CHAPTER I

Going places, c. 1208–48

(A) FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE

'I went to England and asked my lord the king to give me my father's inheritance.' So begins the remarkable fragment of autobiography in which Simon de Montfort set out his grievances against King Henry III.[1] Looking back from the early 1260s, he had, not surprisingly, a clear memory of what had happened some thirty years earlier to put him on the road first to advancement and then to a bitter separation from his former patron. For his purposes it was not necessary to go farther back into the past. Yet the departure for England in 1230 of this young French noble, equipped with little more than great expectations and his own abilities, was far from being the start of the story; for even more than is the case with most of our lives, Simon de Montfort's life took its direction from his inheritance and upbringing. 'Family background' is not just the biographer's conventional setting of the scene, but an essential part of the plot.

Montfort was born into one of the great aristocratic dynasties of northern France.[2] His father, another Simon, had his seat at Montfort l'Amaury, about thirty miles west of Paris and the same distance from the boundary which, until the loss of Normandy in 1204, had separated the Norman lands of the kings of England from the domain of the French Crown (Fig. 2). In the twelfth century the feudal rivalries of this frontier had been the chief influence on the affairs and fortunes of the Montforts. But latterly the more powerful and emotional force of the crusade had come to give another identity and a new sense of mission to

[1] Bémont, *Montfort* (1st edn), p. 333.

[2] The best account of the earlier Montforts will be found in *Peerage*, VII, pp. 708–17 ('The Ancestors of Simon de Montfort'), and of the elder Simon in ibid., pp. 537–40. For his exploits in the south, see especially J. Sumption, *The Albigensian Crusade* (London, 1978), pp. 100–98. All unreferenced statements in the following paragraphs derive from these works.

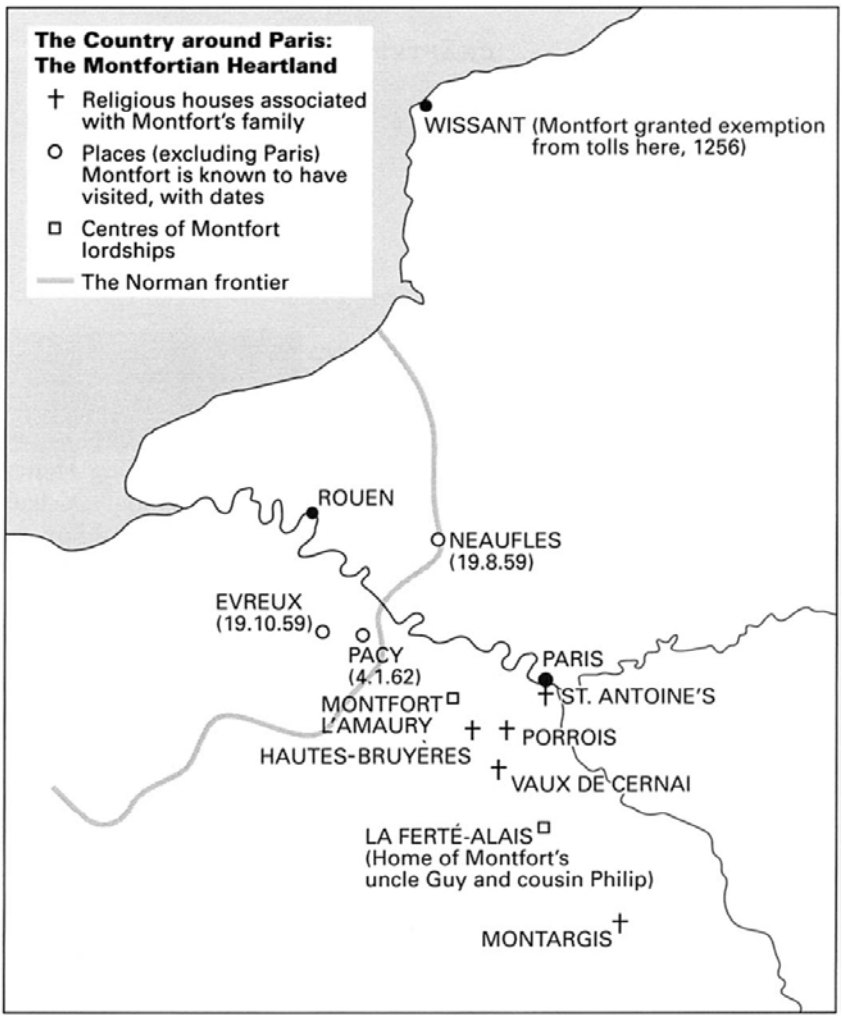

Fig.2. The country round Paris: the Montfortian heartland.

the family, and a different field of action to its leader. The elder Simon's brother, Guy, had gone with Philip Augustus on the Third Crusade in 1191 and married in the Holy Land. Simon himself had taken part in the Fourth Crusade, fought with distinction in the east, and returned to play a much larger part in a different sort of holy war. From 1209 he led the armies of northern France against the Albigensian heretics of the

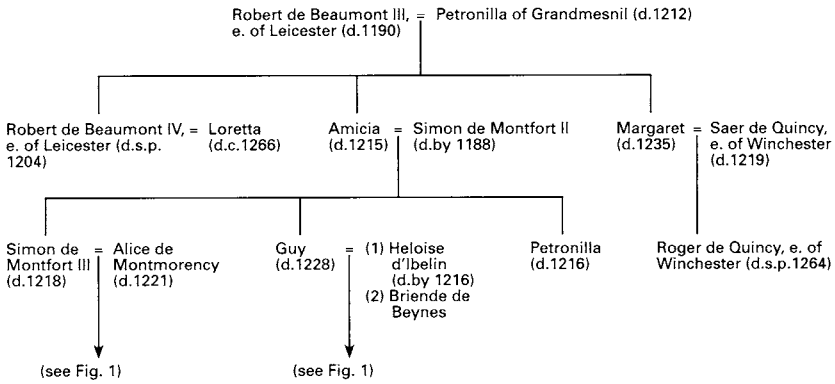

Fig. 3. Montfort's pedigree: the Leicester inheritance.

south. There he became famous as a general, built up a great territorial empire, and acquired a reputation for acquisitive brutality which was to dog his son's footsteps in that part of France more than thirty years later. After his death outside the walls of Toulouse in 1218 the advantage returned to the south, forcing his elder son, Amaury, to abandon his father's gains. In the end it was the French monarchy, under Louis VIII, which took over Simon's lands and which was the legatee of his successes.

It was the elder Simon's connections farther north which were eventually to bring our Simon on to the English political stage. The mother of Montfort senior had been Amicia, sister and coheiress of Robert de Beaumont, earl of Leicester, who had died childless in 1204. Through Amicia, the elder Simon inherited a claim to the earldom of Leicester (Fig. 3), which seems to have been recognised by the Crown after Simon had visited England in 1205 or 1206; and in 1207 the lands were divided between Amicia's heir and the second co-heiress, her sister Margaret, wife of Saer de Quincy, earl of Winchester. The partition of 1207 brought Simon only a notional advantage, for his status as a French subject gave him no hope of obtaining the lands; instead, King John committed them to a series of keepers. Yet despite his lack of a territorial footing in England, Simon was evidently a greatly respected figure on this side of the Channel. In 1210 it was plausibly rumoured that John's enemies among the barons had chosen him as king,[3] more probably in tribute to the prestige brought by his crusade

[3] *Ann. Dun.*, p. 331.

and his war against the Albigensians than to any impression made on his brief visit to England. But, of course, the rumour came to nothing. The elder Montfort remained little more than a phantom member of the English baronage, with a title and a reputation unmatched by the tangible assets of land or power.

Our Simon was probably born about 1208, the third of his father's four sons. It is the historian's misfortune, as it was Simon's, that he was a younger son, with no obvious prospects and therefore of no interest to the chroniclers. The bare fact of his existence is first revealed in a grant made by his mother, Alice de Montmorency, in 1217, to which he and his brothers assented;[4] but after that almost nothing certain is known about him until 1230, when he set out for England. It is likely that he spent his most impressionable years with the rest of his family in the south. His mother Alice was present with her husband through most of his campaigns. She was not far away when the eldest Simon won his two greatest victories, over Raymond, count of Toulouse, at Castelnaudary in 1211 and over King Peter of Aragon at Muret in 1213, and she was present, too, at the siege of Toulouse in 1217–18, where Simon was killed. Peter de Vaux-de-Cernai, the chronicler of the crusade, tells us that at Toulouse were not only Alice, but Amaury and Guy, her two elder sons, and the 'numerous children', sons and daughters, of both Simon and his brother, another Guy. The younger Simon's probable presence among these 'numerous children' is as near as we can get to conclusiveness concerning his whereabouts at any stage of his boyhood or youth.[5]

If Montfort did indeed grow up in his parents' household in the south he would have passed his formative years in an atmosphere of intense piety, crusading fervour and military excitement. Even by the standards of the day, the elder Montfort was an exceptionally devout man. With a genuine religious enthusiasm he combined ambition and rapacity, in a mixture which we find hard to comprehend but which, in a less heightened form, characterised the outlook of many members of the medieval nobility. His fervent orthodoxy made him both obedient to the pope and receptive to the new forces which were emerging to shape the future of the Church. When Pope Innocent III had prohibited an assault on the Christian city of Zara in Dalmatia on the crusade of

[4] BN MS. Clairambault 1188, f. 26v; Bémont, *Montfort* (2nd edn), p. 1, n. 2 (wrong foliation cited).
[5] *Petrum Vallium Sarnaii Monachi Hystoria Albigensis*, ed. P. Guébin and E. Lyon (3 vols., Société de l'Histoire de France, 1926–29), i, pp. 146, 185, 257; ii, 142, 294–5, 305.

1202, Simon, unlike the other crusaders, had withdrawn. He was, too, a close friend and benefactor of St Dominic, whose southern preaching tours, aimed at the conversion of heretics, formed a more pacific counterpoint to Simon's own campaigns. It was Dominic who had baptised Simon's daughter Petronilla in 1211 and who blessed the marriage of his son Amaury to Beatrice of Burgundy three years later.[6] In aligning himself with the crusade, the suppression of heresy, and the friars, he turned his family in a new direction, away from the feudal politics of northern France and towards a wider horizon promising both salvation and profit.

The outlook of the elder Montfort was precisely mirrored in that of his wife: a remarkable woman, whose qualities had been overlooked until Monique Zerner recently brought them into the light.[7] Alice de Montmorency was born into another of the great noble families of the north and was descended on her mother's side from an illegitimate daughter of Henry I of England. (Though our Simon de Montfort probably did not know it, and though the distinction must have been diluted among many, he was in fact the great-great-great-great-grandson of William the Conqueror.) His social equal, Alice was also her husband's partner not only in the Albigensian crusade but in his piety. In the years around 1200 both of them had come under the influence of Foulques de Neuilly, the evangelist and moral reformer, who had been as famous for his work among the prostitutes of Paris as for his inflammatory preaching of the crusade.[8] It was to the Parisian nunnery of St Antoine's, founded by Foulques and later attached to the Cistercians, that Alice consigned her ten-year-old daughter Petronilla, the child of the crusade, in 1221.[9] Like her husband, she was, too, a patron of the early Dominicans and a benefactor of the house founded by Dominic at Prouille for Albigensian women converts. But for the most part her devoutness, like her husband's, was more militant than monastic or quietist. She had participated in the counsels of the

[6] Fratris Gerardi de Fracheto, *Vitae Fratrum Ordinis Praedicatorum*, ed. B. M. Reichert, i (Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Historica, Rome and Stuttgart, 1897), p. 322; W. A. Hinnebusch, *The History of the Dominican Order*, i (New York, 1966), p. 31.

[7] M. Zerner, 'L'épouse de Simon de Montfort et la croisade albigeoise', *Femmes – Mariages – Lignages, XII^e–XIV^e Siècles. Mélanges offerts à Georges Duby*, ed. J. Dufournet, A. Joris and P. Toubert (Brussels, 1992), pp. 449–70. All unreferenced statements in this paragraph derive from Zerner.

[8] For Foulques de Neuilly, see esp. J. W. Baldwin, *Masters, Princes and Merchants: The Social Views of Peter the Chanter and his Circle* (2 vols., Princeton, 1970), pp. 36–8, 136–7.

[9] For Petronilla and her brother Simon, see below, pp. 102, 174–5.

crusaders, recruited reinforcements for them in France, and taken the initiative in imprisoning the Jews of Toulouse in 1217. As much at home on the back of a horse as among bishops and friars, she personified the vigorous, aggressive and enterprising religion of the crusaders whom her husband led and which would later be found in the life of her third son.

The twelve-year caesura between the child Simon's appearance with his mother outside Toulouse and his re-emergence as a young man in 1230, on the eve of his first visit to England, forms the most frustrating gap in our knowledge of his career. After her husband's death Alice had returned to the family's estates near Paris.[10] When she too died in February 1221 Simon was probably taken under the wing of Amaury, now his only surviving elder brother after the death of his second brother, Guy, at the siege of Castelnaudary in 1220. In the decade of the 1220s he appears only twice in the sources, in May 1222 and February 1226, on both occasions confirming his brother's charters in northern France.[11] He must certainly have been on close terms with Amaury immediately prior to his departure for England, for the two of them had by then worked out a deal by which Simon was to claim Amaury's English inheritance. There is a strong probability that in the meantime he had been introduced to arms during the renewed Albigensian crusades of 1226–29, in which both Amaury and the brothers' uncle Guy took part.[12] One of the puzzling features of Montfort's English career is his early reputation for military ability, which rests on little in the way of known exploits;[13] and if he first saw action during these campaigns he would have had some grounding in the military expertise with which he was later credited, a little mysteriously, in England. Was he present, for example, at Louis VIII's siege of Avignon between June and September 1226, where the besiegers' use of artillery and boats puts one strongly in mind of the tactics used at his own siege of Rochester in April 1264?[14]

Almost complete though our ignorance is about the events of Montfort's early life, the influences on its future direction are fortunately

[10] Zerner, 'L'épouse', p. 465.
[11] *Necrologe de l'Abbaie de Notre Dame de Port-Roial des Champs* (Amsterdam, 1723), p. 101; A. Rhein, *La Seigneurie de Montfort en Iveline* (Versailles, 1910), pp. 206, 213.
[12] Sumption, *The Albigensian Crusade*, pp. 209–10, 216.
[13] Montfort's military reputation is considered more fully below, p. 109.
[14] For the siege of Avignon, see C. Petit-Dutaillis, *Étude sur la Vie et le Règne de Louis VIII (1187–1226)* (Paris, 1894), pp. 302–9, and for that of Rochester, Rishanger, *De Bellis*, pp. 25–6.

visible enough. Foremost, of course, was the example of his father, whose near-legendary status as a man of war and defender of the Church did much to fashion the attitudes of the next generation towards his son. It was in the mind of the taunting Henry III when, in 1252, he told Montfort to return to Gascony, 'where you will find war enough and bring back your merited reward, as your father did'. It was in the minds, too, of the French nobility when, in the following year, they offered Simon de Montfort the stewardship of France. If enemies and friends saw Montfort in his father's image, how much more is his own self-image likely to have been shaped by what he knew and had seen of his father? He may have known that the elder Simon had come close to acquiring the throne of England in 1210. He must have known how much his father had achieved as a man of courage, energy and military ability, who had been prepared to seize his chances. In 1258 he was to react with violent anger when one of his enemies told him that his father had been a traitor.[15] His own status, not only as a younger son, but as one who had lost both parents by the time he was about thirteen, made him independent at an early age and free of the leading strings with which medieval kings and nobles were apt to tie the hands of their offspring. Paternal example without paternal constraint, combined with the need to make his own way in the world, nourished the fierce ambition which was to be one of his most consistent principles of action. It was a principle complemented rather than countered by the sort of religion which he had learnt from his father and, as we can now conjecture with some certainty, from his mother too. The hard and combative faith, the friendship with ecclesiastics and holy men, the sense of mission which combined self-interest with what was almost a sense of divine vocation, were all features of his parents' lives which were to be replicated in his own. We do not need the facile arts of the psychohistorian to see that Simon de Montfort's career was set on course by the powerful and enduring exemplars and ideals of his childhood and youth.

(B) THE KING'S GREAT BOUNTY, 1230–38

Montfort's first footing in England came when he acquired the honor of Leicester in August 1231. He owed his establishment as an English magnate to his own initiative, to Henry III's generosity, and to the concurrence

[15] Paris, v, pp. 313, 372, 677; below, p. 154.

of two other men who, like Henry, had good cause to weigh up the likely consequences of his elevation: his elder brother Amaury, and his father's successor in the honor, Ranulf, earl of Chester. Through careful planning, adroit diplomacy and a firmly controlled ambitiousness, he was able to reconcile his own claims with the interests of these various benefactors in a way which was to be surprisingly harmonious.

His father's rights in the earldom of Leicester provided him with an opening. Amaury had already petitioned Henry for the elder Simon's inheritance, but his standing as constable of France, one of the great vassals of the French Crown, and Henry's life grant of the Leicester lands in 1227 to Ranulf of Chester, their custodian since 1215, both stood in the way of success. Rejected by Henry, Amaury had made over to Simon his rights in the Leicester lands, in return for Simon's inherited lands in France (unknown to us in location and extent) and in all probability for a large sum of money. Amaury had emerged from the Albigensian wars loaded with debt – Pope Gregory IX estimated that he and his father between them owed £10,000 – and he must have seen his younger brother's ambitions in England as a providential opportunity to be exploited. In 1234 he was claiming £1,500 paris, or about £500 sterling, from Simon. These transactions are likely to have taken place in 1229 or early in 1230, perhaps shortly after Simon's coming of age. They were to saddle him with a debt lasting for many years and with financial difficulties which came to characterise much of his career. Out of a colourable but hopeless claim Amaury had managed to extract a substantial benefit, to his brother's advantage too, but also at his expense.[16]

Armed with Amaury's commendations and letters of renunciation, Simon paid his first visit to England, probably in February 1230. That his initial negotiations with the king were conducted through one Amaury de Misternun, who was almost certainly his brother's knight, was another mark of Amaury's eagerness to forward his claim.[17] According to his own later recollections, written in 1262, when his bitterness with Henry ran deep, his request for his inheritance had been turned down. In fact the records show that before he returned to France

[16] Bémont, *Montfort* (1st edn), p. 333, (2nd edn), p. 4; *Layettes*, ii, Nos. 2088, 2366; L. W. V. Harcourt, *His Grace the Steward and Trial of Peers* (London, 1907), pp. 107–8; *PR, 1225–32*, p. 124; *Les Registres de Gregoire IX*, ed. L. Auray and others (4 vols., Paris, 1896–1955), iii, No. 3926. For the £ paris/sterling exchange rate, see P. Spufford, *Handbook of Medieval Exchange* (London, 1986), pp. 172, 209.

[17] *CR, 1227–31*, p. 316; Harcourt, *His Grace the Steward*, p. 113.

he had succeeded in obtaining all that Henry was yet able to offer: a grant of the reversion of the Leicester lands, to take effect when the estates had been released by Ranulf. That Ranulf was a witness to this grant suggests that some collusive settlement was in the offing. In the meantime his expectations were kept warm by a further royal grant to him, in April 1230, of 400 marks a year, in exchange for his service until the estate should fall in. But Simon could not wait. Late in 1230 or early in 1231 he approached Ranulf at his castle of St James de Beuvron in Brittany and persuaded him to agree to the early transfer of the inheritance. Some such arrangement, rather than the reversion of the estate which would naturally follow from Ranulf's death, had perhaps been in Henry's mind when he made his initial concession to Simon. In August 1231 the two men returned to England together and travelled to Painscastle on the Welsh marches, where Henry took Simon's homage for the Leicester lands.[18]

Montfort's quick and easy success in inducing all three of the men who had an interest in his English inheritance to stand aside owed much to his political deftness and perhaps to a persuasiveness of speech which can now only be imagined. His 'pleasant and courteous way of speaking' would later be recalled as one of his most admirable qualities.[19] All those whose goodwill he needed had reason to listen to him, for each had something to gain, or not much to lose, by his promotion. The financial inducement offered to Amaury has already been mentioned. A debt of £200 which Montfort owed to Ranulf of Chester at the time of the earl's death in 1232 suggests that he too may have been bought out, though here money did not tell the whole story. Ranulf was over sixty in 1231, an elderly man, lacking children and with only a life interest in the Leicester lands; so his generosity did no large disservice to himself and none at all to his heirs. It may have been stimulated by family ties – for Ranulf was the cousin of Montfort's father – and by a large-minded willingness to recognise the superiority of Montfort's claim. That at least was how Montfort saw things some thirty years later, at the time of his quarrel with the king.[20]

[18] Bémont, *Montfort* (1st edn), p. 333; *Layettes*, ii, No. 2151; Harcourt, *His Grace the Steward*, p. 110; *Foedera*, i, i, p. 206; *PR, 1225–32*, p. 325; *CR, 1227–31*, pp. 316, 543; R. Eales, 'Henry III and the End of the Norman Earldom of Chester', *TCE*, i, pp. 106–7.

[19] Rishanger, *De Bellis*, p. 6; below, pp. 350–1.

[20] Bémont, *Montfort* (1st edn), p. 333; *CPR, 1232–47*, p. 185; *RL*, ii, p. 379. For Ranulf's birth in 1170, see *Ann. Cestr.*, p. 25, and for his relationship with Montfort's father, *Peerage*, iii, p. 167, vii, p. 709.

It was, however, disingenuous of Montfort then to make out that he owed his good fortune more to the complaisance of Amaury and Ranulf than to the 'great bounty' which Henry claimed to have showed him in accepting his homage.[21] Henry's friendly co-operation underpinned the whole series of transactions by which Montfort became an English magnate. His landlessness – or at least his holding no land from the king of France[22] – was an initial advantage, for it meant that there was no bar to his acceptance by Henry. But there are likely to have been other more positive reasons for his reception of this impecunious younger son. Henry's birth in 1207 meant that the two men were almost of an age. Montfort's intelligence and abilities, gifts difficult for us to assess in any medieval noble but suggested in this case by, for example, the later offers to him of high position in the Holy Land and France, may already have been evident.[23] Even if Montfort was a younger son, his father had been a famous man and Henry may have believed that his qualities ran in the blood. He came to England at a particularly opportune moment. In the early months of 1230 Henry was about to embark on the first foreign expedition of his reign, with the object of regaining Normandy from the French.[24] He needed manpower and service, both of which Montfort could provide. The king's grant of the 400-mark fee in April was made some three weeks before Henry sailed from Portsmouth and in return for service 'as much in England as elsewhere'; while Montfort's presence later in the campaign with Ranulf of Chester in Brittany suggests that he had joined Henry's forces in France. Though the army was diverted south to Poitou and achieved nothing, its recruiting may have given Montfort his opening. Henry's favours for foreigners were handed out less capriciously than has sometimes been thought, and it is likely that he saw in Montfort both a useful volunteer and a man whose family connections on the borders of Normandy might possibly be turned to advantage.

Montfort's induction into English affairs was not entirely troublefree, for he found himself and his inheritance immediately caught up in factional rivalries which had originated in Henry's minority and which continued to divide his court in the early 1230s. In those rivalries

[21] Bémont, *Montfort* (1st edn), p. 333.
[22] *Layettes*, ii, no. 2088; Harcourt, *His Grace the Steward*, p. 108.
[23] Below, pp. 30, 76, 121.
[24] For Henry's objectives, see Paris, iii, p. 190, and *Robert of Gloucs.*, ii. p. 720.