

Helen Castor, *Joan of Arc: A History* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014). ISBN 978-0-572-28462-7. Hardback, 328 pages. £20.00.

Winner of the Franco-British Society Book Prize, 2014.

Statues of Joan of Arc, canonised by the Pope in 1920, can be found in nearly every church in France. Churches in Rennes, Rouen, Nice, Orléans, Le Touquet, Versailles and many other places are dedicated to this Saint. Yet, as Helen Castor informs us, Joan of Arc was a name Joan never used. With so much mystery and myth surrounding the subject, Castor succeeds in the difficult task of unravelling the gossip and revealing facts based on archival research.

She commences this tripartite book by setting the scene at the bloody battle of Azincourt (Agincourt to the English) in 1415, the victory of the English and their King's claim to the throne of France, 'heaven's mandate in action' (19). Far from a peaceful outcome, the cauldron bubbles fiercely as rival forces gain power and strength and are more and more determined to win ground. There is conflict between England and France and between the Burgundian and Armagnac claims. This is a story of treachery, destruction, starvation, epidemics and endless warmongering. Castor depicts the lawlessness of France, against a backcloth of a belief in the divine right of Kings. Her style is engaging such as her vivid description of the assassination of John the Fearless, Duke of Burgundy on the bridge over the river Yonne at Montereau: 'As the duke knelt, doffing his black velvet hat in obeisance to his prince, he could hear the water moving softly all around [...]. The moment was fleeting. Then the bullet struck: the steel blade of a war axe, driven deep into his skull. There was blood, pooling around the falling body of John of Burgundy, dripping in great goutts from the axe in the hands of Tanguy du Châtel' (36).

No wonder a saviour is needed in the shape of Joan the Maid whose prized virginity is ascertained by several examinations. We marvel at the illiterate Maid's linguistic ability to speak and persuade her followers of her special Divine powers and right (98), and that she has come at God's command to fight the English (106). Even the foreskin of Christ, a sacred relic that offered special protection in childbirth, plays a part in this story. To what extent one can believe in its entirety the story of Joan of Arc is left to the reader.

This complicated story is facilitated by clearly presented family trees, a cast of characters and some delightful illustrations in colour.

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