



Ralph (II) (iii) de Tosny.

c.1029 – 9 Apr 1102.

Father: Roger (I) de Tosny.

Mother: Godehildis (Godeheut).

Spouse: Isabelle de Montfort (1058 – 1147)

Children:

1. Roger de Tosny (1073 – 1147).
2. Ralph (III) (iv) de Tosny (1078 – 1125).
3. Godehut de Tosny (? – 1097).

It is said that Ralph (II) (iii) was born at the family's manor house at Flamstead, in Hertfordshire, England, some time about 1029.

The boy was only about eleven years old when his father, Roger (I) de Tosny, was killed in battle 30/31 May 1040 fighting in a skirmish with the Beaumonts. As heir, but still a minor, Ralph was placed under the protection of Richard, 3rd Count of Évreux. There is no surprise about this since his mother, Godehildis, had been required to marry the Count after her first husband's death. This marriage was to be of great importance to Ralph and the Tosnys since the family of Évreux were close kin of the ducal family.

Even when he was still quite young, Ralph appeared signing charters alongside his mother. In about 1045 Ralph's sister Adeliza (Alice) de Tosny married William fitz Osbern and this drew the Tosny family even closer to the ducal family. William fought at Hastings having contributed sixty ships to the expedition fleet.¹

Ralph had probably attained his *majority* by the time that he is found signing Duke William's confirmation charter for Saint-Evroul abbey (1050).²

By the time that he was 25 years of age Ralph had inherited his father's position as *Gonfalonier* (Standard Bearer) of Normandy. He was present at Mortemer, Seine Maritime, on 6th February 1054, when Duke William's allies defeated the French forces of Count Odo and Count Renaud of Clermont. The story is told that the Duke sent an enthusiastic Ralph to declare the victory to the French King. Positioning himself on a crest above the king's camp he shouted the news so energetically that it

¹ ONDB <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/9620> (accessed 11/01/21).

² Moore (2017), 75; TELMA, 122.

caused great alarm and discomfit to the whole French contingent which remained with King Henry I and they promptly withdrew in dismay without offering battle.

Among the lords assembled at Hastings there were many whose retinues were large enough to afford, not only training in horsemanship, but some experience of military discipline. Within the contingents led by such men as Hugh de Montfort, Walter Giffard, Ralf(sic.) de Tosny, William de Warenne, William fitz Osbern, and William Malet, the individual knights must have known one another intimately, and developed at least a rudimentary capacity for concerted action.”³ The expedition of 1066 was essentially a Norman enterprise, made possible by volunteers from other parts, but based on the resources and the personal support of William’s Norman lords. The ducal family itself was represented by William, son of Ricard, count of Évreux; Richard, son of Count Gilbert of Brionne; Robert, Count of Mortain; and Odo, bishop of the Norman diocese of Bayeux. Among the duke’s household officers – each of them an important landowner – there came William fitz Osbern, the *dapifer* or steward, [married to Adeliza de Tosny, Raoul’s sister]; Hugh de Montfort, the *constable* [a relation of Raoul’s wife]; Hugh de Ivry, the *butler*; Ralf de Tancarville, the *chamberlain*; and Girald the *marshal*. The ‘unofficial baronage of Normandy’ supplied Thurstan, son of Rolf, who carried the Norman standard, Walter Giffard, Raoul (II)(iii) de Tosny, Hugh de Grandemesnil, Robert de Beaumont, William Malet, Engenulf de Laigle, and William de Warenne.

“As a group, the barons of the Conquest were closely interrelated with one another by descent and marriage. Raoul, lord of Tosny in Normandy, who was powerful in East Anglia and the southern midlands, was brother of Robert, lord of Stafford. He seems also to have been a nephew of Robert de Tosny, lord of Belvoir.”

[Stenton (1947), 623]

These ‘barons of Normandy’ were powerful to the point of independence and fiercely loyal to their followers. The famous story of Raoul (II)(iii) de Tosny rejecting his ‘hereditary’ position as *gonfalonier of Normandy* in the face of Harold’s army at Hastings is the stuff of legend, but it also demonstrates that Raoul placed the interests of his own followers on at least an equal footing with his responsibilities to the Duke.

"Then the Duke called for the standard which the Pope had sent him, and, he who bore it having unfolded it, the Duke took it and called to Raoul de Conches {Raoul (II)(iii) de Tosny}. 'Bear my standard,' said he, 'for I would not but do you right; by right and by ancestry your line are standard-bearers of Normandy, and very good knights have they all been.' But Raoul said that he would serve the Duke that day in other guise and would fight the English with his hand as long as life should last.

³ Stenton, F.M. (1943) *Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 585.

"Then the Duke bade Walter Giffard bear the standard. But he was old and white-headed, and bade the Duke give the standard to some younger and stronger man to carry. Then the Duke said fiercely, 'By the splendor of God, my lords, I think you mean to betray and fail me in this great need.' 'Sire,' said Giffard, 'not so! we have done no treason, nor do I refuse from any felony toward you; but I have to lead a great chivalry, both hired men and the men of my fief. Never had I such good means of serving you as I now have; and, if God please, I will serve you; if need be I will die for you, and will give my own heart for yours.'

"By my faith,' quoth the Duke, 'I always loved thee, and now I love thee more; if I survive this day, thou shalt be the better for it all thy days.' Then he called out a knight, whom he had heard much praised, Tosteins Fitz-Rou le Blanc⁴ by name, whose abode was at Bec-en-Caux. To him he delivered the standard; and Tosteins took it right cheerfully, and bowed low to him in thanks, and bore it gallantly and with good heart. His kindred still have quittance of all service for their inheritance on this account, and their heirs are entitled so to hold their inheritance forever.

[Creasy, E.S. (1885) *The later decisive battles of the world, from Hastings to Waterloo*, London: Richard Bentley & Sons, 19-20.]

Raoul had chosen to be 'in the thick of it' with his own followers, ever eager for the thrill of battle. In making this choice he gave up great riches and gifts of land which Duke William then showered on Turstin who became lord of Wigmore and, c.1086, made a good marriage with Agnes, the daughter of Alured de Merleberge (Alfred of Marlborough) who held the Castle of Ewias from William. Raoul had shown that he was much more his followers' 'man' rather than Duke William's official – he wanted to lead his own men rather than chase around following the Duke. In this he demonstrated a significant degree of independence from the Duke - a characteristic that was to mark him out throughout his lifetime.

Ralph (II)(iii) de Tosny demonstrated that he had inherited his ancestor's characteristics. He was notoriously belligerent and had frequent violent quarrels with his neighbours. About this time, one of these violent quarrels involved the Montgomery family. Roger de Montgomery († 1094) was a relative of Duke William and was also one of his principal counsellors and so it is not surprising that, in the matter of the quarrel, Duke William took the Montgomery side. The duke confiscated Ralph de Tosny's lands⁵ and exiled him along with some of his supporters. In retribution, Ralph and these other dispossessed lords razed the town of St Evroult.

⁴ Usually referred to today as *Turstin son of Rolf*, or *Toustain fitz Rou le Blanc*, thought to have been a young Flemish knight.

⁵ At this time the Tosny estates were at Conches, Tosny, and Acquigny, with other fiefs scattered north of the Seine and even in the Cotentin. [*ibid.*]

What had been Ralph's offence? It is difficult to know for certain, but the following story is told. When Robert Grandmesnil (Hugh's brother) had been in office as abbot of Saint-Evroult for about a year and a half, during which the affairs of the convent appear to have been managed with ability and discretion, he was so unfortunate as to incur the serious displeasure of his ducal sovereign. In the latter part of 1061, according to Orderic but without giving any just reason, "William disinherited and drove into exile Hugh de Grentemesnil, Ralph de Toeni and Arnold d'Echauffour."⁶ Though the old historian regards these enterprising warriors as the victims of misrepresentation, the vicomte de Motey has shown that Hugh had taken a leading part in the fomenting of an insurrection against Roger de Montgomerie, afterwards earl of Shrewsbury, who was holding the frontiers of Normandy against the duke's enemies. Simultaneously with the disgrace of Hugh and his associates,⁷ Robert de Grentemesnil was cited to appear before the ducal court to answer a charge brought against him by Rainer, a monk of Chatillon, whom he had raised to the office of prior at the abbey of St. Evroult and whom he had treated as a confidential friend. The allegation was that, in the course of a private conversation, abbot Robert had commented disparagingly upon duke William's personal character. Whether there was anything in Rainer's story or not, abbot Robert, who had been secretly informed that the duke was violently enraged against him and all his kindred, did not appear on the day appointed to defend himself against the accusation. Feeling that he was in danger of bodily injury, he acted on the advice of his friend the bishop of Lisieux and prudently fled from the wrath that threatened him. On 27 January 1061, after chanting at vespers the antiphon, *Peccala inca, Domiie*, he took his departure, and mounting on horseback with two monks, Fulk and Urse, travelled through France, and thence proceeded to present himself to pope Nicholas and lay his case before him. During Robert's absence, duke William invested Osbern, prior of Corneilles, with the abbacy of Saint-Evroult.⁸

So, Ralph, along with Hugh de Grandmesnil, and Ernald d'Echauffouer, were banished from Normandy and deprived of their lands. But, by 1063, Ralph had been restored to his lands and titles in Normandy, thanks to the intercession of Simon I de Montfort-l'Amaury⁹ and Valeran I de Breteuil-en-Beauvaisis.¹⁰ It is also recorded that he gave donations to the abbey of Saint-Évroult "en reparacion de l'incendie du

⁶ Ord. Vit., Vol. I, p. 431. {Note the old spelling of the surnames here.} Arnold d'Échauffour was heir of Robert Giroie, and cousin of Hugh de Grandmesnil.

⁷ Motey, Vicomte du (1920) *Origines de la Normandie et du duché d'Alençon*, Paris: Picard, p. 30. Chatillon was the abbey at Conches-en-Ouches founded by the family of Tosny.

⁸ For the concluding acts in this 'abatial contest', see: Francis, H.J., 'Hugh de Grentemesnil and his Family, Leicestershire Archaeological Society, *Transactions*, Vol. 13 (1923-24), pp. 155-198, 167-171.

[https://www.le.ac.uk/lahs/downloads/1923-24/1923-24%20\(13\)%20155-198%20Francis.pdf](https://www.le.ac.uk/lahs/downloads/1923-24/1923-24%20(13)%20155-198%20Francis.pdf) (accessed 24/01/2021).

⁹ Simon I de Montfort-l'Amaury (c.1025 – 25 Sept 1087). He built the fortress at Epernon.

¹⁰ Valeran I de Breteuil-en-Beauvaisis (1038-1084).

bourg de Saint-Evrout, donne à l'abbaye deux arpents de vigne [2 acres of vines]." He added various other donations from Normandy and England.¹¹

Ralph fought at Hastings, and the tale is told that, in order to become more actively involved in the fighting, he passed the duties of *Gonfalonier* to one Turstin FitzRou after Walter Giffard had also, in spite of his age, turned the honour down.

Isobel de Montfort, Ralph's wife, was almost as famous as he was in the world of Norman warfare. It is said that, to defend her lands she, "rode armed as a knight among the mounted knights, and she showed no less courage when amongst the knights in hauberks and the sergeants at arms."¹² She is said to have demonstrated this most particularly during a conflict in northern France in the late eleventh century.¹³ Isobel was the epitome of a Norman wife. In what was obviously the praise of an ardent admirer, Orderic Vitalis described Isobel (of Conches) as being as brave as "several Amazons and the legendary Camilla, who fought as an ally of the Italian king Turnus in the *Aeneid*." She was described as being a beautiful woman who later repented the sins of her youth, particularly that of enjoying luxury, and, after the death of her husband in 1102, she dedicated herself to the service of God and eventually took the veil.¹¹

In 1081, we find Ralph in Winchester in attendance with the king giving witness to a charter, which King William confirms with the sign of the Holy Cross in the presence of his sons, Robert and William. Also in attendance were Hugh de Grentmesnil, Ralph de Conches {de Tosny} as already noted and William de Breteuil (his nephew), with various lesser personages.

When King William died in 1087 Ralph lost no time in shaking off the 'supervision' that the king had tried to impose on him. He immediately expelled the garrison which the king had placed in the Tosny castle at Conches and various other Norman lords, such as William de Breteuil, Robert of Bellême and William, count of Évreux, did the same.¹⁴ Many of these individuals, certainly Ralph de Tosny, supported Curthose's rebellion that same year. Ralph fought for Curthose in Maine in the summer of 1088,¹⁵ but it is not clear if he supported the Curthose cause in England.

But Ralph eventually fell out even with these relations, who once had been close allies. In 1090, violence broke out between him and William of Breteuil and William,

¹¹ SCRIPTA, 134. Dated (16 July 1066 - 6 March 1089).

¹² Orderic Vitalis, *The Ecclesiastical History*, M. Chibnall (tr.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, Vol. VI, 212-213. "*In expeditione inter milites et miles equitabat armata, et loricatis equitibus ac spiculatis satellitibus non minori præstabat audacia.*"

¹³ Eddington, S. and Lambert, S. (2002) *Gendering the Crusades*, Columbia University Press, 53-54. ¹¹ *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 128-129.

¹⁴ OV, iv., 114.

¹⁵ OV, iv., 154.

count of Évreux.¹⁶ This was the famous *Guerre des Belles Dames*, which is said to have arisen out of an argument between the two wives – Helvide, wife of William d'Évreux and Isabelle de Montfort, Raoul's wife. Count William, William de Breteuil and Richard de Montfort combined to attack Conches in November 1091.¹⁷ This whole episode is remarkable for the way that it reveals the vicissitudes of 'friendship' during this era in Normandy, even amongst supposedly close members of the family. However, Ralph demonstrated once more that he was a *bonnie fechter*, as the Scots would say, and was endowed with impressive quantities of a very valuable personal ability – raw cunning! Ralph finally sealed victory when he captured William de Breteuil.¹⁸ But he carried home a more substantial 'victory' by refusing to release William in return for a massive ransom both in terms of its financial value and the political settlement that it forced on his opponents – a payment of three thousand livres and the recognition of Ralph's son, Roger, as heir to both Breteuil and the county of Évreux (neither of them having children of their own). It is to be doubted that, even in his worst temper, Ralph would have had William of Breteuil executed (although it would have been accepted that he would have been within his rights to do so had he chosen). Moore reflects Strickland's comment that, "the profitability of ransom was an important obstacle to unrestrained violence in northern France in the eleventh century".¹⁹ The ransom that Ralph demanded was stunning, even for those times, and would have resulted in his son being raised to the Norman nobility, something that the family had failed to obtain up to that point. However, Roger died "still a youth", that is, whilst still under the age of twenty-one years, some time about 15 May 1091, and so the terms of the ransom failed.

It is worth reminding ourselves here that Ralph (II)(iii) de Tosny, whatever his ambitions may have been, never rose to the ranks of the aristocracy or nobility.

However, it is an inescapable fact that he was one of the most powerful people in the Norman world in which he lived and that his own '*puissance*' was supported by some equally powerful relations – Richard, count of Évreux, his stepfather; William, count of Évreux, his half-brother; William fitz Osbern, his brother-in-law; William de Breteuil, his nephew. If we add to these the significant number of individuals who looked to him as their liege lord, then we can start to appreciate the imposing power-bloc that Ralph commanded. Ever his own man, at times 'a thorn in the side' of the mightiest rulers, short-tempered, and suitably religious in his outlook, Ralph was, without question, a man who had unbelievable prospects, but who was, in the

¹⁶ OV, iv., 212-16.

¹⁷ OV, iv., 214.

¹⁸ Moore, J. (2017) *The Norman Aristocracy in the Long Eleventh Century: three case studies*, unpublished DPhil thesis, St Peter's College, University of Oxford, 91.
<https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:8982f5401890-4469-ae16-3c78c1ecac1e> (accessed 03/08/2021)

¹⁹ Moore 2017, 91; Strickland, M.J. (2001) 'Killing or Clemency?' in *Krieg im Mittelalter*, ed. H.-H. Körtüm, (Berlin, 2001), 93-122, at 106-16.

end, quite content to focus principally on his Norman lands and the people, especially the members of his family, who lived on them. It is a source of considerable regret that his grave in the abbey church of St Peter and St Paul is not now to be found.