

Henry III has a claim to be the most significant king of the Middle Ages, one whose long reign continues to have a profound impact on us. The son of King John, catapulted onto the throne aged just nine, he reigned for fifty-six years and, during this time, his country was transformed from being the private plaything of a French-speaking dynasty into a medieval state in which the king answered for his actions to an English parliament.

Despite Henry's central importance, however, his brother-in-law and most vociferous opponent, Simon de Montfort, is in many ways more famous than the monarch himself, whose self-conscious piety often put him at odds with those around him. As Stephen Church's sparkling account of Henry III's complex and important reign makes clear, he deserves to be better known and understood: for the birth of Parliament, the building of Westminster Abbey, and the development of a kingdom that still recognizably exists today.