

Book Review: The Hundred Years War, Volume 4: Cursed Kings, Middle Ages

Series

By

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This is a key read for any academician or practitioner of history. In his remarkable narrative history of the Hundred Years War, Jonathan Sumption's fourth and penultimate volume covers the fascinating period from approximately 1399 to 1422, i.e., from the overthrow of Richard II in England and the start of the French civil war to the deaths of Henry V of England and Charles VI of France. Thus, this chronological narrative explores what was, even by the turbulent standards of the Middle Ages, a deeply chaotic period of history. Sumption has dubbed the volume "Cursed Kings" as an overarching theme, and reading this enormous tome makes the choice appropriate: The author's focus is narrowed down to the issues facing the men who currently hold the French crowns and those who aspire to do so.

After over thirty years of labor and four thousand pages of writing, Jonathan Sumption has completed his epic five-volume chronicle of the Hundred Years War with Triumph and Illusion. In this last book, he takes us from 1422, the year Henry V passed away after achieving great achievement, to 1453, the year Henry VI suffered complete loss. From a French point of view, the dates stand for the humiliating demise of the deranged Charles VI and the eventual triumph of his son, Charles VII.

The war's conclusion is more fascinating than its convoluted beginnings, which began in 1328 with the assassination of Charles IV of France, which brought an end to the Capetian dynasty and the establishment of the Valois one.

Edward III of England used this opportunity to claim the French throne through his mother, Isabella of France, as a result of the ongoing tensions between France and England (the latter pushing into this territory under its aggressive new monarch, Philip), as well as the former's continued possession of Gascony. It is amazing that England was able to fight a war if only sporadically for over a century against a population that was perhaps six or seven times larger than it was, but the result was unavoidable, or as "inevitable" as history would allow. Sumption provides a detailed account of how misconception led to the English defeat and how France triumphed.

With his stunning victory at Agincourt in 1415, Henry V appeared to have ushered in a new era of English military supremacy and a return to the turbulent 1340s Crécy. Henry VI of England was crowned King of France in the Dual Monarchy in 1420 after Henry and his Burgundian allies had taken control of France down to the Loire Valley, leaving the disinherited dauphin Charles attempting to reclaim his country and title. For a few years after Henry V's early death in 1422, England prospered in France under the skillful leadership of the Duke of Bedford, Henry V's brother.

Bedford, the "beak-nosed" protagonist in Sumption's account, is praised for his positive traits and is described as "a capable administrator and an astute politician with an incisive mind" who "managed to combine an affable manner with an imposing presence and a habit of authority." Even Bedford, however, was only able to maintain the line for a limited amount of time despite his win at the much-overlooked Battle of Verneuil in 1424—"the bloodiest fight of the Hundred Years War," in Sumption's opinion, among a field of formidable opponents. Like in this case, where an illiterate young peasant girl created an English meltdown, history frequently demonstrates that reality can sometimes be stranger than fiction. Belief is beggared by the very fantastic and nearly unbelievable account of Joan of Arc.

In calm, factual tones, Sumption does a good job of explaining how she flipped the tide against the English. He dedicates about 120 pages to the Joan phenomenon; the

book's cover, which shows the English siege of Orléans in 1429—a siege that Joan lifted—further emphasizes Joan's significance as the dauphin's savior and Bedford's adversary. Joan ensured Charles' coronation as Charles VII of France at that year's Reims; Bedford retaliated in 1431 by having Joan put on trial and executed. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that Frenchmen conducted her trial and execution; numerous ones of them "had always felt uncomfortable about her visions and male dress," even in the dauphin's court.

In the end, the English were driven out of France by more mundane issues. The Anglo-Burgundian alliance's disintegration in 1435, the year Bedford passed away, and the subsequent surrender of Paris in 1436 marked the true turning point. From that point on, the English were unable to significantly offset the forces working against them, particularly after Charles successfully imposed a standing army and war taxes on a scale that much outpaced England's meager financial efforts. England's attempts to adopt similar measures resulted in unfavorable over-exploitation of the trade and economy. France's tax base increased with the amount of territory it reclaimed; sadly, the English experienced the opposite trend.

Money was the limiting factor for all that the English did in France, as Sumption, who is always a great source of information on financial concerns, points out. Recruitment problems were made worse by defeats, a lack of resources, and a lack of trust (particularly from England's peace faction). Normandy's garrisons were understaffed and unable to significantly support field troops. The political as well as the military momentum of France drove the Hundred Years War to a close in 1453, with the English controlling only Calais. While France rejoiced, England lived in deception for ages. Its rulers would only give up claiming the French throne as their own in 1802.

Sumption makes sure that the weight of detail, which frequently involves complex politics and diplomacy, is balanced throughout the book by shocking disclosures and tales that keep the story interesting and serve as a reminder of the bizarre and horrifying cruelty of the Middle Ages. One of the defenders' chopped heads was impaled on a spike by an enemy soldier who had emerged above the town's gate after it had fallen; the victim's mother was waiting "in the crowd below with a bag full of money" for the ransom. Dressed as a man, the formidable aristocratic Jacqueline of

Bavaria made a spectacular escape from her jail. Reminded that they were not permitted to carry swords or other weapons, members of the English parliament in 1426 chose to conceal clubs and pebbles inside their long hoods and sleeves.

This is enormous historical storytelling at its most magnificent. Historians for many years to come will refer to the five volumes, which together with decades of research, represent the definitive book on the battle.

In conclusion, what every reader must know is that the classic write up narrates the tale of how France was destroyed due to the insane behavior of its monarch and the violence and avarice of his family. The strongest and most populous nation in Europe, France, saw a total internal collapse at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The nation was left at the mercy of one of the most remarkable kings of the European Middle Ages, Henry V of England, who had destroyed the French army on the field of Agincourt in October 1415 and left the majority of France's leadership dead, while the warring parties within fought for the spoils of the kingdom under the vacant gaze of the insane King Charles VI. This must provide lessons for many upcoming democracies and hence to avoid the mistakes of monarchs that have existed in the past. This explains why Sumption describes in amazing detail the tenacious conquest that in a few of years took Henry to the streets and palaces of Paris. Two months before his coronation as king of France, in 1422, he passed away at the age of thirty-six at a French royal fortress. These remarkable events are layered, six centuries later, with the powerful national mythology of England and France and the echoing words of Shakespeare. Jonathan Sumption peels back the layers of Cursed Kings to reveal the people and happenings that are hidden beneath.