

Notes for his book, *Myself as Witness* by James Goldman
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A Note to the Reader

King John, the youngest son of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine, ruled England from 1199 to 1216. His reputation as one of the most sinister, corrupt and vicious kings in Western history has been, for centuries, both a popular belief and an academic tradition.

I have written about King John before; he makes appearances in both *The Lion in Winter* and *Robin and Marian*. Following the mainstream, I conceived him as a violent, unstable person with no principles at all. Not so this time around. Several years ago, this completely villainous King John began to seem increasingly improbable to me. He was too black, too terrible. And so I went back to the history books, and the more I read the more it seemed apparent that tradition had it wrong: a very different John must have existed. What had begun as an emotional conviction gradually seemed to be substantiated by the facts.

What are the facts? Remarkably little survives that was written while John was alive, and the picture of him that emerges from these scattered sources is surprisingly complimentary. The evil monarch we have come to know begins to appear in chronicles, written a generation or more after his death. On top of which, the writing of history was a curious procedure in those days, and the chroniclers on whom we have relied give us reports of devils and dragons with the same conviction and seriousness that they accord verifiable political events.

Why these chroniclers made John into a monster is an unanswerable question. Possibly because England had had enough of Henry, and his children, possibly because John's reign saw more defeats than victories, possibly in response to political pressure of the moment.

In any case, over the last twenty years a number of historians have begun to make a new assessment of King John. My story rests on their revisionary work. I have put it into the form of a chronicle which I have based, as strictly, as I could, on fact. If it is known that John was, on a given day, in Dover, I have put him there. The writs and official letters are, with one exception, quoted from existing documents. The political maneuvering, the battles and campaigns are all drawn from data. There is, I think, no other way to reassess a figure out of history: one must base it on the evidence.

There are, of course, limits to this. Unlike the historian whose interest centers on the facts, my interest centers on the people: who they were, and what they felt, and why they did the things they did. In short, what I have written, though it deals carefully with history, remains a piece of fiction.

I have put my chronicles into the hands of Giraldus Cambrensis, as distinguished an author as there was in England at this time. He knew John and his family intimately, he was much involved with the Plantagenets. But in the years the novel covers, he was not among those present. He was living in retirement at Lincoln, studying and writing in the quiet of the

cloisters there. Even so, I like to think that I have used his eyes and ears, and that what I have written here is what he might have told us.

– J. G.

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