

The Crusades

Review Number:

1170

Publish date:

Tuesday, 1 November, 2011

Author:

Jan Guillou

ISBN:

9780007285860

Date of Publication:

2010

Price:

£7.99

Pages:

480pp.

Publisher:

Harper Collins

Place of Publication:

London

Author:

Jonathan Riley-Smith

ISBN:

9780826459541

Date of Publication:

2001

Price:

£18.99

Pages:

336pp.

Publisher:

Athlone Press

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Jenny Benham

Jan Guillou is a well-known Swedish author, journalist and political commentator. Anyone who has spent time living in Scandinavia since the 1970s will be familiar with his novels about the spy Carl Hamilton, including the titles *Coq Rouge* (1986), *The Democratic Terrorist* (*Den demokratiska terroristen*, 1987) and *Enemy's Enemy* (*Fiendens fiende*, 1989); his many high-profile investigative documentaries and articles, including one exposing the Swedish secret intelligence agency, *Informationsbyrån* (The Information Bureau); his outspoken views on a number of political issues; and his own alleged involvement in espionage. With such a background, some eyebrows must have been raised, I'm sure, when Guillou published a trilogy of historical novels set in the high Middle Ages. Known in English as the 'Crusades Trilogy' it is really the

second book in the series, *The Templar Knight* (Swedish: *Tempelriddaren*), that deals with events in the Holy Land in the lead up to the Third Crusade. It follows the fate of the fictional Swedish noble Arn Magnusson and his beloved Cecilia, who have been penalised for prematurely consummating their anticipated marriage, resulting in Arn having to spend 20 years as a templar knight defending the kingdom of Jerusalem against the Saracens while Cecilia languishes in the convent of Gudhem in western Sweden under a vengeful abbess. The book opens with Arn pursuing a band of Saracen thieves thereby saving the lives of a merchant and his brothers. The merchant invites Arn to supper as mark of gratitude and during the evening not only is a friendship forged between the two men but the merchant is also revealed to be the crusaders' fiercest enemy, Saladin, who is preparing an attack on the kingdom of Jerusalem (pp. 17-38). These opening pages present an Arn who has already spent ten years in the Holy Land – a veteran among the Knights Templar and commander of the important fort at Gaza. Following his encounter with Saladin war comes upon the crusaders and Arn himself, who can speak Arabic and has studied the Muslim way of life by employing locals in various positions around his fort, finds himself increasingly at odds with the intrigues and behaviour of the crusader lords in Outremer. Having defeated Saladin's army at the Battle of Montgisard by taking it by surprise in dense fog, the jostling for power among the political factions soon leads to murder, the disastrous Battle of Hattin and ultimately the fall of Jerusalem, in which only Arn's friendship with Saladin spares the inhabitants of the city. It is also Saladin who 'persuades' the Grand Master of the Templars, Gerald de Ridefort, to release Arn of his vow so that he can begin his long journey back home to the northern edge of Europe.

There is much in this book that will be familiar to readers. The meeting and friendship between Arn and Saladin is similar to the storyline in Sir Walter Scott's *The Talisman* and the book as a whole has much in common with the 2005 film *Kingdom of Heaven*, although Guillou's book was of course published prior to the film, in 1999. Guillou also weaves other familiar legends and stories into his narrative. For instance, anyone *au fait* with classical literature will recognise the scene in which Arn attempts to mediate in a dispute between two local men over the ownership of a horse, a case which the knight settles by cutting the horse in two and giving the men each a half (p. 235). Guillou furthermore follows a well-known theme throughout the book of the crusader states being run by power-hungry individuals, supported by an incompetent Latin Church. Jonathan Riley-Smith is just one of many scholars to have built up this theory and his *The Crusades: A Short History* explicitly spells this out in several places (p. 55, 60, 85). Guillou is the master of political intrigue and he has done his research well. One of the ways in which the author quickens the pace and heightens the suspense of *The Templar Knight* is to alternate the chapters so one follows Arn and events in the kingdom of Jerusalem while the next covers Arn's beloved Cecilia and the civil war over the Swedish crown. Furthermore, while Arn himself may well be a fictional character, those around him are usually not and the author paints realistic portraits of historical figures such as Count Raymond of Tripoli, Gérard de Ridefort and Arnaldo de Torroja. Guillou also shows that not only has he done his research on the characters, but his account of the settlements and the daily life in and around the fort of Gaza reflects in the main what historians know. For instance, chapter four of Riley-Smith's *The Crusades* details life in countryside and town, explaining how each village was run by a council of elders presided over by a headman, the workings of the Muslim tax, the diversity of indigenous communities in towns, and the adaptations of local government (pp. 61–9). Riley-Smith also discusses the use of *turcoples*, mercenaries fighting with Muslim equipment, and the fact that the number of Latin fighting men in the East was never particularly high. Such details are fully visualised in Guillou's work and a large part of the book is dedicated to showing Arn learning and adopting these practices in government and as military tactics. In addition, like any scholar, Guillou has consulted the primary sources. Thus for the crusading part, there is much that will be familiar to those with an acquaintance of William of Tyre's *History of Deeds Done Beyond the Sea*, while events in Sweden and the main characters are largely recognisable from saga material. Here, however, Guillou has been hindered, or possibly helped, by the fact that there are scarcely any contemporary Scandinavian sources detailing the events of the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Nevertheless, the author has used what few short annals, brief mentions in Danish sources, papal letters, and later legends available to great effect.

In many ways, then, *The Templar Knight* is underpinned by rigorous research, which is what one would

expect from someone who previously earned his keep as an investigative journalist. Of course, like most works of fiction it is not necessarily the historical accuracy that keeps the reader hooked. Instead, it is Guillou's ability to construct likeable, or not, characters, and their interlinked relationships with and to each other that fascinates. Often, the author says just enough to make the reader want to find out more and while reading this I continuously found myself looking up the various characters in academic books. Furthermore, the main character's main attraction, to me anyway, rests not with being the best warrior, which the author portrays him as being, but rather in him never being quite clever or power-hungry enough to partake in the wildest political intrigues of the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem. Though this is on the one hand annoying, it is also what makes this particular 'hero' human. He does not always do or say the right thing, but it is his integrity which makes Arn so appealing because he is that ideal to which everyone (or maybe just me!) aspires; that is, he has convictions which he obeys not just for reasons of personal gain or glory. Guillou shows this in many ways. For instance, when Arn has to fight three newly-arrived Franks to stop them crusading against an innocent Bedouin village, he only wins at great personal cost as one of the Franks thrusts his sword into Khamsiin – the Arabic horse Arn has ridden since a young boy (p. 280).

Representing character and emotion in this way is usually where academic historians fail their readers, primarily because the sources rarely tell us much about people's motivations and emotions. This, and plentiful and lengthy footnotes and bibliographies full of titles in several modern and ancient languages, tend to make academic history books rather dry. The footnotes, perhaps rightly, are usually the first thing to go in history books aimed at a more general audience, as is the case with Riley-Smith's *The Crusades*. This particular book is furthermore extremely informative while written in a simple prose free from academic jargon with any foreign words given a short explanation. As Guillou alternates his narrative by moving between Outremer and Sweden in each chapter, Riley-Smith, rather than giving just a chronological account of each crusade, has inserted chapters on related matters such as 'The holy places and the Catholic patriarchates of Jerusalem and Antioch' (chapter three) and 'The Latin East' (chapter eight). Each chapter is, moreover, divided into several sub-chapters so that the reader is never presented with several pages of factual text without any breaks. The bibliography is short but contains the most useful works and there is also a list of primary sources in translation. One particular highlight, I feel, is that *The Crusades* also has no fewer than nine maps, allowing the reader to follow the events closely. Here, Riley-Smith's book has a distinct advantage over the novel because while the original Swedish version of *The Templar Knight* contains a map of the Holy Land detailing the most important forts, cities and battles, the English version has no map of the Kingdom of Jerusalem nor of Sweden in this period. This is particularly regrettable since parts of Guillou's narrative are dependent on an understanding of the lie of the land.

The Crusades: A Short History is easy and good reading and provides not only an insight to the crusades as a movement but also an excellent format for writing history aimed at a more general audience. By contrast, *The Templar Knight* is a good story but it is not the best book in the trilogy. At times it is plodding, primarily because as a historian I found that the crusading events are just too well-known and thus the plot is predictable. This series has obviously been translated into English as 'The Crusades Trilogy' because the crusades mean sales. However, it is not really about the crusades but about the formation of the kingdom of Sweden. As a whole, the trilogy traces how the experiences of Arn and Cecilia enabled them to build up the social, military, commercial and legal framework within which their dynasty finally assumes power. Like so many historical novels, the books in the trilogy are not meant to conform exactly to current historical research or offer new interpretations, but to affirm popular beliefs about the creation of a nation, religious beliefs, and well-known individuals and events. The trilogy does exactly that. It follows the legendary Folkung (lit. 'folk king') dynasty and their loyal support for the Erik clan in their battle for the crown against the backward Sverker clan, who are supported by the 'wicked' and more advanced Danes. It reaffirms many commonly-held beliefs and plays on feelings of 'Swedishness' by presenting certain events, such as the famous battle of Gestilren, as a triumph of Sweden over Denmark. Hardly surprising then that the trilogy has sold over two-and-a-half million copies just in Sweden – a country with a population of around nine million – and that its popularity has resulted in a surge of public interest in the history of medieval Sweden and also in historical novels about Scandinavia as a whole.

Having said all this, the first and the third book in ‘The Crusades Trilogy’ are extremely readable and the first book, *The Road to Jerusalem (Vägen till Jerusalem, 1998)*, detailing Arn’s coming of age at a monastery under the tutelage of a Cistercian and former knight, and the third, *Birth of the Kingdom (Riket vid vägens slut, 2000)*, charting Arn’s return to Sweden and his efforts to build a lasting peace, have both received critical acclaim. Each book can be read as a standalone, but as a whole the trilogy is an epic tale of intrigue, faith, and struggle. But then, as a Swede, I would say that.

Other reviews:

Medievalists.net

<http://www.medievalists.net/2010/02/28/the-templar-knight-book-two-of-the-crusades-trilogy/> [3]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1170>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7815>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/7816>

[3] <http://www.medievalists.net/2010/02/28/the-templar-knight-book-two-of-the-crusades-trilogy/>