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Anne Curry, *Agincourt*. (Great Battles, ed. Hew Strachan). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. ix + 256 pp., maps, illustrations, £18.99 (pb). ISBN 978-0-19-968101-3.

Review by David Potter, University of Kent.

Anniversaries have become a stock-in-trade of publishers and historians. Whether they reflect any genuine sense of memory and commemoration among the public is a matter for another time but it is perhaps worth observing that all concerned are required to tread carefully these days. French academics could lightly wallow in Marignano during 2015 (and incidentally produce some good work) because the enemy were the Swiss. Even so, issuing a commemorative coin was a step too far; the planned French two-euro piece was suppressed at the insistence, presumably, of the European Commission. Plans for the Belgian mint to issue a Waterloo two-piece coin were opposed by France and so were restricted to Belgium alone by being issued at a face value of 2½ euros. The Royal Mint, not formally subject to such blandishments, would only issue Agincourt commemorative coins for Alderney, of all places, and in impossibly small numbers. What has to be avoided is triumphalism and gloating, a delicate matter in the case of Agincourt, since there are still those who, like the late Willie Whitelaw, “go up and down the country gloating like mad.”

Anne Curry begins her latest foray into the fields of Agincourt with a delightful excerpt from some of John Lennon’s juvenilia, including his copying-out, illustrated by scenes of knightly combat, of a piece of early seventeenth-century verse on the battle by Michael Drayton, which reveals a remarkable metrical similarity to Tennyson’s *Charge of the Light Brigade*. Considering that Drayton was already writing in an archaic style, this is in itself quite a curiosity and links two literary battle commemorations, one of a field which came to symbolize everything about English military superiority, the other the gallant failure and the fatuity of military command. The link is provided by the role of the common soldier in both. Anne Curry has very much made Agincourt her own field over the last twenty years and in this latest book—coinciding with the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary—seeks to expand her view to encompass the afterlife of the battle down to modern times as part of a series which aims to broaden the scope of battle history.

Professor Curry, one of our leading historians of medieval warfare and of the reign of Henry V, has written many times before on the battle of Agincourt and Lancastrian France. She is thus supremely well placed to carry out the remit of this series in discussing the context of the war, its historical legacy, its place in national memory and commemoration, and its “manifestations in art and culture.” She is a leading authority on the organisation of armies in the fifteenth century, working on the assumption that the outcome of battle cannot be understood without some idea of how armies were raised, paid for, fed and campaigns planned; in other words the well tried English tradition of medieval war organization. Prof. Curry has done more than any other modern British historian to explore all surviving sources and has herself contributed to the discovery of hitherto unknown evidence, not least with her remarkable searchable database on “The Soldier in the Late Middle Ages, 1369-1453” (<http://www.medievalsoldier.org/>), coupled with a number of published works emerging from it: notably *The Soldier in late Medieval England* (with Adrian Bell and David Simpkin) as well as a number

of other collections of essays and articles.[1] All of these exploit the remarkably well preserved administrative records of the medieval English monarchy, a contrast with the somewhat less well preserved French records of military administration in the same period (French muster rolls survive both in central and local collections but are often frustratingly interrupted in series; the result of accidents of preservation above all).

Curry is also fully in command of the narrative sources and published an earlier book, *The Battle of Agincourt: Sources and Interpretations in 2000*,[2] which assembled most of the important contemporary narrative sources as well as subsequent fifteenth-century accounts. Her 2005 *Agincourt: A New History* is of fundamental importance in overturning the traditional picture of an English army, small and exhausted, battling against a French army of vastly superior numbers.[3] In this interpretation, an English army of 8500-9000 men (not unusual in size for the early fifteenth century) stood against a French force of only a few thousand more, perhaps around 12,000. Not for her, therefore, is the assumption that the event is not as important as what has been written about it. Her minute and forensic analysis of the sources has, indeed, led to a significant shift in historical interpretation.

It is worth remembering that the history of battle was largely ignored during the years of Annaliste supremacy in France (roughly the 1930s to the 1980s). Battles were consigned to the barely-tolerated domain of “histoire événementielle,” the detritus of nationalism and militarism, their narratives at most examples of the conventions employed in the construction of discredited myths. Georges Duby in his 1973 book on Bouvines in the very traditionally entitled series “Trente journées qui ont fait la France” embarked on what he later called a “military ethnography” of warfare and this had a major influence.[4] Duby argued that that battle “only exists through what is said about it because, strictly speaking, it is constructed by those who spread its renown,” a formula which is both fruitful and deceptive. The serious study of battle history—after all one of the most popular forms of history—has until recently been consigned to a rubbish-heap by academic historians. Yet there is now a revival of battle studies under the banner of Duby’s perception that what matters is not what happened but what was thought to have happened and how that related to pre-existing templates for understanding events. This has produced a crop of thought-provoking work, for instance the collection edited by Arianne Boltanski and others, *La Bataille* (Rennes, 2015).[5] The problem this generates is pointed up by the introduction to this series by Sir Hew Strachan, as distinguished an editor of a series as one could expect: “determination to seek battle and to venerate its effects may ... be culturally determined, the product of time and place, rather than an inherent attribute of war” (p. vi). If taken to its logical conclusion this might point towards a military history without a narrative of the culminating, though not necessarily always decisive, event of any war and one for which the training and cultural formation of the participants was leading to; in other words an absence at the very heart of the enterprise.

Anyone who has tried to reconstruct the events of battles will be aware of the problem of narrating them, though of course this has not impeded generations of writers who have tried to do so. It is obvious that historians usually know the outcomes of battle; they can even in some cases estimate the reasons for victory (though this is much more problematic). What actually happened on the field often puts an impossible strain on the contradictory sources. Even the topography of the battlefield is often difficult to reconcile with contemporary narratives. There is a fundamental gap between “what actually happens” in a battle and the processes available for narrating it and, naturally, the further back we go those processes are so much the more formalised if not stereotyped. Armies in the mass were probably the largest agglomerations of human beings in any one place before the nineteenth century. Their internal dynamics are therefore subject to all the usual vagaries of historical contradictions. Contemporary historians have approached the subject from two angles: first, the broadening out of the reconstructed narrative of battle to take account of the experiences of the rank-and-file. Second, we can understand more clearly that the narrative framework for classifying and describing battles already exists before the event and such encounters were narrated within that framework, which was not fixed but evolved. Throughout the Middle Ages there was involved a form of ideological conflict alongside the “feat of

arms,” victory validating right or demonstrating the will of God. The new battle history has thus opened up important questions, though whether we can still argue that the “what actually happened” approach is neither feasible nor desirable is brought into question by some of the most recent archaeological investigations of battlefield. The project on Bosworth is an obvious case in point, discussed in the 2013 book (*Bosworth 1485: a Battlefield Rediscovered*) partly written by Curry herself.[6]

This analysis has taken time to penetrate French popular history of Agincourt; recent French books published alongside a re-issue of Philippe Contamine’s 1964 book are mainly concerned with why the French lost (François Neveux), the limits of the consequences (Contamine) and the role of the defeat of chivalry in paving the way for an outburst of national resistance (Valérie Toureille).[7] One new work, the guidebook for the 2015 exhibition at the Musée de l’Armée, *D’Azincourt à Marignan. Chevaliers et bombardes*, which is a sumptuous book, produces an essay on the uses of the battle in English mythology in novels and war games but no study of the evidence for the battle itself.[8] Other than studies of weaponry and tactics over a period, the work seems to follow the research direction of “histoire-mémoire.” There has been some interesting work on the late medieval French army by Laurent Vissière and others.[9] It has become clearer that the image of the French armies as repeatedly stuck in a conservative rut unable to counter the innovative techniques of English commanders, is wide of the mark. French men-at-arms now often fought on foot and the discovery of the Boucicaut memorandum by Christopher Phillpotts and published in the *English Historical Review* in 1984 indicates that the French certainly had a rational battle plan in 1415.[10] Yet as Christophe Masson’s recent book on French armies in Italy in this period (*Des guerres en Italie avant les guerres d’Italie*, 2014) shows, after a period of fruitful innovation in the 1350s-60s it is possible that French armies reverted to a conservative model under the dukes of Orléans in the 1390s-1400s.[11]

Professor Curry is not in any straightforward way a practitioner of post-modernist rejection of positivism. Nor is Agincourt a battle that can simply be speculated on in the manner of DUBY on Bouvines; the nature of the sources is quite different. She begins her new book with a brisk and straightforward discussion of the campaign and the battle, bringing up to date her thinking on strategy and numbers. She confirms her earlier findings about the size and compositions of the two armies—perhaps 8500 English facing 12,000 French, the heavier French reliance on men-at-arms, the absence of a rout and the reasons for the killing of prisoners, perhaps most importantly the general perception that the battle was not in itself decisive except for being a moral rather than a strategic victory. This has become more or less the accepted story, despite many caveats by other historians. As far as the conquest of Normandy was concerned, it was the naval victory in the Seine estuary in August 1416 that secured Harfleur and the base for the reduction of the duchy during the following year. Actually, the parallels between Agincourt and another disastrous defeat of the French, Pavia in 1525, are worth pondering at this point. In that case, too, there was massive exaggeration of the numbers involved, a French army of between 50,000 and 80,000 facing an Imperial army of half that, French casualties often put at 12,000 dead as against 400 Imperial. In fact, recent research tends to suggest a French army of 24,000-26,000 facing an Imperial army of 20,000. The extent of victory against the odds was an important element in divine validation.

As for the treatment of prisoners, Pescara in 1525 gave the order to take no prisoners (hence the high number of aristocratic casualties) and Louis XII had done the same at Agnadello in 1509. Battle without quarter was not all that uncommon and this raises the question of why the “killing of the prisoners” at Agincourt has so exercised chroniclers and commentators. Just as the strategic significance of Agincourt has been seriously questioned, so has that of Pavia, which saw the King of France captured; Milan was again lost but Charles V was unable to make good his strategic triumph until after another round of war and the treaty of Cambrai in 1529 and even then his main objective, the duchy of Burgundy, remained beyond his reach. The great contrast with Agincourt is the degree to which Francis I and his panegyrists succeeded in turning the disaster into a triumph for their ideas of honour;

after all, if anyone remembers anything about Pavia, it is king's words in his letter to his mother: "de toutes choses ne m'est demeuré que l'honneur et la vie qui est sauve." [12]

The French monarchy in 1525 was clearly in command of its propaganda. In 1415 there was no royal pronouncement on the defeat to parallel the dissemination of news from the Regent via the Parlements under Francis I; nor was "honour" an easy quality to emphasize in the context. In her third chapter, Prof. Curry makes clear that the early understanding of the battle in France was tainted by the accelerating conflict between the Burgundians and Armagnacs. For the French, it was the recriminations of Armagnacs and Burgundians which tainted the lens through which the story of the battle was filtered. Church chroniclers like the Religieux of Saint-Denis naturally blamed debauchery, blasphemy, and luxury; many deplored the folly of the campaign. One side or another was blamed for not having pulled their weight in the battle. The result was a generation in which all sorts of wild exaggerations could prevail until the expulsion of the English from France diminished the significance of the battle for France. In England, naturally, it was the control of the message that is most notable, the idea being to point up the divine sanction for overwhelming victory. Works that have been used intensively by scholars such as the *Gesta Henrici Quinti* may not have circulated widely but most accounts shared a triumphalist tone. Prof. Curry in analysing all these sources--and they are numerous--seeks to judge between them judiciously with the aim of establishing the most reliable accounts and pointing up the contradictions between them. The angle of vision is a positivist one; the traditional job of the historian in weighing up the evidence of the sources. One curious aspect of this is the observation that tomb and other monuments in fifteenth-century England scarcely if ever mentioned the battle.

Curry's chapter on Shakespeare takes us efficiently through the sources that were available for the play and the contrasts with other works on the same subject in the same period (including, of course, Drayton). The context of the 1590s is surely the key here. Though it is not the case, as the author states (p. 90), that there was "no more formal wars with France after 1544" (there were such conflicts in 1549-50, 1557-9, 1563-4), Anglo-French relations had changed subtly during the Wars of Religion. Elizabeth I had attempted, perhaps against her better judgment, to take advantage of civil conflict in 1562-3 in a vague parallel with the interventions of Henry V and his father in the Burgundian-Armagnac conflict in 1411-13. This was a failure but English troops were again in France during the 1590s, collaborating with Henri IV in the siege of Rouen and many English soldiers of fortune had had experience of the wars in France. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the great national enemy had become Spain and the Catholic world by 1599. Shakespeare's play had a very oblique view of all this, appealing to the idea of victory against all odds. That, and the humanity--or otherwise--of the king's character, was surely the secret of its success.

Curry's discussion of the afterlife of the play is useful and her analysis of the two major films shows how film can turn the same play into two very different messages. She discusses the problems of filming clearly, but does not point out that the famous arrow storm of 1944 was created by sound effects using rubber bands to create the "twanging" effect, which would simply not have happened by arrows alone. The author goes on in chapter five to show, intriguingly, how the battle, used lavishly to back up the crucial anti-French element in creating a British national identity in the eighteenth century and Napoleonic period, mutates, through the cod-medievalism of the Victorian era and the revival of interest in archery, to become a touchstone in cementing, of all things, the Anglo-French alliance during the First World War. There is an enjoyable chapter which is based partly on Curry's findings from the muster rolls and punctures some of the many myths about the battle and the way they have been used, notably the antiquarian appeal to the "Agincourt roll" in order to make good claims of gentility. Welsh claims to predominance in the king's force are sent on their way (ten percent of Henry's archers were Welsh) and the V-sign seems to be a relatively modern development, its association with English archers an urban myth.

Finally, in one of the most fruitful chapters, Prof. Curry outlines the development of the historical exploration of the battle based on contemporary sources and responds to some of the controversies which have grown up around her own findings concerning numbers and strategy. This is valuable and the observations on the continuing uncertainty about the exact location of the battlefield must surely point towards the necessity for a serious archaeological programme of investigation. This is a relatively short book but it has a lot of ideas packed into it and it tells us both about the state of research on the battle and about the ways national mythology has evolved.

## NOTES

[1] Anne Curry, Adrian Bell, and David Simpkin, *The Soldier in Late Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013).

[2] Anne Curry, *The Battle of Agincourt: Sources and Interpretations* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2000).

[3] Anne Curry, *Agincourt: A New History* (Stroud: Tempus, 2006).

[4] Georges Duby, *Le dimanche de Bouvines, 27 juillet 1214* (Paris: Gallimard, 2013).

[5] Ariane Boltanski, Yann Lagadec, and Franck Mercier, *La Bataille. Du fait d'armes au combat idéologique, XI-XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015).

[6] Glenn Foard and Anne Curry, *Bosworth 1485: a Battlefield Rediscovered* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2014).

[7] Philippe Contamine, *Azincourt* (Paris: Folio, 2013); François Neveux, *Azincourt : la dernière bataille de la chevalerie française* (Rennes: Ouest-France, 2015); Valérie Toureille, *Le drame d'Azincourt. Histoire d'une étrange défaite* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2015).

[8] Antoine Leduc, Sylvia Leluc, and Olivier Renaudeau, eds., *D'Azincourt à Marignan. Chevaliers et bombardes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2015).

[9] Laurent Vissière, Alain Marchandisse, and Jonathan Dumont, *1513. L'année terrible. Le siège de Dijon* (Dijon: Faton, 2013).

[10] Christopher Phillpotts, "The French plan of battle during the Agincourt campaign," *English Historical Review* 99 (1984): 59-64.

[11] Christophe Masson, *Des guerres d'Italie avant les guerres d'Italie - Les entreprises militaires françaises dans la péninsule à l'époque du Grand Schisme d'Occident* (Paris-Rome: Ecole française de Rome, 2015).

[12] A. Champollion-Figeac, *Captivité du roi François Ier* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, Collection de documents inédits I, 1847), pp.129-30.

David Potter  
University of Kent  
[D.L.Potter@kent.ac.uk](mailto:D.L.Potter@kent.ac.uk)

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