

## William, King and Conqueror

**Review Number:**

1437

**Publish date:**

Thursday, 20 June, 2013

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**ISBN:**

9781780763545

**Date of Publication:**

2013

**Price:**

£20.00

**Pages:**

256pp.

**Publisher:**

I B Tauris

**Publisher url:**

<http://www.ibtauris.com/Books/Biography%20%20True%20Stories/Biography%20general/Biography%20historical>

**Place of Publication:**

London

**Reviewer:**

George Garnett

As medieval English kings go, William I has been well-served by his modern English biographers. D.C. Douglas' self-consciously monumental life of 1964 has worn well, despite subsequent developments in scholarship, and a certain ponderousness of tone; David Bates' briefer life of 1989 encompasses many of those developments with a lighter touch, and is presented as but a first stab at a much more substantial replacement for Douglas. What room is there, then, for another short biography in the interim, prior to the appearance of Bates' promised work?

Normandy and England in the 11th and 12th centuries remain the most active area in Anglophone medieval historical scholarship, as a glance through the annual volumes of *Anglo-Norman Studies* will confirm. Partly for that reason, there is no lack of disagreement and controversy. This would suggest that there is considerable scope for a fresh assessment, to take account of the last quarter century of publications, and, one might hope, to present a view different, perhaps markedly different, from those of either Douglas or Bates, not to mention various recent French biographers.

Mark Hagger cites a great deal of recently published work, both in his endnotes, and in ten supplementary pages of suggested further reading. He makes considerable use of it, but not to advance a strikingly novel assessment of the Conqueror. Any selection from the work of others is bound to be personal, but there are some omissions which are by any standards curious: Ken Lawson on the battle of Hastings, or most of J. C. Holt's wonderful essays of the 1980s and 1990s. Michael Hare's subtle and suggestive studies arguing for the practice of crown-wearings in Edward the Confessor's reign are of less general importance than either of

these, but their absence here is still surprising, given the emphasis which Dr Hagger rightly lays on royal ritual and ceremony. Works which are mentioned sometimes seem to have had no detectable influence on Hagger, although they should be fundamental to any modern study of the Conqueror's reign in England: Robin Fleming's use of Domesday to reassess the replacement of the Old English aristocracy, for instance, or Holt's (in my view) definitive essay on the introduction of knight service. The conclusions of the latter are directly contradicted, without any attempt to justify the position taken, or any acknowledgement of the contradiction. They might be disputed, but they cannot simply be ignored. The subject which is most noticeably enriched by recent publications is the history of Normandy, particularly as illuminated by detailed assessment of charters, including a few which have yet to be edited – a subject on which Hagger has published a number of interesting papers.

The book's approach and its tone are traditional, and the story it tells is therefore a familiar one. William of Poitiers' claims not to have taken a single step beyond the truth appear to have been accepted at face value; there is no sense that the *Gesta Guillelmi* is artfully contrived, steeped in the traditions of Roman historiography and of classical literature more generally, with William taking evident pleasure in his own scholarly virtuosity. Thus, for instance, Hagger simply accepts that when the invasion fleet was on its way, the duke really did drop anchor in the middle of the Channel, and sit down to a slap up confidence-boosting meal. The implicit parallel with Aeneas, which was doubtless William of Poitiers' point, is never considered. And because William of Poitiers and William of Jumièges together cannot provide enough anecdotal material to sustain even a brief modern biography, Hagger turns to Orderic Vitalis, who wrote decades after the Conqueror's death, and who himself elaborated and tweaked both William of Poitiers (of which he had a fuller text than that now extant) and William of Jumièges. But Orderic's confections were scarcely less Romanesque than William of Poitiers', and, of necessity, could hardly be based on much eye-witness testimony – a telling consideration for one steeped in the conventions of classical historiography. Hagger acknowledges that Orderic's 'account of William's reign incorporates stories that had grown up in the 50 years since the Conqueror's death'; but it seems that some stories are too good to be omitted, and should therefore be accepted as accurate records of events. He does not go so far as to say that the deathbed speech which Orderic attributes to the Conqueror is an accurate transcription of what the dying king said, but he implies that it might well be. Yet Orderic was almost as great an admirer of Sallust as William of Poitiers, and they both confected speeches in the Sallustian manner, for Sallustian purposes. Even Wace is adduced as a reliable source for the disposition of forces at the battle of Val-ès-Dunes, though he wrote well over a century after the event, with the primary aim of entertaining his lay audience.

Hagger is, therefore, too credulous in his treatment of narrative sources. But he seems more at his ease with them than with documents other than the Norman charters which are his forte. Ermenfrid of Sion's penitential ordinance is almost certainly misdated. This is a minor glitch, and open to dispute. More serious is the mishandling of Domesday Book. It would require a degree of ingenuity to integrate the Survey and the Book into a biography of the Conqueror – one would certainly want to suggest something about the 'deep speech' at the 1085 Christmas court at Gloucester, when the Survey was planned and instituted, and the great assembly at Old Sarum on Lammas day 1086, which appears to have marked its formal end, with the presentation to the king of the documentation produced by that point, and mass performance of homage to him. One might also trawl through the Book and its satellites for those rare entries when some specific event involving the king was recorded, to see what it revealed about the details of his life. Hagger mentions the occasion at Old Sarum, and ventures to suggest that it 'seems in some ways to have made a formal end to the Norman Conquest of England'. But he fails to explain in what ways it did and in what ways it did not. If he is thinking of Holt's rich paper on 1086, one part of which might be summarised in this way, he does not say so. Otherwise all we get is just over half a page on Domesday, offering the most cursory of surveys of a few scholarly opinions about the Book (during which Maitland's name is misspelt). Hagger is capable of adducing intriguing and obscure details from Norman charters, which conjure up some of the particularities of 11th-century life: a quilt for the royal bed, or the gift of a fox fur, or Roger of Montgomery's dressing his young son, Robert of Bellême, in a miniver cloak, and throwing him into a marsh in order to ensure that witnesses would remember Roger's gift of the marsh to a nearby abbey (Orderic would have relished that one). Such nuggets suggest that Hagger would be capable of extracting much more from Domesday, which

has been characterised as the greatest of the Conqueror's English charters. But then none of the king's more standard English (by contrast with Norman) writs and charters receives much attention. The coverage of the evidence is puzzlingly patchy. Perhaps his publisher was draconian about a word limit.

It might be objected that an introductory book intended 'for both undergraduates and the general reader' should present an uncontroversial, perhaps even a bland, survey, and leave it to readers whose interest has been fired to pursue further reading. But as this review has suggested, it is simply not possible to be uncontroversial about the Conqueror. The evidence for his reign is too plentiful and rich – certainly by comparison with any other 11th-century ruler – and it has been pored over too intensively by too many historians. And blandness is no more a guarantee of objectivity and accuracy than the affected flamboyance of a William of Poitiers, or the more subtle artfulness of an Orderic Vitalis. Indeed, blandness can be much more effective than flamboyance in concealing questionable judgements and assumptions. Thus at the inconclusive end of an apparently even-handed discussion of differing interpretations of Duke William's claim to the English throne, we are told that 'the very fact that William risked all by invading England in 1066 suggests that he believed, indeed was certain, that he had been promised the throne at some point during Edward's reign'. At first sight this might appear just common-sensical, but a moment's reflection reveals that the assumptions made here are both astonishing and unsubstantiated.

In sum, the book is a missed opportunity. If Hagger had written more, he might have been able to explore the many topics which are simply glossed over. He might also have allowed his eye for intriguing detail to rove more freely – Orderic's passing reference to prosthetic fingers, for instance. But as it stands, undergraduate and general readers cannot dispense with Douglas or, if they prefer a short and more accessible account, with Bates.

Mark Hagger does not wish to comment. For those who would like to establish the accuracy of the review for themselves, or would like to gain an idea of the content or approach of the book, extracts may be found at <http://bangor.academia.edu/MarkHagger> [2].

#### **Other reviews:**

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