

The changing British interpretations of the effects of the Norman Conquest since 1066



This paper was inspired after reading Majorie Chibnall's *The Debate on the Norman Conquest* to which the reader is directed for a more in depth read and a very comprehensive collection of notes on original and secondary sources. I was also fortunate enough to track down a copy of David Douglas's 1946 lecture *The Norman Conquest and British Historians* which is a superb synopsis of historical thinking to the mid-20th century about how historians had bent with the political tides. It also made me seek more recent pre-Conquest histories, particularly related to Normandy and expand the introduction of this paper. The views expressed in this paper are the author's, but although his views have been influenced by the above works, any errors remain his alone, and a synopsis will never be perfect.

Introduction

Interpretations of the long term effects of the Norman Conquest since the immediate post-Conquest period until the beginning of the 21st century have varied quite significantly over the centuries. These interpretations were influenced by the concurrent dynastic and geopolitics, economics, social criteria and visions. Seldom was any great rigour or critical questioning attached to these varied constructs until towards the end of the 19th century, and indeed sometimes it could be personally dangerous for historians to try to use such tools. History could not be regarded as a dispassionate science until the dawn of the 20th century and even now there are disagreements.

There has been a plethora of myths, chronicles, charters, manuscripts, discussions, books, views, academic papers, radio and television programmes, films, internet forums and quite a bit of misinterpretation and misinformation, sometimes opportunely and/or deliberately, sometimes innocently because of error, about the Norman Conquest since the day after the Battle of Hastings. Possibly that is about all we can be certain about in this long standing debate. Many of the numerous written sources, communications and interpretations have unfortunately been biased or controversial or have errors and confictions, sometimes with two of the three or all three, enough to confuse all who have searched for the many elusive facts.

The Anglo-Saxon world, already influenced since the 8th century by Danes who had settled in the north and east of England, had become even more influenced by people from Scandinavian backgrounds from the 10th century when Aethelred II 'the Unraed' married Emma of Normandy in 1002. She had arrived in England with an attendant train of Normans. This influence was even greater after the accession by conquest of the Danish King Cnut in 1016 to the English throne and his marriage to the same Emma. Then once again after the short interlude (following the death of Cnut in 1035 when his Anglo-Scandinavian son Harold I Harefoot (d.1040) and Norman-Scandinavian son Harthacnut (d.1042) were kings of England) the Anglo-Norman Edward the Confessor, the son of Aethelred II 'the Unraed' and

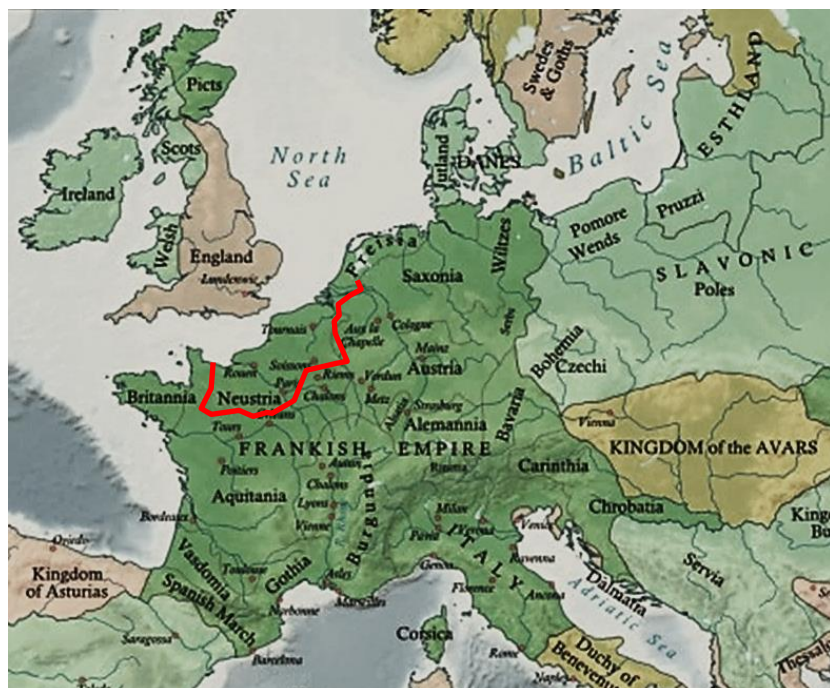
Emma was crowned. About 30 years of Edward's childhood and life had been spent in Normandy in exile and he brought a significant number his Norman friends with him and placed them in positions of influence, causing tensions particularly with Earl Godwin of Wessex.

The great English earldoms also had distinctive characteristics which meant that England was not the uniform kingdom it may have seemed from outside. But a common law had been established – for example via Edgar's code, issued in 962-3. This specifically talks about: *'...measures common to all the nation, whether English, Danes, or Britons, in every province of my kingdom, to the end that poor man and rich may possess what they rightly acquire...'* and the laws of Edgar were chosen in the reign of Cnut by the Danes and English at a 'Great Meeting' at Oxford in 1018.

The English king and nobility made the laws, but village communities and family ties were strong and helped enforce the law at a local level, so crime and punishment were normally dealt with within local hundreds. Anglo-Saxon justice also relied heavily on religion when deciding whether someone was guilty or innocent and oaths played an important part in proving innocence. Hearings took place in public. If there was uncertainty trial by ordeal could take place. Punishments could include execution, mutilation, slavery and fines.

The Norman duchy had been a parallel development following immigration of Danes into western Neustria (the western part of the kingdom of the Franks – see map below), from about 800CE when the area around the River Seine and Rouen was colonised. There were not huge numbers of immigrants in relative terms, but they married local Frankish women and this was followed by a surprisingly rapid spread across Normandy with assimilation and some submergence of their language with the western Franks, with the institutions and customs of the duchy remaining essentially Frankish, with some input from Scandinavian justice systems.

Neustria covered the northern part of France within the Frankish empire in about 800CE



As early as the beginning of the 10th century oral legal customs evolved – *La Coutume de Normandie*, progressively refined in the 11th and 12th centuries, remained in use, with further developments including influences from the Anglo-Norman realm of England in the 12th century and other modifications of course until the French Revolution. Besmier and Neveux both describe its evolution. Elements of this persist in the Channel Islands, the last bit of Normandy under British control, with effects on law and language there.

The Battle of Hastings of 14th October 1066 was the result of political and dynastic events which had occurred mainly over the previous century, which Foord and Clephane-Cameron précis in chapters 6–11 of their book. It could even be considered that the Battle of Hastings was fought between Anglo-Danes aka the English and Franco-Danes aka the Normans (with the blessing of the pope and plenty of mercenary help from Franks, the Flemish and Bretons).

No list of the ‘100 most decisive battles of the world’ would exclude the Battle of Hastings and the world cannot forget the date 1066 as the authors of ‘*1066 and all that*’ exploited. The battle was fought for the crown of England on an empty hillside with a sandy ridge at a natural bottleneck – on the only landside way out of what was then a Hastings peninsula – by an ancient track crossroad at a place now called simply ‘Battle’.

‘Hastings’ marked the English beginning of the Norman Conquest, which event would influence the English-speaking world over centuries, with echoes even today. Not only that but it would also indirectly affect many other peoples who encountered that English speaking world.

Progress after conquest to homogenisation of the two cultures would be slow. The old English and new Norman French languages would not suddenly meld to become ‘middle English’. This would take a considerable time. The post-Hastings progress of Norman settlement and acculturation of England would initially be brutal but later move to a more positive developmental phase, but it would never develop as rapidly as Normandy itself had developed because it was a definitive takeover of crown, government and land and the Normans, whilst numerically well outnumbered, remained the elite and prime force in the land.

Holding at first by force and castle building, they also moved on to use more subtle spiritual means as abbey, church and cathedral building gathered momentum to match that which they had achieved in Normandy at places like Jumièges, Rouen, Bec, Caen and Fécamp. Cathedrals like Durham and Ely, built after rebellions, were powerful weapons of occupation with the clear statement ‘We are here to stay.’ Norman churchmen became placed in all the leading Christian roles and became extensive landholders at the expense of local English earls, thanes and yeomen in much the same way as the more warlike followers of William I. English archbishops and bishops were fairly quickly replaced by Norman clergy and Normans were the abbots of the new monasteries.

So just how did the Norman Conquest come to be viewed by the population and historians on the northern side of the English Channel? For the discussion below the periods when distinctly different perspectives can be seen are divided as follows:

- a) Post-Conquest through to the early mediaeval period.
- b) The later Medieval period until the Reformation.
- c) Post-Reformation: 1538 to the end of the Tudors.
- d) The reigns of the Stuarts and the interregnum.
- e) From the Glorious Revolution to the end of the Industrial Revolution.
- f) The Victorian era.
- g) Early 20th century.
- h) The late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Post-Conquest to early Mediaeval

It was now the Normans who wrote and enforced the laws in England, but there was continuity of local English laws via the hundreds and some higher-ranking English were on non-baronial local juries. Trial by combat was added to the list of ordeals by fire or water if innocence or guilt could not be easily determined, but later this was supplanted by inquest juries with jurors drawn from the local area, a development from Frankish law. Forest law with draconian punishments for trespass and poaching was introduced, which was particularly resented by the English. Norman French was the ruling language of power, but old English was never suppressed.

It is worth reviewing the way, firstly in which the Norman system of military service and administration had developed, and secondly how it changed after William had full control of his duchy, as once rebellions settled down. It was William's version that was implemented in England at a level above the mainly continuing English laws, although there was never any 'perfect pyramid' of organisation.

Firstly, the pre-William II Norman way

(with thanks to François Neveux (1998) whose description of the 'feudal' arrangements both before and after William's changes has been translated from the French and contextualised by the author)

Normandy before the time of Duke William II had developed an hierarchical society. The next in order of precedence to the duke in the aristocracy were his tenants in chief or barons or seigneuries. Often heading several baronies they each had dependent large numbers of knights, but quite deliberately their lands were scattered across the duchy, to reduce the potential for coalescence of large seigneuries in a single block, which might seriously threaten the authority of the duke. However the barons' principal residences were usually localised e.g. at Beaumont in the Risle Valley, and Montgomery in the south of the Auge country. The only notable exception to this was the barony of Bellême, on the border between Normandy and Anjou where the baron's fiefs were defensively clustered. The barons

paid direct homage to the duke and many had family ties to the ducal family, and also with each other via intermarriages.

Under the barons each knight would hold a fief at a secondary level. This fief had to provide the resources for the equipment and maintenance of mounted warrior, able to give at least 40 days of service per year, which was very expensive. In addition he had to live a 'noble' life. This meant that the fief would normally have to cover an area of between 200 and 600 hectares (2 to 6 square kilometres or 500 to 1500 acres or $\frac{3}{4}$ to $2\frac{1}{4}$ square miles) to provide the sort of income required. Presumably the area would have been somewhat dependent on the nature of the terrain, its agricultural value etc.

Under the knight's fief existed the vavassorie, which usually corresponded to a fraction of a feif. A vavasseur was essentially an under vassal with military obligations similar to those of the knight, sometimes with a riding horse but more normally providing a horse for transport purposes.

The local administration was originally entrusted to the barons and their viscounts, or sheriffs who carried out administrative duties, policing and justice

Secondly, William's Norman Way

Author's explanatory note: William, son of Duke Robert I, acceded to the duchy at the age of only seven in 1034. By 1037 the barons were engaging in bloody private wars. Sometime after 1040 King Henri I of France intervened to help William in his capacity as overlord and things held together until 1047 when Guy of Burgundy led a coup. This was thwarted at the Battle of Val ès Dunes which was followed by the 'Truce of God'. By 1054 William was in control of Normandy but Henri was feeling that he was becoming a threat to the kingdom of France. William withstood his assaults and a few baronial revolts and by 1060 was in full control. For a fuller precis see Chapters 6 and 11 of Foord and Cameron (2015).

Duke William II made some significant changes to the governance of Normandy as soon as he was able (presumably starting in about 1054) to reduce the independence of the barons. (Incidentally this may have been the cause of some localised baronial revolts, all of which were eventually put down). Only the Counts of Eu, Evreux and Mortain remained trusted ducal family members. The rest of the duchy was divided into counties with viscounts (sheriffs) directly administering ducal affairs and finances and responsible solely to William, although the barons retained their sheriffs for specific local affairs. In the south-west this system was less developed with more retention of local powers.

The viscounts now exercised ducal administrative powers, policing and justice in their areas. They commanded the troops conscripted for the ducal army and castle guards. Also on the financial side, they were assisted by lower ranking personnel – the 'graverie' who collected direct ducal tax, the 'tonlieu', responsible for collecting indirect taxes, and 'forestarii', foresters responsible for the ducal forests.

The operation of the military system was possible only because it was backed by a well-organised ducal administrative organization, which used a rudimentary but

efficient calculator, using tokens and boxes, looking somewhat like a chessboard, later called an 'Exchequer'.

This was the system that William introduced to England, with barons' landholdings scattered across the country, except that in strategic defensive areas around the south coast and the Welsh and Scottish borders the model of Bellême (*above and see Foord, 2018*) was used to set up baronies like the Rape of Hastings under one well trusted baron, in this case the Count of Eu. He also used county sheriffs to keep an eye on royal finances, justice and administration. Even so imbalances of power could still develop as barons could exhibit 'an extravagant and self-interested hooliganism' for self-enhancement (Fleming).

In France the underlings were subject to la Coutume de Normandie and in England basic customary English law was maintained for local land and justice administration although later there was some confluence started by Henry II.

Under Henry I, when Normandy and England were re-united after the spats between William II Rufus and Robert Curthose, and then between Henry I and Robert Curthose and up until 1204 there was no clear top level separate administration for the kingdom and for the duchy. The main innovation was the introduction of a "justicier of Normandy" who was the representative of the king in the duchy whilst the king was in England. This post was first held by Jean, Bishop of Lisieux. Jean (1107-1141) had been a royal chaplain and so belonged to Henry's family group. For Norman justice there was of a group of itinerant officers who were called "justiciers".

In the reign of Henry I (1100-1135) what was definitively put into place were the financial organization and judicial systems that would develop and fully manifest themselves in England under the name of 'Exchequer' at the time of the Plantagenets after the reign of Stephen.

It was mostly Norman monks who wrote the laudatory (panegyric) early histories of the victors. English perspective histories of 1066 and the subsequent violent years of 'shock and awe' are sparse and only developed sometime later as the acculturation progressed. By Domesday in 1086 it is estimated that (in approximate terms) 20% of the land was held by William or the royal family, Norman barons held 48%, the church (which had had a Norman takeover) 26% and about 6% by pre-Conquest landowners, not all of whom were English as this would have included holders like the Abbaye de Fécamp. English monks and clerics were highly unlikely to obtain promotions. By 1086 there were only four significant English tenants in chief and in 1087 Wulfstan of Worcester was the only remaining English bishop. In addition Norman merchants were commonplace and usually received more favourable arrangements than their English counterparts with respect to local tenancies and taxes.

It had been a culturally and physically violent and extensive takeover indeed, probably to all intents and purposes cemented by 1072 when it has been estimated that the English had no way back. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle entries for the post-Conquest years (in old English) are notably terse and brief. But there were small signs of early assimilation as by 1090 William's

son William II Rufus sent for 'Englishmen under the command of sheriffs' to fight his brother Robert Curthose for the control of his father's new empire, rather than rely on Norman lords' split loyalties. But note the phrase 'under the command of sheriffs'. These sheriffs were still Normans, local administrators and law enforcers, known in Normandy as 'vicomtes'. In the Rape of Hastings a man called Reinbert was an early sheriff, responsible to the lord of the Rape, Robert, Count of Eu. He did well and in turn held much land from Eu, becoming the progenitor of the Etchingham family.

The differentiation between Norman aristocrats and their retainers and their subject local English populations would break down only very slowly. At the end of the 12th century David Bates notes that even at that time, about 125 years after the Conquest, the upper levels of the aristocracy remained almost impenetrable to those of English birth and descent and that Norman networks remained strong across England and Normandy, including cross-Channel networks.

Later Medieval period until the Reformation

French initially remained the language of the rulers, but this French became an 'Anglo-Norman' dialect, eventually mocked by Frenchmen who found the words and accents of those who attempted to speak 'French' hilarious or bizarre. With intermarriage and the passing of the years Norman-French and the old English languages co-existed and then intermingled and middle English evolved to become dominant in secular life.

At first the clerical scribes had written their histories in Latin, but two generations onwards Anglo-French started to be used, followed by more works in Middle English from the 13th century. By the late 1300s teaching of children of all statuses was in Middle English and Latin and Norman-French histories started to be translated to English.

The Plantagenet Empire which followed 'the Anarchy' and Stephen's rule in England from 1154 broke down at the end of the 13th century, basically due to King John's many errors. But much of the Norman network remained intact and many barons had cross-Channel interests, although they had started to lose control of their destinies. Many had to decide if they were to continue in England or in Normandy alone. Taxation in England was high and post-1204 change was in the air as the English-Norman barons moved in on a weak King John and demanded more control of affairs. This led to the Magna Carta of 1215 which stated the right of the barons to consult and advise the king in his Great Council. John rapidly had the pope revoke this. When King John suddenly died in 1216, his heir Henry III (b.1207–r.1216–1272) was only nine-years-old. The earl of Pembroke, William Marshal, governed until Henry III came of age and he issued a modified Magna Carta on 12th November 1216 and a further revision on 6th November 1217. In 1225 King Henry III made yet more revisions and reissued the charter and 1236 saw the earliest use of the term 'Parliament', referring to the Great Council. The 1225 version of Magna Carta officially became part of English law in 1297.

The system of interconnecting feudal obligations was still there but started to significantly break down in England even before the Peasants Revolt of 1381. Payments of money began to replace the original obligation of armed service. Fiefs became mainly hereditary, reducing the link between vassal and lord. To use the example of the Rape of Hastings the Eu family held it from 1070 until Countess Alix elected to retain her possessions in France in 1243/4. Even after that it passed in 1268 to the Duke of Brittany (still separate from Normandy and transient ally of England), who was also Earl of Richmond, and through the hands of subsequent dukes/earls until forfeited in 1341.

Henry IV (r.1399–1413) was perhaps the first king of England for whom English was the language of choice. Before him, from 1362, all pleas in the law courts and from 1363, the majority of discussions in parliament, had to be conducted in English.

Because early medieval histories were so full of myths, poetic licence, exaggerations of events and prowess, misplaced praise and references back to the sometimes dubious one-sided post-1066 Norman histories, which often have multiple revisions and embroideries, they were and unfortunately remain an abundant source of varying interpretations and misinterpretation if read selectively and non-critically. It says it all that in Henry VIII's reign his scholarly advisors led by Bishop Edward Foxe used these faulty ancient texts to mine for arguments during his pre-Reformation attempts to divorce Catherine of Aragon.

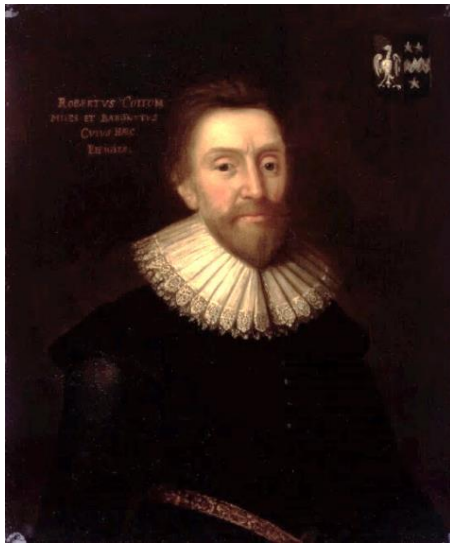
John Rastell included the Norman Conquest in his book '*Pastyme of Peoples*' in 1530, which contained Tudor English nationalistic theories about the feudal age. Rastell married Elizabeth More, sister of the catholic martyr Sir Thomas More, but became a protestant who was never completely trusted and died in 1536. He was an MP and has an interesting entry in the History of Parliament web pages.

Post-Reformation: 1538 to the end of the Tudors

After the reformation lay people became more educated, printing became established, and many manuscripts became available from dissolved monasteries and found their way into various collectors' libraries, such as the Cottonian Collection made by Sir Robert Bruce Cotton MP (1571–1631). French and Latin histories were translated into English and de novo English histories were produced, usually curious mixtures of invention, extracts from translated old chronicles and even legend – Marjorie Chibnall says William of Malmesbury's and Henry of Huntingdon's 12th century writings were 'roughly cobbled together' for these printings. Shakespeare wrote his 'Histories', which were mainly fiction, based on a little history, and fortunately did not include a '*William I*'.

A peculiar form of regal and legal old French (OF) persisted, curiously still seen today in 'la reyne/le roy le veult' (*trans. the queen/king wishes it*) signifying in the UK Parliament that a public bill (including a private member's bill) has received royal assent from the monarch of the United Kingdom. It was only in 1971 that travelling 'assize' (OF: *assise* [*trans. sessions or*

sitting]) courts, one of whose commissions was OF: 'oyer and terminer' (*trans: to hear and to determine*), were abolished by the Courts Act of 1971 and replaced by permanent crown courts. The town crier's 'Oyez – Oyez' is another small survival.



Sir Robert Bruce Cotton, 1st Bt. after Cornelius Johnson (Cornelius Janssen van Ceulen) oil on canvas, 17th-19th century, based on a work of 1629
NPG 534 © National Portrait Gallery, London

Judgements on the value of the history of the Norman conquest veered strongly in royalist directions during Tudor times, and avoided discussing earlier rebellious phases which could draw dangerous attentions to the authors underlying possibly treasonous motives, although the absence of male heirs caused some

interest to be taken in Henry I's manoeuvrings to try to make his daughter Mathilda his heir or at least create a precedent for the crown to be passed onward via the female line if there was no direct male heir.

Ecclesiastical authority and freedom of conscience were Tudor tiger territory, to be avoided.

The reigns of the Stuarts and the interregnum

Once the Stuarts took over and during the interregnum the debate moved to constitutional issues and the effects that the Norman Conquest had had on an imagined pre-Conquest ancient 'constitution' of the kingdom and some sort of illusory post-Conquest parliament. Cue the involvement of lawyers, parliamentarians and scholars, all serious but some not so or ideological or swayed by popular opinions. This foment found no evidence that the English witan had any ancient 'constitution' although it had provided an ad hoc gathering of available senior earls and clerics to proffer advice if asked and to endorse the king's decision, and no writs summoning representation of the 'commons' could be found from before Henry III's reign. The myth that the pre-Conquest English had all existed as some sort of free and equal citizens in some kind of rural utopia was rightly extinguished.

So an ancient parliament that for some reason had become imagined from older untrustworthy writings such as the '*Laws of King William*' and the '*Laws of Edward the Confessor*' (called by Robert Brady '*an incoherent farce and mixture and a heap of nonsense*') had not been subverted by the Norman Conquest and the Norman 'feudal' system with Norman laws and customs at organizational and administrative levels had basically been imposed on top of local traditional English law. From that evolved 'feudal obligations' over land tenure, wardship, marriage, military services etc., all of which if

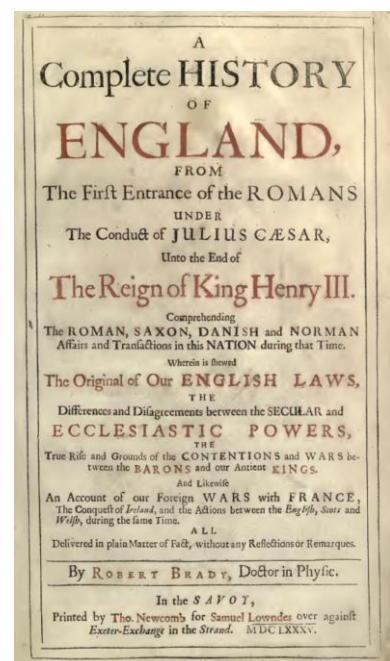
disputed, initially by Normans against their overlords, involved the legal system which evolved the concepts of precedents and outcomes of prior litigation so beloved of lawyers.

It is interesting to note that the Cottonian Library was closed in 1629-33 (during which period Sir Thomas Bruce Cotton died, with the collection passing to his son) on the orders of Charles I in case it contained items which could be used against the monarchy.

John Hayward produced maybe the first textbook about the Conquest in 1613, in 1623 John Selden edited and published Eadmer's *'Historia Novorum'* and in 1629 Henry Spelman initiated a study of feudalism when he wrote *'Feuds and Tenures by Knight Service'*.

From the Glorious Revolution to the end of the Industrial Revolution

Following the debut of the multi-disciplinary Royal Society in 1662 and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 international contacts improved and debates about the past moved to a less political and more serious intellectual level. Robert Brady produced *A complete History of England* using old chronicles, some cartularies, the Domesday Book, the Close, Patent and Charter Rolls critically. Sir Mathew Hale, a respected Chief Justice between 1671 and 1676 contributed a *History of the Common Law* which was published posthumously. Anglo-Saxon studies advanced and Thomas Rymer made accessible previously secret treaties and other documents concerning foreign relations. Thomas Madox followed up by making available in the *Formulare Anglicanum* many hundreds of charters, following the French cleric Mabillon's rules (published in his *'De re diplomatica'*) for distinguishing forgeries, including scrutiny of their script, style, seals, signatures, testimonials, and other intrinsic and extrinsic factors, using an acquired *'taste'* derived from long experience, and consulting the views of other document scholars. These previously unavailable and secret documents were research tools of the first order.

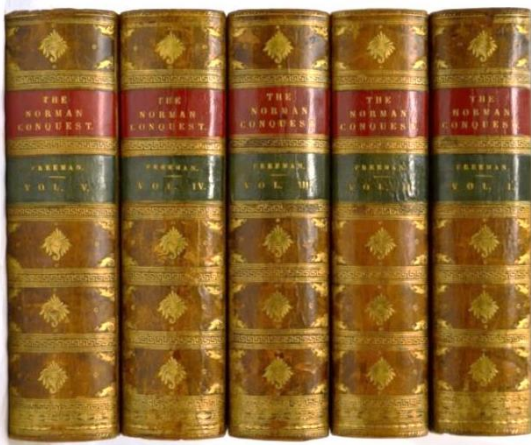


Argument swung backwards and forwards about the continuing influence of the Norman Conquest on replacing an old English common law tradition with one of contracts concerning tenure, serfdom, military duties and primogeniture, thus producing unequal divisions in society. Douglas says 'Almost all the controversies of that disputatious age were adorned and disfigured by tales of the Norman Conquest.' Stories of the Conquest, suitably enhanced with Whiggish nationalistic interpretations were made available to the public. Butterfield described this process: "*the tendency in many historians to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasise certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present*".

The resulting nationalistic 'fug' makes viewing the early history difficult even today, as there has been endless repetition of the fug, taken up those with nationalistic views and by historical novelists. Was the Norman Conquest truly such a national disaster and humiliation? The Whigs thought so...

The Victorian era

Following the Industrial Revolution, social and revolutionary changes in Europe, developments of nationalism and the introduction of Marxist and other philosophies there was a transformation in historical thought. Saxons were proposed to be fighters for social freedoms against the tyranny of Norman 'feudalism', and history mingled with fiction in heroic literature such as '*Ivanhoe*'. Such distortions were convenient for politicians interested in social change. This rolled into assertive Victorian mythologies which idealised the Middle Ages and perceived strong Saxon roots.



More people became involved in education. Universities started history courses, libraries were set up, learned societies were founded for the promotion of all sorts of ideas, good or crackpot, and local history societies flourished. But In Victorian academic studies of the Norman Conquest the Anglo-Saxons had a head start. Edward Freeman, who saw English history as a story of the triumphant emergence of the English nation with a free parliament, wrote his huge *History of the Norman Conquest in England* in

five volumes published 1867-79. Within an erudite work of great detail he rather over-glorified Earl Godwin and Harold Godwinson as championing English nationalism and his relative lack of critical questioning and degrees of exaggeration left him open to attack, and he duly was attacked, and ferociously, so by John Round.

In the end the bitter dispute led to some polarisation of historians into pro-Saxon and pro-Norman camps which were to distort some writings into the 20th century, but fortunately new and closer collaborations with American and French historians helped balance things up at the end of the 19th century. A Danish work by Johannes Steenstrup, *Normannerne*, published concurrently with Freeman's works, started a re-assessment of the Scandinavian contribution to English history. Unfortunately this was initially rudely dubbed in some British historical circles as 'lubrications in an unknown tongue', but Frank Stenton would bring Scandinavian studies into play, starting work on his '*Danelaw Charters*' and '*Danes in England*' (studies related to the prelude to the Norman invasion) as well as his place names studies and by 1908 would publish his '*William the Conqueror*'.

Round would point out clearly that the major change in England after the Conquest was in the retention of a king-centric '*curia*', with a new carefully chosen (by the king of course) Norman advisory circle of able and supportive relatives, trusted friends and churchmen, but still without real power (i.e. in no way an elected body and de facto replacing the witan, which was a body with a rather more fluid membership less under the control of the king).

Of great importance were the contracts made under oath that William made with his chief tenants to provide military service in return for baronies, and in turn those contracts that they made locally with their knights, the latter in a rather flexible way – it did not matter how the dues and service were provided as long as they were – and the county sheriff was there to make sure of it. This gave the king a powerful and loyal military machine. Curiously this analysis had been advanced two centuries before by Henry Spelman and Robert Cotton but ignored and obscured by entrenched misconceptions and the 'fug'.

Early 20th century

In the 20th century historical writing became more professional and objective, and tried to avoid any influence from contemporary events. New approaches challenged historians to re-think interpretations of the past. The American researcher Charles Haskins focussed on Normandy and his work gleaned from many French archives highlighted the structure and obligations which had evolved in pre-Conquest Normandy, particularly under Duke William II, to be later imposed on post-Conquest England. These were reviewed by François Neveux.

David Douglas took up this work and expanded it. Frank Stenton augmented this further contributing new work on Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian influences. Thus the Conquest started to be placed in a wider European context. Increasingly economic, anthropological, historical-geographic, social and archaeological studies were taken into account.

Late 20th and early 21st centuries

Later 20th century studies challenged further concepts of 'feudalism' and its imposition – or not. It was suggested that systematic change could not have happened immediately post-Conquest, but this did not deny that lordship and tenure did exist, as described above. The Normans in England were essentially pragmatic. Lordship was only one of the bonds of the new society even when associated with land, as there were also ducal and royal rights to consider and sometimes a tenant held lands of more than one lord. Homage was a two-way and sometimes multi-layered affair with oath-taking both to serve and protect. No uniform system of military service existed at first; it was being worked out as there were also paid troops and mercenaries to take into account.

Clearly there had been mass disenfranchisement of the ruling English class. This started with allocation of the royal lands and the very extensive lands previously held by members of the Godwin family which were the first to be distributed to new Norman lords, if not retained in

royal hands. Elsewhere most but not all English were 'demoted' to hold their previous lands from a new Norman land holder, but it is more difficult to know what happened to the middle and low ranking English. Apart from having a new lord did life change much at all for them if they avoided getting involved in any rebellions? We do know that the Normans essentially abolished slavery.

The views of French historians, such as François Neveux, have become more widely available and we also have a view from the Channel Islander John Le Patourel in his book *'The Norman Empire'*.

Robin Fleming examined hundreds of references to proceedings about property rights and concluded that if these were not held at baronial courts then some of the disruption was mitigated by the retention of older pre-Conquest customs at the local level of hundred and shire courts where about half the jurors were English. Henry II codified the laws after 1154, with 1189 being the end of 'time immemorial' and the start of the common law of England, as later interpreted by courts. The baronial courts were much weakened and permanent professional courts at Westminster and in the shires were established. Thus we had the true start of the creation of a new post-Conquest English common law.

Today (i.e. 2018)

Into the 21st century studies of the Norman Conquest and its consequences continue to fascinate historians and others and the study of its history is thriving. *A Companion to the Anglo-Norman World*, with multiple authors and edited by Harper-Bill and van Houts was published in 2002 containing overviews both of Norman secular administration and of the church, and a study of 'feudalism' and lordship, and David Bates published his book *The Normans and Empire* in 2013 offering a new cross-disciplinary interpretive framework for the same period (1066–1204) based on borrowings from social and political sciences.

A synopsis of a course of seminars at Kings College London said 'seminars will address the impact of the Norman Conquest on different aspects of government and society, such as land tenure and lordship, military matters, secular and religious architecture, kingship, queenship, government, law, the church, the economy, the formation of national identity, and on different social groups such as the aristocracy, women and the peasantry. The sheer range of engaging subject matter is one reason to opting for this module. There are several others: the profusion and richness of the sources; the quality of the historiography; the continuing relevance and resonance of this material'.

The Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies founded by R. Allen Brown in 1978 continues to attract academics from all over the world (although sadly it is no longer held in Battle itself) and is an annual conference devoted to English and Norman mediaeval history and culture. It focuses primarily, but not exclusively, on the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Its purpose is 'to discuss and forward knowledge on all aspects of Anglo-Norman history, with particular reference to the Anglo-Norman realm, but also to be concerned with the Old

English and Scandinavian contribution to the Anglo-Norman achievement in Italy, Sicily, Spain and the Crusades'.

So what are the effects of the Norman Conquest today? There is a different legal system from most of Europe – exported to the Commonwealth and USA, where time has created variations and different precedents. William's 'Harrowing of the North' may to a small extent help to explain the relative deprivation of the north that gives modern Britain Europe's highest regional inequality. We now have closer ties with continental Europe than Scandinavia. Students with Norman surnames are over-represented at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. Much of the country remains the property of a few elite families - 0.3% of the population own two thirds of the country. The descendants of the Normans as a group remain wealthier than the general population. The word-rich English language with its incorporated Scandinavian and 10,000 Norman French words is now spoken across the world. There is a fascination with history and a land full of castles, cathedrals and ruined abbeys.

Without doubt, the Norman Conquest had an impact on England. The invasion didn't immediately change the face of English society except at the top, but as England developed under the Normans their actions would change English culture, with the impact still found with mainly social and anachronistic consequences in Britain today

Recently historians have stressed post-Conquest continuity for the middle and lower groups of English society, questioning whether the invasion should be viewed as a cataclysm or a catalyst for change. Douglas clearly thought that the Conquest had vitally affected the British constitution, but that the appreciation of that had tended to obscure the qualities of the Anglo-Scandinavian way of life and administration that existed before 1066 and actually persisted at a local level after 1066, in parallel with changes 'at the top'. The Norman world which was a harsher militaristic and materialistic world had also lacked somewhat in arts and literature, which the English world had embraced, but was in terms of church structure and theologically further ahead, and more obedient to Rome (probably the reason why the pope gave William's adventure his blessing). Much of the lower levels of administration after the Conquest were still based on English norms, but the Normans introduced a new executive administration, reinvigorated the religious world and were politically and militarily ruthless masters of all they held.

What is certain is that any new concepts and ideas now need to be soundly evidence based, critically assessed and free from modern political or social bias. The era of introverted and controversial Anglo-centric scholarship is hopefully over. No longer should we contemplate the Conquest in terms of modern nationalism, Whig theories, protestant fervour or nineteenth century liberalism. It has its own unique balanced history.

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