

MOVES IN ENGLISH edited by Charles Vasey

# EMPIRES OF THE MIDDLE AGES AND SIMON DE MONTFORT

by Charles Vasey

This could be regarded as "Son of Medieval Miscellany," but it was prompted mostly by my desire to express surprised pleasure at *Empires of the Middle Ages* — a game which will give any player some idea of Medieval kingship even though it has no rules for the Pope! As I started in gaming with a Jim Dunnigan game, it's nice to see the Master popping up through the floorboards with another fine work. Alongside it I decided to review a British game published by WWW — an association for which I have a cordial dislike, but which paid some of its dues with this game. In fact, following on the taoist quotes I used in writing the reviews one might almost introduce the article as:

*A Ancient Master presents Truths in the guise of a Simple Exercise*

*An old enemy produces a fine work and receives praise*

...am I beginning to sound like Kevin Zucker?

CHV

## Empires of the Middle Ages

*Governing a large state is like boiling a small fish. (Lao Tzu. LX 138)*

The concept of *Empires of the Middle Ages* was one that seemed as if it might go the way of all flesh — "A Thousand Years of History, Now You Are There" and other mentions in *S&T* all confirmed my fears that this was going to be a real turkey. It is therefore pleasing to announce that despite it all, especially the bunch of play-testers I saw in New York, the result is rather good and succeeds in the very areas where I expected dramatic failure. One might say the game rested on three foundations: the importance of the language-racial-religious divides of Europe (a demographic rather than feudal view); the limitations of Medieval personalised kingship; and a myriad special rules to give the game the ginger it requires to lift it out of the realms of high-grade *Diplomacy* and deposit it firmly in the ranks of historical simulations.

*But when territories are acquired in regions where there are differences in language, customs and laws, then great good fortune and much hard work are required to hold them. (Machiavelli, Il Principe, Book III)*

Such could be the design-notes of this game. Jim Dunnigan has taken this principle as the *Grundnorm* of his view of history. He does not deny that an able monarch could not rule myriad peoples, but he will find that it consumes much time and trouble. The map is accordingly divided into language groups and sub-groups, and into religious groupings. Most medieval kingdoms transcended

these borders, but the nodal groupings that were the heartland of what were later to become the first "national" states are already there. Indeed one might say the fact that they are as much in evidence in 900 AD as in 1490 AD is just one of the problems that must face any design that covers so much time. It cannot be stated too many times that the design accepts as inevitable the movement that culminated in the 1918 massacre of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the hands of Woodrow Wilson. If you find it hard to believe that a Carolingian thought himself a Frenchman, or that one should accept the language of subject rather than lord as a determining factor, then you must accept that you disagree with Dunnigan's view. I must admit I am not totally happy with it, but neither can one say it does not contain a great many truths.

A swift glance at the map shows the blocks of Anglo-Saxon speakers that constituted England, the Northern French block of Langue d'Oil speakers upon whom the Capetian Kingdom of France was based, the Greek speakers of the Byzantine Empire, and so on. What immediately attracts one's attention is the Romanic Group of languages, because these chappies have both population and social status. Given the problems of language that will become evident later, it seems obvious that Northern Italy was the natural site for a kingdom the like of which was never seen. From this *festung* of population and wealth our new Roman Empire can spread through the Occidental-speaking areas of southern France and Catalonia and even take the bases of the Kingdoms of France, Spain and Sicily. It seems cruel to ask why this never happened. One reason might be that Dunnigan's concept is not intended to be viewed as correct for all events. The fact that two national groups occur in the Italic group — Castille and France — prevents too much rascality, and the German grip on Northern Italy is a factor that slows things down. Even so, it exposes the central problem of compressing much into little. In one scenario, one player is the King of Burgundy (that is Arelat, not the medieval Burgundy), and his possibilities for success surprised me, as I was proceeding on the historical picture of this area being much given to political anarchy (or of the sort of division evidenced by the Guelfs and Ghibellines in Italy). Population and wealth do not make world beaters, nor do brothers always combine well; such lessons must be

noted if the game's results are to be understood when they differ from history.

Indeed, a moment's thought will uncover all sorts of anachronisms. I have already mentioned the possibility of a resurgent Occidental Burgundy ruining the Capetian Kingdom. Another question of interest is how did the Christians reconquer Spain when the Castillian and Aragonese kingdoms are pretty well over-shadowed by the Moslem emirates of Cordoba and Granada? In game turns the answer is, once more, that one does not get an Emir player! Never mind the potential of a state; it must also obey a second condition — that is that it had the thrust to do something, and this is represented by giving it a player. Look at Scotland and Wales: are these pesky little rat-holes really the powers that obliged English kings to spend so much time in controlling them? The only time they are likely to do anything is if a very powerful magnate appears; instead of being constant thorns in the side of England they are demoted to banana-republic status, and (insult of insults) Scotland is demoted to worse than Wales! Another prickly little nation — Switzerland — appears as just a poor province of Germany. The Sicily one sees on the map is not quite the brilliant creation of the de Hautevilles. All this is by-the-by; one cannot expect everything, and one can bolt further sections on if you really wish.

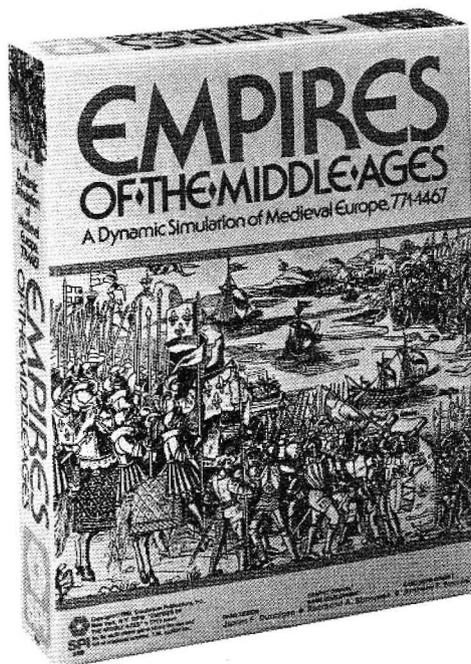
To handle the inevitable random factors of history, Dunnigan has devised the Magnate rule. Neat stuff this, as one man can rise in some independent area and possibly carve himself an empire out of the other nations. He is still faced with a tough job as the player-powers can usually fight him off with money *if it is available*. A Byzantine Empire, to be really stretched by a Bulgarian Magnate and a Syrian Magnate, must really have suffered an awful series of disasters to be threatened. As such, the Byzantine player is left with an awful lot of room to expand, safe from the attentions of most players. In such cases I recommend a quick Crusade to teach the damned Greeks some manners. Nothing keeps the Gryfons from getting lippy quite like a Frankish Emperor in Constantinople and Franks in Greece. With a bit of luck, a Syrian Magnate should arise and help crush this perfidious race.

As I have already mentioned, one might query that it was the nature of the people that determined the racial bias *or* the nature of the rulers. The English court area appears to speak Anglo-Saxon — a quite ridiculous idea

when speaking of anything after 1066. Having said that, one is forced to wonder how the Dukes of Normandy ever managed to capture England; it would seem they were jolly lucky not to have the Irish come over and give them a good thrashing! Of course this problem would only occur in the Campaign Game as Jim has studiously avoided the more atypical eras of the period. Let me provide another example. Henry II of England was the overlord of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. While Wales was obviously controlled by force, the other two states saw ruling castes of French blood agreeing to serve under a king of French blood. To see the national differences one must wait a few centuries.

Having accepted the limitations of the game, one comes to its second area — the nature of Kingship. It is this that I find the most impressive piece of the design. The average game always tends to translate *potential* strength and wealth into *actual* wealth and strength. This is not so here. To rule the German Empire is to know real frustration, as its huge potential requires more than the abilities of one man. One is frequently sitting there contemplating some great evil (perhaps the complete capture and defeat of those annoying Italians), but by the time one has quelled unrest over the required taxation, dealt with diplomatic raids by the smaller players, one has no time for conquest. As was said of Henry II's Angevin Empire, Henry was obliged to spend his life in the saddle just maintaining it at its present state, never mind increasing it. In some ways the bias may have swung towards the smaller powers, but only if the largest power is a diplomatic disaster.

The principle limitation is time. The ruler has the classic Five Card Trick. He may choose five "endeavours" to perform and apply the results shown on the cards. This limit applies no matter how large or small the empire in question. These endeavours are interesting, if only because they realise that one does not rule by fighting battles all the time. Conquest is an expensive procedure that requires you to attack from a province which has a high Social Status — requiring you to make careful preparations first. Pillage, however, is always useful when your neighbours are richer than you — although it will tend to irritate them rather. It is also far cheaper and produces real *money*. Diplomacy is also rather effective; by establishing clients in an opponent's areas, you can foment all sorts of trouble if he wants to tax there and, by this sort of insidious behaviour, you may end up ruling the area, for it is much the procedure by which the French chased Henry II's descendents out of most of what we now know as France. One may keep cards aside, or use them out of turn, for Defense. This simulates our monarch tirelessly riding his borders, defeating evil enemies, one of the game's problems being that one can only add money and ability to the defence if playing the defence card. Kings could, after all, only be in one place at once. This rather disregards the possibility of a capable Constable who



could be the King's right arm; a pity this was not considered. Ruling is probably the most common endeavour (as indeed it should be) by which one raises the tax-potential of one's empire, quiets unrest and strengthens the defences of the empire, as Lao Tzu says...

***When the way prevails in the Empire, fleet footed horses are relegated to ploughing the fields; when the way does not prevail in the empire, war-horses breed on the border. (XLVI 104)***

At times in the game, one is presented with a most agreeable picture of all the kings engaged in the pursuits of peace until some vulgar bully stirs up trouble. Of course one's activities are much influenced by the present monarch's attributes, and a good administrative leader should not be wasted in warfare, nor a good general in foolish attempts to reform the taxation of Southern Ruritania when he could be hacking through the enemy ranks.

Certain points must be made to gamers. Firstly, if one power grows too mighty, he can soon be cut down to size by several wheezes. First we have the Diplomatic Offensive. All players simply perform five Diplomacy endeavours on the tyrant's areas, they then add to the dice for unrest in taxation. He can only beat this off by his own diplomatic missions, but he can only do five a turn if he abandons all other evil.

Secondly, one can use the death of a thousand cuts; this consists of bleeding away the tyrant's cards in Defence endeavours to prevent him ever having time to be offensive. It is at times like this that one will have regard to the population of one's court area. It is consequently much easier to topple a German Emperor than a French King (not that I accept that as being historically correct).

The game combines the essential nature of kingship with plenty of diplomatic interaction. It is a fine role-player of the period, especially when added to the Events card pack. No single nation is able to rule forever, although I must once again warn about the

Byzantines. Indeed in one game, King John of England suffered a horrid fate as Philip of France took Wessex while Otto of Germany took the Mercian and Northumbrian provinces! One wonders whether in the long run things will not tend towards equilibrium?

The third foundation of the game is the "specials," and here my list must be incomplete. There are lots of clever tricks lurking around in the game, from the small rules, like the Venetian propensity to independence, to many major rules. Raiders are perhaps the most obvious with their simulation of the external factors that may well have shaped the nation states that are assumed to be so immutable. The Vikings appear as rather wet characters who raid the Atlantic coasts of Britain and France. They seem to avoid entering the Mediterranean or setting up the Kievan kingdoms on the drive to Constantinople. Due to a neat fix they always settle in Normandy as well (tsk tsk Mr. Dunnigan). The Saracens just engage in making sure the Romanic group has plenty about which to think. The Magyars also seem rather quiet and do not make many of the massive raids through to France. The remarks about magnates apply here, and cash and leadership reduce the effect to an irritation taking time but not toppling kings. What would King Canute have thought?

The Crusades and Schism rules are neat and quite good fun with plenty of possibilities for all sorts of rascality. Rather boringly, we managed to unite the churches once; these sections are less used in early games, but will soon find their way forward as players get more skilled. The religious rules are pretty interesting too; some day I may manage my desire to convert Rome to Islam! Such a policy is very much a long range activity to be carried out in some backwater. The same applies to colonisation, a method by which some of these national boundaries could be altered, although I question the economical basis of these activities. Excommunication appears as a rather profane mass vote. Unfortunately one cannot say that is so inaccurate, as Popes were frequently at the mercy of various kings. Any rule that requires voting is, of course, bound to cause plenty of fun in a multi-player game.

The actual scenarios are rather a problem, being far too long and requiring quite a few players. I would recommend you either play by mail or be prepared to limit the length of the scenarios. Many of the historical problems I have outlined will disappear as one plays the later scenarios, but all have something to offer, although one cannot help wondering who would play some of the smaller nations (which is perhaps why the larger ones are given Achilles Heels).

The total effect of *Empires* is good. It must inevitably fail to simulate so complex a subject as the history of nations, but it comes very close and — in the areas under consideration in the scenarios — even closer. It is a challenging game with plenty of available strategies and it is a good multi-player subject, especially after the calculation of endeavours becomes second nature. Furthermore, the amateur historian is handed a

useful mechanism with which he can tinker. *Empires of the Middle Ages* stands a head higher than many of the "Medieval-Ancient Fantasy Empire" games that sit around on the market, and the fact that it tries to be accurate in no way prevents it being interesting. Recently *Phoenix* magazine's resident wiseacre complained about SPI's approach to games, and one of his supporters states (with no noticeable evidence) that people do not play games to learn, but to have fun. Well here my little man, is one game where you can do both.

### Simon de Montfort

Simon de Montfort was one of the great barons of England, and a member of the brotherhood of Frankish knights who bestride the Middle Ages like a race of Titans. He is also remembered by "historians" as a great figure in the rise of a parliamentary democracy and of liberty. That sort of "history" also sees Magna Carta as a sort of American Constitution, instead of being a re-statement of the terms by which one class, the tenants-in-chief, held their land of their king. None of this is really the sort of thing Tom Paine would have written home about, but viewed in the historical perspective of our subsequent history, perhaps the events seem more important than they did then.

The greatest problem of any period of history is reducing oneself to thinking as one's subjects did. Any student of English history will have his view of the word "king" influenced by the excesses of our most imperial monarch, Henry VIII, or the papist plans of our most obstinate monarch, James II. Most barons of the thirteenth century were too near in time and blood-lines to the days when ancestors of the present "King of England" had been merely Dukes of Normandy. If Simon was not quite in the Patrick Henry mould, he was nevertheless an interesting character, one who rose above the common herd and stamped his authority on his age, and whose ill-fortune in meeting the future Edward I perhaps lessened his attempt to reduce England to the kind of feudal chaos that bedevilled Germany and France. The period also had its fair share of interesting characters, Henry III being one of the less spectacular kings of England. His son Edward was later to be known as The Hammer of the Scots, and his brother Richard was always known as King of the Romans from his attempts to become Holy Roman Emperor.

It is not, however, with the precise period historicity of the game *Simon de Montfort* that I intend to deal. For this is not one of my periods of study, and I do not propose to pontificate upon that which is only a hazy outline to me. If you want reviewers who are instant experts, you must look elsewhere. Rather, I would like to look at this game as a symptom of the ways we can simulate the period, much as one might review *White Death* as a simulation of Velkie Luki or of an excellent way of simulating East Front battles in general.

*Simon de Montfort* is designed by Martin Edwardes, whose name was formerly known to me in *Diplomacy* circles in Britain. It is a fairly simple game in concept (you do not require lots of pieces of paper for example) and it can end quite quickly. The scene opens with Simon the leader of a disgruntled baronage who outnumber the Royalists. The various nobles set up in their castles, and the first few turns of the war are spent in manoeuvring with no combat being allowed between leaders (so apart from attacking castles defended by a few sergeants, the early moves consist of massing for the attacks that must come). The Rebels also make the moves that give them the whip-hand on the game by occupying the cities of York, Bristol and Norwich. Movement is made by leaders and attendant counters, an excellent rule which ever since the days of *Frederick the Great* has prevented vast numbers of small units manoeuvring by radio-control. There is one rule about movement which must be noted, and that is one may not enter a hex containing both friendly and enemy units unless one force is under siege. The import of this is that units must combine the turn before combat; they may not practice some kind of Napoleonic envelopment battle. This simple device (although not perfect) does much to simulate the difficulties that bedevilled commanders in an age when even maps were not always available.

Combat involves a simple read-off against the number of troops on each side with losses occurring between the knights, infantry, and leaders. After each round of combat, morale must be checked, and those who have "departed to kiss their wives and sweethearts" are removed. The usual result is one side's knights fight to the last. Unfortunately the beaten troops who have withdrawn from combat are not obliged to

retreat, or become disorganised (as in *Freddie*), and often they descend on the erstwhile victors and beat them up. This is far and away the weakest feature of the combat. After any great battle, both sides could well be considered out-for-the-count.

The neatest trick of all, however, is the recruitment rules. Rather than a series of complex rules on baronial holdings, the designer has simply allotted recruitment values to various towns and cities. These are added to the recruitment factors of the leaders and the requisite number of infantry raised. This device tends to impel nobles to operate and recruit in the areas of their strength. The political sides of the war are handled by nobles deserting the rebel cause during the winter interphase. One can imagine them looking at their calendars and seeing pencilled in "Desert rebels" around the Christmas dates.

A few jollies appear, like Queen Eleanor crosses from Calais with mercenaries. The Oxford students march for the rebels (I take a particular pleasure in slaughtering these impudent louts) as do the Welsh and the London Levy (although the latter do rather more running than marching). The basic system is simple and the rules not too contorted, although I feel they could have been given the once-over by a professional rules reader. Victory goes on a point total from holding the four cities and King each winter, with sudden-death if you hold all four and the King at the same time.

The problems of the system and game are sufficient to make me say that, as a game, I do not recommend you try it, although by the time you know all these problems (after two playings maximum) you would probably have put the game aside anyway! The first difficulty is play-balance. As I have remarked, the Rebels can take three cities at once, so

To enter a clear terrain hex	1 movement point (mp)
To enter a forest hex	2mp
To enter a march hex	3mp
To enter a rough terrain hex	4mp
To cross an'all-sea or wide river hexside:	not allowed
To cross a river hexside	+ 2mp, but there must be no enemy force on the other bank.
To cross London bridge	+ 0mp, but there must be no enemy force on the other bank.

5. Combat results table:

die roll	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	0 0	0 0	0 0	0 0	0 0	1 0	1 0	1 0	1 0	1 0
2	0 0	0 0	0 0	0 0	1 0	1 0	1 0	1 0	1 0	1 0
3	0 0	0 0	1 0	1 0	1 0	1 0	1 1	2 1	2 1	2 1
4	0 0	0 0	1 0	1 0	1 0	1 1	1 1	2 1	2 1	2 1
5	0 0	1 0	1 1	1 1	1 1	1 1	2 1	2 1	2 1	3 1
6	1 0	1 1	1 1	2 1	2 1	2 1	2 1	2 1	3 1	3 2
	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1

even if nothing more occurs, they have a 3:2 position at the end of the first year. They usually manage to get one of the other two targets — London or Henry III. This throws the Royalists heavily on the defence, and obliges the South-Western nobles to try to free Bristol before the nasty Rebels get the fifth target and go for instant victory. Frequently, even if the Royalists stave off sudden death, they find the victory point difference too large to beat. The victory points also have an unhistorical effect on campaigns by tending to concentrate matters.

This leads us conveniently to the point of politics. The game sets out its parameters with some care, and these cannot include a complete simulation of the complexities of a civil war. I do not blame Martin Edwardes for this; better that he should seek to do what he can within these limits than fail to make a game out of the period. Having said this, and also saying that the major features of the war have appeared, it must be admitted that much flavour is lost. The desertion of leaders is odd but not that unhistorical — barons were usually involved in a complex web of family relationships that meant any desertion should be accomplished with as much tact as possible, and the signs would be obvious.

What is missing, however, is the mechanism by which the Rebels lost those deserters and the Royalists gained them. We are left with an inevitable fore-knowledge of what will occur which limits strategies in a way neither side would have considered in the real event. Surely this could have been handled better, even if it was simply to make the desertions more random. All gaming is role-playing, and the players in this game have a great deal too much fore-knowledge. Of course, such a change would require more rules to be satisfying, and obviously Martin did not want to produce so weighty a game,

which leads me to wonder whether despite this laudable aim simulating such a situation does require a certain minimum level of complexity if one is not to end up with more shadow than substance.

One more feature is missing that sticks in my memory, and to a degree in my craw; And this is the lack of a road system. Movement is very slow in *Simon de Montfort* with its monthly turns, but this is less of a problem than it seems on the old gaming principle of one hour of march and two hours of standing around. What is bad is that the road system which would give one a chance to use some real speed is gone. This in turn reduces the importance of various towns and castles which held the roads. The roads channeled movement and established patterns; instead one is given a random system of movement which simply passes castles with total contempt. In this map-less age, I cannot feel a general would lightly set off into the wild blue yonder; and when a monarch did so, he could frequently come to grief as in the "Mud March" of Louis X of France.

Where the game succeeds notably is its map. This actually is a *full* colour map, and jolly period it looks with its strange views of cities, towns and castles. While one could engage in many a happy hour of nit-picking about the status of certain cities and towns, the total effect is excellent, and aids in the suspension of disbelief required for the game.

The game also works in its mix of movement and supply. Mr. Edwardes has made the bold leap of abandoning supply rules totally. Instead he substitutes attrition rules. As long as forces are of reasonable size they can support themselves anywhere, but when they concentrate, they risk attrition. This tends to mean that managing a large siege is going to require the use of the supply-convoys one can raise. The result of this is that one is faced with a war without fronts; the indirect approach becomes pointless when one cannot threaten non-existent lines of supply. This rule alone is probably the major factor in my belief that even if the scenario does not fully work, the system is of interest to any medievalist.

Experts of the period have certain complaints against the game, but these have really been conceptually covered by the point about simulating the politics of the period. Thus the political cost of Simon's links with the Welsh among the Marcher lords is not shown but, as I remarked, such things require more complexity. The thrust of the game is correct however, and Martin Edwardes shows every evidence of actually having tried to simulate his period rather than cannibalising an old AH or SPI system. That he has not brought it off totally is unfortunate and, given his chosen level of complexity, perhaps inevitable. That he has done as much as he has is laudable, and it's a long time since I have enjoyed playing a game which I later concluded was spiked. Perhaps it would be wiser to use this approach in a "national" war (a Hundred Years War campaign for example) where the battle-lines were more clearly drawn. ■■

**Fifth Corps** *[continued from page 16]*

might provide the balance needed. It did, but only partially. The Warsaw Pact could now capture Giessen, but the division doing it was repeatedly mangled so badly as to be of little further use in the scenario.

We tried to have the division in the south try first for Rhein-Main, and then for Wiesbaden. For a change, NATO units were lost, but so were Warsaw Pact units. Neither objective fell. We were beginning to have some doubts about the viability of the scenario, but two further alterations changed the balance to a point where NATO, finally, needed some help. First, Chuck Kamps sent new information about increased Warsaw Pact mechanized rifle regiment strengths. The present strengths of 10-14 resulted from this information. The old strengths, by the way, were either 7-9 or 8-12. John had done some more homework on movement rates and found that a second and subsequent Phase cost of one Operation Point per autobahn hex was both attainable and realistic for gaming purposes. Testings at this stage showed that the Warsaw Pact forces were too powerful insofar as their performance in terms of Victory Points was concerned. A marginal victory used to occur at 14. The Warsaw Pact units achieved that much repeatedly without having to try to take Rhein-Main. We agreed that the scenario definitely had the proper "backs to the wall" atmosphere with strong, fast Soviet units smashing away at the smaller NATO types hanging on for dear life. The last refinement was fairly simple. We raised the VP levels by two points to force the Warsaw Pact to try for Rhein-Main.

**Conclusions**

*Fifth Corps* is a very good simulation of what a conflict in Europe will probably be like. I feel instinctively, based on prior service, that the Friction Point gain system for movement is as true to life as you can get. I can still recall too many convoys where vehicles had to drop out due to maintenance problems. I can also recall my mechanics patching them together somehow so they could re-join — a Friction Point loss.

The tremendous advantages for the defender are mirrored in the Combat Results Table. A glance at the counters drives home the point that the Warsaw Pact possesses a significant numerical superiority. The NATO player cannot escape feeling how it is to fight outnumbered. There are some rough spots. The nuclear weapons rules, for example, are not very workable. However, improved rules, applicable to *Fifth Corps*, are included in the next game of the series (*Hof Gap*).

This game is the first in what I hope will be a long series. Improvements are already being factored into the second game. There is always room for further improvement, however. One of the primary goals in this hobby should be to make the new games better than the ones that came before. Any of you out there with thoughts on how to make this game series better should send them to John Butterfield. Your suggestion could become the next improvement. ■■

