

THE WHITE SHIP BOOK REVIEW

The White Ship – Conquest, Anarchy and the Wrecking of Henry I's Dream

Author: Charles Spencer

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REVIEW BY IRIS HUNT, FRIENDS OF READING ABBEY

Central to Charles Spencer's book, as the title suggests, is the White Ship disaster in 1120. The book takes the reader through Norman history from the foundations of Normandy to William the Conqueror's invasion of England; Henry I's accidental rise to kingship and the repercussion for the succession of the drowning of his only son and heir, William Atheling, in the sinking of the White Ship; Stephen of Blois's grab for the throne when Henry I died in 1135, ignoring the pledge he had made to Henry to support his daughter, the Empress Matilda, to inherit the crown; and the subsequent conflict between Stephen and Matilda and her husband Geoffrey of Anjou, leading to the 'Anarchy'. The final chapter takes us to the eventual crowning of Henry I's grandson, Henry II, as king in 1154.

The book held my attention by the author's easy style of writing with detailing of current events and with retrospection, finding it helpful to reason the consequences. We are taken through the book in three parts: Part One, Triumph; Part Two, Disaster and Part Three, Chaos.

Triumph

Chapter 1 of Part One takes a brief look at Henry I, then retrospectively looks at his lineage from the Scandinavian invasion headed by Rollo in 799, on the northern coast of France. Normandy becomes the focus of continual hostilities from the surrounding provinces, which are followed throughout the book. This section continues with the background in the Anglo-Saxon world, the Conquest by William to meet both challenges in England and Normandy, and the continued threat of Scandinavian invasion to establish his rule.

The book details the Conquerors' sons and the role played by the rivalries between them for supremacy: the eldest Robert, named Curthose (due to his short legs); the next Richard of Normandy (killed while hunting in the New

Forest); the third William named Rufus (due to his red hair); and Henry, as the youngest. The book states that he may well have been destined for 'a high office in the church', and his education was overseen by Osmond, previously the Conqueror's chancellor, who became Bishop of Salisbury. While the Conqueror took Robert and William on campaigns, Henry spent time at the Benedictine monastery of St. Mary's in Abingdon. Henry was to be termed *Beauclerc* for his education.

In 1087, William lay dying with Henry by his side. His last words to Henry were, 'You in your own time will have all the dominions that I have acquired, and be greater than your brothers in wealth and power'. (Henry of Huntingdon). At William's death, his lands are divided, with his eldest son, Robert, becoming Duke of Normandy, and William Rufus succeeding as king of England.

Henry continues to take a back seat until 1092 when he is called by the citizens of Domfront for help against their overlord de Bellême, who inflicts cruelties on his residents.

The book shows the role the church played in the politics and overlordship of the valued province of Normandy. In continuation of the church concerns, Pope Urban II convened the Council of Clermont in November 1095, and at the behest of the emperor of Byzantium, the head of the Christian faith in the east, agreed to send mercenaries to help fight the Turks; this is significant to the outcome of the Normandy homeland, later in the book.

Robert Curthose departed for the Crusades; his achievements were held as distinctive; Wace, the chronicler, recorded that Curthose 'received great renown and great honour; many people spoke of him'. However, Curthose was away on Crusade when his brother, William Rufus, was killed in a hunting accident in the New Forest in 1100, which facilitated Henry's succession as king of England. On return, Robert 'was furious that he had again been passed over for the English throne'. His youngest brother, Henry I, was now king.

The passion for hunting by the Conqueror was also held by his sons. Forests were held in ownership by the king and the hunting by the court retinue were only at the king's pleasure.

The book examines the opportunity that came for Henry when hunting with the king in the New Forest in 1100: an arrow pierced the chest of William Rufus. Spencer uses this chapter to take into account the possibilities that may have occurred, the characters involved in the hunting party and Henry's response.

Following the fatal shooting of Rufus, Henry made for Winchester to claim the treasury and the crown; he was crowned at Westminster Abbey by Maurice Bishop of London who had been chancellor of England under William the Conqueror. Henry vowed that now he was king, no one would be above the law and began to reverse 'Rufus's degenerate rule'. The major aim of the new king now was to father a legitimate heir, and at the age of 31 he chose a princess of Scotland named Edith, a direct descendent of the Saxon royal line of England, who became Queen Matilda.

The first-born son of Henry and Matilda was named William after his grandfather. The name was given a suffix of 'Atheling' which, in Anglo-Saxon meant successor.

Here Robert Curthose's son, William Clito, emerges into the ongoing fray, born in 1102. 'Clito' is the Norman equivalent of 'Atheling'.

Henry defeated Robert in 1106, in the Battle of Tinchebray, and then claimed Normandy as a possession of the English crown. Robert was captured at the battle and then held prisoner in England and Wales until his death in 1134, in his early 80s.

The early years of Henry's reign included an underlying disagreement between Henry and the church concerning investiture, whether the king could appoint the lay members of his court with ecclesiastical offices and, in addition, marry off priests. The conflict between Henry I and St Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, would continue for some time to add to the king's concerns.

Chapter 7, Kingship takes a look at Henry's leadership following a period of peace. Spencer states that 'Henry had ears and eyes everywhere having built up a network of spies at home and abroad'. Some administration fell to one man, Roger Bishop of Salisbury, loyal to Henry, who 'focused on binding the finances and the justice of the kingdom more tightly to the crown'. Roger of Salisbury became Henry's Justiciar and, in William of Malmesbury's estimation, in charge of 'the vey kingdom'. The title of 'Exchequer' and its origin is described in this chapter with the design of the 'finance chequer board' and is explained. Sheriffs also now have a more important role in this new administrative set up.

Quoted from the book, 'Henry's reign also saw a void left by his brother and father to be filled. They had both failed to produce a recognised and accessible body of law'. The laws of Henry I were not officiated, detailing the laws of

Henry's reign, based on custom, it applied to the highest in the land down to the lowest. Page 114 details his administration.

Disaster

And so, to the DISASTER. Spencer opens this section with a quote from Orderic Vitalis, the contemporary chronicler: 'King Henry who had now, after tremendous toil, settled affairs admirably in Normandy, decided to cross the Channel, pay generous wages to the young champions and distinguishes knights who had fought hard and loyally, and raise the status of some by giving them extensive honours (feudal baronies) in England. He commanded the fleet to be made ready at once, and numbers of knights of all ranks to accompany him'. They were to rendezvous in Barfleur. Spencer goes into great detail of those who sailed and the relevant part they played in support of Henry.

William Atheling is now duke of Normandy and heir to the English throne.

Chapters ten and eleven, 'The Sea' and 'Bound for England', detail the tragedy that now follows. Quotes and poems of the time written by contemporary chroniclers are included in these chapters. The events of 1120 are detailed by Spencer, featuring the characters involved in the celebrations in Barfleur and the tragedy of the sinking.

The result is that the White Ship hits a hidden reef at the entrance to Barfleur harbour and goes down; and William Atheling is drowned, along with all hands except one.

Chaos

Chapter Twelve, 'Reaction to Tragedy: Spencer examines the reactions of Henry to the death of his son and heir, and the changing fortunes of those left at court after the tragedy. This chapter also explains the background to associations of characters with Germany and, in particular retrospectively, with Anjou.

Charles Spencer writes in great detail concerning the consequences of the drowning of the Atheling. Henry has named his daughter, Matilda, as now heir to the throne with pledges from his nephew, Stephen of Blois, in particular, in 1127. The book looks at the events that lead to the civil war, the 'Anarchy', Stephen against Matilda and her husband, Geoffrey of Anjou; and the earlier response of William Clito, grandson of the Conqueror, now Count of Flanders, in the regional fray.

The last chapter is named 'Order'. Normandy is still the province to be fought for. With Henry's daughter, Matilda now married to Geoffrey of Anjou, Geoffrey on behalf of his wife and sons 'led the fighting in Normandy with drive and energy, riding into battle with a *Planta Genist'* – the Latin name for a type of yellow blooming flower – as his talisman, and the origin of his nickname of 'Plantagenet'. Matilda sails away, her son Henry has now grown, into a handsome man (like his father, Geoffrey) of red hair, fine proportions, and (like his grandfather, Henry) medium height. His appearance would remain impressive, and his vicious temper noted throughout manhood: 'His eyes are round, and white and plain, while he is of calm spirit'. This is Henry II.

Conclusion

This book by Charles Spencer is recommended reading for both those interested in history and in an absorbing story. The summary submitted above does not give the book justice considering the in-depth research but is a brief explanation of the content. The style of writing makes easy reading and the retrospective look at current events is helpful to understand the context in which they take place.

The book is structured to three parts so that each progressive period of events is clearly understood. The second part, The Disaster, is central to the book as the title The White Ship suggests but the lead to the tragedy and the consequences from it, are in themselves, of historical interest.

I would thoroughly recommend this book.

Iris Hunt