

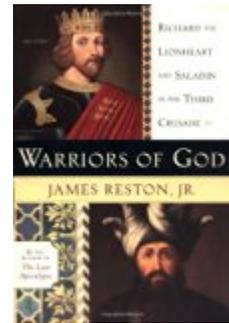
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Reston, Jr. *Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*. New York: Doubleday, 2001. xx + 346 pp. \$15.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-385-49562-2; \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-385-49561-5.

Reviewed by Michael Pedrotty (Department of History, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)

Published on H-Albion (January, 2003)



A Popular History of the Third Crusade

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Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade by James Reston Jr. might be read as both a popular history of the Third Crusade and as a dual biography of Saladin and Richard the Lionheart. Donning his “historian’s hat,” Reston sets the stage for his drama by providing brief backgrounds on the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem and Saladin’s unification of Egypt and Syria.[1] He also describes the Sultan’s conquest of the Christian holdings from 1187 to 1189, and next follows the preaching, mobilization, and course of the Third Crusade in roughly chronological fashion from 1189 to 1192. As biographer, Reston also devotes a good deal of text to a presentation of his title characters’ early lives and careers, theorizes how their personalities and experiences impacted the course of the crusade, and briefly touches on their fates after the campaign. The author is perhaps at his best when wearing an essayist’s hat, as he derives valuable insights on the modern legacy of the crusade movement from his travels in the Middle East and interviews with Muslim scholars.

Reston apparently desired to avoid a Western bias in his account, and in this he has certainly succeeded. If anything, he seems to prefer his Muslim subjects, and his treatment of the Christians as a whole is generally pejorative in tone. The Christians are the aggressors in his drama, they are less civilized, less religious, more greedy, and more savage. Reston characterizes Islam as the “na-

tive faith” of the Holy Land and states that, “In the first instance [the Third Crusade] was a Christian Holy War that was met in response and in reaction by the Muslim concept of jihad” (pp. xvi, xviii). Both of these assertions are debatable, and rely, to a large extent, on the defining chronological scope, as do their modern parallels today. They typify the author’s style not only in that they privilege the Muslim perspective, but also in that they ignore the subtleties of the issue at hand, by presenting one side of a complex concept or thorny debate as simple fact. Reston’s simplistic, dualist constructions prevent him from addressing some of the most interesting and enlightening aspects of his subject.

This is particularly evident in the author’s portraits of Richard and Saladin, with the former doing little right and the latter incapable of doing wrong. In general, Reston’s characterizations are rather thin and one-dimensional, with no hint of competing interpretations or any other complexities that might muddy the waters of his tale. Richard is painted as reckless, brutish, unprincipled, and vacillating, with his only commendable trait being that he was a great warrior (pp. 115, 181, 192, 226, 341). Saladin, on the other hand, is noble, devout, wise, and imperturbable (pp. 23, 25, 172, 201, 203, 218, 283, 292-293). Richard is roundly condemned for the massacre of Muslim prisoners at Acre, after negotiations for their release broke down following repeated delays by Saladin. Yet no censure accompanies the Sultan’s less-numerous executions of Christian prisoners, both before and after

Richard's, including the beheading of women passengers seized by Muslim corsairs and brought before him for interrogation. Richard is a savage, but Saladin is supposed to have been motivated by piety in his executions. Reston blandly states that the Koran sanctioned such "retaliation," quoting an "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" passage that (excepting some anatomical detail) is precisely what might be found in the Old Testament (p. 277).

The author does employ an engaging style, painting vivid scenes with imaginative and descriptive prose. Unfortunately, he appears to be more concerned with telling a good story than with presenting an accurate or responsible history, and he too often ventures into the hyperbolic and fantastic. Thus he has Richard wading ashore to the Battle of Jaffa "with a crossbow in one hand and sword in the other" like some Hollywood action movie hero, when the chronicles simply note his use of both weapons at different times during a day-long battle (p. 288).[2] He also uses such anachronistic terms as "seals" and "commandos" to describe medieval combatants, presumably because he thinks they convey the essence of the matter, if not the reality, as well as enhancing readability (pp. 120, 159, 160, 175). But certainly the best example of Reston's taste for the titillating version of a story is his insistence that Richard was homosexual, that he and Philip Augustus were lovers, and that their dissolved relationship then impacted not only the course of the crusade but future European politics as well. Reston is certainly not the first to assert Richard's supposed homosexuality, despite the fact that the evidence for it is extremely thin. But the manner in which he presents the case is notable in its bald confidence, with no hint that a contrary viewpoint might exist: "In any event, in their adolescence and early adulthood, Philip Augustus and Richard the Lionheart had been lovers" (p. 61). Moreover, Reston goes beyond merely discussing Richard's sexuality to place it at the very center of his drama. The Third Crusade supposedly dissolved because Philip could not bear to labor on in his ex-lover's shadow (pp. 164, 170-176). The Plantagenet-Capetian wars of the late Twelfth Century were not part of a bitterly complex and long-standing dynastic rivalry, but were merely another lovers' quarrel: "But behind it all the matter was personal. They [Richard and Philip Augustus] fought and made peace and fought again, just as lovers fight and make up and fight again" (p. 339). It may be a juicy story, but it is not good history.

Reston employs a wide range of primary and secondary sources—most of the important chronicles are represented in the bibliography—but he too often makes poor use of them. He draws heavily on the medieval

sources, but does so neither critically nor faithfully, and he appears to regard all types of information from them as equal in evidentiary value. The author grants a factual voice to legendary or fantastic material. We are told, for example, that King Henry II could trace his lineage back to Noah (p. 28) and that Guy of Lusignan could trace his back to a "serpent woman" (p. 14). Moreover, prophecies regarding Richard's birth were delivered "by no less a figure than Merlin the Magician" (p. 29). Reston's conception of his subject also appears to have been shaped as much by modern literary and theatrical sources, as he describes for us the intrigues of the Plantagenet and Capetian courts as seen "from the modern play *The Lion in Winter*" (p. 61). A very fine play and a memorable film, but hardly a reliable historical source. Finally, Reston exhibits a disturbing willingness to manipulate his sources in order to advance his story line, as when he claims that Richard, a few weeks before the arrival of his bride-to-be in Sicily, gathered together some bishops, stripped himself naked, and "confessed the filthiness of his homosexuality." Roger of Hoveden simply states that he "confessed the filthiness of his life" and that "the thorns of lustfulness had departed from his head" (p. 135).[3]

It is possible that Reston simply underestimates the limitations of his medieval sources, as he demonstrates what appears to be an imperfect understanding of the period as a whole. Examples are legion, but among the most striking are the author's criticisms of Richard's military judgement at every turn, in particular his eventual refusal to besiege Jerusalem itself in the summer of 1192. Reston states that no historian has "adequately" explained why Richard pulled back to Jaffa at that point, and he offers up that "[s]uddenly, inexplicably, disgracefully, the Lionheart became fainthearted" (p. 277).[4] So his apparently adequate explanation is that Richard simply turned coward. In fact, Richard himself explained why he dared not press the attack, and his decision was in full accord with the vast majority of the most experienced military minds of the host-men of the time who lived or died by their skill at judging these affairs. They and Richard determined that a successful siege was unlikely so far removed from their maritime supply lines and that even if they could capture the Holy City, they could not maintain possession of it since the majority of the crusaders would leave for home.[5] It would be better to march on Egypt and split Damascus from Cairo once again, in other words to recreate the environment in which the first crusaders had succeeded and the only one in which they could hope to succeed again. Reston dismisses this project as a flight of fancy, despite the fact

that every major crusade to the East thereafter aimed at Cairo, and not Jerusalem. These indictments, and many others, reveal more about the author's lack of understanding regarding medieval military affairs than they do Richard's strategic acumen.

Reston has identified a topic of great potential for a popular history on a strikingly dramatic event that does indeed have important lessons for the contemporary world, and for this he should be applauded. He should not be faulted for not producing a rigorous history of his subject, for he is not a historian. But he can rightly be faulted where his work is simplistic, unbalanced, sensationalized, or inaccurate. Popular history makes its greatest contribution when it engages the broader reading public with well-written, well-researched accounts of humanity's collective past. Although it need not be exhaustive, fully documented, or methodologically innovative, surely we must still demand that it be balanced, responsibly researched, and accurately told. Unfortunately, few academics will find use for *Warriors of God* except as an example for students of the charms and perils of popular history.

Notes

[1]. WAMU Radio, "James Reston, Jr: *Warriors of God: Richard The Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*," <http://www.wamu.org/pi/shows/piarc_010521.html>, at 11:50 of 51:21 recording. This is an author's interview with Kojo Nnamdi of NPR, in which Reston reveals a great deal on how he approached his topic. He aptly describes himself as a "story teller" and states that he "donned his historian's cap" for this project.

[2]. Ambroise, *The Crusade of Richard Lion-Heart*, translated by Jerome Hubert with notes and documentation by John L. La Monte (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), ll. 11,127-11,202; and, *Itinerarium Peregrinorum et Gesta Regis Ricardi* (London: H. G. Bohn, 1848), pp. 317-319.

[3]. Roger of Hoveden, *The Annals*, vol. II, translated by H. T. Riley (London: H. G. Bohn, 1853), p. 176.

[4]. Other examples of the author indicting Richard's military judgment include pp. 149, 273, 339.

[5]. *Itinerarium*, pp. 300-303.

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Citation: Michael Pedrotty. Review of Reston, James, Jr., *Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2003.

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