



## 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 his family 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 6<sup>th</sup> 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 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.

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

However, by 1060, Ralph (II)(iii) de Tosny demonstrated that he had inherited his ancestor's characters. 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 lands<sup>2</sup> and exiled him along with some of his supporters. In retribution, Ralph and these other dispossessed lords razed the town of St Evroult.

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."<sup>3</sup> 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,<sup>4</sup> Robert de Grentemesnil was cited to appear before the ducal court to answer a charge brought against him by Rainer, a monk of Chatillon<sup>5</sup>, 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

<sup>2</sup> 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.*]

<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>4</sup> Motey, Vicomte du (1920) *Origines de la Normandie et du duché d'Alençon*, Paris, Picard, p. 30.

<sup>5</sup> Chatillon was the abbey at Conches-en-Ouches founded by the family of Tosny.

him. During Robert's absence, duke William invested Osbern, prior of Cormeilles, with the abbacy of Saint-Evrout.<sup>6</sup>

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'Amaury<sup>7</sup> and Valeran I de Breteuil-en-Beauvaisis.<sup>8</sup>

Ralph fought at Hastings and the tale is told that, in order to become 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."<sup>9</sup> She is said to have demonstrated this most particularly during a conflict in northern France in the late eleventh century.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

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,

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<sup>6</sup> 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).

<sup>7</sup> Simon I de Montfort-l'Amaury (c.1025 – 25 Sept 1087). He built the fortress at Epernon.

<sup>8</sup> Valeran I de Breteuil-en-Beauvaisis (1038-1084).

<sup>9</sup> 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 loricated equitibus ac spiculatis satellitibus non minori præstabat audacia."

<sup>10</sup> Eddington, S. and Lambert, S. (2002) *Gendering the Crusades*, Columbia University Press, 53-54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ecclesiastical History*, III, 128-129.

did the same.<sup>12</sup> 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,<sup>13</sup> 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, count of Évreux.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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".<sup>17</sup> 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,

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<sup>12</sup> OV, iv., 114.

<sup>13</sup> OV, iv., 154.

<sup>14</sup> OV, iv., 212-16.

<sup>15</sup> OV, iv., 214.

<sup>16</sup> 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:8982f540-1890-4469-ae16-3c78c1ecac1e> (accessed 03/08/2021)

<sup>17</sup> Moore 2017, 91; Strickland, M.J. (2001) 'Killing or Clemency?' in *Krieg im Mittelalter*, ed. H.-H. Kortüm, (Berlin, 2001), 93-122, at 106-16.

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 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.