

## William the Conqueror

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**Author:** David Bates

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**Reviewer:** Matthew Bennett

There is surely no-one better placed than Professor David Bates to write this biography. His pedigree extends over four decades during which he has made enormous contributions to our understanding of the history of Normandy and England in the 11th century. His first major publication on the topic, *Normandy before 1066* (1) identified his trajectory of research: only by having a thorough understanding of the duchy's development would it be possible fully to appreciate the achievements of its rulers, especially duke William II. At that time he commented favourably on the value of Marie Faroux's edition of 230 ducal charters, yet through his industry and enthusiasm in exploring the Norman archives, he has been able to find hundreds more from the 11th and 12th centuries considerably expanding knowledge in that area. This is evidenced not least by his full edition of the *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum* (RRAN) published two decades ago, a most valuable tool for historical enquiry. Indeed, it is his expertise in identifying and exploring documentary sources that gives this volume its richness and depth. It enables him to tease out the details of who, what, when, where and why, which might otherwise remain obscure to us today. Furthermore, he has the unusual distinction of having held professorial chairs in all three countries of mainland Britain and a Visiting Professorship at Caen, in Normandy, which has afforded him a unique perspective on the Anglo-Norman world.

The Norman Conquest was the result of the succession dispute which inevitably followed the death of King Edward at the beginning of January 1066. He has been given a soft ride by most historians, for it was undoubtedly his weakness that led to the crisis. An exile from England for a quarter of a century following the Danish conquest (1014–16) he had no political constituency in the country. Edward was dependent upon Earl Godwin, who ensured that the new king married his daughter Edith. No offspring ensued. Since divorce was impossible in these circumstances it looks as if Edward was determined not to father an heir who would be the grandson of the man directly responsible for the murder of his brother Alfred in 1036. During the crisis of 1051–2, when Godwin was exiled, Edward wasted no time sending his queen to a nunnery. Bates provides convincing evidence that the young duke William did make a visit and was offered the throne. He also points out that Harold Godwinson, when he fell into the hands of Guy of Ponthieu, had already met him in 1056, as a newly revaluated diploma proves. Then Harold was forced to take an oath to William, or rather oaths, as he was paraded around the duchy, and joined him on the Brittany expedition.

In January 1066, whether Harold 'was as close to being the popular choice for king as was possible... (with) the full support of England's religious elite' (pp. 216–17) is more of a moot point, although the sources agree that Edward made a legal deathbed bequest. Bates also considers Harold made a conscious decision not to put his case before the pope. But how could he have done so, when the archbishop of Canterbury was a pluralist and appointed by an anti-pope, making diplomacy very difficult indeed? This in stark contrast to William's tactics in winning papal support for his invasion, with missions, a papal banner and a promise to reform the English Church (was was indeed carried out by Lanfranc).

William was a conscientiously pious, both individually and as a ruler responsible for the Church's good health in his dominions. The two abbeys which he built in Caen, his capital in Lower Normandy, were a very public and ostentatious demonstration of this. Similarly, his foundation of a monastery on the site of the great battle in which he proved his right to rule by killing Harold and routing the English forces was both a thanks-offering to God for his victory and expiation for lives lost in achieving it. The Penitential Ordinance of 1067 was part of the moves to reform and reorganize the Church in England, and points in the same direction. However, Bates perceives it as 'possibly ... simple window dressing' (p. 279), which is but one of many criticisms of William that are laced through the text, either as direct statements or faint praise, and which set the tone for his assessment of William the man.

Not that the author is keen to engage with these possibilities. He declares that a psychological portrait is impossible to achieve and so declines to engage with any opportunities to understand why William was the type of person his actions seem to portray him to be. On several occasions Bates states that he has ethical qualms about dealing with a man capable of such violent behaviour. This need not surprise the reader; that someone born in the mid-20th century cannot fully empathise with a warrior king from a millennium before his own time; but isn't that what historians are supposed to do – especially biographers?

Bates clearly understands the society which he describes and which he has studied for so long. It was dominated by a military aristocracy whose members considered that they had a right to violence which they could exercise in pursuit of their goals. So it is interesting how he plays down the impact of threats to ducal government and the young duke's person which are recorded during his minority. This is despite the deaths of his guardian, tutor and steward, all of whom were murdered by dissident factions over that period. After the assassination of the guardian Gilbert of Brionne, his two sons took refuge at the court of Baldwin, count of Flanders, only returning to Normandy in the train of Matilda, a dozen years later. We are reassured instead that William had both loving parents and the opportunity for a good education. While it is true that some of the more exciting stories of ducal danger stem from the pen of Orderic Vitalis writing a century after the events in question, and that the monk of Saint Evroult is prone to purple passages, Bates is ready to accept vivid descriptions of other incidents while he rejects these.

There is also the issue of William's illegitimacy. His parents did not go through a Christian marriage although they partook in a public (secular) ceremony to declare their union. This could indeed have made the young duke vulnerable to challenges to his authority; but may not have been the problem that it was to become after the Church reform movement had its way. To be a bastard in the 1030s was not as much of an impediment as it was a century later, when the Anglo-Norman historians were writing. So it was that the most successful of Henry I's two-dozen illegitimate offspring, Robert, earl of Gloucester could not be considered throne-worthy, despite his evident talents. Orderic, writing about the siege at Alençon when members of the garrison were mutilated on its capture, allegedly for insulting William's mother (the Tanner's Daughter myth) and deriding the duke's status, naturally attributes the attitudes of his own time. Nevertheless, the king-duke's prickliness over the respect worthy of his rank and tendency to take revenge upon those who upset him could well be result of the insecurity of his youth. Bates comments on William's (unusual) sexual continence in his youth and his devotion to his queen Matilda, by whom he had a quiver-full of sons and many daughters. She played a full role in government in both Normandy and England and her death may well have hit him hard. William seems to have possessed a Puritan streak which meant that he was obsessively concerned to do the right thing; but was also convinced that he was always in the right.

How might this background lead to William's well-deserved reputation for ruthlessness in war and politics? At issue here is not that he was ruthless, but whether he 'went significantly beyond contemporary norms' (p. 164). This is a constant refrain throughout the book; nor is it a new tune, for it merely repeats what Bates wrote in his first, shorter biography of 1989, but with more lavish orchestration. War, one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, is by nature a bloody and beastly business. What makes it acceptable to any society is its legitimisation – by ones means or another – as a necessary evil, in a good cause and for a just outcome (to paraphrase St Augustine of Hippo). Also, the rules of war (*coutumes de guerre*) which were practised meant that restraints fell far below the ideal standards of the Geneva Conventions (which have themselves been in use for barely a century-and-a-half). For the main form of warfare in William's era was that of fire and the sword, an attack on both the economic basis of an enemy's strength and on his moral authority by demonstrating a failure to protect both the assets and people for which the ruler was responsible. The tenets of chivalry protected nobles but often persecuted non-noble soldiers and the hapless non-combatant population.

William practised this kind of warfare – as did every other ruler of his era. For comparison read Abbot Suger's *Deeds of Louis the Fat* (VI) of France [\(2\)](#), written a couple of generations later. Here you will find destruction and mutilations of both individuals and captured soldiers en masse; but the important factor to bear in mind is that except for a few exceptional cases, those treated in this way are from the lower classes. Chivalric protection was only given to warriors of high social status: for the few and not the many. There remains to consider, though, the winter campaign of 1069–70, conducted in the wake of defeating the Danes and another sacking of York, specifically aimed at punishing the wider population, not just of Yorkshire but of a broad swath of the northern shires. The evidence for the devastation of the agricultural economy and the persecution of the inhabitants is clearly to be found in Domesday Book, a decade-and-a-half later. This was indeed beyond the norms, a product of the continual invasions and rebellions which had actually preceded the arrival of William, dating back to the expulsion of earl Tostig in the autumn of 1065. It was concomitant with William's crown wearing at York that winter, signalling his determination to be king of all England as, well as the rebuilding of the city which followed.

For the truth is that the southern-based English royal government had only ever exercised a weak authority north of the Humber. The disruption caused by the war of succession in 1066 exacerbated the situation. To explain is not to excuse, but it is worth considering what might have turned out if William had not operated in this way: continued disturbances fed by the threat of Viking attacks, effective Northumbrian independence or further destructive campaigns? There is no doubt that the king was much exercised by the threat from Scandinavia, witness the heavy taxes and logistical preparations in 1085 – against an invasion which never came – which contributed to the creation of Domesday Book, a project for recording the resources of the kingdom available to the Crown. At this point it should be mentioned that Bates produces a masterly

summary in less than a score of pages (pp. 462–78) on the purpose, making and impact of Domesday Book: ‘the unique foundation for an understanding of William’s practice of kingship and the expectations that his subjects had of him which goes beyond anything that any other source can provide’ (p. 464). Together with the Salisbury Oath they: ‘were demonstrations of rule that consolidated and sought to lay a new foundation for social and personal relationships including the inter-ethnic’ (p. 477). Many a student will be grateful to discover such a concise and cogent analysis of very a complex topic.

Further to the specific issue of treatment of the northern territories is the general point about sacking towns and fortresses, and general pillaging and winning of booty. The rules for this were well understood in the 11th century (and much later). If the garrison and/or the inhabitants of a place (which need not necessarily be in accordance) negotiated a surrender, then their lives, and to a certain extent their property, were secured. However, should they hold out ‘unreasonably’ owing to the obvious lack of relief or in the face of a practicable breach in the walls, leading to a storm, then their lives were forfeit and the buildings and possessions were plundered for three days. What this means is: each case needs to be taken on its own terms. It was just not down to the whim, or anger, of William as commander, but according to the rules of the game, whether the soldiers got their booty or not. And, as Bates recognises, ‘looting sustained morale’ (p. 233).

Also, upon examination, other actions for which William is condemned turn out to be not so exceptional. The attack upon the French rearguard at Varaville as the army was crossing the Dives, in 1055, is described as ‘massacre’, although ‘justifiable in war’ (p. 161); while it can also be read as a clever tactic, with relatively minor loss of life compared to a pitched battle and just punishment for the vicious raiding which had been inflicted on Normandy by the invading force. Louis VI is praised by Suger for just such an attack. Indeed, the saintly abbot makes a joke about ‘the second baptism’ which the victims received as they fell into the river.[\(3\)](#)

There is also the issue of how suitable the format of biography is in considering the wider impact of the Norman Conquest. A major part of the author’s achievement is to discover exactly where William was at any time in his life and to better explain his actions by so doing. This can create a certain feeling of claustrophobia in the narrative, however, as we are constantly in William’s company, making it difficult for the reader to sit back and gain an overview of the changes which took place. So, there is little on the ‘tenurial revolution’ explored in such depth by Sir James Holt. Also, although Bates clearly appreciates military achievements (see his assessment of 1068–70 at pp. 321 ff) he does not say much about the impact of castellation upon the English society and countryside. Quoting Bisson on the fortifications being ‘perpetrators of violence’ (p. 299) also strikes an awkward note. It is quite true that when their owners were recalcitrant – as during the wars of King Stephen’s reign – they were a nuisance; but Orderic believed that they had a value in national defence and that had the English possessed them in 1066, it would have been difficult for William to conquer the country. Their usefulness depended upon the loyalty of castellans entrusted with their charge.

Nor are the Church reforms, both conceptual in the sense of how Lanfranc and others sought to improve the care of souls, and their physical expression in the construction of many new (or improved) church buildings – from small parish chapels to huge cathedrals – made apparent. Of course, the latter was not all achieved before 1087, but the impetus behind the programme was certainly down to the new king and his advisors, as well as his successors, regal, ecclesiastical and lay. There is also the issue of economic developments: towns, trade, changing use of lands and slavery, which had both significant and long-term impacts. In the last case, slave markets were condemned and indeed had effectively disappeared, except in the north of the kingdom, within a generation of William’s death. Yet Bates cannot resist pointing out that the king had not fully shut down the trade in human beings. Once again, to explain is not to excuse; but it really does take time to change culturally embedded social practice. This is what the 19th-century reformers discovered, and even as recently as 2015 an anti-slavery act passed through the British Parliament. While such legislation might be

hoped to abolish the cruel practice within a matter of years, no-one should hold their breath.

The very last page deals with the state of William's eternal soul. It is fairly clear that Bates wishes him to be burning in Hell. The problem with this is that in William's mind – and also that of most of his contemporaries, although not all Anglo-Norman commentators – through his acts of piety he had done enough to propitiate the Deity. He received a Christian burial and both he and Matilda were remembered in Masses for eternity in their respective monastic institutions (or until 1789, at least). In what is otherwise a magnificent achievement of detailed description and analysis it is a pity that Bates' urgent need to critique William can get in the way of a balanced assessment. At least he can be said to have avoided the besetting sin of the biographer: to fall in love with his subject.

## Notes

1. David Bates, *Normandy before 1066* (London, 1982). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Henri de Wacquet, *Vie de Louis le Gros*, Latin ed. (Paris, 1929); *Deeds of Louis the Fat*, trans. Richard Cusimano and John Moorhead (Washington, DC, 1992). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Celebrated by the editor as an example of his sense of humour, *ibid*, pp. 91-92 and fn. 18. [Back to \(3\)](#)

### Other reviews:

Times

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/books-william-the-conqueror-by-david-bates-zkwsqsz0b> [2]

Open Letters Monthly

<https://www.openlettersmonthly.com/book-review-william-the-conqueror/> [3]

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