Marshal, William

by Ronan Mackay and David Beresford

Marshal, William (I) (c.1146–1219), earl of Pembroke, regent of England and lord of Leinster, was the fourth son of John fitz Gilbert (John the Marshal), his second son by his second wife, Sibyl, daughter of Walter of Salisbury. At the age of six he was given as a hostage for his father's good behaviour to King Stephen; despite his father's refusal to honour his commitments William's life was spared. Most of his childhood and early adolescence was spent as a squire in the household of William de Tancarville, hereditary master chamberlain of Normandy. In 1167 he served with his uncle, the earl of Salisbury, in Poitou, was captured, and was eventually ransomed by Queen Eleanor. He became a prominent member of the following of Henry the Young King and joined Henry's rebellion against Henry II (qv) in 1173–4. He was knighted in 1173, he himself knighted the young Henry, and on the latter's death was charged with carrying his cross to the Holy Land in 1183.

Marshal had returned to England by 1187 and became a valued member of Henry II's household. He served with Henry against his rebellious son Richard in France in 1187–8, and in a famous incident spared the future king's life. He was present at Henry's deathbed at Chinon in 1189 and escorted the king's body to its burial at Fontevrault. He immediately received the patronage and favour of Richard I, who granted him the marriage of Isabella (qv), daughter and heir of Richard fitz Gilbert de Clare (qv), Strongbow. However, despite the marriage, the king's brother John (qv), as lord of Ireland, was reluctant to relinquish his control of the lordship of Leinster, and Marshal had to solicit Richard's aid in order for it to be released. He appeared unable to exercise any effective control over his Irish lordship for another ten years; indeed his first visit to Ireland probably did not occur until 1200–01, when he founded the town of New Ross, soon the most important port in south Leinster. In the meantime he acted as assistant justiciar of England, loyally and capably served Richard in England and France, and opposed John's revolt in 1193. He became hereditary master marshal of the king's armies following his brother's death in 1194. Between 1194 and 1199 he was continuously at Richard's side in Normandy, and in 1199 he played a crucial part in John's accession to the throne, leading magnate support for the legitimacy of his claims. On the day of John's coronation, 27 May 1199, he was created earl of Pembroke and the following year was one of the sureties for peace between John and Philip of France. A rift was created between the king and his leading baron after the loss of Normandy in 1204; Marshal decided to do homage to the French king for lands he held in Normandy and in 1205 led opposition to John's proposed expedition to Poitou.

At the end of 1206 Marshal sought the king's permission to go to Ireland to tend to his estates there; already out of favour in England he was concerned at the activities of John's justiciar, Meiler fitz Henry (qv), nominally a Marshal vassal in Leinster,
who claimed the castle and territory of Offaly and was supported by the resentful king. Permission was forthcoming only when William handed over his son Richard (see below) as hostage for his good behaviour (he had earlier been forced to give up his eldest son, William (see below), to the king as a hostage). Marshal arrived in Ireland in February 1207 and immediately set about trying to win over the loyalty of many of his Leinster vassals, who had hitherto shown little affection for their lord. In May that year Marshal was behind a petition from the barons of Leinster and Meath demanding that the king force fitz Henry to relinquish Offaly. Incensed, in September John summoned Marshal and his justiciar to England, where through a combination of subtle promises and outright bribery the king managed to dislodge some of the earl's following. He kept Marshal at court throughout the winter and sent fitz Henry back to Ireland to cause more mischief – he had already engineered a destructive raid on New Ross by his followers while he himself was in England. Marshal's remaining support in Ireland rallied around his pregnant wife; with aid from Hugh de Lacy (qv) and his brother Walter de Lacy (qv), the Marshal following succeeded in containing the justiciar. In February 1208 fitz Henry was captured by Marshal's forces and allies, his castles were taken, and he was forced to give hostages. The following month in a tacit acknowledgement that his plans to undermine the lord of Leinster were at an end, John repudiated the actions of his justiciar and shortly afterwards removed him from office; Offaly was restored to Marshal and a new charter for Leinster was granted, albeit limiting the exercise of the lordship's franchisal rights. The antagonism between the king and Marshal briefly resurfaced early in 1209, when Marshal sheltered the fugitive William de Braose (qv) and his family in Leinster, but he hastened to Wales to assure the king of his loyalty when in 1210 he heard of John's forthcoming expedition, and he campaigned against his former allies the Lacys, taking part in the siege of Trim with the king.

With the exception of a short expedition to Wales in 1212 Marshal spent the years 1208–12 in Leinster, where he lived in semi-retirement from the English court, directing his energies towards the economic exploitation of the lordship. The town of New Ross, which he had founded on his first visit to Ireland, had become a major port, which allowed merchants to bypass the king's town of Waterford. He now issued charters for his towns of Kilkenny, Kildare, and Carlow, attracting burgesses and trade. He pushed forward the encastellation and settlement of much of his lordship, and founded Cistercian abbeys at Tintern Parva and Duiske (Graiguenamanagh). (He was also the founder of an Augustinian priory at Cartmel in Lancashire.) In October 1212 he was the leading figure behind a petition to the pope from the magnates of Ireland, deploiring Rome's treatment of John and assuring Innocent III that the Irish barons would remain steadfast behind the king. In May the following year he witnessed John's charter of resignation to the pope and loyally remained by his side during the period of vehement opposition to him and the succeeding civil conflict. He was present at Runnymede for the sealing of Magna Carta, having finally persuaded John to give in to the barons' demands. After the king's death in 1216 Marshal attended the young Henry III's coronation and on 11 November was unanimously chosen as regent of England. In May 1217 he won
a vital victory against anti-royalist and French forces at Lincoln and in September concluded a peace treaty with the French.

As regent he issued Magna Carta for Ireland, which was transmitted to Ireland in February 1217. In January that year he directed the justiciar to ensure that no Irishman be elected or promoted to any cathedral church in Ireland, arguing that such appointments would lead to disturbances in the lordship. Honorius III repudiated this policy of blatant discrimination in 1220, after it was brought to his attention by the archbishop of Cashel, Donnchad Ua Longargáin (qv). As a statement of English policy in Ireland it may have been motivated by Marshal's long-standing quarrel with the bishop of Ferns over his appropriation of episcopal manors. This case was eventually taken to Rome; Marshal engaged in prevarication and appealed to technicalities, was excommunicated by the archbishops of Cashel and Tuam, and had his Irish lands placed under interdict. Legend has it that the frustrated bishop of Ferns placed a curse on the Marshal family, decreeing that his sons would bear no male offspring and thus his name would die.

Marshal died 14 May 1219 at Caversham and on his deathbed passed responsibility for the under-age king to the papal legate. He was buried at the Temple Church, London. His long life was celebrated in a notable middle French poem, *L'histoire de Guillaume le Mareschal*, which consists of nearly 20,000 lines of rhyming couplets. It was written shortly after 1226 and was commissioned by Marshal's eldest son, William; much of it was based on the reminiscences of Marshal's leading retainer, John of Earley. Remarkable for its detail it is a valuable source not only of biography but also of social and economic history. William's marriage to Isabella, daughter of Strongbow, and Aífe (qv), daughter of Diarmaid Mac Murchadha (qv), heiress of Leinster and the honour of Striguil, produced five sons and five daughters.

His eldest son, William Marshal (II) (c.1190–1231), earl of Pembroke, justiciar of Ireland and lord of Leinster, was given as a hostage by his father to John in 1205 and was finally released in 1212. He joined the growing baronial opposition to the king in defiance of his father and was one of those magnates elected to ensure that the provisions of Magna Carta were fully implemented; for his role in these events he was excommunicated by the pope. In May 1216 he made homage to the Prince Louis of France, but by the autumn had repudiated the rebel cause and re-joined his father; he fought at his side at Lincoln in May the following year. After his father's death he succeeded to his vast estates but in May 1220 he ceded control over his lands in Normandy to his younger brother, Richard. He acted as surety for his vassal Geoffrey de Marisco (qv), the justiciar, in his agreement with the king the same year, and during successive visits to his lordship of Leinster developed a good relationship with many of his Irish tenants, particularly Theobald Butler (qv) (d. 1230); he led a contingent from Ireland in an expedition against Llywelyn ab Iorwerth in Wales in 1223.
Despite prior warning that Hugh de Lacy planned to invade Ireland in order to win back his confiscated lordship of Ulster, the English government was entirely unprepared for his arrival late in 1223; in order to enforce stability in what appeared to be the crumbling lordship of Ireland, Marshal was appointed justiciar on 2 May 1224. Accompanied by Walter de Lacy, Hugh’s brother, he arrived at Waterford on 19 June. His progress thereafter against Lacy and his allies was outlined in a detailed letter to the king. He quickly proceeded to besiege Trim and dispatched a force to lift the siege of Carrickfergus. The former fell after a number of weeks (August) and the latter was quickly relieved; Lacy was forced to retire and his strategy lay in ruins. Meanwhile Marshal sent a force against Hugh’s half-brother William de Lacy (qv), who barely escaped. With the aid of Cathal O’Reilly (qv) (d. 1256), Marshal’s forces succeeded in capturing William de Lacy’s wife, a daughter of Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, and his mother, a daughter of Ruaidrí Ua Conchobair (qv). Marshal also managed to cobble together a loose confederation of Irish kings against Hugh de Lacy, the most prominent of whom was Áed O’Connor (qv), king of Connacht. Though de Lacy continued to be a nuisance in Ulster, where he gained the support of Áed O’Neill (qv) (d. 1230), the threat to the lordship was removed and Marshal finally convinced Lacy to surrender in October, almost certainly after reassuring him of leniency. Lacy’s punishment was minimal and, probably at the justiciar’s behest, he was slowly rehabilitated in royal circles; Marshal acted as surety for both Lacy brothers, which cemented their agreements with the crown.

Marshal continued as justiciar of Ireland until 22 June 1226, when his removal appears to have been engineered by the English justiciar, Hubert de Burgh, uncle of Richard de Burgh (qv). The cause of Marshal’s fall from favour was his opposition to the new policy of the English crown towards Connacht; previously it had supported Áed O’Connor as king of Connacht, but suddenly it abandoned him and planned his expropriation in order to open the way for de Burgh’s claims to the province. Marshal objected and went so far as to try to warn O’Connor, though his motivation for doing so is unclear. He directed his bailiffs to hinder the access of Geoffrey de Marisco (qv), his successor as justiciar, to royal castles, and ordered his proxies, Theobald Butler and William le Gras, his seneschal of Leinster, to thwart any moves against the beleaguered Irish king. Marshal finally backed down in August 1226 when faced with the possibility of an open and damaging breach with the king and returned to Ireland to ensure his vassals’ compliance with royal mandates.

In general Marshal’s time in Ireland, when not spent fulfilling official duties, was fully occupied continuing the work his father had started on the expansion and exploitation of the lordship of Leinster. He initiated a further campaign of castle building and was granted the proceeds of the royal service of Ireland in order to further this; the castles of Carlow and Ferns date from his time as lord of Leinster. In 1223 he gave an extended charter to Carlow town and followed this with a similar grant to Kilkenny. He also confirmed his father’s gifts to the church and founded the Dominican convent at Kilkenny. Marshal accompanied Henry III on his visit to
Brittany in 1230 and remained there after the king’s departure. He died 6 April 1231 and was buried on 15 April at the Temple Church, London.

He married first, in 1214, Alice daughter of Baldwin de Béthune, count of Aumale, and Hawise, daughter of William, count of Aumale; but Alice died shortly afterwards. His second marriage, in 1224, was to Eleanor, the younger daughter of King John and Isabella, daughter of Aymer, count of Angoulême. He died without direct heirs, and his widow married Simon de Montfort.

The heir to Marshal's estates in England and Ireland was his younger brother, Richard Marshal (b. p. 1190, d. 1234), earl of Pembroke, magnate, who was born after 1190. His father gave him as a hostage to King John before leaving for Ireland in 1207, and like his brother he was released in 1212. In 1214 he accompanied John to Poitou and seems to have remained there for quite some time; he was at the French court when his father died and in May 1220 his brother settled on him the Marshal estates in Normandy. In 1222 he became lord of Dinan in Brittany through his marriage to Gervaise, daughter and heir of Alain de Dinan, lord of Dinan, and widow first of the lord of Mayenne and then of the vicomte de Rocha. By 1231 he was said to have become marshal of the army of France.

Marshal returned to England in July 1231 to claim his inheritance and eventually obtained investiture by Henry III, who was initially suspicious of Marshal's close connections with the French king. In 1232 he was one of the four earls who became sureties for the disgraced justiciar, Hubert de Burgh, and early the following year he led the opposition against the king's Poitevin advisers Peter des Roches and Peter de Rivaux, demanding their dismissal and lamenting their unhealthy influence on the impressionable young king. He was driven into rebellion when he learned of a supposed plot against his life by the king's advisers; in August 1233 he was proclaimed a traitor and his office of marshal was declared forfeit. He retreated to Wales, where he made an alliance with Llywelyn ab Iorwerth, and for some time he conducted a successful ‘guerilla’ war against crown forces. In the meantime his Irish lands were ravaged by the Lacys, the justiciar, Maurice FitzGerald (qv), and some of the earl's leading tenants of Leinster, at the behest of Henry III, who is alleged to have ordered that should Marshal be taken dead or alive in Ireland his possessions there might be shared out among those who loyally served the crown.

In February 1234 Marshal proceeded to Ireland with a small following, leaving behind the bulk of his forces to defend his Welsh lands. He immediately began to collect support from remaining loyal vassals, recaptured some of his castles in Leinster, and took Limerick. At a battle at the Curragh in Kildare on 1 April 1234 he was defeated, wounded, and captured. At first he appeared to recover from his wounds, but through the intervention of an inept (or deliberately incompetent) surgeon he died on 16 April at Kilkenny castle; he was buried the following day at the Franciscan church in Kilkenny. His death was represented by contemporary chroniclers as a deed of treachery, and it is impossible to reconstruct the true
events; evidence that he died by murder, of his betrayal by Geoffrey de Marisco, and of the king's connivance in this act is almost totally reliant on the rather dubious accounts of Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris. The immediate beneficiary of his death was Richard de Burgh (d. 1243), his leading opponent in Ireland, who may have been motivated by a wish to avenge William (II) Marshal's opposition to his plans for Connacht, and who was doing all in his power to restore himself to the king's good favour. Marshal's death shocked and scandalised opinion on both sides of the Irish Sea; according to one of the Irish annals it was 'one of the worst deeds done in that age'. Richard's marriage produced no heirs.

The eldest surviving brother, Gilbert Marshal (d. 1241), was allowed to succeed to most of his family's lands and titles on 25 May 1234, even though he had been intended for the church and had taken minor orders and held benefices before his brother's death. Gilbert appears to have developed a good relationship with the king (who was probably striving to put the murder of Richard behind him), and received a series of honours and grants in the summer of 1234. He was knighted on 11 June, and had the remainder of his family's lands restored on 22 August. Further signs of royal favour continued in the winter of 1234–5 and culminated in his marriage to Margaret, daughter of William I (d. 1214), king of Scotland, but his relations with the king soured when he allied with his brother-in-law, Richard, earl of Cornwall, in opposition to the king's foreign favourites in 1238. In November 1239 Marshal swore to go on crusade unless he was reconciled to the king, which finally happened in June 1240. He died (27 June 1241) of injuries sustained while participating in a tournament forbidden by the king, attempting to prove that his education as a cleric had not made him less of a warrior. Although he had one illegitimate daughter, Isabel, he had no legitimate children. His remaining brothers, Walter (d. 1245) and Anselm (d. 1245), succeeded him as lords of Leinster and earls of Pembroke, but they had less impact than their predecessors on their Irish lands. Following the death of Anselm, the last male Marshal heir, the great lordship of Leinster was divided into five equally valuable parts (though it was broken up into four new liberties, Kildare, Carlow, Kilkenny, and Wexford), one for each of William Marshal's five daughters or their representatives, and passed into the hands of their families. The Bigods, earls of Norfolk, became lords of Carlow; the Clares, earls of Gloucester, became lords of Kilkenny; Wexford passed into the hands of William de Valence; and Kildare was further divided, though control rested with the Vescys.

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CDI 1172–1251; Chartul. St Mary's, Dublin; DNB; G.E.C., Peerage; Orpen, Normans, ii, iii; Sidney Painter, William Marshal (1933); F. M. Powicke, King Henry Ill and the Lord Edward: the community of the realm in the thirteenth century (2 vols, 1947), i; W. L. Warren, King John (1961); Richardson & Sayles, Admin. Ire.; Hand, Eng. law Ire., 1290–1324 (1967); J. A. Watt, The church in medieval Ireland (1972); John Gillingham, Richard the Lionheart (1978); A. J. Otway-Ruthven, A history of