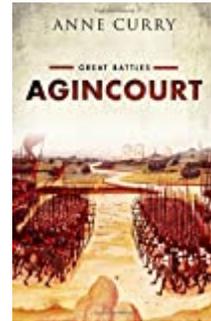




Anne Curry. *Agincourt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 256 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-968101-3.



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With the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Agincourt, Anne Curry has returned to the field for the Oxford University Press's Great Battles series. Previous works such as *The Battle of Agincourt: Sources and Interpretation* (2000) and *Agincourt: A New History* (2005) have established her as the topic's preeminent scholar. Stephen Morillo asserted the latter would "become the standard account of the battle for years to come."^[1] But Curry's just-published *Agincourt* offers a different perspective of the event. As with other books in this recently launched series, it examines how the battle was subsequently remembered and incorporated into popular culture and public discourse.

In this regard, *Agincourt* is firmly within the cultural and "history of memory" approach discussed by Robert Citino in his 2007 article "Military Histories Old & New: A Reintroduction."^[2] Such an approach is not the distinct purview of military history per se. But the latter lends itself easily to such analyses given, as Hew Strachan notes in the book's foreword, that "military history, more than other forms of history, is bound up with national stories" (p. viii). Investigations of this type require deft scrutiny of cultural materials and events usually far removed from the battlefield, and *Agincourt* thoroughly impresses the reader with the number and types

of sources consulted by the author.

Curry's introductory first chapter to this short book begins with the Agincourt-inspired creations of a young John Lennon to demonstrate the enduring fascination with the battle in modern Britain, and presents a quick overview of the cultural artifacts that contributed to it. The next chapter offers an overview of the campaign and battle, with Curry drawing upon her research from her earlier work. The treatment thus benefits from scrutiny of financial and administrative records to help provide political and socioeconomic context. It also addresses questions with which scholarship continues to wrestle, such as the French decision to engage at Agincourt, army sizes, and the role of archers and Henry's order to kill prisoners. Curry also notes that, though an English victory, the battle was not decisive for ending the conflict with France.

The author begins her assessment of Agincourt's depiction in culture and media in the third chapter, focusing here on the decades that followed the battle. She offers a thorough analysis of all known sources produced in this period, noting that they generally emphasized the role of Henry V, as well as divine favor. But Curry also observes that the battle had not yet acquired the broader

symbolism with which British culture would endow it in later centuries. Rather it was Shakespeare's *Henry V* that set the stage for Agincourt's cultural eminence. Curry's fourth chapter examines the prominent narrative treatments of the battle available in the late sixteenth century, and also discusses other cultural depictions of it into the early 1600s, including dramatic works by other playwrights and the poems of Michael Drayton. But the later elevation of Shakespeare's work to its iconic status resurrected productions of *Henry V*, and the discussion traces the major stagings of the play since the eighteenth century, as well as the cinematic versions produced by Lawrence Olivier and Kenneth Branagh. In Curry's estimation, most people's knowledge of Agincourt is derived via Shakespeare's play, particularly given the popularity of the "band of brothers" or St. Crispin's Day speech.

Shakespeare's work, though, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for explaining the battle's renown. The other key factor is the role it has served as a touchstone for bolstering British national identity. In the fifth chapter, Curry explores this point, initially addressing the seventeenth century through the end of the Napoleonic Wars. But the bulk of the discussion focuses on the period from 1815 through the First World War. With regard to the nineteenth century, key points address the growing fascination with the role of archers at Agincourt, and how depictions of the battle reflected fluctuations in the relationship between Britain and France. Curry's comments on the Great War emphasize commemorations and media accounts of the 500th anniversary of the battle, and illustrate how they served to support the Anglo-French alliance, among other points.

The next chapter, "Agincourt PLC: Traditions, Myths and Creations," is something of a hodgepodge, highlighting the multitudinous manifestations of Agincourt in British culture. One section discusses the "Agincourt Roll" and attempts by various families to bolster claims of noble status by claiming an ancestor listed on it. Another considers both the role of Welsh soldiers at Agincourt, and conversely the battle's contribution to Welsh identity. Curry also debunks the notion that the rude "V-sign" gesture originated at the battle, and demonstrates the falsehood of purported relics from the fight. She also considers Agincourt's treatment in British literature, art, and music since the eighteenth century, even noting references to the battle in the famous science-fiction show *Doctor Who*.

The book's last substantive chapter traces the evolu-

tion of scholarship regarding the battle. Curry begins by highlighting contributions prior to the twentieth century by individuals who created and used new collections of documents, and wrote with more analytical rigor than seen in traditional narrative treatments of the battle. Examples here include the Napoleonic War veteran Harris Nicolas and the Public Record Office's Joseph Hunter. The chapter then addresses more contemporary scholarship, noting original approaches such as Sergio Boffa's use of financial records and Remy Ambruhl's work on ransoms. Curry also addresses ongoing academic debates about issues such as the size of armies, and how to use original chronicles to establish actions and their sequence during the battle. She devotes an entire section to the question of the battle's actual location, reviewing documents, maps, and archeological endeavors that have addressed the issue. The chapter ends with a review of commemoration efforts.

There are spots in the work where the number of details overwhelm the analysis. Readers should also understand that *Agincourt* focuses on the place in the battle in British culture and history, though Curry gives some attention to perspectives from France and areas that were once part of the British Empire. But the book succeeds in demonstrating the battle's pervasive cultural influence. Specialists will no doubt wish Curry had provided deeper analysis on particular subjects. Yet she nicely touches on Agincourt's ongoing controversies throughout the work, noting how sources produced in different eras addressed topics such as Henry's order to kill prisoners and the role of archers.

But *Agincourt*'s greatest strength is the author's discussion of sources and evidence. Curry carefully assesses the documents used to produce histories of the battle, discussing the context in which they were produced and their strengths and weaknesses. She meticulously traces the influence of earlier accounts on later works, both historical and cultural. For topics where hard evidence is questionable or lacking, she addresses what is known, and offers reasoned explanations of the possible origins of myths. For these reasons, *Agincourt* is an excellent work for students, for very few books cover such a large breadth of topics—from military operations to cultural history to commemoration—while also offering penetrating scrutiny of source material.

Notes

- [1]. Stephen Morillo, "Reviewed Work: *Agincourt: A New History*, by Anne Curry," *Speculum* 82 (2007): 172-173.

[2]. Robert Citino, "Military Histories Old & New: A Reintroduction," *American Historical Review* 112 (2007): 1070-71, 1082.

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