

Eleanor of Aquitaine

Eleanor of Aquitaine was quite a lady. Like all her family, her first loyalty was to her lands and her rights and titles, and woe betide anyone who got in the way, even her husbands. Eleanor's first husband was Prince Louis, who soon became King Louis VII of France. Not a happy marriage. Louis was all very good and pious and really rather boring, whereas Eleanor was fiery and full of zip. Louis decided to go off on the Second Crusade – a silly idea because sequels are never as good as the original – and he was a hopeless soldier: He soon had the Second Crusade going nowhere fast. Eleanor started flirting with her uncle, the Count of Antioch, and when Louis refused to march and help him against the Saracens, she stormed out of the royal tent and demanded a divorce. While the

Saracens cut her uncle's head off, Eleanor and Louis returned home in separate ships. Poor old Louis got shipwrecked on the way home (it just wasn't his day), and even the Pope couldn't patch things up with him and Eleanor. So Eleanor got her divorce and immediately made a beeline for young Henry of Anjou, who was going to be the next King of England – after all, not many women get to be Queen of France *and* Queen of England. Henry and Eleanor had plenty of children, but their marriage wasn't a happy one. They were both unfaithful, and soon Eleanor started scheming with her sons against Henry until he had her locked her up. She didn't get out till he died. If you're into girl power, then you'll like Eleanor of Aquitaine. Just be thankful she wasn't your mother.

Henry was no fool. He didn't want any of these Marcher Lords doing to him what he had done to Louis VII, so he came to Wales to sort things out himself: He would decide who got what, which meant, in effect, that everything went to him. The Welsh princes had to give the Marcher Lords their lands back and recognise that Henry ruled in north Wales. All in all, things were going very satisfactorily for Henry, when he blew it. Absolutely blew it.

Henry decided to do for Wales what William the Conqueror had done for England: Declare himself overlord and require everyone to come and pay him homage. Well! The Welsh might have lost some battles, but they were not about to accept that Henry had the right to the whole country. So just when Henry was drawing up plans for a statue of himself trampling on a set of Welsh princes and eating a leek, his messengers brought news that he had a full-scale war on his hands – and he was losing. Henry set off again, but this time, the campaign was much harder. It rained like there was no tomorrow, and Henry just seems to have decided that conquering Wales himself wasn't worth the trouble. He was a top-rank European monarch, don't forget: He had better things to do. So he left the Welsh and the Marchers to it, and they carried on hammer and tongs for a good few years, though a number of the Marchers were rather wishing they had tried taking over somewhere a bit easier. And then someone suggested, Have you thought of Ireland?

