



*The Battle of Agincourt* ed. Anne Curry and Malcolm Mercer.

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The six-hundredth anniversary of the Battle of Agincourt (1415) led to a flurry of publications and activities commemorating the event, including a major exhibition at the Tower of London,<sup>1</sup> which in turn led to the publication of this anthology of essays by twenty-four specialists in the battle, its larger con-

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1. *The Battle of Agincourt: 600th Anniversary Exhibition* (23 Oct. 2015–31 Jan. 2016), sponsored by the Royal Armouries.

text, and its remembrance. The volume's well qualified editors have themselves made several contributions to the collection. Anne Curry, a member of the Agincourt 600 Committee, wrote the standard historical study of the battle.<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Mercer, a curator at the Tower of London, is an expert on medieval weapons and armor. The other authors are mostly British academics.

The book is essentially an expanded catalogue for the exhibition. Its many illustrations are enhanced by unusually detailed captions. The text is coherently organized and the authors regularly reference each other's essays. Intended for general readers, the book is comparatively free of academic jargon. The editors have organized the papers in three sections: the first provides historical context of the battle, examining the English and French monarchies during the Hundred Years War, as well as the shared military values of knights and noblemen on both sides of the English Channel. Part 2 concentrates on the 1415 campaign and the battle itself, including the kinds of soldiers deployed, their weapons and equipment, the logistical support they required, and the physical conditions they endured. Part 3 concerns the battle's aftermath, both short- and long-term, as it affected the subsequent course of the war; it also traces the ways it has been remembered, especially in William Shakespeare's *Henry V* and Laurence Olivier's film version of the play, artistic works that, Curry writes, made Agincourt and not the English victories at Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356) stand out most prominently in the British national consciousness.

The opening chapters explain for general readers the causes and course of the Hundred Years War up to 1415. The authors stress that the political situation in England inspired Henry V to resume the war in France, while dissension among French princes kept them from pooling their manpower and resources to defeat the invaders. Also discussed are such aspects of the war as relevant heraldry and cultural differences within each army. The English of necessity relied heavily on archers, and the noblemen leading the army had learned the value of the commoners in their ranks. The French, with their larger population and greater resources, fielded many more noblemen and knights, who saw themselves as superior to their archers. As Matthew Strickland notes,

Pride, honour and disdain for the common soldiers lay behind the French decision to push to the rear the considerable numbers of missilemen in the French host, said to number some 4,000 crossbowmen and 1,000 archers, despite these troops being regarded as an essential element of the earlier French battle plan. This rendered them largely ineffective and gave the English an important tactical advantage. By contrast, though social hierarchy within the English army remained significant, the ability of the English nobility to work effectively with their archers, whose military value they had long recognised, was a vital reason behind the success of English arms and the victory at Agincourt. (45)

While these are not new insights, this passage, like many others in the volume, effectively synthesizes the current scholarship on its subject.

Military historians have long recognized that the French lacked experience in organizing and deploying large combined-arms forces and that their best commanders were either absent, as in the case of Duke John of Burgundy, or had been pushed aside like Marshal Boucicaut by impetuous young noblemen eager for glory. But other aspects of the battle are less well known. For example, we are not entirely sure where it actually took place. Archaeologist Tim Sutherland draws on his own research on the site, as well as the much earlier work of a British officer, George Woodford (1782–1870), who was with the army of occupation in France after Waterloo. Woodford recovered many artifacts in the area, but most were destroyed in a fire later in the nineteenth century. His extensive field notes have been lost as well. Sutherland himself led a team that combed the area with metal detectors but found no

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2. Anne Curry, *Agincourt: A New History* (2005; rpt. Stroud, UK: History Pr, 2015).

evidence in the specific sectors traditionally identified as the battlefield. The most promising finds turned out to be remnants from an oil drilling venture in the 1960s! Contrasting his work at Agincourt with the results of the more productive excavations at Towton, site of a battle from the Wars of the Roses, he notes that

Much additional work needs to be carried out on the battlefield of Agincourt to compare it with the results from Towton. This will rely on extensive cooperation between everyone who believes that the site is not only valued and should be protected, but also that it should be investigated further. The Agincourt Battlefield Archaeology Project plans to continue looking for evidence as there is currently no recorded physical evidence of the battle ever having taken place! (201)

Fortunately, the extant documentary evidence relating to the battle is more abundant. It includes not only chronicles, but governmental and legal documents, and literary works, all of which the contributors use very astutely.

In the final section, Rémy Ambühl's chapter on the French prisoners and Rowena Archer's on war widows make good use of a range of written sources to assess the human costs of the battle and the war. Many of the prisoners were killed on the battlefield on the orders of Henry V, but hundreds were not. Their fates, Ambühl suggests, depended greatly upon their rank—the more prominent noblemen often spent years or even decades in captivity in England; captives farther down the social scale were treated differently:

most ... were put to ransom within a year or two of the battle. The majority, if not all, of the prisoners included in the eighty obligations for the payment of the crown's ransom share, had never been brought to England at all. The presence of people of Calais among the masters of prisoners substantiates the comment of the chroniclers Le Fèvre and Waurin that English soldiers and their French prisoners had been barred from entering Calais in 1415 out of fear that the town would run out of food. As a result, many of the soldiers sold both equipment and prisoners to the inhabitants of Calais town at a low price in order to have enough money to eat and return home. (213)

Similarly, Archer taps literary works by Christine de Pisan and others as well as government documents and even works of art to flesh out the lives of both French and English women widowed during the campaign.

In the book's last three chapters, Ros King discusses Shakespeare's play, Robert Woosnam-Savage explicates Olivier's film, and David Owen Norris considers music inspired by the battle. The volume contains no overall conclusion.

*The Battle of Agincourt* may not be the "defining reassessment" touted by its publisher, but it is certainly a thorough and accessible synthesis of the scholarship on the battle. Interested nonspecialists will find it eminently readable and thought-provoking, while specialists will appreciate its range of coverage and its lavish illustrations, especially the photographs of arms and armor featured in the exhibition.