

Goodrich Castle and the Curse of the Marshalls

On 6 July 1189, the 56 year old King Henry II died at Chinon. Soon afterwards Count Richard of Poitou came to see his father's body. There he met William Marshall and agreed to honour his father's promise by giving him the hand of Earl Richard's only surviving daughter, Isabella Clare. William dashed across the Channel, receiving the Giffard barony of Longeuville on route, and married Isabella in the Tower of London in the later part of July 1189, after convincing Ranulf Glanville that he had the new king's permission. By this act William became earl of Pembroke in his wife's name, although he was not himself to use the title until formally granted it by King John some ten years later, possibly on the death of Countess Aoife^{*1}. Earl William Marshall was already a 42 year old bachelor with a reputation as a fearsome fighter^{*2}. Isabella was only a little over sixteen. Earl William died thirty years later in 1219, and in the intervening years Isabella bore him at least ten children. Four of the five sons were in turn to inherit Goodrich castle and all were to die childless in unfortunate circumstances. Even contemporaries thought the male Marshall progeny cursed, though the contemporary, but gossipy chronicler Matthew Paris (bef.1200-59), had a separate explanation for the extinction of the Marshalls.

A Remarkable occurrence connected with the great William Marshall and his five sons.

A wretched and lamentable misfortune, and one hitherto unheard of, happened to the five sons of the great William Marshall, who were all, in the order of their birth, taken from amongst us childless, whilst prosperity was smiling upon them in the midst of their possessions, and in the prime of life. This accorded with a prophecy of their mother, who said that, "all of them would be earls of one earldom", for, although Anselm was not invested with the earldom, it devolved upon him; and thus their mother proved herself a sibyl. I do not think, however, that we should believe that this occurred without divine interposition, and as this occurrence is worthy of mention, we have thought fit to insert an account of it in this work. When the brave and warlike William, surnamed the 'Mareschal', as though "Seneschal of Mars", was indulging in slaughter and pillage in Ireland, and was acquiring a large territory, he presumptuously and by force took away from a certain holy bishop two manors which belonged to his church, and held possession of them as if they were his own by a just claim, because they were acquired in war. The bishop in consequence, after frequent warnings, to which the earl replied with insolence, still retaining possession of the manors, and contumaciously persisting in his sin, fulminated sentence of excommunication against him, and with good cause; but this the earl despised, and, pleading as an excuse that it was in the time of war, he heaped injury upon injury. It was owing to these proceedings of his, that one Master Gervase Melkeley, composing verses on him, and speaking as if in the person of the earl, said;

In Ireland I am Saturn; in England the Sun's rays surround me:

^{*1} Similarly Henry Bohun was not made earl of Hereford until the death of Countess Cecily Fitz John about 1207, *Rotuli Litterarum Clausarum in Turri Londinensi asservati [1204-27]*, ed, T.D. Hardy [2 vols., 1833-44] I, 24; *PR 9 John*, 177-8. Her husband, Earl Roger of Hereford, had died back in 1155.

^{*2} William dismounted Richard the Lionheart in battle outside Le Mans by killing his horse with a lance thrust. Later Richard, his pride wounded, is said to have reproached William for his bad aim in killing the horse. William retorted that his aim was true and if he had wished it would have been Richard killed and not his charger! The Marshall's modern reputation as the 'best knight in Christendom' is rather family folklore than fact and his nickname of Scoffbeef is probably nearer the mark. For his life see, Crouch, D., *William Marshall: Knighthood, War and Chivalry, 1147-1219* [2002].

In Normandy I am Mercury, but France for ever Mars has found me.

The earl subsequently held these manors under his jurisdiction all his life until he died and was buried at the New Temple in London. When this became known to the bishop of Ferns, he went to the king who was at the time staying in London, and making a heavy complaint of the injury done to him, declared that he had excommunicated the earl for his offence, not without good cause; he then begged of the king, for the release of the soul of Earl William, to restore his manors to him, that the deceased might obtain benefit of absolution. The king, touched with sorrow on hearing this, asked the bishop to go to the earl's tomb and absolve him, promising that he would himself see that satisfaction was given. The bishop went with the king and many others to the tomb... and said;

William, you who are entombed here, bound with the bonds of excommunication, if the possessions which you wrongfully deprived my church of be restored with adequate satisfaction, by the agency of the king or your heir, or any one of your relations, I absolve you; if otherwise, I confirm the sentence, that, being involved in your sins, you may remain in hell a condemned man for ever.

The king on hearing this became angry, and reproved the immoderate severity of the bishop. To this he replied;

Do not be astonished, my lord, if I am aroused; for he despoiled my church of its greatest profit.

The king then spoke privately to the earl's eldest son and heir of all his property, William, who was currently invested with the earldom, and also to some of his brothers, and begged of them, by restoring the manors... to release the soul of their father. To this William replied;

I do not believe, neither ought it be believed, that my father took these manors away wrongfully; for what is taken in time of war becomes a just possession. If that old and foolish bishop has pronounced the sentence unjustly, may it be hurled back on his own head; I do not choose to diminish the inheritance with which I am invested. My father died seised of these manors, and I, with good right, entered into possession of what I found.

In this decision the brothers all agreed, and the king, being at the time a young man, and under a guardian, would not on any account give offence to such a powerful noble. When this afterwards became known to the bishop, he grieved more at the contumacy of the sons, than at the injury done to him in the first place by the father. He went before the king and said to him;

What I have said, I have said, and what I have written, I have written indelibly. The sentence is confirmed. A punishment has been inflicted on malefactors by the Lord, and the curse which is described in the psalm is imposed in a heavy degree on Earl William, of whom I complain, "In one generation his name shall be destroyed," and his sons shall be without share in that blessing of the

lord, "Increase and multiply!" Some of them will die by a lamentable death, and their inheritance will be scattered; and all this, my lord king, you will see in your lifetime, indeed, in the prime of your life.

After delivering this speech from the bitterness of his heart, as if inspired by a prophetic spirit, the bishop departed in sorrow. Thus was the noble Earl William Marshal, who had placed his confidence on an arm of flesh, left entangled in the bonds of anathema. As an evident proof of this circumstance, some years afterwards, after the death of all his sons, when the church of New Temple was dedicated, in the year 12[40^{*3}], the body of the earl, which had been sewn up in a bull's hide, was found entire, but rotten, and loathsome to the sight. The last of the brothers but one, Earl Walter Marshall, followed in his steps; for although he had most faithfully promised a revenue of £3 to St Mary, belonging to the monks of Hertford, and had given written promise thereof, because his brother Earl Gilbert died there, and his bowels still remained buried there, he forgot his pledge and promise which he had made for the redemption of his brother, and, after causing much useless vexation to the prior of the house, he proved himself a manifest deceiver and transgressor.^{*4}

We can see from this that the rapid demise of lords of Goodrich castle was of interest to contemporaries, although, as ever, Matthew Paris did not allow facts to get in the way of a good story! His comments on the affair were probably written after the death of Anselm in 1245 and therefore are nothing but a good story to explain the unfortunate circumstances of the demise of the earl's progeny and a warning to all concerned not to cross Matthew and his church! The story is not surprisingly expurgated from the shorter history of England that Matthew wrote for King Henry III in the early 1250s.

^{*3} The last of William's sons died in 1245, five years after the New Temple was dedicated and although Matthew obviously knew this, he never got around to verifying and filling in the date.

^{*4} *Matthaei Parisiensis, monachi Sancti Albani, Chronica Majora*, ed. H.R. Luard [7 vols., 1872-83] IV, 492-95.