

Remembered as a time in which 'Christ and his saints slept', Stephen's troubled rule plunged England into Civil War. Without clear rules of succession in the Norman monarchy, conflict between members of William the Conqueror's family was inevitable. But there was another problem, too: Stephen himself.

Stephen styled himself a political panacea, promising strength without oppression. Yet, as external threats and internal resistance to his rule accumulated, it was a promise he was unable to keep. Unable to transcend his flawed claim to the throne, and to make good the transition from nobleman to king, Stephen's royal voice never quite rang true.

The resulting violence that spread through England was not only the work of bloodthirsty men on the make. As Watkins shows in this resonant new portrait, it arose because of a new and turbulent kind of politics that appeared when the king was in eclipse.