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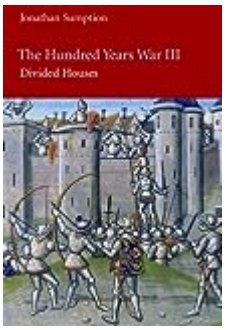

Jonathan Sumption. *The Hundred Years War, Volume III: Divided Houses.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. xvii + 1006 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4223-2.

Reviewed by Stephen M. Cooper

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Commissioned by Brian G.H. Ditcham

The Man of Law's Tale

Divided Houses is the third volume of Jonathan Sumptionâs history of the Hundred Years War. It is unlikely to be the last, since the author set out, twenty years ago, to write a history of the entire war, and he has only reached the Revolution of 1399. Since historians conventionally regard the Hundred Years War as beginning in 1337 and finishing in 1453, that leaves another fifty-four years to cover. Sumption has now turned sixty, but who would bet against him? The energy involved in producing the first three volumes has been prodigious, especially when one considers that he has managed to combine this with a highly successful career as a lawyer in Britain. He has staked a good claim to be considered the modern equivalent of Chaucerâs Man of Law, in terms of the breadth of his knowledge and his wise words on all subjects.

The book describes and explains the years 1369-99, which the English usually think of as an interlude between the âCrÃ©cy Warâ and the âAgincourt War.â Yet, as Sumption so richly demonstrates, these were years packed with action: the campaigns of Bertrand du Guesclin; the English defeats in the sea battle off La Rochelle in 1374 and at the Battle of Otterburn in 1388; the threatened French invasion in the 1380s; the pursuit of the "Path of Flanders" and the "Path of Portugal" (proxy wars in the countries named); the Angevin invasion of Italy in the 1380s; the (real) crusade against the Turks and the (phoney) crusade of the Bishop of Norwich.

As he told us in the preface to his first volume, Sumptionâs objective is to write a grand narrative, based primarily on documentary rather than chronicle sources; he considers the chronicles "episodic, prejudiced, inaccurate and late."[1] He also aimed to eschew analysis, as well as the scholarly debates which so often sidetrack historians. "The facts," he wrote, "sometimes explain themselves better than any analysis could possibly do."[2] The project has certainly succeeded thus far, and on a grand scale. In the 1960s in Britain–when Sumption was an undergraduate–it sometimes seemed as if old-fashioned narrative was in danger of being crushed, intellectually, between the hammer of Marxism and the anvil of the French âAnnalesâ school. The author shows, if only by implication, how short-lived each of these critiques was.

You will still find a Marxist analysis of the Hundred Years War in the French version of Wikipedia–it talks about the trades in wool, wine, and salt–but âDivided Housesâ shows that commercial considerations were unimportant so far as the monarchy and the military aristocracy was concerned. Men like Edward III of England, John of Gaunt, and Charles V and Charles VI of France had no substantial stake or interest in trade: their aim was to pursue or defend their inherited legal rights. As for the micro-histories at village level once considered so profoundly interesting by the âAnnalistes,â these seem small beer in comparison with the politics, diplomacy, and warfare which are Sumptionâs meat and drink.

Despite the dimensions of his chosen field, the writer appears to have explored all the printed primary sources (together with a good number of the unprinted ones) and to have read all the secondary authorities and to have pursued his researches in several countries–England, France, and Spain at the least. His thoroughness shines through in his description of the the sack of Limoges in 1370; the account of the English Peasantsâ Revolt of 1381; and the discussion of the parlous state of English naval power in the 1370s and 80s, to take but three examples.

Sumptionâs knowledge of the relevant administrative records allows him to explain the changes in the French tax system which enabled Charles V to harness the vast resources of his kingdom. As in the previous volumes he is also very good on the English tax system. His analyses of the key developments of the period are always worth pondering–why the later âchevauchÃ©esâ failed; English "barbican strategy"; the aristocratic reaction in France and Flanders; the limits of the "Auld Alliance" between France and Scotland from the French point of view; âroutierâ activity of the 1380s; the activities of the so-called peace and war parties in England during Richard IIâs reign; and why the "peace process" ultimately failed. His account of the international tournament at St. Inglevert illuminates much about the nature of English aristocratic society; when given the choice of the (relatively innocuous) "arms of peace" or the (lethal) "arms of war," English knights who came to joust, to a man, chose the latter.

The authorâs style is not that of Edward Gibbon. He is too much the modern, workmanlike barrister for that, driving home his case by the patient accumulation of detailed evidence. He does however have the gift of painting lively pictures of places–the English "bastion" of Calais; Castile and Wales–and making apt summaries of the characters of such key figures as John of Gaunt, Charles V, Bertrand du Guesclin, and the Duke of Anjou. The numerous excellent maps add color to the narrative.

Of course, by some standards, the book is far too long. At close to a thousand pages (much longer even than volumes 1 and 2) it will require an effort from all but the specialist in medieval history to get through it. It is, however, worth making this effort because the book does justice to the complexity of late fourteenth-century politics. The period may be "calamitous" (to borrow Barbara Tuchmanâs judgment in *A Distant Mirror* of 1978) but the civilization portrayed here is certainly not uninteresting or even, to this reviewerâs mind, unsympathetic. The book is also a far cry from the short analyses of the Hundred Years War to be found in Ãdouard Perroyâs classic account of 1945, Christopher Allmandâs of 1989, or Anne Curryâs of 2002. These are all pithy summaries; but only Sumption gives you the whole picture.

This book is more than the sum of its parts. The war was fought mainly in France, but Sumption shows how the violence there spilled over into surrounding countries, especially Spain and the Italian states. He perhaps underestimates Sir John Hawkwoodâs role in the latter theater, but that may be a prejudice of mine. He portrays the reality of a world where there was fighting going on in several theaters at the same time, and in almost every campaigning season. The war was far more than just the few set-piece battles and sieges we have all read about. It was a saga of almost continuous military effort on many fronts. His account of Thomas Trivetâs invasion of Navarre in 1378-79 may stand as an example. Read about this and be amazed at the boldness of the soldier–and admire the industry of the scholar.

Notes

[1]. J. Sumption, *The Hundred Years War, Volume I: Trial by Battle* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), x.

[2]. Ibid., ix.

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