

## The De Nogent Descendants and England

England - 1066 !

Chance is but the spin of a coin. It may fall heads or tails. The chances that the House of Rotrou in France should terminate without a male heir in the distant future of 1226 are about even. However, nature's coin often falls on the negative side. The chance that another branch of the House of Rotrou should begin in another country, some time before the extinction of the French House of Rotrou, is not so easy to predict, but we are happy that it did. Otherwise, you would not be reading this document !

In another 150 years, the main branch of the House of Rotrou in France will be extinguished. But another branch of the family is already being created in England.

The House of Rotrou in France is slowly but surely building in power. Rotrou II is changing alliances. Vassals of the Counts of Blois and Chartres, and thus of the Kings of France for more than a hundred years, the House of Rotrou is becoming powerful enough to make its own choices. This change of heart does not take place overnight. The House of Rotrou has been in a constant state of war with the House of Bellême and the Normans, at least since 963, when the city of Bellême was lost to the Normans by Rotrou, the first of our lineage.

When Rotrou I, commander of one of the armies of Thibault, Count of Blois and Chartres, attacked the Normans in 963, but lost the battle and was forced to cede the town of Bellême, he could not possibly have foreseen that his descendants would take sides with the Normans in the Conquest of England, just 100 years later. The House of Blois & Chartres and their vassals, the Viscounts of Châteaudun, were subservient to the Kings of France, and as such were continually at war with the bellicious Normans, who were directly descended from the Vikings, and whose favourite past-time appeared to be pillaging their neighbours. The Normans would storm across the border, whenever they felt like it, descend into the rich plains of l'Ile de France, ransacking and burning, and then retire behind their border to the safety of their Mottes and Baileys <sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Motte & Bailey - . Early Norman castles were of the 'motte and bailey' type. A motte (or castle-mound) is an artificial mound of earth, surrounded by a ditch and fortified by timber walls. A bailey is a fortified enclosure built next to the motte. To the Normans, a castle meant a safe haven from the hostile local population and a protected base from which they could strike at will at those who displeased them. Once an area of land was taken, a fortification of the motte and bailey type was built and manned, holding all within riding distance under their sway. The motte was a fortification which could rapidly be built (of wood) and later improved. A ditch was dug and the earth removed used to make a mound or 'motte'. On the mound, a tower (keep) was raised. On the inside lip of the ditch, a wooden palisade was erected and the enclosure or 'bailey' created was used to house both men and horses. A motte and bailey castle was a disposable item. The Normans frequently abandoned such constructions, whilst those erected at important sites were subsequently replaced by more extensive examples in stone.

There appeared to be no solution to this problem until the King of France, Lothaire, ordered Thibault to take steps to halt the Norman incursions. And so begins the saga of the De Nogent family. Rotrou I, under orders from his liege Thibault, builds a Motte and Bailey of some stature just across the border, at a small developing town called Nogent-le-Châtel<sup>2</sup>. While responsible for the maintenance of these fortifications, the Rotrou family becomes more important, and is allowed to marry into the House of Châteaudun, and will later become Viscounts. Due to the marriage of Rotrou II, to Adelaide de Bellême (probably arranged by Yves de Bellême, the Bishop of Sées), Rotrou has met Roger de Montgommery, husband of Mabel de Bellême. Roger is one of Duke William of Normandy's most trusted men, and brings Rotrou into contact with the future King of England. They are both associated with punitive expeditions into the Perche-Gouet, a part of the Perche which is far too strong to cede to invasion attempts by neighbours, from Nogent or from Bellême. This "rapprochement" also paves the way for William to approach Geoffrey III of Mortagne, in his search for mercenaries to help in his conquest of England. Thus the situation between the House of Rotrou and the Normans changed after a period of a hundred years, from extreme animosity to an association of interest. Williams strategy was very sound. The slow building up of a considerable power block to the south of his borders, by the Counts of Perche, may eventually hinder Williams plans of expansion, and so he judiciously makes peace with them, and implicates them in his glorious future.

When Edward the Confessor, King of England, dies in January, 1066, there are three claimants to the throne, including William, Duke of Normandy. Although Williams claim is by far the most tenuous, and Harold Godwinson is rapidly proclaimed king in accordance with the wishes of Edward<sup>3</sup>, William will not let the matter rest there. He amasses an enormous fleet of ships, and together with a large army of mercenaries, invades England in October 1066. And so the House of Rotrou, in the form of Geoffrey III of Mortagne, Rotrou de Nogent (future Rotrou de Montfort), and Fulke (Foulques) de Nogent (later given the sobriquet Fulke of Bellême), accompanies the troops of William the Conqueror to England, in an armada of more than 600 ships.

After the initial battles, those of the House of Rotrou who have a title and a future in France, return to their country. Fulke, and later his sons, apparently with no such future, will eke out an existence (probably quite comfortable) in England, and begin the long and famous line of the Nugents. It is probable that the family receives its future name at this time, as the descendants of Rotrou II in England are probably referred to as "De Nogent"<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. The best way to stop the Normans was to use mechanisms of their own invention. A fortification of the "motte/bailey" structure, placed in a strategic position in the north of the Perche, could only hinder the Normans in their sallies across the border. The fortifications of Nogent-le-Châtel, which will one day become known as Nogent-le-Rotrou, are strategically placed on high ground on a bend in the River Huisne.

Early in January, 1066, after the death of King Edward (the Confessor) who apparently had not shown a clear preference for his successor, the *Witenagemot* (assembly of wise men) declared Harold Godwinson as the new king. Harold was crowned at Westminster Abbey on January 6th, 1066.

<sup>4</sup> The fact that the name means absolutely nothing (ie. Nugent is derived from "De Nogent" - "From the New Settlement"), probably escapes the Irish, as our famous family name comes from this rather vague definition, handed down from the 11th century (Shhh ! Don't tell anybody) ! However, many family names from this time have their roots in the most unlikely beginnings.

However, the de Nogent descendants who settle in England are minor members of the family, and Fulke was rarely seen in France. Fulke and his sons and grandsons literally disappear from view. Little trace can be found of them for more than a hundred years. Several historical documents<sup>5</sup> follow the De Nogent family to their demise in France in 1226, A wealth of genealogy references can be found for the principal Irish families, and follow the De Nogent family from the moment that they arrive in Ireland in October 1171.<sup>6</sup> But after many years of research, I have found no documents relating to the De Nogent descendants in England between 1066 and 1171. We are left to ask ourselves how is it that we have the names of all the descendants, and their affiliation, and yet know absolutely nothing more.

The following chapters try to piece together the events concerning the English settlers of the De Nogent family from their arrival in England in 1066, to their departure to Ireland in 1171.

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<sup>5</sup> Well documented books by Bart de Boulais, M. O. Des Murs, Vicomte de Romanet and Kathleen Thompson are but a few of the recommended suggestions.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Burke, William Betham, John Debrett, Edmund Lodge, Mervyn Archdall, George William Collen ..... to name but a few !