

# Bernard de Neufmarche, Dorstone and the Marcher Lordships

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ENGLAND CHANGED RAPIDLY in the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The institution and the country it described altered swiftly in the years following the great survey. The *Domesday Book* pictures the country as it existed in 1086. This may seem a fairly obvious statement, but it can hardly be overemphasized, especially in regard to the frontier we are discussing.

The medieval Welsh frontier was neither a particular geographic location nor a specific group of people. It was a process: a process of which *Domesday Book* records only one particular stage. The character of the frontier changed considerably only a few years after 1086. It would have changed in any event, but in this particular case the process was accelerated by the peculiar nature of the royal frontier policy.

William the Conqueror had finally secured peace along his western border by developing a policy based on balance of power. He stationed a strong group of Norman lords along the frontier to guard against Welsh attack. He then helped to stabilize the position of Rhys ap Tewdwr and used Rhys as a counter balance to the power of the border barons. As long as both of these antagonistic powers remained intact, each limited the other's freedom of action. It was in the royal interests that this situation be maintained, and William took steps to avoid a decisive clash between the two. It was probably for this reason that he allowed the Welsh kingdoms of Morgannwg, Gwynllwg, and Brycheiniog to retain their independence; they were to act as buffer states. Unfortunately for this plan these kingdoms never developed sufficient strength to fulfill their roles adequately. Rather than forming a buffer between the Welsh king and the Norman lords, they formed a vacuum. They offered a tempting avenue for expansion, especially for the border barons.

The greatest danger to this balance of power came from the turbulent and land-hungry Marcher lords. If the royal frontier policy was to be successful, the border barons had to observe the agreement of 1081 and had to respect the independence of the buffer kingdoms which separated them from Rhys. William was more than equal to the task of ensuring this and he had many advantages working for him.

In the first place, he had chosen many of the frontier lords because of their personal loyalty; ties of affection and kinship assured that royal interests along the border would be served. Secondly, many of these marcher lords held estates both along the Welsh border and in the duchy of Normandy. Although rebellion might have gained them a Welsh kingdom, it would assuredly have lost them their ancestral homes. Thirdly, William had granted these men extensive privileges for serving on the frontier. The privileges they possessed may have atoned for the denial of those they coveted. Finally, disobedience to the Conqueror was not a course to be undertaken lightly. He was a ruler without challenger and had concentrated great powers in his hands. Moreover, he used these powers decisively in enforcing his will. While he lived, his authority was supreme and his frontier policy was maintained. One of these frontier Lords was Bernard de Neufmarche.

**Bernard of Neumarche** (1050-1125) had been born at the castle of Le Neufe-Marche-en-Lyons. In his sketch of Bernard, Orderic Vitalis (Medieval English Chronicler) stated that he was a member of the powerful Norman family of Aufay, distinguished by its close connections with, and services to, the ducal house.(Duke Robert)) It had as its caput the town of Aufay, a few miles south of Dieppe and on the river Sie. The effective founder of the family was Gilbert of St. Valeri, who established his fortunes by marrying a daughter of Duke Richard. Their son,

Richard, continued long in the service of his uncle and was rewarded by being given Ada, the widow of Herluin of Heugleville, in marriage. Richard was greatly enriched by this advantageous marriage. He founded the town of Aufay and gave his colonists the customs of Corneilles.

In 1035, Duke Robert died and was succeeded by the eight-year old William the Bastard (William II Duke of Normandy). Normandy entered a stormy period which saw Richard supporting the young duke. His greatest trial came during the revolt of William of Arques in 1053, when, alone of all of the nobles of his district, he remained loyal to Duke William's banner. He garrisoned and held his castle of St. Aubins against the insurgents. Supporting him in this action was his son-in-law, Geoffrey, son of Turketil of Neufmarche. Turketil had acted as guardian of the young duke, and was assassinated while performing this office, perhaps in the same plot that took the life of William Fitz-Osbern's father. Geoffrey now had entered into close contact with his father-in-law's group. The rebellion was quelled, and the family of Aufay achieved the high regard of Duke William for their loyalty. Geoffrey continued in the ducal service, but with less success than had his father-in-law. He was the lawful heir of Turketil's fortress of Le Neuf-Marche-en-Lions, on the borders of Beauvais. He appears to have been unable to halt the raids of his French neighbours in this region, and for this reason lost the confidence of Duke William. He apparently fell far from favour and was finally dispossessed of his fortress for some trivial reason.

Geoffrey had two sons to witness his disgrace in 1060. The one, Dreux, gave up military service and entered the monastery of St. Evroult. He does not seem to have shared his father's disgrace, for his duties consisted of staying with the ducal court and attempting to obtain grants and benefactions for the abbey. The other son was Bernard of Neufmarche, who remained in the service of the duke. Born at the castle of Le Neuf-Marche-en-Lions, he no doubt grew up with the excellent military experience which life on the Marches afforded.

There is some question as to whether or not Bernard participated in the invasion of England. Although his name is generally accepted in the lists of the conquerors made by modern compilers, the evidence is somewhat mixed.

To argue against Bernard's participation in the Conquest, it may be pointed out that his name is not present in *Domesday*. It is hard to believe that he would not have received at least some English lands if he had taken part in the original expedition. While this test is certainly not conclusive, the burden of proof must rest with those who wish to include Bernard among the conquerors. The lack of evidence suggests that Bernard did not join William's expedition against England, or if he did, that he played a very minor role.

In any event, the year 1086 found him without English lands, but in attendance at the Conqueror's court, perhaps in his personal service. However the evidence shows that Bernard's fortunes took a decided turn for the better in the next two years. He was finally rewarded with lands by the then King William II of Normandy in 1087. He received lands in Herefordshire - lands which had been devolved to the crown with the deaths of Gilbert Fitz Thorold and Alfred of Marlborough.

Those which formed the greater part of Bernard's Herefordshire holdings included the villis of Bach, (Bage) Middlewood, and Harewood, which lay south of Clifford Castle and at the head of the Golden Valley. In addition, Gilbert had been entrusted with the border station (*domus defensabilis*) located at Eardisley. By this time he may also have commenced construction of the fortifications at Dorestone, Snodhill, and Urishay which were later to connect Clifford and Ewyas Harold to form an unbroken line of frontier defences. From Alfred he received Pembridge, Burghill and Brinsop sometime before 1079.

Bernard's omission from Domesday is especially peculiar. It is possible that he had some kind of exemption due to his lands being considered more Welsh than English.

Probably as a consequence of his rapid rise in the Marches, Bernard attracted the attention of Osbern Fitz Richard (Richard's Castle, Brother of William Fitz Osbern) who gave him his daughter Nesta, (Agnes - English form of Nesta) whose mother was the Welsh Princess Nesta, daughter of Gruffydd ap Llewellyn, in marriage sometime before 1099. She brought with her a dowry of Beryngton and Little Hereford. All of his estates lay in the Golden Valley and along an old Roman Road which led into Brycheiniog. The military possibility of that road could only have encouraged his subsequent ventures into Wales.

On September 7, 1087 William the Conqueror died and his strong hand was removed from the border. By his wishes, his possessions were divided among his three sons. Robert, the eldest, received the duchy of Normandy, William, surnamed Rufus, became king of England, and Henry was forced to content himself with a sum of money. The balance of power which the elder William had established along the border deteriorated, since his son lacked the power by which he could enforce his will in the region. The border nobility felt no special feelings of loyalty or respect for Rufus. As a matter of fact, many of them had already taken oaths of allegiance to Robert. Nor did Rufus control their Norman estates. These were in the hands of Robert, who quickly became a challenger to Rufus' authority in England. Despite his obviously weak position, Rufus refused to adopt a conciliatory path. On the contrary, he set about to destroy the customary limits which had been set upon the feudal powers of the king, and began to strip the border barons of the privileges they enjoyed.

Within a few years he had even resurrected the almost-forgotten doctrine that a fief was a lifetime benefice only, granted at the pleasure of the king. This reactionary point of view must have alienated large segments of the nobility, especially among the border barons. Even this need not have been disastrous, if Rufus had carried out his plans with the determination and pragmatism of his father. These qualities, however, were sadly lacking in him. His personal characteristics were passion, capriciousness, a tendency toward delusions of grandeur and a complete contempt for the basic standards of conduct.

To all of these factors acting against him was added the treachery of his uncle, Odo of Bayeux, who enlisted the aid of many nobles in his attempt to depose Rufus and to place Robert on the throne. The rebellion erupted in 1088, ostensibly over the question of succession. The list of nobles arrayed against Rufus, however, betrays a deeper cause of disaffection. Roger of Montgomery, Bernard of Neufmarche, Roger of Lacy, Geoffrey of Coutances, Robert of Mowbray, Gilbert of Clare, and William of Calais were all prominent among those who took up the cause of Robert Curthose. This was, in essence, a Marcher revolt and was directed, no doubt, at gaining these men a greater measure of freedom from the restrictions of royal authority.

Despite its powerful supporters, the insurrection was soon quelled by the resolute action of the fyrd and some few loyal barons, all led by the archbishop of Canterbury and by Rufus himself. It is difficult to say whether the movement actually failed, however, since most of the Marcher lords who took part appear to have escaped serious punishment. What is more, this rebellion of 1088 coincided with the apparent disappearance of the royal policy of maintaining a balance of power along the Welsh frontier.

Bernard of Neufmarche seems to have begun his conquest of Brycheiniog shortly after the end of the ill-fated insurrection. At least, in a charter of the same year, Bernard was in possession of Glasbury. It is thus clear that royal guarantees of the independence of this buffer state had been allowed to lapse. At the same time the Marcher lords began to probe the position of Rhys ap

Tewdwr, and to seek a means of eliminating him and, with him, the last obstacle to the conquest of South Wales. It seems clear that the agreement of 1081 still had some force, at least in respect to Rhys, for the means employed by the border barons were uniformly indirect. In 1088, Rhys was attacked by the sons of Bleddyn, king of Powys. The attackers may well have enjoyed Norman support in this, the first serious attack on him since 1081. In any event, the attempt failed when Rhys obtained the aid of a Danish fleet from Ireland.

In 1091, another attack was launched. This time the Herefordshire landholder, Gruffydd ap Maredudd, attempted to assert his claim to the throne of Deheubarth. The hand of the Marcher lords can be seen even more clearly in this action. Rhys again proved triumphant and defeated and killed his rival. Despite these victories, however, his position was rapidly deteriorating. Although he was able to maintain himself against these Norman-inspired conspiracies, Brycheiniog was slowly crumbling before the relentless pressure of Bernard of Neufmarche.

In a short time, the independent kingdom of Brycheiniog would cease to exist, and Rhys would find a strong Norman lordship established on the very borders of Deheubarth. He took the only course that was open to him when he allied himself with the hard-pressed king of Brycheiniog.

In Easter week of 1093, they moved against the Norman forces engaged in rearing a strong fortress in the central plain of Brycheiniog. Rhys had been forced to put himself in the power of the Normans and, in the ensuing battle, he was killed. With his death the last vestiges of the agreement of 1081 came to an end, and the last obstacle to massive Norman invasion was removed. After the death of Rhys, the Norman onslaught began. Rhys' death was a momentous event for South Wales and ultimately opened the way for Norman domination of that region.

Bernard of Neufmarche appears to have been a dynamic figure in the chain of events that led to the demise of the Welsh prince. It was he who led the way in destroying the kingdom of Brycheiniog and forcing Rhys to battle. Finally, it was at the hands of his troops that Rhys died. Despite Bernard's importance, the accounts of the time are largely silent concerning this Marcher lord. Only incidental references, together with the evidence of a few charters, make it possible to discern even the broad outlines of his life. The details of his activities must remain vague.

To support the contention that he was present at Hastings, one might point to the fact that he maintained a connection with Battle Abbey - so close as to suggest a special regard for the establishment. His name appears on the charter by which William founded the abbey to commemorate forever the battle in which the power of Harold was broken. Bernard later established a cell of this abbey near his castle of Brecon. This evidence is less conclusive than one might think. In the first place, the foundation charter of Battle Abbey must be dated between 1086 and 1087. Secondly, the Battle Abbey cell at Brecon may have been established as an analogy to the mother house; to commemorate the battle in which Bernard broke the power of Rhys ap Tewdwr and delivered South Wales into Norman hands.

By the time of his death around 1125, Bernard had established a flourishing borough around his castle of Brecon. Henry I had married Bernard's daughter Sybil to Miles Fitz Walter, the sheriff of Gloucestershire, in 1121 and passed a significant portion of Bernard's honour to him as a dowry, including Hay-on-Wye Castle. According to Giraldus Cambrensis this was because Mahel de Neufmarché, the son and heir of Bernard, had mutilated the paramour of his mother. In vengeance, his mother Princess Nesta swore to King Henry I that her son was illegitimate. Henry was therefore able by law and custom to pass over Mahel and give the land to his friend and confidant Miles Fitz Walter with Bernard's legal heiress in marriage.

By the time he died in 1125, Neufmarche had become the effective ruler of all of South Eastern Wales.