



A Brief History of the Hundred Years War

Desmond Seward

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For over a hundred years England repeatedly invaded France on the pretext that her kings had a right to the French throne. France was a large, unwieldy kingdom, England was small and poor, but for the most part she dominated the war, sacking towns and castles and winning battles - including such glorious victories as Crecy, Poitiers and Agincourt, but then the English run of success began to fail, and in four short years she lost Normandy and finally her last stronghold in Guyenne. The protagonists of the Hundred Year War are among the most colourful in European history: for the English, Edward III, the Black Prince and Henry V, later immortalized by Shakespeare; for the French, the splendid but inept John II, who died a prisoner in London, Charles V, who very nearly overcame England and the enigmatic Charles VII, who did at last drive the English out. Desmond Seward's account traces the changes that led to France's final victory and brings to life all the intrigue and colour of the last chivalric combats as they gave way to a more brutal modern warfare.

A Brief History of the Hundred Years War Details

Date : Published March 27th 2003 by Robinson Publishing

ISBN : 9781841196787

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Format : Paperback 320 pages

Genre : History, Nonfiction, Historical, Medieval, Military, Military History, Medieval History, European History

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Terra says

Good stuff, potentially actually worthy of four stars, but since I read it right after Wars of the Roses, I was feeling some English-history fatigue. Plus, it doesn't have quite the same sense of focus as Wars of the Roses did, as there are no anchor figures to orient you. I mostly just love Seward's use of adverbs in describing random stuff people did, e.g. "the Council coolly informed King So-and-So that they would be having no more of his shenanigans" (paraphrasing, though he actually DID describe the English Council doing something coolly - I picture them discussing matters of state while sporting the Maroney "not impressed" face) and "Queen Isabeau cheerfully proclaimed her son Charles [some number or other] to be a bastard by one of her many lovers" (seriously, "cheerfully" is the word he used - Queen Isabeau sounds like kind of a broad, though not as badass a broad as Margaret Beaufort or Queen Margaret of Anjou. Maybe if her name had been Margaret?).

Hokay, time for a break from the land of late medieval history before I pass out from knights-and-castles overload.

Daniel Kukwa says

It's a bit TOO dense compared to sister books in this series...even the text is smaller and compacted together in a less than pleasant manner. Some of the writing style tends to be too dry for its own good...even around subjects as epic and exciting as Joan of Arc. Another edit wouldn't have gone amiss...

T B says

An easy read that covers a lot of battles, personalities and history.

Scooter says

Re-enlist, re-enlist and re-enlist in the hundred years war.... Should have been called the Hundred years looting extravaganza. That aside I really enjoyed this book, whilst it doesn't delve into the depths of over detail, it saves itself from being bogged down by it, giving the reader a shortened yet informative look at the goings on at this point of history.

Simon Jones says

I have really enjoyed this book. It was a perfect introduction to the 100 Years War. Entertainly written and

well paced but still full of fascinating detail it gives a great overview of the campaigns, the main protagonists and most importantly of course the battles. I thoroughly recommend it.

Tamer Nosshi says

A good starter. Felt a rushed though, with little information about the larger contexts of battles, of the war in general, and the players. Summarizing the repercussions of the entire war in three-four pages, might be way too brief for even a brief history of...

Jorg says

Brief, lively, entertaining: an excellent narrative introduction to the subject. Not a substitute for a serious study, but then again it isn't meant to be. A fun read with plenty of characters and detailed descriptions of major battles and the political intrigues and machinations.

Anneli says

A compact overview of the time. Besides getting a better knowlwdge of history it also makes one think how pointless all this war and plunder has been with no-one actually winning anything.

Kate says

The book explains the long time rivalry between the English and French. It shows how war was a means of gaining wealth, prestige, and upward mobility in both countries. I am glad my ancestors were not of the nobility. So my ancestors were not participating in the carnage, looting, and complete disrespect of fellow humans. The step ladder to fame and fortune in the 15th century seems to have been through brutal treatment of the common man and woman. It also makes one wonder how the people of the time could ever believe in the divine right of kings. The French and English kings were weaklings and certainly not models of the ideal father figure.

Iain Hamilton says

Good general introduction to the Hundred Years War. Left me feeling I knew a little bit but wanted to know more. (In my view precisely what these kinds of books should do.) Have already looked up a couple of other works by this author as an introduction to other bits of history I want to know more about.

Andrew Herbert says

This is a readable overview of the English/French conflicts from the start of the 14th century through 1455 or so. I was aware of Crecy, Poitiers & Agincourt, but not so much the rest of the events. This book is a nice summary, and suggests other things to read.

Given its length and the time period covered, there isn't a lot of detail on events outside major battles and sieges, but the various claims to the crowns of England and France, the various factions involved in this long conflict, and the major players are all well summarized. This book makes me want to read more on the topic, which is always good.

Karolina says

It's about as brief as one can get when talking about a war that lasts over a century without skipping any of the good stuff - from colourful characters and epic battles to finances and the peasants caught in the midst of power struggles. Aside from teaching you that people will go to war for anything, this book leaves you with the relief that you didn't live back then, an inclination to distrust a Burgundian Duke, and appropriately with the feeling that the war was just a huge waste of time and money. The war was a miserable time for everyone - near the end, even those who were once successful leaders in England were eventually lynched for "treason" - and the war itself can basically be summed up like this:

[spoiler alert for those who have never seen a map]

- the English mostly won for the first 90% of the war (go longbows)
- the French get everything back, and then some (go artillery)
- both sides spend exorbitant amounts of money (while everyone's building themselves castles - taxation fail)
- England is left with nothing on the mainland, but with probably more money than it had before (what can I say, France was rich)

The book is dense at times, but anything else wouldn't do the material justice. I don't know why it's in the "Brief History" series - it seems to be the exact same length as the [original?] other edition of "The Hundred Years' War" by Desmond Seward. Even if you know what happens (did I mention France wins in the end?), it still makes for good reading. I wish the results of individual battles weren't alluded to before they actually ended, because it was quite the non-fiction page-turner at times - kind of like when you read "1066: The Year of the Three Battles" (which I don't think I can recommend strongly enough) and find yourself rooting for the guy you KNOW will lose all the way through. It's great how the English are the protagonists, but upon further reflection also seem to be the villains.

Dear HBO: please change this into a miniseries.

Joshua Neil says

A Brief History of the Hundred Years War is what it says on the tin - a run through, from start to finish, of the major events and battles of the Hundred Years War, from the death of Charles IV to the last defeats inflicted on the English which pushed them entirely out of France around 120 years later.

The book is a great initial read on the period it relates - clear, concise, fairly well-written and containing lots of interesting details which add flavour and colour to the time. The information ranges from the descriptions and characters of kings, to the mechanisms of the weaponry used, to the tactics of the battles fought.

The book is a useful tool for those new to the Hundred Years War: it sets out all relevant information, contains useful maps - all handily in one spot, even if that is at the back of the book - and is clear and well-written.

There are some problems, of course - much of the information goes by too quickly to take in clearly, with some times and dates confused and the dozens of titles and estates often confusing.

Overall this is a good book for finding out about the period, both interesting and informative.

Kalliope says

Given that before I finished the book some Friends were already asking me how good was it on its topic, I think I should address just that in my review.

This is not my first book on the Hundred Years War, so it has helped me clarify ideas that were already moving around, in a somewhat muddled manner, in my head. But even if the material was not completely new to me, this could be a very good first book on this medieval English-French war.

I have also read *The Age of Plantagenet* and *Valois* and *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, and a few biographies (*The Perfect King: The Life of Edward III, Father of the English Nation*, *Richard II*, *Les Grands ducs de Bourgogne*). The first assumed one was more familiar with the material than I was; Tuchman's is a brilliant account but goes beyond the war; the biographies function like close ups. I still needed something that would pull everything together. This book did exactly this.

Now I have the four main phases better delineated:

Those led by Edward III who the English on top);

then the effective recovery by the French Charles V;

then the English go on the offensive again with Henry V;

and finally, to everyone's surprise (except maybe for the illuminated Joan of Arc), the final victory by the

French under the King from whom no one, not even himself, expected much – Charles VII.

This book also leads you naturally to follow the drama in England with the War of the Roses, and I plan to use Seward's account - The Wars of the Roses: Through the Lives of Five Men and Women of the Fifteenth Century

What I enjoyed in Seward's account:

He writes very clearly. And his choice of a chronological order is entirely fitting for the subject.

The very neutral viewpoint he maintains. Although he is possibly a bit harsher with the English side. This is accompanied with what seems a very judicial assessment of the characters of the various personalities.

Some aspects, like the nature of the *chevauchées* are very well explained. And these suck out any romanticism from this extremely violent war. The crucial differences in the functioning, limitations and effectiveness of the crossbow versus the long bow are also very well described.

He also includes ample accounts of the finances of the war. So that it becomes clear that for England this was a very attractive war. They could reap considerable profits from looting, plunder and ransoming. Large estates and houses and castles were built or purchased with these benefits. Seward names many of these. One such is Sir Rowland Lenthal's Hampton Court in Herefordshire, financed with the ransoms obtained during Henry V's campaigns.

A different look into the great Duchy of Burgundy. Seduced by all the art they patronised, I have a particular interest in this clan. With Seward I came to realise that these Dukes were horrible, and dangerous, men.

I spite of coming with a wealth of facts, there are many shrew observations. One of them pertains precisely the Burgundy house. Seward concludes that their big mistake was to abandon the English and switch to the Valois side, since that would eventually bring their own demise.

I also enjoyed greatly the way he brings Shakespeare in, since I plan to tackle his historical plays soon. The best of these was the tracking of the deeds of Sir John's Fastolf – Falstaff.

It comes illustrated, with many maps and battle diagrams, and with a few genealogical trees (view spoiler).

So, to go back to the questions in the Comments: Yes, great book on The Hundred Years War.

