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King John: And the Road to Magna Carta

Stephen Church

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King John has long been dubbed one of the “vilest” of English kings. He was brutish, untrustworthy, and ruled as a virtual tyrant—and yet his reign changed the course of English history. As renowned medieval historian Stephen Church argues, John’s importance has for too long been overshadowed by more heroic family members like Richard the Lionhearted and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

John was a skilled political manipulator, but his traditional belief in the unchecked power of the sovereign became increasingly unpopular during his reign, leading to frequent confrontations between the king and his barons. In 1215, a group of barons rebelled in response to John’s repressive fiscal policies. The peace treaty that resulted was the Magna Carta, which enshrined the king’s obligation to rule within the framework of the law.

King John offers an authoritative portrait of King John and the moment that signaled the end of the age of absolute monarchy and the dawn of constitutional law.

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