

ELEANOR DE MONTFORT (c. 1258-1282), princess and diplomat

Name: Eleanor de Montfort
Date of birth: c. 1258
Date of death: 1282
Spouse: Llywelyn ap Gruffudd
Child: Gwenllïan ferch Llywelyn ap Gruffudd
Parent: Eleanor de Montfort
Parent: Simon de Montfort
Gender: Female
Occupation: princess and diplomat
Area of activity: Politics, Government and Political Movements; Royalty and Society
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Eleanor was youngest child and the only surviving daughter of Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester (c. 1208-1265) and his wife, Eleanor (1215?-1275), countess of Pembroke and Leicester. Eleanor's brothers were Henry de Montfort, Simon de Montfort, Amaury de Montfort, Guy de Montfort and Richard de Montfort. She was the wife of [Llywelyn ap Gruffudd](#) (died 1282).

It is not known where Eleanor was born, but it appears that she remained with her mother throughout her childhood and adolescence. The 1265 household accounts of the countess of Leicester intimate that as young as the age of seven Eleanor received both religious and literary instruction. She had a portable breviary made of parchment purchased in London by Brother G. Boyon in February 1265. Most importantly, the countess of Leicester's household rolls reveal a genuine affection established between Eleanor and her cousin, the future king Edward I as letters from Eleanor were delivered to 'the lord Edward' (domino Edwardo) at her mother's expense. This bond played a crucial role in their subsequent political interactions in adulthood.

At the age of five, Eleanor was betrothed to Llywelyn ap Gruffudd, prince of Gwynedd. The chroniclers Nicholas Trevet and William Rishanger and the Winchester annalist imply the marital alliance was a direct result of the prince's support of Simon de Montfort and the Second Barons' War. When Simon was killed at the battle of Evesham on 4 August 1265, the countess of Leicester negotiated surrender of Dover castle with the Lord Edward and fled to France with Eleanor on 28 October 1265. Whilst in exile, Eleanor and her mother took refuge at the Montfortian founded Dominican nunnery at Montargis.

In spite of initial pressures from Pope Clement IV who issued directives to Llywelyn to disassociate himself from any remaining Montfortian connections after Evesham, under threats of excommunication and interdict, and the ten-year Montfort family exile to France, the prince decided to marry Eleanor, possibly in fulfilment of an earlier agreement, in 1275. The reasons for this are uncertain, though J. B. Smith suggests that Llywelyn probably sought retaliation against Edward I, who harboured those who conspired to assassinate him in 1274, including his fugitive younger brother [Dafydd](#). Dafydd was possibly Llywelyn's heir apparent and his defection may have spurred Llywelyn to marry Eleanor as a means to producing an 'heir of his body'. It is unclear who instigated the marriage. Nicholas Trevet states that the countess of Leicester had a hand in the negotiation, while King Edward claimed that it was 'by the advice of her relations and other of her friends' that Eleanor set out to marry Llywelyn. Yet, at the marriageable age of seventeen, having grown up in a household with a successful and politically active mother as a role model, the suggestion that Eleanor herself may have instigated the state of play should not be dismissed.

Sometime between 9 and 23 January 1275-76, after the couple were married by proxy, Eleanor set sail for Wales to formally wed Llywelyn, accompanied by her brother Amaury and a number of people loyal to the Montforts. Although Eleanor's journey was supposedly secret, whilst off the west coast of Britain her ship was seized by men believed to have been hired by the king. The Montfort banner was found hidden on the ship and Eleanor initially spent a week in Bristol prison. She was thereafter taken to Windsor castle where she remained under house arrest for three years. Amaury was sent to Corfe castle. It was Eleanor's imprisonment that was the final straw in the long-standing and increasingly divisive conflict between the prince of Wales and the king of England.

It seems that Edward's biggest problem with the marriage was its potential to generate discord throughout his kingdom. Aware of the increasingly suspicious activities of the Montforts in Europe, especially after the murder of his own cousin Henry of Almain by Eleanor's brothers Simon and Guy, the new king believed another Montfortian insurgency was underway. In particular, Edward was concerned that marriage to Llywelyn would provide Eleanor herself the power and necessary allegiances to successfully take up and strengthen her father's cause. This fear was hardly tempered by Llywelyn's continued rebellious nature. In a letter addressed to Robert Kilwardby, archbishop of Canterbury, Edward openly expressed his unease and his belief that Eleanor was a threat to the security of his realm, claiming that she was politically inspired by a marriage to Llywelyn. Although she would have found it difficult to generate the power needed to spread dissension on her own, marriage to the prince of Wales would provide her with the best amenities 'to spread the seed of malice' originated by her father.

Brut y Tywysogion records that Eleanor and Llywelyn were married by proxy, *trwy eiriau cynddrychol (per verba de presenti)* before she sailed from France. This is a claim later backed by Pope John XXI who, intervening on Llywelyn's behalf for Eleanor's release, supported the couple's claim that they were married 'by words of the present'. During the period of her imprisonment, chronicles, chancery documents and ecclesiastical records identify Eleanor as a Montfort and as Edward's cousin. More interestingly, however, Eleanor is clearly referred to as Llywelyn's legal wife. That Eleanor was thus referred to by many contemporaries strongly indicates the real power of her position; not simply as a Montfort or as Llywelyn's wife, but with her presumed status as princess of Wales. This potent combination strengthens the speculations expressed by Edward who clearly believed that Eleanor had the acumen to recognise that the pairing of the two ranks promised her considerable political leverage - enough to cause serious conflict. His suspicions may also have been enhanced by the personal ties between the Montforts and the king of France. Eleanor's perceived power is likely one of the key reasons for the length of her imprisonment.

The legitimacy of their union and Eleanor's detainment were keynote features in the prince's subsequent correspondence with the king. The Waverley annals record that in 1276 the prince resisted a summons to Parliament, instead sending messengers on his behalf to make peace and offer money for his wife's release. The request was ignored. In a letter written sometime before 14 October 1276, Llywelyn again requested that the king restore his 'wife' with her escort, offering to pay homage on the proviso he was given safe conduct by powerful men such as the archbishop of Canterbury and the earls of Cornwall and Gloucester. Llywelyn cited Eleanor's unlawful imprisonment as cause for concern for his own liberty. The king refused and in November 1276, branded the prince of Wales a rebel.

Between December 1276 and January 1277, Llywelyn informed the papacy of Eleanor's detention. In February, Pope John XXI intervened. He unsuccessfully urged Edward to restore Eleanor's liberty as the prince's lawful wife. Chronicles record that throughout 1277 'Llywelyn frequently sent messengers to the king's court to seek to arrange peace between them, but he did not succeed at all'. In a memorandum of proposals dated January or February 1277 the Welsh prince not only offered to pay homage, but also proposed to compensate the king 6,000 marks fifteen days after paying homage if the Lady Eleanor was released from prison and restored as his wife and consort (*domine Alienore uxoris sue et sue comitive*). Llywelyn's correspondence demonstrates his increased desperation to come to terms with the English king and in November 1277 he suffered a humiliating defeat and was forced into submission under the Treaty of Aberconwy.

It seems that Edward's perception of Eleanor as a real threat changed once Llywelyn's own authority significantly weakened. The prince tendered his homage during Christmas celebrations in London in 1277 and it is likely during this time the two rulers reached an agreement concerning Eleanor's release. According to the Waverley annals, it was not long after Christmas 1277 that Eleanor was released and her protection transferred to Llywelyn. The Dunstaple annals record that once the king allowed the prince's wife her freedom, she returned with him to Wales. Soon after, Edward sent officials to Wales to ensure that arrangements were made for Eleanor's dower. J. B. Smith rightly suggests this was a sign of Edward's interest in his cousin's future and hints at the king's own intentions of finally recognising their marriage.

It was a further nine months after Eleanor's release that the couple finally married. The ceremony took place at Worcester cathedral 13 October 1278 and was attended by Edward and Eleanor of Castile (died 1290), the king and queen of Scotland and many nobles. The festivities were paid for by Edward, who, together with his wife, gave Eleanor a handkerchief and Llywelyn a marker for his prayer-book as wedding gifts. According to the Worcester annals, Edward gave Eleanor away at the ceremony, but the *Brutiau* claim that both 'king Edward and Edmund, his brother, gave Eleanor, daughter of Simon de Montfort, their kinswoman, as wedded wife to the prince'. Eleanor is also noted for her beauty. According to grievances issued by Llywelyn to Archbishop Pecham 21 × 31 October 1282, the stark reality of the wedding day was that just before the ceremony, Edward forced the prince to agree to amendments the king made to the Treaty of Aberconwy. Llywelyn claimed he complied and affixed his seal under duress, as a man compelled by fear.

Eleanor's first act as princess of Wales is recorded just months after her marriage. Shortly before 12 March 1279 she successfully petitioned Edward - probably in written

form as is evidenced by use of her official title - for the pardon of abjuration of the realm for ten men who remained in prison for accompanying her from France. The pardon was granted 'at the instance of Eleanor, the king's kinswoman, princess of Wales and lady of Snowdon'. Seven months later, on 18 October, she issued another petition asking for clemency for her brother Amaury. Having been informed that the king proposed to discuss his case, Eleanor wrote to Edward to remind him of the importance of familial bonds.

In October 1280, Eleanor was actively involved in the controversy surrounding the administration of her mother's will. Nicholas de Waltham, a canon of Lincoln, had been made the executor of the countess's will, having previously represented her at court in 1275. This appointment was rebuffed by the king who suspected Waltham of having joined forces with Llywelyn and Eleanor's two brothers, Guy and Amaury, in a conspiracy against him. In a letter dated 10 October, Eleanor informed Edward of her need to intervene lest her mother's last wishes were not met. She asked to be informed when her mother's goods, her own legacy, were ready to be collected from the royal treasury.

There is clear evidence of Eleanor's burgeoning role as diplomat and emissary in the Anglo-Welsh conflict. In a letter dated between 1279 and 1281, the princess of Wales pleaded with the king to disregard unfavourable reports that reached him regarding her and Llywelyn's loyalty. She invited him to address the issue directly with them so they could prove their reverence of him. As evidence of their continued good faith, Eleanor reminded him of their friendliness and the good-natured relations they enjoyed when they had previously met in Worcester. She assured Edward that whatever he demanded from them, she and Llywelyn would 'execute and accomplish' if able to do so.

The continued strain on relationships and the need for Eleanor's advocacy is clear in her last official act before she died. In her formal guise as princess of Wales, she boldly confronted Edward for his unjust actions on a number of political issues. First, she expressed her surprise that the king had allowed certain merchants to harass Llywelyn over a matter of little significance, claiming the Welsh prince had acted judiciously in accordance with the customs of his lands. She confessed to the king she found it strange that complaints concerning her husband were listened to before the case was even discussed in the prince's own land. In this light, it is most likely to have been in her official capacity as political diplomat that she visited the English court at Windsor in January 1281. She continued her letter with a petition for the release of an additional three Englishmen who accompanied her from France. Most unflinchingly, Eleanor admonished the king for restoring John Becard's free status at the behest of others, whilst continually ignoring her own requests for pardon. Her disappointment in Edward, as king and kinsman, is palpable, claiming that 'she did not believe that she was so estranged from the king that he would not more quickly receive them into his peace for her sake than for the sake of others'. Although Becard may have been pardoned at the instance of Luke de Tany in January 1282, the Patent Rolls for 12 February 1282 state that it was due to the intervention by the princess of Wales that Hugh de Punfred, Hugh Cook and Philip Taylor were pardoned from allegations made against them.

Eleanor died in childbirth on 19 June 1282, at the age of twenty-four, and was buried at the Franciscan friary of Llan-faes, Anglesey. Less than a month after her death, on 12 July, members of her household were given safe conduct to return to England. Her daughter, Gwenllïan, survived only to be placed in Sempringham priory by Edward after the death of her father on 11 December 1282 and the subsequent conquest of Wales. Gwenllïan died 7 June 1337 at the age of 55 and was the last of the line on both her mother's and father's sides.

Surviving documentary evidence concerning Eleanor de Montfort as a royal woman in native Wales is singular in comparison to any of her predecessors or contemporaries. Her *acta* are demonstrative of her aptitude for manipulating her relationship with the king of England for political capital. She may have not used her rank as princess of Wales, or position as a Montfort, in a way that explicitly threatened the Crown as Edward originally feared, but she adeptly employed the agency associated with her dual status as Edward's vassal and his kinswoman. More importantly, the diplomatic of her five extant letters reveals much about how Eleanor perceived her role as princess of Wales and provides context to an understanding of the office of the Welsh 'queen', at least within the Venetian court. Throughout, Eleanor underscored her formal political role through the consistent use of her designation as princess of Wales and lady of Snowdon, and not simply as the wife of a powerful Welsh ruler, as the king's kinswoman or as the daughter of Simon de Montfort. Such usage implies that she possessed an understanding of the type of authority she could wield with her royal office.

Author

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Further Reading

Wikipedia Article: [Eleanor de Montfort](#)

Additional Links

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