

Agincourt. Anne Curry.

Great Battles. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. xvi + 256 pp. \$29.95.

Battles, in Churchill's words, are "the principal milestones of secular history." Academic historians disagree, dismissing battle history as event focused and abandoning it to popular writers. Still, even the advanced scholar will admit that some battles compel attention. Thermopylae, Hastings, Gettysburg, Stalingrad: their names alone evoke powerful cultural memories. Any such list surely includes Agincourt, so iconic that Charles Schulz could have his beloved Snoopy turn to its memory for courage as he consulted a veterinarian. Why does this distant triumph in a long-lost war serve to instill courage and inspire martial ardor? No better person could address this question than Anne Curry, whose expertise assures us an authoritative overview in this learned yet accessible book. As military history it offers little that is new to specialists; its real value lies in its historiographic approach. It offers both the accomplished scholar and the beginning student of history an invaluable case study in the evolution of historical scholarship, popular memory, and national mythology.

This timely work, appearing on the 600th anniversary of the battle, begins by explaining the complicated politics of this moment in the Hundred Years' War, when an insecure Lancastrian monarch opportunistically diverted English attention abroad. Henry V launched an invasion of a kingdom rendered vulnerable by the madness of Charles VI and murderous civil strife between the Dukes of Burgundy and Orleans. Curry draws on her own groundbreaking research into pay records, muster rolls, ships' logs, and tax levies to document the mobilization and transport of the army that captured Harfleur before traversing the north of France en route to Calais. Henry V's purpose in that risky passage remains uncertain but the end result was the great victory at Agincourt. Curry's account of the battle is striking both in its clarity and its generosity as she acknowledges and explains how she differs with colleagues on such contentious issues as the location of the battlefield, the disposition and size of forces engaged, and the penetrating power of the longbow. While celebrating Henry's tactical brilliance regarding his deployment of the archers as the crucial battlefield decision, she admits his responsibility in the explicable but in no way heroic massacre of the prisoners in the end stages of the encounter.

This masterful narrative is but prologue for the remaining three-quarters of the book, which addresses the remarkable afterlife of the battle. Curry illustrates how its legend morphed through the centuries, demonstrating what a remarkably complex and powerful force the memory of a battle can be. She begins with the trenchant observation that while the victory was of great moral power, it had virtually no strategic impact. Agincourt was used in Crown propaganda to foster support for further Norman campaigns, but it was only the collapse of the Valois state after the assassination of the Duke of Burgundy that led to England's triumph in the 1420 Treaty of Troyes. In the ensuing decades numerous celebratory English accounts featured Henry as an idealized monarch, while in French sources the defeat served as a means for attacks in rival factions. Eventual French victory in the war allowed the defeat to be blessedly forgotten by the French, but in England, over the next century, the victory was endlessly reimagined in drama, poetry, and history. When Shakespeare gave Agincourt its legendary form in 1599 the battle was assured immortality.

Thus Shakespeare completed the transition from history to legend. Since then it has been impossible to speak of the battle save in his terms. Even snippets of his language, the "band of brothers" or "the happy few," come immediately to mind when we hear the name of Agincourt. The propaganda value of the myth continues to serve well with its most dramatic use during World War II, when Olivier's epochal film anticipated yet another invasion of Normandy. Still today Agincourt remains a powerful trope in novels, in TV series, and even in the names of various companies and localities seeking the prestige the name conveys. As long as the Agincourt hymn is sung and genealogists determinedly search to link their family to the nobility the battle symbolizes, we can concur with Shakespeare's Henry V that "From this day to the ending of the world . . . it shall be remembered."

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