



The Conquering Family

Thomas B. Costain

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Thomas B. Costain's four-volume history of the Plantagenets begins with THE CONQUERING FAMILY and the conquest of England by William the Conqueror in 1066, closing with the reign of John in 1216.

The troubled period after the Norman Conquest, when the foundations of government were hammered out between monarch and people, comes to life through Costain's storytelling skill and historical imagination.

THE CONQUERING FAMILY is the first in A History of the Plantagenets, and is followed by THE MAGNIFICENT CENTURY.

The Conquering Family Details

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Author : Thomas B. Costain

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From Reader Review The Conquering Family for online ebook

Ray Campbell says

Works of history range from dry, straight up re-counting of the facts to reconstructions and imaginings that have to be called "historical fiction". Even when writing scholarly history, some authors are adept at choosing and quoting facts, characters and order of presentation in such a way as to create a story line and narrative worthy of first rate fiction. If a straight recounting of facts is a 1 in terms of readability (bad), and historical fiction style non-fiction is a 10, then Costain's writing is a 7.

This book was first published in 1949. It's being re-printed and available speaks to it's readability. Costain is clearly re-telling history and can be dry at times, but the period is rich with intrigue and adventure, and Costain does an excellent job of putting the stories together into a very readable tale. And, as interesting as the facts are, Costain acknowledges and explains side stories that add depth and interest. This volume covers the period of King Stephen to King Henry III and includes Henry II, Richard the Lion Heart and King John I. Since the Robin Hood story is joined with Richard and John, Costain takes a chapter and explains the origin of the story, the truth of the tale as well as the evidence that the real Robin Hood live 100 years later.

This is the 1st volume in a series of four books that cover the Plantagenet Kings. Costain does not have the flowing novelistic style of Alison Weir, but he's not far off. I can't wait to start the next volume.

Mouldy Squid says

History for those who hate reading history. Costain does a remarkable job of bringing to life the dry historical record of the earliest Norman kings of England. He intimately describes the character of the august personages that ruled that age and brings an immediacy to the world of the late 11th and early 12th centuries. If you are one of those (and there are a great many of you) who hate reading history this is the book for you. It is a wonderful examination of an interesting aspect of English history that is never dull or dry. It is not a text book with nothing but dates and names, but rather a living text, a Capotean non-fiction novel.

Christina says

Originally published in 1949, Thomas Costain's Conquering Family is a history of Henry II and his family. It is the first volume in a series about the Plantagenet Dynasty and is told from a wonderfully British perspective.

The work discusses the succession problems created when Henry I's son died in the White Ship crash. He continues through the death of that famously hated king, John.

Costain uses his British style to introduce readers to the Plantagenet's with detail and an entertaining voice. For example, in describing Richard the Lionheart: Richard was always the knight, never the king.

The author also addresses court rumor and works to help readers distinguish fact and fiction. However, because the book has an older publication date there are a few things that historians have discovered in the

past 60 years. It seems history is always coming to light. One example of this is Henry II's illegitimate son, William. New research has discovered William is not Rosamund's son-- the child of one of Henry's other mistresses, Ida.

Throughout the work, the author provides useful asides. For example, he gives a good description of Strongbow's conquest of Ireland, the Robin Hood Legend and the life of a villen during the period. These details help paint a picture of the times beyond just what was happening to the Plantagenet dynasty.

One aspect that maybe tough for new readers to this period of history are the author's speculations. Every once in while he adds his own opinion of events. I enjoyed his ideas, however, people less well versed in the period my be confused and take his musings as fact. As long as you give the book a close reading, I don't think readers will be confused.

I was reading this concurrent with The Plantagenets: The Warrior Kings and Queens Who Made England by Dan Jones. Jones' book is more recent (2013) but Constain's book is much better, more entertaining and readable. Over and over I found myself wishing I was reading Costain's when I was reading Jones'.

Finally, I had the extra treat of listening to Conquering Family on audio and the narrator David Case does a wonderful job. His voice, accent, and timing add a lot to the book!

Sonya Wanvig says

Costain said he wanted to write a history of England that reads like a story. Wow, did he succeed! And it really is a history with no dialogue, but he writes in such a way that you don't lose interest. An older lady I know recommended Costain to me and I've been searching for his books for about a year. I finally got the spelling of Costain right and found them a couple weeks ago. My library's catalog says they have one copy of each of his books. When I got the book, it still had one of the old cards in the back from the precomputer days! All the dates were from the 1950s so this one hasn't been popular in awhile. Great great book; best history of England I've read to date...

Lady of the Lake says

This is an EXCELLENT read. Not DRY at all and is a fast exciting read of history. I love the PLANTAGENET'S they are one of my all time favorite families in history!
Publisher's Summary

Thomas B. Costain's four-volume history of the Plantagenet's begins with The Conquering Family and the conquest of England by William the Conqueror in 1066, closing with the reign of John in 1216.

The troubled period after the Norman Conquest, when the foundations of government were hammered out between monarch and people, comes to life through Costain's storytelling skill and historical imagination.

I am definitely moving on to Volume two "The Magnificent Century" and I recommend this book to History

lovers and even to more serious HF fans as it will give you a concise and true background to many things you may read about in your HF travels! You will have no trouble following and he does history in a well organized and easy manner to follow. Very enjoyable!

Mercedes Rochelle says

I first read this book, oh gosh, maybe thirty years ago. In fact, it was the very first book I ever read about the Plantagenets, and one of the first I ever read about the middle ages. What a good choice! His writing style is so smooth (I guess you would call him Popular History) that the book almost reads like a novel. This is a good thing for a history novice. I gobbled up the rest of the series, and I think his interpretations latched into my memory as the definite versions of events. This is the reason I picked him up again; by now I consider myself pretty well versed in the period, and I wanted to see if his books carried the same "punch" they did on the first reading. Amazingly, they do!

Volume one starts essentially with the Matilda vs. Stephen civil war, which leads naturally to Henry II; it ends with the death of King John. Even though I have read many books about my favorite king (which interest was launched, I admit, by "The Lion In Winter"), I still found Costain's descriptions entertaining, and at times original to me. For instance, leading up to the death of Becket: "Before the performance of high mass Thomas a Becket preached in the chapter house...He made it clear that he knew the fate in store for him. With great emotion he referred to the death of Alfege, the primate who had been killed by the Danes, and when he said, 'There will soon be another,' people laid their heads in their hands and sobbed. The backs of the monks in the choir shook with the grief which filled them." To be literal, I suppose Costain couldn't have possibly known whether the backs of the monks shook with grief, but such imagery makes a scene stick in the mind of a reader, and his books are full of this kind of writing. I had forgotten that Becket predicted his end in front of so many witnesses, and little details like this appear frequently.

Admittedly this account is somewhat general, but I think this is to be expected when reading an overview. For instance, in referring to the squabbles Henry II had with his sons, "There was so much switching of sides and betraying of allies that to recite the whole sequence of events would be repetitious and would, moreover, serve no useful purpose." On the other hand, he went into detail describing Henry's last humiliating meeting with King Philip of France, who forced him to agree to a long list of demands. Finally: "He had given in and accepted these debasing terms without a protest. His spirit was so broken, in fact, that he said nothing when Geoffrey ordered his squires to lift him from the saddle and place him in a litter." Off to Chinon and the final humiliation of seeing John's name on the top of the list of conspirators. So I would venture to say that Costain would pick and choose the tastiest tidbits to include, but he tied them all together very cleanly.

In the end, it seems he couldn't resist a little moralizing, and essentially concluded that the Norman invasion was a good thing for the country (in the long run). I could have lived without that! However, there are three more books in the series and I have every intention of continuing the story of my favorite dynasty. There are more "facts" I am clinging to that I need to uncover... something about Richard II. But more on that, later!

Tony says

Conquering Family is a marvelous summary of the Angevin era. Having previously read several works on

this period, I was initially skeptical that an overview would be of much interest. However, Costain quickly proved me wrong. His insightful treatment added to my knowledge and his wonderful prose never failed to keep me engaged and entertained.

DoctorM says

I first read Costain's four-volume history of the Plantagenet family back when I was twelve or thirteen--- long, long ago. The books have long ago dropped out of sight--- popular history published first more than half a century ago. And that's a pity. I can't say that they're academic history, or that Costain's interpretations of England from the 1140s to 1485 have held up. But these are the books that introduced me to Anglo-Norman England and to a host of figures (Henry and Eleanor, the over-maligned John, Edward I, the over-praised Henry V, the tragic Richard III) I went on to read about in other, more academic works. I think the Costain books still work as an introduction, and I very much think they're good reads.

Bryan says

The Conquering Family is the first of four books chronicling the Plantagenet Kings of England; and traces the origins of the family from the marriage of Matilda (granddaughter of William the Conqueror) and Geoffrey of Anjou. Since Henry I (son of William) had died without a male heir, he named his daughter Matilda successor, but not all in England were happy with this choice, and there was a period called The Anarchy which took place as Matilda and her cousin Stephen of Blois struggled for the crown. Eventually Matilda's son Henry (later to be known as Henry II) assumed control and founded the dynasty. This book ends with the death of King John in 1216.

So much of European royal history seems to me to be mired in a mixture of similar names and lists of place names and events that I have a hard time putting into context--I have difficulty affixing all these details firmly onto a timeline. When a particular king or count or battle is mentioned in another source, I often have trouble understanding its value since I have no idea of its place in the larger scheme of things. When I saw all four volumes of Thomas Costain's Plantagenet series on sale at a recent discard sale, I took a chance on it despite its original published date of 1949, rightly guessing that it would be a relatively easy and entertaining way of digesting a large chunk of English history that I was woefully under-familiar with.

While the book did exactly what I expected it to, it did take some time for me to get comfortable with Costain's style. It felt a bit as if I were running to catch a train that had already left the station and was picking up speed, but I did manage to get into the swing of things after the first couple of chapters. Probably the biggest hurdle to overcome was Costain's method of historiography--in my mind I pictured a man who had studied quite intensely about his subject, and then settled comfortably into his raconteur's chair to tell a good yarn. I was most reminded of Costain's contemporary, Harold Lamb, whose biographies of figures from the far east and the classical world also seem more like narratives than history.

What Costain and Lamb and others like them have going for them, in my mind, is a method that tends to stick. Have these historical personalities that they were writing about undergone reevaluation in the 60+ years since *The Conquering Family*? I can't believe they haven't, especially as there seems to be a whole industry devoted to reinterpreting and revising history that's sprung up in the last forty or so years. Costain is no slouch himself when it comes to imprinting his own opinions on the storyline, but in the end, while I

might come away with a slightly skewed idea on some of the minute details, the larger picture falls solidly into place.

I believe that the time when Costain was writing also affects the narrative--were someone to try and cover this same period now (and writing in a 'popular' style), our contemporary sensibilities would no doubt influence what the author would feel was worthwhile to emphasize. I know that for myself, I seem to absorb these mid-century texts better than I do our modern ones--in my opinion I think they tend to be more in-depth, more interesting, and less worried about offending anyone. They also require a bit more effort from the reader, but, other than a bumpy beginning, I think Costain is very readable, and very entertaining. Looking forward to the remaining three books.

Laura says

Page 9:

It was in an early year of the twelfth century that a handsome young man named Geoffrey, son of the Count of Anjou, fell into the habit of wearing a sprig of the yellow bloom (*planta genesta*) in his helmet.

A magnificent historical review by Thomas Costain with plenty of details of all important characters involved in the medieval history in Great Britain.

Kelly says

I absolutely loved this book! It is the first book in a series of 4 detailing the history of England from the Conqueror to the end of the Plantagenet dynasty. It's an older book, and the historian feels free to make commentary on the history, drawing conclusions about human nature and placing value judgments on what happened. That has been a real joy. For instance, he hates the code of chivalry and points out whenever it leads rulers to focus less on the good of their subjects and more on winning glory. The book has really changed my opinion of Henry II, deepened my appreciation of and fascination with Thomas A'Beckett, given me a new and more balanced view of Eleanor of Aquitaine, completely changed my opinion of Richard, and, though I knew John was a very bad king, I now know exactly why. :)

Lots of fun, very informative, and I immediately bought the next in the series.

Jamie Collins says

This is the first volume of Costain's history of the Plantagenets. It begins with the civil war between Stephen and Matilda, covers the story of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine and their children, and ends with the signing of the Magna Carta and the death of King John. This is a lot of history to cover in less than 400 pages, so he's just hitting the highlights.

This is dramatized non-fiction, for lack of a better description, and Costain has a strange writing style. One sentence will be quite elegant, and the next paragraph will contain phrasing that might have come from a high school student's term paper, such as: "This handsome man, who had wanted everyone to like him, was probably the worst king England ever had because of the suffering he brought the people."

Costain is very subjective and uses colorful language, obviously more interested in spinning a yarn than in telling a straight history. I found myself entertained by the sheer glee with which he skewers the historical figures he dislikes.

Becky says

From the introduction: It must be said at the outset that there is no need for another history of England unless it can be given popular appeal. History, on which people depended once for enlightenment and entertainment in reading, is now little read except in classrooms, and this is due to the stern limits which historians have set for themselves.

From chapter one: It was late in September, the year was 1066, and that section of the great north highway which crosses the Aire and the Wharfe and rolls on to the city of York was black with marching soldiers.

Premise/plot: Thomas Costain wrote four (nonfiction) books on the Plantagenets. This is the first in that series. It begins with William the Conqueror and ends with the death of King John. It is packed with drama and adventure. It is an entertaining read. Plenty of familiar details--of course--but I learned many things as well.

From chapter two: The strongest of the three men had won. Never in history, perhaps, have the qualities which make a successful dictator been combined more perfectly and completely in one vigorous frame and one keen brain. William was a great warrior as well as an astute general. (13)

From chapter three: There is only one good thing to be said about the reign of William II, called Rufus or the Red. It was brief. (30)

From chapter four: Good news travels fast, even in a land where most of the roads are no better than cow trails. The word which swept over England immediately after the accession to the throne of the youngest son of William the Conqueror was so good that it set the whole countryside ablaze with joyful expectations. Henry wanted to take a Saxon princess as his bride. (43)

From chapter five: Henry I was not a great man, but was in many respects a great king. (62)

My thoughts: I enjoyed this one very much! I would recommend it to anglophiles everywhere! I enjoyed the narrative style. I enjoyed the stories. It is written to be entertaining to the masses, if you will.

The overall 'so what' of the book is that Costain believes that England was ultimately better off because of the Norman invasion led by William the Conqueror. That it was the blending of Anglo-Saxons and Normans that made the English people GREAT. Yes, these turbulent years might have been bloody at times, unfair to some perhaps--but the ends justify the means.

cindy says

this one surprised me. it had been on my shelf forever, it had taken me forever to find. old-school historical fiction is no longer in print after all. right off the bat i started wondering why in the world i would like this

book. the writing is dry, the style is scholarly english gentleman (who i envision composing this in a huge jane austen like library), a few exclamation points were used, all in all it read more like a textbook than novel.

but i "really liked it" as goodreads terms 4 stars and it definitely had me researching the entire plantagenet and tudor line on wikipedia. yes, all of it. it took hours. but im still fascinated.

Gary Foss says

This is a good history, if somewhat lacking in historiography. What I mean by that is that it relates the story of the historical events, and remains accurate to the information of the time, but may delve into speculation and elaboration upon occasion based upon the author's suppositions and conjectures. In this case, only educated opinions are offered up by the author, though they may not be entirely as logical and certain as the author might suggest. Readers should be particularly wary of sentences that contain the words "must have" or "can only" in them....

Nonetheless, it makes for an entertaining read, and a nice overview for those looking to get a solid presentation of several generations of English rulers. I'll more than likely be checking out other books in the series, as Costain's description of dynasty and the personalities of royals, as well as those close to them, provides a neat "big picture" of British history.
