

Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years War Volume IV: Cursed Kings*, Faber and Faber, London, 2015; pp. 909; RRP \$95.00 Hardback/\$66.00 Paperback.

The Hundred Years War was an interconnected series of conflicts taking place between England and France from 1337 to 1453. Initially a struggle for the English to regain territory previously lost on the continent, it changed into a battle for the French crown itself. Some of the most famous battles in English military history were fought during this time, including Crecy, Poitiers, and Agincourt. In his cycle of history plays, William Shakespeare placed the latter half of this conflict in the foreground, culminating in one of the great speeches of the English theatre: Henry V's St Crispin's Day rallying cry. And with its cycle of blood-soaked conflicts, series of mad kings, and political betrayals, a number of elements of the Hundred Years War have made it into the popular series *Game of Thrones*.

Academically speaking, the Hundred Years War has proven to be fertile ground for medieval historians, with particular emphasis on the military and political aspects. What this approach lacked, however, was an all-encompassing history, focusing not just on the kings and power-brokers, but all aspects of English and French society during this time period. In 1990, the first volume of such a history appeared. Written by high-profile British historian and QC Jonathan Sumption, *Trial by Battle* set out the intention behind the series:

I have tried to describe not only what happened, but why it happened and how it affected those who experienced it, whether they were close at hand, like the soldiers in the field and the inhabitants of countless burnt-out villages and towns, or saw it at a distance, like the bankers, war contractors, bureaucrats and tax-payers, and the readers of newsletters and proclamations (*Trial by Battle*, p. ix).

Two more volumes, *Trial by Fire* (1999) and *Divided Houses* (2009) advanced the story through to the end of the fourteenth century. Sumption's work is narrative history on a grand scale. The intention is obvious: for the volumes of this work (four so far, one more still to come) to sit alongside classic multi-volume histories such as Steve Runciman's history of the Crusades, Robert Caro's multi-volume saga of the life and times of Lyndon Johnson, perhaps even Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. A vast amount of research, both primary and secondary, has gone into producing these mammoth volumes (the four volumes weigh in at just over three thousand pages in total), with Sumption effortlessly gliding between the English and French archives, unearthing in the process a wealth of unpublished material and information.

The new volume, *Cursed Kings*, picks up the narrative in 1399, and finishes in 1422, a period bookended with the coup that toppled the Plantagenet dynasty in England in favour of their Lancastrian cousins in 1399, and the death of Henry V in 1422. The thread that runs through the book, as Sumption explains in the opening, is the notion of the 'cursed kings', rulers who were consumed by poor decision-making,

inexperience, madness and death. Opening with Paris, a city 'which attained the highest and lowest points of its medieval history in the period covered by this volume', Sumption swiftly outlines the major players and personalities that dominated this phase of the Hundred Years War. For Sumption, the French saw the overthrow of Richard II of England, who had previously negotiated peace of a kind with the French, as a 'declaration of war', and refused initially to acknowledge the Lancastrian Henry IV as the king. The turbulent dynastic situation in England was mirrored, however, in the various rivalries between the powerful members of the French nobility. The manoeuvres between these historical actors swirled around the central figure of Charles VI, the French king who had early in his reign gone mad:

The King would wander through the corridors of his palaces howling and screaming, tearing and soiling his clothes, breaking the furniture or throwing it in the fire, not knowing who or what he was and unable to recognize his closest friends and kinsman or even his wife. In his intervals of lucidity Charles was capable of picking up traces of his previous political positions. He was gracious and could be articulate, even forceful. He acted out his role. He retained the loyalty and affection of his subjects. But he was no longer capable of governing his realm (p. 17).

As Charles suffered, more forceful rulers emerged. Nowhere was this more obvious than the rise of the Lancastrian heir: the future Henry V. As Sumption points out, separating the man and the myth is no easy task, so dominant was the 'uncritical adulation of [his] contemporaries'. Henry was marked by a stern religiosity, as well as military skills that made him the preeminent medieval monarch. Sumption's account of the campaign that culminated with the battle of Agincourt is thrilling, and marked by Henry's determination to humiliate France's rulers and point out their impotence to their French subjects.

While the narrative is masterful, at times the level of detail threatens to overwhelm the work. Nowhere is this clearer than in Sumption's account of the various domestic uprisings that plagued the first few years of Henry IV's reign: Hotspur's rebellion of 1403 and Archbishop Scrope's rebellion of 1405. While the account of these uprisings is gripping, the reader does begin to question whether Sumption is spreading himself a little too thin, and drifting too far away from the central points about conflict between the English and the French. Given that the next (and last volume) will take the narrative up to 1453, one wonders if time and space will be spent on the opening battles of the Wars of the Roses as well. This level of detail is daunting for the newcomer, or for those who want quick references, and much like the previous volumes in this series it is hard at times to get a sense of what audience Sumption is writing for. But these are minor quibbles. *Cursed Kings* forms part of a monumental historical work, one that will be the definitive version for generations to come.

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