

## Whence Magna Carta

THE REIGN OF KING JOHN. By Sidney Painter. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press. 397 pp. \$5.50.

By JOSEPH R. STRAYER

"WE WILL take no king called John." This slogan of the rebels of 1381, directed against the supposed ambitions of John of Gaunt, was effective because it recalled all the legends of the tyrannous king who had yielded to the rebels of 1215. From John's own contemporaries, who charged him with unrestrained lust, greed, and cruelty, through the late thirteenth-century chroniclers who accused him of wanting to reduce all England to forest, down to the popular historians of the nineteenth century the stories of John's lawless behavior grew and multiplied. Against this dark background Magna Carta shone with added brilliance, and the barons of Runnymede became the fathers of constitutionalism and civil liberties.

There have been attempts to rehabilitate John, but they were as one-sided as the legends against him. We have long needed what Mr. Painter has provided, a sober, dispassionate account of the reign and of the man. Few writers have ever studied the period so carefully and it is on the basis of wide and exact knowledge that Mr. Painter answers the fundamental questions: What did John do? Why was he so disliked? There are no easy answers to these questions and the reader must study with care the detailed explanations of John's policies and the even more meticulous descriptions of the relations between John and his barons. These last are particularly important; in a country where fewer than 100 men had any real political power personalities were usually more important than principles. John's political (and military) strategy was often brilliant but his tactics in handling men were abominable.

John wanted to be a strong ruler like his father, Henry II, like his great rivals, Philip Augustus of France and Pope Innocent III. To be strong he had to push every royal right to its limit; he had to interpret every disputed claim in his own favor. There was nothing unusual or reprehensible in this policy, but to succeed in it a ruler had to possess either political skill, great military ability, or wide popularity. John had none of these qualities. There was a fatal flaw in his character which made him distrust everyone, even, at times, himself. There was an instability which made him hesitate when he should

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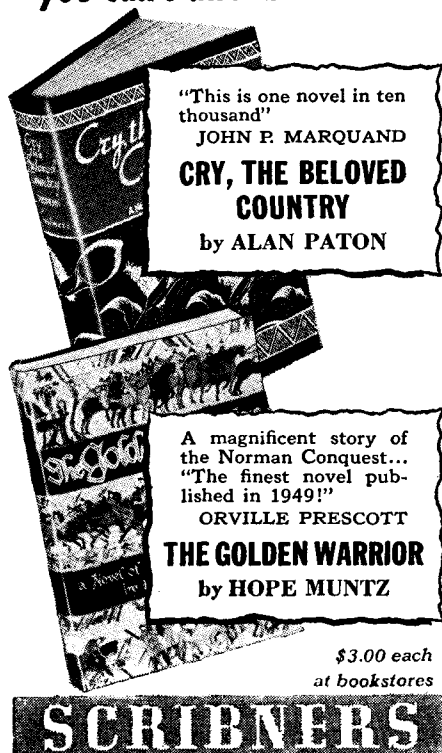
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have struck and strike when he should have temporized. The barons understood even if they disliked John's attempts to curb their political power. What drove them to violence was the unpredictable behavior of the king, causeless suspicion, nursing of grudges, attempts to ruin them financially as well as politically.

If John's character is only slightly improved by Mr. Painter's investigations, that of the opposition is considerably blackened. Most of the rebel barons were thinking of immediate economic gains when they rose against John, and a large part of the population had no more liking for them than it did for John. Yet out of this welter of selfish interests came Magna Carta, a document which with all its limitations is firmly based on principles of law and justice. With one or two exceptions it gives the barons no more than their due; it gives some guarantees to men not of baronial rank; it leaves the royal government sufficient power to preserve order in the realm. It is intelligent and moderate and yet the official leaders of the rebellion were not distinguished for either quality. Mr. Painter is inclined to give most of the credit to the great archbishop of Canterbury Stephen Langton. While I share his admiration for Langton I doubt that one man, whatever his ability, could have wrought such a miracle. In the hard school of the Angevins even feudal lords had acquired some political wisdom and John's own example showed them the folly of unrestrained ambition. Moreover, they had to conciliate the large group of barons who were still

neutral and justify their actions to John's feudal superior, the Pope. I suspect that they were ready for any reasonable compromise and that Langton merely helped them express their ideas in suitable language. Whatever the reason, the result is one more proof that we should speak of the luck of the English, not the Irish. They are the only medieval people who profited instead of suffering from a great feudal rebellion.

*Joseph R. Strayer, chairman of the department of history at Princeton, is author of "The Administration of Normandy Under Louis" and other monographs on medieval history.*

## History Notes

**THE CRISIS OF THE CONSTITUTION: An Essay in Constitutional and Political Thought in England, 1603-1645** by Margaret Atwood Judson. Rutgers University Press. \$5. A highly specialized inquiry into the confused state of English political theory in the period between Good Queen Bess's demise and the advent of Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell. The author, a history professor at the New Jersey College for Women, has tunneled through several mountains of Parliamentary diaries, Sunday sermons, pamphleteering broadsides, and the like to produce a book studded with extended, truncated, and paraphrased quotations, olden spellings, and innumerable footnotes. She argues that the Tudors, who reigned before the "crisis," built up the power of the State in ways heretofore un-

## Music-Box Mountain

(For Edith & Lloyd Goodrich)

By John Gould Fletcher

**I**N that house there were ranked half-a-dozen music-boxes,  
Rolling, rolling, caroling their close notes  
As the disks and the cylinders revolved. In that house  
behind blinds, hidden,  
The music-boxes chimed. But the air hung silent beyond them.  
And outside by the east-opening windows  
The wild plum and the redbud woke on the slate-dark mountain.  
Torrent of notes outsprung, where are you rolling?  
Down the side of the ridge, into the bouldered hollow  
And out again to the other side, waking the violets,  
Shaking the mullein, moving past the gray shadow  
Where a red squirrel flashed yesterday? The whole mountain  
is silent,  
As note on note rolls down. Now each hand-wound contraption,  
Assembly-line of boxes sounding through the locked room,  
Quivers to a quavering stop. O music-box mountain,  
I listen to you and feel only  
Across the sky, ridge behind curved ridge,  
Silence. Miles, miles away your notes may faintly echo  
Like a forgotten minuet by Mozart or an old gavotte  
by Bach.