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a New Element in English History

Author(s): Montagu Burrows

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THE PUBLICATION OF THE GASCON ROLLS  
BY THE BRITISH AND FRENCH GOVERN-  
MENTS, CONSIDERED AS A NEW ELEMENT  
IN ENGLISH HISTORY.

By PROFESSOR MONTAGU BURROWS, R.N., F.S.A., V.-P.R. Hist. Soc.,  
Officier de l'Instruction Publique.

I NEED hardly explain to this Society what the Gascon Rolls are, nor why their publication is a matter of importance. A very few words on these two points must, however, accompany the remarks which I propose to make on the reasons why their publication has been so long delayed, and on the course of events which has at last issued in their being brought to light.

The Gascon Rolls, as we all know, contain the registered Acts of the English King's Court of Chancery concerning Aquitaine, dated, for the earlier part, chiefly from Bordeaux, the official centre and capital of the provinces included under that name. These provinces, brought to Henry II., just before he became King of England, by Eleanor, Duchess of Guienne, were most frequently spoken of under the latter name, which indeed was generally held to designate the whole of the English provinces from the Loire to the Pyrenees. After King John had lost Normandy and its dependencies, and Henry III. had failed to keep or recover Poitou, the name of 'Guienne' came to be restricted to the actual province; and Gascony also for a long time meant nothing more than the well-defined province which owed its name to the Basques. But after the temporary conquest of the Principality of Aquitaine (so called after the Peace of

Bretigni) by Charles V., and the reduction of the English possessions to little more than the neighbourhood of the great seaports of Bordeaux and Bayonne, the term 'Gascony,' of which the capital was the city of St. Sever, always faithful to the English, came to be the usual appellation of what was left of the English kings' inheritance. It remained so more or less during the fluctuations of the Lancastrian reigns, and thus the Rolls were naturally styled and are known now as 'The Gascon Rolls.' They are, however, concerned with all Aquitaine, and record the transactions of two centuries, beginning with Henry III.'s war in France in 1242, and ending in 1460. The records of the previous century, including the reigns of Henry II., Richard, John, and the earlier half of Henry III.'s, are not found in these Rolls, nor have they been discovered elsewhere. It has been supposed that they were not kept in any central dépôt, and so came to be dispersed, but it is not wonderful that they should have been lost in the vicissitudes of the English Rule in Aquitaine. At any rate the presence of the last-named king, accompanied by his English officials, and the re-settlement of affairs in the provinces, begins a new order of Records, those which we now possess.

It is during the presence of Henry III. and Edward I. in Guienne that we find in the Rolls numerous letters from those kings on various subjects, interspersed promiscuously with every species of official document. Some, if not all, of these letters have been extracted by Rymer. Not a few of the Acts, speaking generally, affect England directly, as for the time the Sovereign of a petty Empire was governing his realms from his provincial capital. Perhaps in our present imperfect knowledge of the Rolls—for they can only be really known to a few experts—the best idea of their variety and importance is conveyed in the Report of the Marquis de Bréquigny, who examined the whole series immediately after the Seven Years' War, and copied several thousands of the documents.<sup>1</sup> 'Suffice it,' he says, 'that these Rolls furnish for general history a multitude of Acts relative to the differ-

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres*, vol. xxxvii.

ences between France and England from the time of St. Louis to that of Henry IV. ;—Acts relating to ecclesiastical history, titles of grant or confirmation of privileges granted to the churches and monasteries of France which had formerly acknowledged the King of England as their sovereign ; papers on the particular history of the provinces ; a numerous collection of documents concerning Normandy, Brittany, a part of Flanders and Picardy,—Guienne above all, which then included the whole part of France which lies between the Loire and the Pyrenees ; the foundation, growth, municipal laws, revolutions, sometimes the destruction, of their towns, castles, forts, villages ; and even exact lists of different orders of magistrates, genealogies of families, and a quantity of memoranda concerning their descent, alliances, distinctions, and services.’

Thomas Carte, who had preceded M. de Bréquigny by more than twenty years in exploring the archives preserved in the Tower of London, uses much the same language. ‘There is scarcely,’ says he, ‘a town in all Guienne which will not find among these Acts the charter of its incorporation, and other charters for the confirmation of its franchises, the augmentation of its privileges, and the grant of its lands. There are few religious communities in these provinces which will not find documents granting their lands, revenues, exemptions from certain imposts, and other advantageous privileges.’ So also, he proceeds to say, with the nobility of the provinces.

‘The Gascon Rolls,’ says M. Francisque Michel,<sup>1</sup> ‘possess an unrivalled variety and importance. They are a rich and inexhaustible store of materials for the general history of the two countries and the biography of the persons they notice. Not even the humblest class of the society of the times fails to find a place.’ And M. Langlois observes that ‘they constitute a well-spring of the first order for the history of English administration.’

These testimonies to the unique value of the Gascon Rolls might be largely multiplied. I say ‘unique’ because,

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *Rôles Gascons*, tome i.

though a Gascon document may here and there find the light, these Rolls alone afford the material for anything like definite and fruitful research. They are as important for the historian as for the antiquary, for England as well as France. When they are once published they will by degrees make a sensible change in the histories of France and England as at present accepted. Indeed it is impossible to have a better proof of their value with respect to the English Rule in Aquitaine than the silence upon that subject which the most cursory reader must have observed in the histories of both countries. By a sort of common consent it has been omitted on both sides of the Channel, even in professed memoirs concerning provinces so long held by the English. If the idea of putting that Rule of three centuries into its proper historical place has ever been entertained, it has been nipped in the bud by the practical inaccessibility of the Rolls. And yet, if one thinks for a moment, if one only glances the eye over Carte's Catalogue, it is impossible not to see that the relations of the Gascon provinces with the country of their 'Roy Outremer,' as they called their English lord, produced contact on so many points, especially with regard to commerce, wars, and alliances, that not only the political, but even the constitutional history of both countries cannot possibly be understood without taking it into account.

Let me expand a little the above remark on the value of the Rolls for English history, as distinguished from their merely antiquarian value, and especially on the constitutional side of English history. It never seems to have struck our able writers on this subject that the English Rule in Gascony was an important factor in constitutional history, or even a factor at all. For this they cannot be blamed. The materials lying hidden in the Gascon Rolls, the only possible materials, had not been brought to light. Those who, like Hallam, set the fashion in treating the subject—only too faithfully followed ever since—merely regarded the Royal Provinces in south-western France as personal and very troublesome appendages to the Crown of England. The almost perennial

struggle between the two countries, which grew out of the tenure of these provinces, was nothing in their eyes but an indication of the rivalry of jealous and combative monarchs. It was to be deplored and despised for the benefit of posterity; it was to afford a warning in the sense of Dr. Watts' hymn :—

Let dogs delight to bark and bite.

Did not these shameful and unnecessary wars cost the lives of thousands upon thousands of human beings? Did they not shockingly devastate France and corrupt England? Did they not lavishly waste the hoarded treasures of national exchequers? And was not the final expulsion of the turbulent and aggressive English a grand deliverance? Was it not a judicial chastisement of the self-willed and sanguinary policy pursued by the Plantagenet kings? Was not the chivalry which found its highest expression in these wars, as we see it embalmed in the romantic pages of Froissart, a mere childish efflorescence of a semi-barbaric age? This is the view of English history which has in modern times almost universally prevailed.

It is a common failing to exaggerate the importance of any fresh contribution to history. But it is quite possible, to say the least, that the publication of these Rolls may have some effect in righting what I for one consider to be a wrong in this estimate. When it is once clearly perceived that the exclusively personal aspect of the Plantagenet sovereignty over Aquitaine was passing away from the English mind after the reigns of John and his feeble son, that a new feeling of national responsibility was beginning to exercise some influence in the reign of Edward I., and that by the time of Edward III. the nation had learnt to take up the quarrel as its own, when, I say, these things are duly considered, the effect of that national sentiment upon the internal affairs of England will perhaps be more correctly judged. The repeated calls upon Parliament and upon the clergy for supplies will not be condemned as mere tyrannical and

blamable acts, but as a just claim upon the English people to fulfil obligations which they were gradually learning to admit. They will discover what an immense place these Provinces held in the English national system, what numbers of Englishmen were employed on this service in various ways,—so that there was scarcely a family of the slightest importance which was not at some time or other concerned in Gascon affairs, many of them continuously. To a very much smaller but still appreciable extent, they will find Gascons employed in the public service of England. They will observe that the development of mutual interests in the sea-separated parts of the little empire was coincident with the rise of the English Parliament, and will discover a connection between that development and the growing ideas of Parliamentary representation. The general progress of the Constitution will connect itself with these mutual interests, and their influence upon the dynastic revolutions of the fifteenth century will receive at last the attention it deserves.

In short, as the whole tone both of constitutional and political history may be reasonably expected to undergo a change, so, it may be added, will it become much more intelligible. Neither kings nor people will be looked down upon with so much lofty compassion for their supposed errors, nor their undoubted sufferings be regarded as a deserved judicial punishment. The Plantagenet dower will cease to be regarded from the vulgar view of mere economy. The English hold upon it will cease to be considered a mere question whether revenue covered expenditure; but it will be asked whether it was not right to recognise honourably such far-reaching obligations, whether a splendid field for the commercial enterprise of the sea-divided subjects of English royalty ought not to have been kept open, and whether the influence of England upon the Continent ought not to have been maintained at the height to which the country had been accustomed since the days of William the Conqueror.

Such considerations will then perhaps carry their due weight in estimating the events of later English history.

The Tudor dynasty, in extending the continental position of England, will be regarded as resuming rather than initiating an Imperial policy ; and the Stuarts will take their place as delinquents in suffering it to be eclipsed. The Hanoverian House, in founding the modern British Empire, will be credited with an 'expansion of England' which was by no means a novelty, in comparison with which all her previous history has been of trifling importance, but the restoration of an old position, a movement which can only be understood by the most careful observation of the whole of the previous events which led up to it.

Nor will our estimate of the honour and glory due to France for the performance of her part in the prolonged struggle be lowered by a full understanding of the difficult task which fell to her in the later Middle Ages. It was the indisputable interest and duty of that great people to clear themselves, whenever an opportunity should occur, of the terrible incumbrance which the marriage of the Duchess Eleanor had laid upon France. Without justifying several of the incidents of the struggle, it may at least be said that the French Suzerain of the English Provinces could not but be expected to take full advantage of the weaker periods of his vassal's government, just as the vassal with equal adroitness used the weakness of his Suzerain to strengthen his own anomalous position. There were rights and wrongs on both sides, and each perceived the merits of his own case with the same onesidedness as men have in all times exhibited. There was the amplest justification for the persistent attempts of the English to hold their own ; and though we can now see that they were sure to fail in the long run, it would have been a very un-English proceeding to give their rights away without a struggle and without an equivalent.

These remarks will suggest that there is abundant reason for desiring all the light which can be obtained upon the English Rule in Gascony, and that it will illuminate a far larger area than might be expected from such a series of documents. It is clearly no petty or unimportant publication,



but an effort of the largest kind to construct and correct history, one truly deserving of the conjunct operation of the two great Powers whose differences for many ages shook the world, and whose united influence has now for nearly a century promoted its progress.

These, then, are the Rolls of parchment which have been for 600 years and more, and still are, practically inaccessible. There are 151 of them, some of great length, made up of membranes or skins sewn together. Each Roll differs from another in the number of membranes it contains. The records of one reign will average 18 membranes to one Roll, of another 10; the total number amounting to about 1,800. They are very thickly covered over with the minute writing of that period, the words of course being crabbed with contractions, sometimes to an unusual extent. Experts alone can read this writing; but who can make an efficient study of such a set of MS. records? And yet this is what we now demand. M. de Bréquigny described it as a frightful task, and he was quite right. If one employs an expert it costs from three shillings to five shillings an hour. You do not, however, know where to direct the expert to look, and if you do not give it up in despair, you must be more than human.

But by this time some will be ready to ask:—Why all this difficulty? Have we not Carte's Catalogue? You will see that even if it were perfect it would ill serve the larger purposes above indicated. But as it is essentially defective, we must now observe how it came to be so—at least as far as we have the means of forming a judgment. And this is a necessary part of our work, since there are still some persons who suppose Carte's Catalogue to be a sufficient guide to the Rolls, and they die hard.

In his Preface to the Catalogue, Carte tells us that in 1728 'he undertook the task out of his zeal to serve the French nation, and to show how sensible he was of the kindness he had received' [when in exile for his Jacobite opinions during the reign of King George I.]. He found the labour of making a thorough study of the Rolls too much for

the time at his disposal. 'I therefore preferred,' he says, 'to pay for a copy of the Catalogue [which then accompanied the Rolls], that I might examine it at leisure.' Having returned to France in 1739, he was asked to search for fresh documents, and having shown his copy of the Tower Catalogue to some friends, was begged to print it. This he did, along with the Norman and French Rolls of the English Chancery, which were deposited in the Tower with the Gascon. By this means he considered that 'all the difficulties which had previously rendered most researches unfruitful would be removed.' He then describes the trouble it cost him to form an index of names and places, which involved not only a collection of these, full of difficulty as they were in consequence of the antique orthography, but also copious reference to genealogical and geographical works, and to such other charters as he could collect.

Now we have reason to be thankful to this industrious author, who was one of the first to write English history from original records, for what he did, and still more as he did this particular service from the highest motives of gratitude; but it is most unfortunate that he did not perform what he promised in his Preface, which was to collate his Catalogue again with those in the Tower. It is impossible that he could have done so, or he would have discovered the enormous difference between the two lists of papers. Judging by the only part of the Rolls which has yet been published, embracing the major portion of Henry III.'s reign, it will be seen that his Catalogue only informs us of the existence of 101 documents in the whole reign, while the actual number already published is 4,314. Assuming that the remainder of the reign brings the number up to 5,000, Carte has only printed one in 500. What may be the case with the other reigns we shall soon see. It appears hopeless to guess how this came about. There is no sign of any principle of selection; and if there were, one would expect to find some statement to that effect, but there is nothing of the kind. We should be able to unravel the

mystery if the Tower Catalogues used by Carte were still to be found ; but the following paper, with which I have been kindly supplied by the Director of the Society of Antiquaries, Mr. H. S. Milman, destroys that possibility. As it is not long I will read it here. It is a MS. note in Carte's handwriting, wafered into the leaf opposite to the title-page of Vol. I. of his printed 'Catalogue des Rôles Gascons,' in the Inner Temple Library, and runs as follows:—'I printed 250 copies of the Gascon, French, and Norman Rolls at Paris. I believe I have one or two sets here. They are in two volumes folio ; the price two guineas in sheets. There is no repertorium to these Rolls in the Tower, that from which I had mine transcribed, [and] which I printed, having been lent to the late Mr. Topham and lost, so that Mr. Holmes and Mr. Rook [apparently officers in charge of the Tower records] have been forced to apply to me for knowing where to find the particular pieces wanted. Most of our kings' grants of estates in England, passed whilst they were abroad, were entered in these Rolls ; and 'tis vain to search for rewards granted for services in foreign wars among the English Rolls, to which only the repertoriums [now] in the Tower relate.'

So much for the careless guardianship of records which obtained in old times. So much also for the necessity which is thus proved to exist for a complete publication. The Rolls were removed to the Record Office about half a century ago, and thus have long been freed from the difficulties of consulting them and other records so pathetically described by M. de Bréquigny.<sup>1</sup> These I must omit for the sake of brevity, but it is pleasant to observe that this learned victim of disorder found some compensation in the extremely kind way in which he was received generally by English savants, and by King George III. himself, who told him that he took the greatest interest in his researches. After spending much time in the Exchequer, looking for documents regarding France, he began upon the Gascon Rolls in the Tower, 'with

<sup>1</sup> Letter of October 3, 1765, quoted by F. Michel. p. iii, Introduction, *Gascon Rolls*.

the intention of transcribing the principal documents given in Carte's Catalogue, but soon perceived that there was no indication whatever of a great part of the documents, and often that the most interesting were those omitted.' He then gives the description of the Rolls which has been already recited, and concludes with a particular example of Carte's omissions, affecting the history of the Siege of Calais, which was of considerable importance. This seems to be the first public notice of the defects of Carte's Catalogue. M. Francisque Michel, in his Preface to the volume of the Rolls published by himself, goes further:—'People have leaned too long,' says he, 'on Carte's publication . . . . The succinct catalogue which he has given is simply a copy of the catalogues of these two collections, much abridged . . . . The compilers of these catalogues, neglecting as useless the documents which only concerned obscure private persons, made no mention of them,' and thus, as he says, led historians into many errors. As in all such cases, *suppressio veri* is really *suggestio falsi*.

It would seem that neither the French nor English people paid much attention to these Rolls for more than two centuries after they had been deposited in the Tower. It was not likely that either of them should care much for the memories of the English rule in Aquitaine. Here and there a seigneur of those parts might consult them, at a ruinous price, upon his rights and privileges. But the impulse which led to Carte's undertaking was derived from the policy of Louis XIV. and Louis XV., who appointed Royal Commissions from amongst the Council of France for the purpose of a complete registration of the French nobility. Edicts for this registration, professing to be levelled against usurpers of the 'titre de noblesse,' extend from 1696 to 1717. The question of title thus became only too familiar to the French nobles and gentry, and Carte could not have taken a better method of returning the kindness shown him in exile than that of supplying his friends with the means of facilitating their inquiries into such evidences of their title as the Gascon, Norman, and French Rolls supplied.

There was a long interval between the discovery that Carte's Catalogue was defective and any serious attempt to rectify it. Constant wars intervened. We have seen that at the first note of a permanent peace M. de Bréquigny's strenuous efforts had achieved a certain success; but the MS. volumes containing his researches were retained in his own possession till just before his death in 1794, soon after which they found their way to the Royal Library. It was not till 1842 that M. Jules Delpit was commissioned by the French Government to visit London in order to complete Bréquigny's work, and he produced enough matter to fill several volumes; but, says M. Francisque Michel, from whose Preface to Volume I. of the 'Gascon Rolls' I obtain this information, 'the Government did not feel itself able to undertake the expense of publication, and only one volume saw the light. This,' he says, 'might make a valuable appendix to the Rolls.' M. F. Michel then tells us that the English Record Commission undertook the publication, but the Commission was soon dissolved on the score of expense. A small portion of the Rolls already printed was handed over to him gratis by Sir John Romilly, Master of the Rolls. M. Félix Solar then resolved to present his Gascon countrymen with the coveted gift, but a 'financial catastrophe overwhelmed his noble design.' At length, in 1875, the French Government entrusted the work to M. F. Michel himself. This author, well known for his researches in medieval literature, did not, however, produce any fruits of his labour till 1885, when he brought out a single volume, containing the first six Rolls of Henry III. The fatality, however, attaching to the enterprise still pursued it. The editor was now eighty years of age, and died almost immediately after he had finished this volume. He could not otherwise have left it without an index, which in such a work is absolutely indispensable; nor if he had been a younger man could he have failed to elucidate the text from the stores of medieval knowledge which he must have acquired.

But it is only proper to add that though M. F. Michel

failed to fulfil the expectations of his employers, he behaved towards the writer of this paper with kindness and consideration ; and it is not too much to say that the present arrangement for the publication has sprung from that intercourse. It was from him that the writer of this paper obtained information which enabled him to complete his researches into the history of the family of Brocas of Beaurepaire ; and when Michel died, and all hope of continuing his work seemed to be at an end, it was the interest in the subject thus gained which suggested a method of overcoming the difficulties presented by circumstances. Those circumstances are of a somewhat too personal nature for this paper. Only four names require mention on the side of the French and two on the side of the British, for the purpose of indicating the quarter from whence assistance has been derived. In settling the part to be taken by the French Government in a joint scheme of publication, the two veterans who stand at the head of French antiquarian literature, M. Paul Meyer and M. Léopold Delisle, and their two rapidly rising subordinates, M. C. V. Langlois and M. C. Bémont, both of l'École des Chartes, have been the main contributors to the result. Of the two last, M. Langlois has been the actual agent during a recent visit to England, and M. Bémont has undertaken to fill the extremely arduous post of editor. The French Government takes on itself the expense of and responsibility for transcribing, editing, and printing ; the English supplies photographs of the Rolls. The superintendence of the British part of the compact has, of course, been entrusted to the careful hands of Mr. Maxwell Lyte, the Deputy Keeper of the Records, and the small annual sum by which it was found necessary to supplement the grants from the Treasury usually assigned for such purposes was obtained through the willing adoption of the idea by the late First Lord, the Right Hon. W. H. Smith. His accustomed largeness of view and kindly spirit responded at once to the sentiment expressed in the letter of application, which was to the following effect :—' The necessary sum might indeed possibly be raised from private sources,

but the work would not be then a joint production of the two Governments ; and it is submitted that this is an international consideration of appreciable importance. Anything which exhibits united action between Great Britain and France would tend to strengthen good relations between them, and as such occasions are by no means frequent, even slight bonds may be of some service.'

It only remains to add that no better editor could be found in Europe than M. Bémont, already favourably known by his 'Life of Simon de Montfort;' and he will have the distinguished assistance not only of M. Langlois, but of a society of savants profoundly interested in the work. Without reflecting on our British men of letters, it would have been quite impossible to match these advantages in our own country.

It has taken some years to effect this joint arrangement : it will take some years before the work is completed. The first set of photographs was transmitted to the French Government about a year ago, and the whole of the Rolls of Edward I., along with the remaining Roll of his predecessor, are now in Paris for transcription. Of course all contractions will be expanded, and we may be sure the work will be properly indexed and edited. The first of the new volumes will complete the reign of Henry III., and include an index to the single volume already published by M. F. Michel. This will contain about 25,000 items. As misfortune has dogged the enterprise for so long a period, and in such an extraordinary manner, it would be rash to entertain too sanguine hopes, but it certainly seems as if the spell were at last broken. The editor hopes to bring out the volume he has in hand before the end of the present year.

Perhaps the writer may be allowed in this place to express his gratitude to the French Government for the honour it has conferred upon him for his humble services in the cause by sending him the very distinguished decoration of 'Officier de l'Instruction Publique,' an honour totally unexpected and greatly prized. It would be well if some mark of honour

could be conferred upon those who have so liberally worked towards the same end in France. They have taken on themselves the lion's share of the burden, while consenting to entitle the work as the joint operation of the two Governments.

It is very much with the hope that influential persons may see their way to expediting so desirable an object that this paper has been drawn up.

I have confined myself in this paper to the possible effect which the publication now in hand may have upon English history. It will probably have very little less upon that of France; but we may well suspect that the French will deal with their own history more quickly and more profitably than we can do on this side of the water. The administration of the Aquitanian cities in the Middle Ages has already attracted the attention of French savants, who have produced some excellent works on the subject; and perhaps it is—speaking of recent times—the desire to make further progress which has made them so much more anxious to have the Gascon Rolls published than the English have been; but, on the other hand, this earnest desire of theirs is of long standing. We have seen how persevering have been their efforts, extended over many generations. No doubt the English would gladly have taken the matter in hand before this, had not the laudable zeal of Lord Romilly and Sir Duffus Hardy been effectually smothered half a century ago by the parsimony of our Government, almost as soon as their work had begun to bear fruit. The utmost our Record Office has been able to do of late years under the conditions imposed upon its officials is of a humbler kind. It must be remembered also that the expense of transcribing this class of documents, even on the spot, has been a very serious difficulty, and that the alternative of photography has only recently become available.

Perhaps it is also right to observe that our country lies under a disability in such matters from which the French do not suffer. Excellent as is the organisation of the Record



Office, it is not the least like the French Academy, with its various literary committees, and its direct connection with the University, the National Library, and the Government. The Minister of Public Instruction represents a public literary opinion which carries the greatest weight, and sets in motion enterprises which in this country are entirely left to individual energy. How often are these private enterprises starved or stifled out of existence in England! Why should not something analogous to the French Academy be set on foot amongst ourselves?