled the bill.

Susanna - Censored by GoodReads says

This is an interesting read.

It does not focus on the politics of 1215, except in brief in the last chapter or so, but looks at what England itself was like in John's reign, and why there was a need felt for such a radical document.

It also, incidentally, indicates why when John was succeeded by a regency for a minor (generally disaster in the medieval period) in 1216, it was *an improvement*.

Melissa says

My husband saw this text in my armload of library books.

Why are you reading that? he asked.

Because it's my right, I retorted. My God-given right.

Steve says

Mid 4. The authors provide a social and cultural snapshot of England in the year 1215, and the genesis of this most vaulted of constitutions - the Magna Carta. Firstly, they set the date in context by commenting that at this time Genghis Khan captured Peking and the Crusades were at their height. It was also a time in which monastic orders were founded and the Fourth Lateran Council under Pope Innocent III gave lasting shape to the teaching and structure of the Catholic Church. The authors focus on different aspects of this late Medieval society in turn, such as the glory of chivalric combat, epitomised by the rise of the tournament in the 12th century. The embodiment of the aristocratic embrace of horsemanship and the chivalry of the knight was William the Marshal, who made his mark on the tournament field to rise through the ranks to become regent during the minority of Henry III. During the 11th and 12th centuries, masonry became the fashionable material for building as opposed to timber, and this time marked the construction of the great cathedrals of Salisbury and Lincoln as well as the Tower of London. Although still in 1215 nine-tenths of the population lived in the countryside, the period marked the fastest rate of the establishment of towns than at any other period of British history. Moreover, by 1215 London was the second largest town, after Paris, in north-west Europe. From 1191 the capital demonstrated its greater autonomy from royal power by being administered by a mayor and aldermen. It became the seat of unrest as in 1196 a London citizen, William FitzOsbert, known as Longbeard, led a protest movement against unfair levels of taxation. Whether a real champion of the poor or an individual using the potential of mass unrest to promote their own cause, FitzOsbert and his supporters proved such a risk to the social order that the king's chief minister, and Archbishop of Canterbury, Hubert Walter, ignored the rights of sanctuary by forcing these men out of the church of St Mary-le-Bow to be dragged to Tyburn and summarily hanged. Such was the capital's bargaining power, given its wealth, that John, in trouble in 1215, attempted to curry its favour by issuing a charter confirming its liberties. This proved fruitless as a mere ten days later the city threw open its gates to the rebels, and the loss of his capital city persuaded the King that he had no choice but to negotiate. A further common aspect of towns in this period was the presence of a Jewish population, who had flourished under the protection of the Crown since first crossing the Channel in the wake of the Norman Conquest. Their chief business practice was money-lending, which were subject to taxation from the Crown, whose officers enforced payment of debts - one theologian of the time described Jews as 'the sponges of kings'. Such sentiment led to anti-Semitic riots

across English towns in the 1190s, most tragically of all in the massacre at Cliffords Tower in York in 1190, and a promise within the Magna Carta from the king to deal fairly with families in debt to Jewish moneylenders. Another aspect of the social milieu which exploded at this time was the growth of education. Though both Cambridge and Oxford universities were established by 1215, many noblemen's sons were sent abroad to study. Indeed, during the period 1179-1215 around a third of those studying at the University of Paris came from England, among them Stephen Langton, who taught theology there, and who would be a key figure in 1215. King John was born on Christmas Eve 1167, the youngest of five sons and eight children. Two of these were his half-sisters from his mother's first marriage to Louis VII of France. Despite being heiress to extensive territorial lands from her father, roughly one-third of modern France, Eleanor of Aquitaine had failed to produce Louis with a son, and the latter thus sought a speedy divorce in 1152. A mere eight weeks later she married Henry II, making him overnight the richest and most powerful ruler in Europe. Yet, Henry's eldest son and namesake would rebel against his father's rule and find common cause with Louis in 1173. Worse still, Eleanor, with exact motive still unclear, would support her son's cause and send her other sons, Richard and Geoffrey, to join their brother at the French court. The war of 1173-74 threatened to involve other European powers looking for an opportunity to cut Henry down to size, but disaster was averted with the quick capture of Eleanor. Though his rebellious sons were pardoned, Henry would keep his unruly wife in custody at Winchester for the rest of his life. Even before Henry's death in 1189 his sons quarrelled over how his empire would be divided up, a situation Henry had not helped by treating the crown like a family firm to be equally divided, with Henry due to inherit England, Normandy and Anjou, Richard to have Aquitaine, and Geoffrey Brittany. John was the only one unprovided for, leading to his father nicknaming him 'Sans Terre', Lackland. The rebellion of 1183 was short-lived due to the death from illness of the king's eldest son, while Geoffrey also died suddenly in Paris in 1186. Yet, the war of 1189 ended with the defeat of the sick and exhausted Henry II by the combined forces of Richard and Philip II of France. John, who had remained loyal to his father throughout, finally joined the rebellion when his father's position became untenable and Henry died in despair. With Richard's untimely death in April 1199 the throne passed to the 'runt of the litter', despite John's treachery in secret dealings with the French crown while Richard was away at the Crusades. The latter's lack of an heir making John the sole Plantagenet candidate. As soon as John ascended the throne he divorced his childless wife to marry a French princess. As such his son Henry was not born until 1207, therefore, too young to offer a viable alternative to his father when the events of 1215 unfolded. This marriage also undermined the loyalty of many barons across the Channel from which both Philip II and John's nephew, the son of his deceased elder brother Geoffrey, profited. His capture of his nephew, Arthur, and his probable murder would further add to his treacherous reputation. When John ascended the throne his dominions stretched from Scotland to Gascony and the Pyreness in the south. His lack of resolve in the face of the French threat would lead to the loss of Normandy, Anjou, and much of Aquitaine, leaving just Gascony, and this would eventually be agreed as the status quo with a hastily drawn truce with Philip in October 1206. The manner in which John would make full use of his powers of patronage over the English barons, in collecting rents owed, inheritance taxation etcetera, in order to raise cash to prepare an expedition to recover his lost French possessions, would sharpen domestic discord and foment the groundswell of opposition leading to Runnymede. Questions over the Crown's right to raise taxation and the justification for a call to war had been asked many times before, but in John's reign became more frequent and insistent. As a result, the Magna Carta would envisage the creation of an assembly of notables to proffer advice - a 'parliament' in embryo. The authors reveal that the 'Magna Carta' was originally entitled merely the 'Charter of Liberties' and only assumed its more magnificent title to distinguish it from another contemporary piece of legislation, the 'Forest Charter' of 1217. One of the most significant causes for complaint levelled at the monarchy was the detested practice of every king since William the Conqueror declaring inhabited countryside as royal forest subject to royal monopoly of its resources and the harshest punishments for poaching or unlicensed hunting. Indeed, by the end of Henry II's reign in 1189, the royal forest reached its maximum ever extent. Any monarch in need of ready cash could send out another forestry commission to fine anyone who had fallen foul of regulations concerning

designated forest, and both Richard and John even discovered its economic potential in selling back 'forested land' paving the way for 'deforestation' to be a feature within the demands of the Magna Carta. At Runnymede in 1215, the baronial reformers demanded that the extent of the forests be restored to that which existed at the start of Henry II's reign, together with the ending of the iniquities of the forestry commission - John would not be prepared to concede so much, but the Council which governed on behalf of the young heir, Henry III did remove some of the excessive legislation. Another issue which was prominent in the Magna Carta was the freedom of the Church from secular power. The murder of Thomas Becket in December 1170 was still fresh in many minds, and better illustrated than any other incident the power struggle between Church and Crown. The clergy greatly resented lay authorities' powers over ecclesiastical appointments, especially that wielded by the Crown. Thus, a dispute arose over the appointment of successor to the Archbishop of Canterbury on the death of Hubert Walter in 1205, between the favoured candidate of the Canterbury monks, and that of the King. Drawn into this struggle, Pope Innocent III proposed a compromise candidate in Stephen Langton and when John refused the latter entry into England, Innocent responded by imposing an interdict in 1208. This effectively amounted to a clerical strike and for six years no bells rang out over the country, no church services were held and no burials conducted on consecrated ground. The actual interdict had little effect as no lay protests emerged at the removal of these services, so the Pope excommunicated John in 1209 which again met with the King's indifference, having personally profited from collecting church revenues in the absence of the bishops. Only the threat of a French invasion and the practicality of papal intervention to prevent this finally led to John backing down and accepting Langton. Though contemporaries would regard his swearing of allegiance as ignominious humiliation, and naval defeat of the invasion fleet in the port of Bruges rather than papal intervention saved the realm. In one respect, the Magna Carta reflected approval of good government in its request for courts chaired by royal judges four times a year. In 1166 the whole English judicial system was transformed with the growth of the legal profession, the introduction of juries for certain cases, and the establishment of a central court of justice at Westminster. As important, was the setting up of a judicial circuit through the counties and the creation of a single framework of law to cover the whole realm - the Common Law. The authors also point out that a century before the Magna Carta established rights for freemen, a more fundamental freedom was attained with the end of slavery. It had been William the Conqueror who had disapproved of this practice and ended it, though the Lords were able to introduce serfdom through the law courts, thus making their tenants subservient to their excessive demands. As a result, though no lord could murder or sell their serfs, the latter had no rights to access public courts and serfdom would not end until the aftermath of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. The Magna Carta arose as the culmination of grievances against the Crown, and due to the fact that no alternative figurehead to John existed, as characterised most revolts in previous reigns. Thus, this charter of liberties and programme of reform was devised as an alternative focus for revolt. The authors state that, despite its mythical status as the cornerstone of English liberties, in 1215 the Magna Carta was an abysmal failure. Designed to end the conflict between the Crown and the barons, within its terms lay the seeds of its own undoing. Aside from the obvious fact that John was known for his duplicity, and could hardly be expected to adhere to terms extracted by force, the charter's own failsafe measures for this eventuality would amount to the destruction of the sovereignty of the Crown. In two clauses of the charter, a committee of 25 barons was established who would be empowered to seize royal castles and lands should they see fit. No king could submit to such terms, and John immediately sought papal annulment of the charter. This duly arrived in September 1215 as Innocent III denounced it shameful and null and void, excommunicating the rebel leaders. When the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, refused to similarly condemn the charter he was suspended from office by papal commissioners. Meanwhile, John had recruited an army of foreign mercenaries and so began the civil war in the autumn, leaving the rebels no option but to offer the throne to Prince Louis of France, whose forces landed at Sandwich in May 1216. With the death of John from dysentery in October 1216, his son was crowned king at a swift ceremony in Gloucester leaving Louis in a no-win situation as depriving the boy of his inheritance would have brought papal condemnation. In addition, the boy's advisers tactfully reissued the charter shorn of its more objectionable clauses. With the

new king prepared to govern according to its stipulations, there remained no reason to support the claim of a foreign prince. The reissuing of the charter had not been just an act of political expediency, as those clauses maintained suggest that it was considered worth modifying but held important rights which should be recognised. When revised a second time in 1217 it obtained its nomenclature to discern it from the accompanying 'Forest Charter', before being reissued in 1225. It is the text of the latter, and not the original Runnymede charter, which has entered the statute books and become mythologised.

Caity C says

An interesting read. There was a lot about daily life in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth century but I picked up this book to read about the Magna Carta. While it was fascinating to read about the religion of the time and the crusades, it was not why I picked up this book. Therefore, it could be 100 pages shorter. I did learn things I did not know about the Magna Carta but I felt most of the information I did know. If you are going to make a book that is so specialised you have to do it really well and for me it did not quite work.

John says

I enjoyed this. A very accessible read from which I learnt a lot. Very useful background read to Medieval England, including relations with its neighbours.

I liked the themed way it was set out eg Town, Countryside, School, Church, King, Forest etc and the link throughout to Magna Carta, the clauses of which end the book.

I can see why we've never had another K John. What a scoundrel! Interesting chapter on the significance of Magna Carta, mystical/mythical and otherwise. Happy 800th birthday MC!

It's worth celebrating. Any plans for the Govt to re-release MC I wonder?

Jen says

I picked up this book from my stash before heading out on a plane--mostly for its size. In hardcover, it's a relatively small book in dimensions, so easy to pack in a computer bag.

Luckily, it's also very interesting, and I found myself anxious for the "how to use a seat belt" speech to end so I could get back to my book. Rather than an in-depth look at the Magna Carta, and the players, it's instead a study of the time period and the culture that gave rise to the Magna Carta. What was like in England at the time and how did this affect the barons who eventually rose up against their king?

The most intriguing part of the book though might be the last chapter, where the author discusses the myth that has surrounded the Magna Carta and how we've made it into a hero of constitutional government. Definitely a good read and worth picking up.

Caitlin says

I rather think that Danny D. is a terrible writer. He tends to go off on tangents and feels the need to add information on sexual acts/women's bodies/random crude topics. Personally, I would have enjoyed this book more if it actually spoke of the Magna Carta more and at least related it to the topics in each chapter better. If you want to find out random information in the Medieval time frame, read this. Beware, there are statistics and facts that contradict themselves, not sure if the authors actually spoke to each other during the process to cross-check. It seems as though they each chose chapters and wrote them, because I have read Danny D. before and can pick out his writing style. This book also drags over information from The Year 1000 book, and there are exact phrases taken as well. If you are just looking for a briefing, read this book.. but, I wouldn't have purchased this again if I had to.. it was for a class so I had to.

Sarah - All The Book Blog Names Are Taken says

John, you rascal. Yay for mentions of Eleanor of Aquitaine and William Marshal. Full review to come.

+++++

<http://allthebookblognamesaretaken.bl...>

www.facebook.com/AllTheBookBlogNamesA...

www.twitter.com/SarahsBookNook

Rating: 4 Stars

I really enjoyed Danzinger's book 'The Year 1000', so I had high hopes for this one for a number of reasons. First, I like his writing style. it is conversation without being condescending about academics. Secondly, I was hopeful (and correct) that Eleanor of Aquitaine would play a role in the text. Some historians are dismissive of her, in saying she was not that important. I beg to differ - how else would Richard have been freed from Leopold, how might John have further ruined England had he usurped the throne with Richard locked up? She was badass and I dare anyone to say it to my face that she wasn't. (I mean, it's not like I would punch you if you said it to my face, but be prepared for a verbal tongue-lashing. And a zillion facts for why you are **WRONG**.) Anyway, also bonus points for references to William Marshal, arguably the greatest knight to ever live. Without he and Eleanor working behind the scenes (and sometimes quite visibly) it can be alarming to think of what other havoc John might have wrecked.

But, on to the book.

I believe that some readers did not read the title fully. I know this happens, as it is something I do all the time. I focus on a word or two in the title and then get all upset when the book is not what I think it is going to be or supposed to be. The book is not about Magna Carta. it is about the year 1215 (and surrounding years, actually), the year this fascinating and incredibly important document was signed. Now, realistically, Magna Carta was not important in the way we think it should have been - John certainly did not take it seriously and almost immediately broke the agreement. It was rewritten and reissued several times, but did not fully

function as it was intended, mostly because John was a weasel. I guess it is not entirely his fault, he was the baby of the bunch, called 'Lackland' because he had no inheritance to speak of while his older brothers lived, and was forever in the shadow of Richard. Still, he was a weasel for whatever reason and that comes through in the text.

Unlike Danzinger's previous book I mentioned that was broken up by each month in the year 1000, this one is divided into topics pertaining to the year 1215 and the early part of the century, really. We are introduced (or revisiting, if you are like me and already familiar with the era). The author presents information about life in towns, the countryside, schools, the Church, tournaments and battles, and so on. There is also a chapter devoted entirely to John, then the charter itself 'The Great Charter'. Something I found to be interesting was that at the beginning of each chapter, a quote relating to said topic was pulled directly from Magna Carta. It's a good way to get an understanding and become familiar with the document before actually diving in to the bulk of it.

As always, I am big fan of authors using contemporary resources. This book makes use of many of such documents, besides Magna Carta. There are clerk records, letters, diaries, purchase records, and more. I love this, because I love reading original material in the language of the time. It is not always easy, and sometimes I might have to read it a couple times to understand, but it is worth the time. Then, of course, the author includes the whole of Magna Carta, every single last clause that makes up this world-changing document.

As an aside, I was really happy to see the full text included here. In 2009, my mom and I visited Scotland and (very briefly) England (mostly just to see Wicked on Mom's birthday, the bulk of the trip was Scotland because it was Mom's dream vacation). For the one full day we were in England, I had booked a day trip that included visits to Bath, Stonehenge, and Salisbury Cathedral. But when we arrived for check-in, we were informed Salisbury had been closed for the day and we would not be able to see Magna Carta. I was so bummed. Windsor Castle was substituted, which would have been great - Henry VIII is buried there! Except...Queen Elizabeth II was knighting people that day so many parts of Windsor were also closed. It was some bad luck, but the perfect excuse to go back. And believe me, that trip will definitely happen.

Overall, I highly recommend this little volume. it is a small book, and a short book, but one well worth the read.
