



## Agincourt Remembered

*Agincourt* by Anne Curry.

New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015. Pp. xvi, 256. ISBN 978-0-19-968101-3.

*Agincourt: The Fight for France* by Ranulph Fiennes.

New York: Pegasus, 2015. Pp. vii, 326. ISBN 978-1-60598-915-0.

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Anniversaries of major battles produce flurries of new books to commemorate them. The 600th anniversary of the Battle of Agincourt (1415) is a case in point. Ideally, the new works include significant reappraisals of the battles, but there were already several recent good (non-anniversary) works on Agincourt.<sup>1</sup> For the most part the two books reviewed here cover familiar ground, at least as military and political histories of the battle and campaign. But their authors have found distinctive new angles of approach to their topic.

Medievalist Anne Curry (Univ. of Southampton) may be the world's leading expert on Agincourt. In the present work, she focuses not on the battle itself, but its remembrance, especially by the British, for whom it holds iconic status. She sets the tone early on with a description of a school notebook (illustrated in fig. 1) of a twelve-year-old John Lennon, quoting the 1610 poem on the battle by Michael Drayton and adorned by the boy's drawing of the siege of Harfleur at the opening of the campaign. Lennon, she argues, was responding to cultural representations of the battle, including Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Unpacking these representations is the goal of her new work.

Curry begins by summarizing the Agincourt campaign, drawing on her own earlier work and that of other scholars, including studies published in the decade since her earlier book. She perceptively deconstructs fifteenth-century accounts of the battle, with due attention to the original context of such sources. Regarding the eyewitness account in the *Gesta Henrici Quinti*, for instance, she identifies several likely motivations of its anonymous author. These include drumming up political and financial support for continued campaigning in France, encouraging the English people to see the conflict as a holy war, and validating Henry V's claim to the French throne to the church leaders assembled at the Council of Constance (52-57). In considering this and other early works, she pinpoints the aspects of the battle they report on and how they buttress or undermine the assumptions and interpretations of later authors. This assessment of the key sources relating to the campaign may be the most valuable part of the book.

The remaining chapters fit more into the study of memory. The author analyzes *Henry V* in historical context, noting the sources Shakespeare likely used and how the play reflected events in the late sixteenth century. She goes on to discuss subsequent literary and artistic depictions of the battle, the traditions and myths that have developed around it, recent scholarly debates about it, and efforts to commemorate it. She considers, too, the attempts of various English families to increase their status by (rightly or wrongly) linking themselves to the campaign.

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1. Including Anne Curry's own *Agincourt: A New History* (Stroud, UK: History Pr, 2005); see also Juliet Barker, *Agincourt: Henry V and the Battle That Made England* (NY: Little, Brown 2006).

An example of an Agincourt misreading concerns John Codrington. The claim is that he had his coat of arms confirmed by Clarenceux herald in July 1441 because of his role as standard bearer to Henry V at the Battle of Agincourt. In fact, the grant does not mention the battle at all but simply acknowledges Codrington's service to Henry V in generic terms: "in Battaile, Watch and Warde under the said our Sovereigne Lord's banner." (Incidentally, this reads more like a sixteenth- than fifteenth-century wording.) Codrington was on the 1415 campaign. A John Codyngton (we should not worry about the slightly different spelling) is listed on the Agincourt Roll. A John Codyngton was also noted in the post-campaign account of Thomas, Lord Camoys as present at the battle. But there is no proof whatsoever that he bore any of the king's standards. (146-47)

Curry compares this example to various other efforts to capitalize on association with the king and his campaign and their enduring influence in British culture over the centuries.

For the French, of course, the battle had very different meanings. Thousands of their soldiers, many of them noblemen, died in the battle. The defeat did not directly cause the French submission to Henry in 1420, but it left scars that lasted even after Joan of Arc, Charles VII, and the French artillery train won the Hundred Years War in the ensuing decades. In the nineteenth century, however, Anglo-French rapprochement yielded a more human perception of the battle, with tragic elements affecting both sides. With this in mind, a publisher invited English adventurer Ranulph Fiennes to write his own account of the battle.

At first glance, Fiennes, a former British Army officer, seems an odd choice. He has spent his life not in academia, but, among other things, chasing Marxist terrorists across the Arabian Peninsula, circumnavigating the globe on foot via both poles, and climbing Mount Everest. But his family has a very long pedigree in the Anglo-Norman nobility, and several of his relatives served at Agincourt. Fiennes weaves his family chronicle into the history of Anglo-French relations from the Norman Conquest through the Wars of the Roses. His lively narrative does not elide or whitewash the uglier sides of war or medieval noble culture. While some of his claims about certain aspects of medieval history will set specialists' teeth on edge, his version of the Agincourt campaign and battle conforms to the scholarly consensus. His accounts of his relatives' lives and careers and allusions to his own experiences add a distinctive flair to the story.

Fiennes begins with the Norman Conquest in 1066, wryly noting that one of his relatives advised William the Conqueror to give up and go home during the Battle of Hastings. That advice notwithstanding, members of what became the Fiennes family loyally served William and his descendants for several centuries, acquiring titles and properties on both sides of the channel. Fiennes moves quickly through the next 350 years of English and French military history and dynastic struggles. While he takes some pride in his family's part in that history, his ancestors more often appear as arrogant, scheming, self-interested noblemen than as chivalric heroes. His sympathies lie far more with the English archers who secured battlefield victories and the commoners who suffered in wars started by ambitious kings and nobles.

Fiennes offers a detailed narrative of the Agincourt campaign itself, moving between the two sides and following his family members as they approach their dates with destiny. On the English side, several proved to be heroes, first at the siege of Harfleur and then at Agincourt itself. On the French side, events were frustrating and ultimately tragic. The author focuses on Robert Fiennes, a Norman nobleman and experienced soldier whose uncle was Constable of France in the late fourteenth century. Robert, Constable Charles d'Albret, and another veteran commander, Marshal Boucicaut, preferred the strategy that had worked so well for an earlier Constable, Bertrand Du Guesclin, namely, harassing the English and preventing them from foraging, while refusing battle in circumstances favoring the English longbowmen. As the French army gathered, however, in the absence of a royal family member

to keep them in line, less experienced noblemen overruled the old hands in their eagerness to capture the English king and followed a battle plan that seemed doomed to fail.

Robert Fiennes had, earlier in the day, walked down the field between the villages and had noted that, although the available space between the two woods where the army would form up was some three-quarters of a mile wide, it narrowed down to less than half a mile at the point where, he estimated, the armies would actually clash. And this would see the bigger force seriously compressed. He also noticed that his feet were sliding about as he walked, due to the mud in the field's deep furrows. He remembered his uncle's many repeated warnings that mud was the great enemy of cavalry and heavy armour. Boucicaut and d'Albret were in agreement that, however well they commanded their divisions on the morrow, they were worried that such a large army should have nobody with experience in overall charge. This they felt was the greatest danger they faced in the coming fight. Robert looked at his shoes and the muddy trail of footprints behind him and was not so sure. (198)

The next day, Robert, wounded and captured in the battle, was apparently killed by the English. Since he left no memoir, Fiennes exercises some artistic license here, but he does shed light on major problems faced by the French.

Fiennes draws on personal experience in a variety of ways. He compares Henry's planning of the Agincourt campaign to his own efforts to fund and conduct his polar expeditions. He discusses in graphic detail his bouts of dysentery, a disease that plagued the English army in 1415. He compares Henry V's order to kill thousands of French prisoners after the battle to his own experience in Arabia, where his small force encountered lone goatherds who might betray them to the terrorists they were fighting. Though Fiennes chose not to kill these individuals, doing so would have been justified, since, as he was well aware, other British patrols had been ambushed after releasing prisoners. When Henry gave his order, French forces seemed to be assembling for a new attack. In that context, the French prisoners might have posed a threat. In light of this and given Henry's limited information about the condition of the French army and its leaders, Fiennes gives him the benefit of the doubt (225–29). This is not exactly scholarly history, but it brings to bear the kind of experience that scholars seldom have. One of the consequences of the battle and the killing of the prisoners was the near extinction of the male line of the French branch of the Fiennes clan, whose holdings passed to other hands.

The story in the rest of the book follows the English side, where those who had distinguished themselves in the campaign, along with their descendants, often went on to checkered careers; several lost their heads. For example, in 1447, James Fiennes, Lord Saye, seems to have had a hand in the death of the Duke of Gloucester, leader of the faction opposed to King Henry VI's desires for peace. Fiennes closes by noting the irony that one of his relatives had almost prevented the whole Anglo-French mess from starting in 1066, and another helped end it nearly four hundred years later.

Readers with a serious interest in the military history of the Agincourt campaign should begin with Anne Curry's 2005 book, but the new works reviewed here have strengths of their own. Curry's discussion in *Agincourt* of source materials and the evolving memory of the battle will enable readers to approach other studies more critically. In turn, Ranulph Fiennes's uniquely personal account offers insights and perspectives not found in more conventional histories.