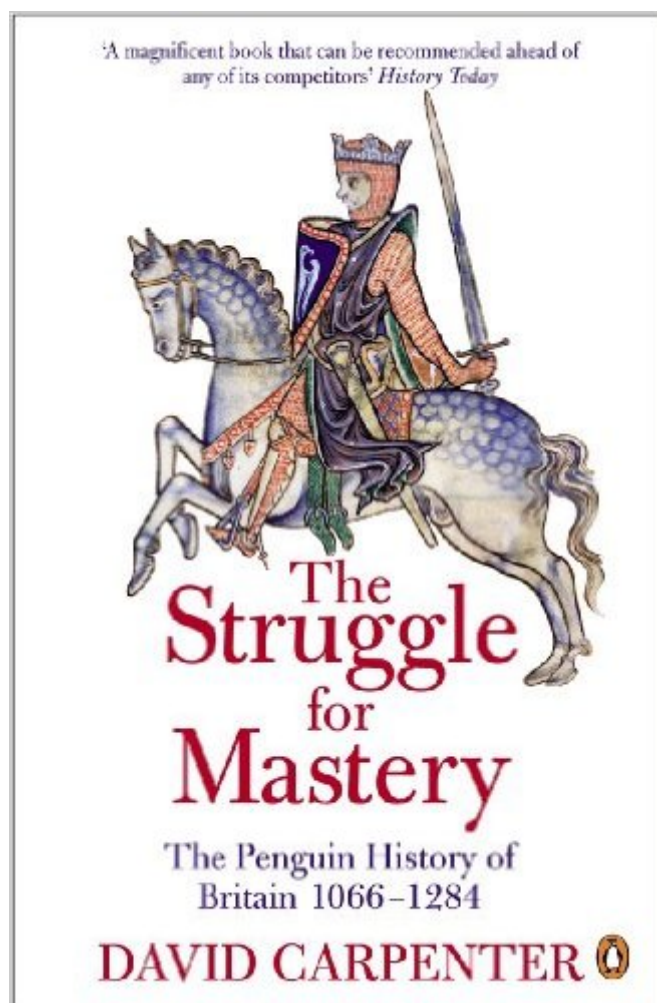


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The Struggle For Mastery: The Penguin History Of Britain, 1066-1284



Synopsis

The two-and-a-half centuries after 1066 were momentous ones in the history of Britain. In 1066, England was conquered for the last time. The Anglo-Saxon ruling class was destroyed and the English became a subject race, dominated by a Norman-French dynasty and aristocracy. This book shows how the English domination of the kingdom was by no means a foregone conclusion. The struggle for mastery in the book's title is in reality the struggle for different masteries within Great Britain. The book weaves together the histories of England, Scotland and Wales in a new way and argues that all three, in their different fashions, were competing for domination

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Carpenter's survey of post-Conquest Britain somehow manages to be both very detailed and very broad. As expected, he focuses mainly on the political and religious aspects of the period, but he is careful to include social history (including discussions of slavery, the peasantry, queenship and chivalry) where it impinges on those subjects. The result is magnificently clear narrative of this complicated and turbulent era. Four chapters of purely social history round out the story: two at the beginning discuss the peoples and economy of Britain, and two near the end summarize "The Structures of Society" and the "Church, Religion, Literacy, and Learning." Within the main body of the text he provides short overviews of Welsh and Scots power structures and history. These are especially welcome additions, and though he generally includes only the details that help make sense of Anglo-Norman actions, he writes these sections from a Welsh or Scottish perspective. Surprisingly, the most gripping parts of the book concern subjects that might be thought

dry. Carpenter excels at dealing with abstractions. His description of the legal system, which changed several times throughout the period and eventually gave rise to both common law and the Magna Carta, is actually thrilling. His discussions of the economy, feudal rights and obligations, and the importance of the castle to medieval politics are fascinating. Of course, all this comes at a price: he doesn't have room for much in the way of anecdote, and a few subjects that ought to make for exciting reading (the civil war between Stephen and Empress Matilda, the reign of Henry II) are a little flat.

This book is very well-written, with text that is not only interesting but easy to follow. I bought it in the hope that it would give me a better understanding of the events that transpired during the two hundred years following the Norman invasion of 1066. I have begun reading a lot of historical fiction during this time period and so I was eager to gain contextual knowledge that would make it easier to distinguish fact from fiction. This book was everything I had hoped for. Not only have I been educated on the events of these years, but I have also been given a fascinating insight into the changing culture of this time. My favourite chapter has turned out to be one entitled 'The Peoples of Britain' which gives a brilliant insight into regional identities, and how these changed during the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries. The Norman invasion of England of course caused a rift between the Norman and the English people, but David Carpenter explores how the two cultures eventually merged into becoming a united English people. He also discusses Scotland and how the distinct areas of this country considered themselves to be of differing nationalities. Wales was also interesting to read about, as the culture there did not merge with the Norman culture as it did in England, and to some extent as it eventually did in Scotland. David Carpenter has a very fluid writing style that easily draws in the reader. He initially gives his key point and then expands from it, allowing the reader not only to see what happened, but how and why it happened. It is easy to tell that he has a genuine love for the period. I love to read history in the words of someone who loves it as much as I do. The maps and genealogical tables included in this book are very useful.

I purchased this book, in part, to compare the differences between the Anglo-Saxon migration of the 5th-6th Centuries to the Norman Conquest in the 11th. I was looking for the cultural milestones and other events that led to two different results - the A-S migration led to a complete overthrow and replacement of the old Romano-Celtic culture while the Norman Conquest led to the invaders being absorbed into the 'English' majority. The book itself does not explore this specific topic but for those who have studied both periods the reasons for the different outcomes become evident enough. As to

the main topic of the book David Carpenter has presented a well written scholarly narrative that explains the immediate effects of the conquest and the displacement of the Anglo-Saxon elite, the political development under the new regime and slow assimilation of the Norman/Angevin dynasties into English culture. As time progressed acculturation of the Angevin elite was made easier by the slow (involuntary) disengagement from continental Europe and the collapse of the Norman/Angevin empire in France and by the influence of more local events as they developed in Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The flow of events that caused these changes are laid out in a clear and concise manner that keeps the pages turning one after the other. The attention paid to Wales, Scotland and to a lesser extent Ireland, is of particular importance to the book. England influenced and was influenced by what was going on in the neighbouring kingdoms.

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