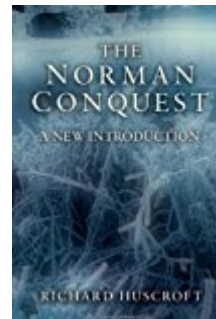


**Richard Huscroft.** *The Norman Conquest: A New Introduction*. Harlow: Pearson/Longman, 2009. xxi + 369 pp. \$34.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-4058-1155-2.



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The Norman Conquest is a topic of endless fascination, whether what is at issue is the military campaign itself or the question of how different England, Britain, and, indeed, the world might be even today if the event had not occurred. Beginning in the seventeenth century, if not earlier, historians looking at the wider question have tended to oscillate between two poles of interpretation. For some, the conquest made little difference: what changes occurred were mere details that might have happened anyway, and the essential English character soon reasserted itself in all fundamentals. For others, the conquest brought abrupt and profound changes, either for the better, rescuing England from weak, directionless Anglo-Saxon leadership, or for the worse, imposing on the defenseless English harsh and rapacious rule, which took the English centuries to overcome. In recent decades, serious scholars have, for the most part, tried to emancipate themselves from this duality and to look, instead, at the ways in which Anglo-Saxon and French institutions and practices worked together to establish

the fundamentals of later medieval English society, economics, government, law, religious institutions and practices, art, architecture, and so on. In his attempt to describe the conquest for a general audience, Richard Huscroft does an excellent job of conveying the results of the last generation of scholarship.

The conquest is here very broadly construed: Huscroft aims to cover causes, events, and consequences over more than a century, from the last decade of the tenth century to the first decade of the twelfth. Causes are covered in the first section, "Preliminaries." The events of the conquest campaign occupy the second section, "The Norman Conquest," which also discusses military affairs through the battle of Tinchebray in 1106, in which "almost exactly 40 years after the Battle of Hastings" England conquered Normandy (p. 182). The third section is on "The Impact of the Conquest." The geographic scope is as wide as the chronological—Huscroft covers not only Normandy and Eng-

land but Scotland and Wales as well. This wide sweep is useful and, almost always, well done.

In "Preliminaries," Huscroft first introduces his readers to the major sources for the period and then considers the state of late Anglo-Saxon, Welsh, Scottish, and Norman government and society as well as the reasons why the English kingdom was up for grabs in 1066. He concludes that it is not surprising that the effects of the Norman Conquest were moderate, for "the peoples of eleventh-century Britain and Normandy had much in common" (p. 69). Moreover, he notes that "the Norman Conquest was little more than the result of yet another of the many succession disputes which characterised English high politics in the eleventh century and beyond" (p. 79). Though Huscroft accepts that in the early 1050s Edward the Confessor had considered leaving the kingdom to William, he concludes that by the mid-1060s Harold intended to succeed his brother-in-law as king and Edward intended him to do so. Indeed, he argues, William betrayed little interest in the kingdom until Harold's ill-fated, and probably accidental, visit to Normandy "in 1064 or 1065," which may have "prompted him to start thinking seriously about seizing the English throne" (pp. 104-105).

Huscroft's account of the campaigns of 1066 emphasizes Harold's capabilities as a general and the contingency of the eventual outcome. The often negative interpretations of the military events that led to the Norman takeover are turned on their head. The return to their homes of the members of the southern fyrd in early September, for example, has "sometimes been interpreted as demonstrating the shortcomings of the Anglo-Saxon military system. That Harold managed to keep his forces in the field at all for upwards of four months, however, was a significant achievement. And the decision to disband, a temporary measure perhaps, may have been as strategic as it was forced" (p. 118). Claims that William had secured the support of Emperor Henry IV, King Swein of

Denmark, and the pope "should be treated with caution" and are, in fact, dismissed with little argument (pp. 121-122). Harold's haste in marching south from his triumph against Harald Hardrada may have been due to "overconfidence," but "it is more likely ... that Harold felt he had little choice but to respond as quickly as possible to the Norman threat" because not to have acted to end William's plundering would have threatened Harold's "standing as a good lord" (pp. 124, 125). Moreover, "Harold may have calculated that, whilst only total victory would suffice for William, avoidance of defeat would be enough for him" (p. 127). "And it is worth repeating that the sheer length of the battle shows how hard fought it was and how unpredictable its outcome until close to the end" (p. 130). Given all this, it comes as a bit of a surprise when Huscroft concludes, "Harold and the English were out-thought and out-fought by a better commander and a superior military machine" (p. 131).

In his consideration of the military campaigns of the forty years after the conquest campaign, Huscroft's emphasis is on the difficulties of the new kings' position. Rebellious Englishmen, unruly Normans, unreconciled Welsh and Scots, enemies on the continent, not to mention difficult sons or brothers, all plagued the first three Norman kings. The treatment of the events of 1067 through 1106 is a competent narrative but does not attempt to make an argument about the overall arc of the events.

In the third section, "The Impact of the Conquest," Huscroft considers, for the four or five decades after Hastings in successive chapters, "Government and Law," "Lands and Armies," "Economies and Families," and "The Church." He argues that these kings were warriors--"soldiers above all else, prepared to be brutal and violent when necessary," and "itinerant warlords who ... kept their subjects in line through force and intimidation rather than through charters and writs"--not statesmen or conscious institution

builders (pp. 189, 197). Nonetheless, they "appreciated that the more organized and thoroughgoing the system of royal government became, the more effectively their subjects could be fleeced" (p. 226). By and large, institutions evolved from English roots rather than being created by Norman innovators, and, Huscroft argues, changes would have occurred anyway. This is true in many, diverse areas, such as earldoms; the author writes that "the Norman origins of the post-conquest English earldoms should not be emphasised too strongly. They evolved in response to changing circumstances in England and acquired a unique character of their own as a result" (p. 204). Huscroft makes a similar argument for women's rights (or lack thereof), slavery, church reform, and other issues.

Dramatic changes did occur in three areas. The first was in the introduction of pervasively tenurial relations among the upper classes. Huscroft accepts the thesis going all the way back to John Horace Round that knight service in return for land was introduced in the first few years after Hastings and fundamentally altered politics, government, and law: "William I may not have set out to create a wholly new social and political system in 1066, but by 1106 this is more or less what he and his sons had done" (p. 239). The second area of drastic change was the much greater "manorialisation" of the countryside. As Huscroft states, "the Norman Conquest initiated a period of significant and sometimes devastating changes for England's rural population" (p. 55). The third area where Norman influence predominated is architecture: "perhaps the most obvious and permanent change affect[ing] the English Church after 1066" (p. 306).

By and large, Huscroft makes a persuasive case for the complexity of influences and developments after 1066. However, the book is relatively weak in two or three areas. One is the incorporation of Scottish and Welsh matters. Often this works well, but sometimes the discussions of de-

velopments in these two areas seem to be present merely because we have been promised that they will be. Just for example, I fail to see why a discussion of Welsh and Scottish kinship systems is relevant to the question of changes in English society after 1066 (pp. 280-282). It might have been better simply to confess that some aspects of Scottish and Welsh affairs are relevant and others are not and then discuss only those that genuinely are.

The second area in which I found the book problematic concerns the introduction of knight service after the conquest. Huscroft contends repeatedly that, for ecclesiastical tenants-in-chief, "by the early 1070s a fixed, specified quota of knights had been demanded from them by William in return for their lands" (p. 291). Unlike almost every area of human life that he considers in this book, in this aspect, Huscroft's use of evidence appears decidedly one-sided. It is especially odd that he uses the writ that William the Conqueror allegedly sent to Abbot Aethelwig of Evesham, which Round used to clinch his argument that William had introduced knight service, complete with specific quotas, by 1070, without any reference to the serious doubts about the writ's authenticity that David Bates raises in his edition of William's acts.<sup>[1]</sup> Unquestioning use of statements by Wace that the Norman leaders of 1066 promised William specific, round numbers of knights is similarly remarkable since Wace was writing about a century after the event. While Huscroft does argue that quotas took longer to develop for lay tenants-in-chief than for their ecclesiastical counterparts, the overall impression is that the full regime found in England a century after the conquest was imposed in pretty much its full form shortly after 1066: see especially the section "'Feudal' England?" It is also going a bit too far to say about the feudal incidents that there was "nothing like them in Normandy before then, and they derived squarely from the nature of the landed settlement imposed on England by the Normans" (p. 237).

Third, relatively little is said about the peasants who formed the vast majority of the population of England at this time. Much too often, Huscroft writes as though the only people in England were lords of some sort, as in the short section entitled "The English Survivors," which is only about thegns. And then there is this statement, following a discussion of mesne tenants: "Below this level,... there must have been a large number of individuals, unrecorded in Domesday Book, who occupied land in some capacity or other" (p. 235). Of course, there were, over a million of them; and many of them are recorded, in the aggregate, in Domesday Book, as the freemen, sokemen, villeins, cottars, bordars, and so on who populated the estates with which Domesday Book is concerned. One might have expected the chapter "Economies and Families" to be mostly about the majority of the population who are not mentioned by name in Domesday Book, but such is not the case. Indeed, that part of the wealth of recent scholarship on Domesday Book that is not about persons mentioned by name, that is, tenants-in-chief and mesne tenants, receives hardly any attention here.

There are some minor annoyances as well. The form "William de Poitiers" used for French names is inexplicably macaronic: William of Poitiers, or Guillaume de Poitiers, please! "Under Cnut" English ealdormen "came to be called earls (from the Old English *eorl*)," without any reference to the Scandinavian *jarl* (p. 33). The argument that "eastern and northern England.... were 'comparatively unmanorial' areas of the kingdom, and it has been suggested that this difference ... explains the relative freedom enjoyed by peasants there" is circular since manorialization is equated with the relative unfreedom of peasants (p. 53, quoting Reginald Lennard, but the imputation of causality is not Lennard's). Eustace of Boulogne is twice described as Edward the Confessor's brother-in-law, but the basis of this relationship is never stated and Eustace is not in the Anglo-Saxon royal genealogy on page xix. Similarly, references

to Harold's wife (or wives) can be confusing: on page 107, Harold marries "Ealdgyth, the sister of Earls Edwin and Morcar"; on page 131, there is a reference to the story that Harold's body was "identified on the battlefield by his first wife, Edith Swan-neck"; and later on the same page "Queen Edith, Harold's widow" surrenders to William at Winchester. Henry I's agreement with Count Robert of Flanders in 1101 is reported as involving "an annual payment of £267" but later as requiring "an annuity of £500" (pp. 179, 207). The "money payment known as scutage" was not "often substituted by tenants" for the knight service they otherwise owed; scutage was initiated by the king (p. 210). It is misleading to state that "if a disappointed party complained of the justice he had received in a lower court,... he could obtain a royal writ ordering the case to come before the king or his justices": the only kind of complaint which would elicit such a writ was that the lower court had failed to hear the case at all, not that it had made a decision which one party did not like (p. 210). While it is certainly plausible that "William I ... was initially reluctant to forgo the profits he recouped from the slave trade with Ireland," no mention is made of the fact that William did eventually prohibit the sale of slaves overseas (p. 279).

Despite these problems, all relatively minor, Huscroft's book serves as an excellent general introduction to the topic of the Norman Conquest. It is well written so that even those new to the subject should find it easy to take in, while those who want an up-to-date summary of the state of the question will find it very useful. I highly recommend it.

#### Note

[1]. David Bates, ed., *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannorum: The Acts of William I (1066-1087)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 449-452.

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