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Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years War*, Vol. III: *Divided Houses*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009. 1024 pp. Maps, plans, tables, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl) £29.50 ISBN 978-0-8122-4223-2

Review by Deborah Fraioli, Simmons College, Boston.

When asked by the French king to assess the state of England in 1369--the opening year of this third volume of Jonathan Sumption's distinguished history of the Hundred Years War--the Count of Saint-Pol answered, according to Froissart, that: "England was only a little country by comparison with France, for he had ridden the length and breadth of it several times and had given much thought to its resources....He was amazed at how they had ever mustered the strength to achieve the conquests that they had" (p. 61). This is but one of the puzzles that such an intractable war leaves the reader to ponder in this doorstep-sized third installment of the conflict of the Hundred Years War, between the years 1369 and 1399.

Sumption's history, once completed, will be surpassed in length only by the master chronicler of the fourteenth-century Jean Froissart himself, but it will represent a sizable abridgment if he wraps up this work-in-progress--by my calculation--at about 3,500 pages and five volumes. But far from wishing to be a modern-day Froissart, Sumption works first from manuscript and printed record sources and only secondarily from chronicles, given their all too frequent inaccuracies. Sumption unapologetically characterizes his history as a narrative, but he proposes to tell not just what happened but *why*, drawing a vital distinction between the thrust of his work and that of the chroniclers, whom he deems "always fuller on actions than designs" (p. 305). He considers Froissart's history a great literary masterpiece of the later Middle Ages, but warns that, among medieval chroniclers, he is "particularly unreliable." [1] On this score Sumption serves as Froissart's polar opposite, ready to take advantage of hindsight and to dig into a mountain of treaty rolls, seigniorial archives, treasury registers, and miscellaneous proceedings, precisely in order to be reliable. From this excavation emanates a completely believable retelling of the war, admirably dispassionate in its judgments. Where he does choose to cite Froissart, however, he reproduces sturdy gems of unforgettable lines.

This particular volume opens as France agrees to interfere in a dispute between Gascon lords in Aquitaine and their English rulers (p. 61), a provocative act if ever there was one when viewed from the perspective of maintaining the treaty of Brétigny (1360). But Sumption makes it clear that by then France was already guilty of mounting violations of the treaty. In fact, these episodes demonstrate that the second phase of the Hundred Years War--in which territory England conquered in the first phase flowed steadily back into French hands--had begun. The war movement in the thirty-year time span of this volume does not provide him with either an easy or an agreeable narrative to tell. Recognizing English superiority at pitched battle--after the shocking French defeats at Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356)--Charles V modified his war strategy. There would be no more magnificent, face-to-face charges against the enemy. Instead France began to pursue a strategy based on "the effective control of territory" (p. 53), with orders that on almost no account should French armies give battle. Rather, according to a strategy in which the French constable Bertrand du Guesclin excelled, they would ingloriously "delay, harass and exhaust" (p. 191) the English enemy. Moreover, there was constant

disturbance from territories that Sumption, without the friendliness implicit in the term, refers to as France and England's "neighbors." Whether from Scotland, Wales, Brittany, Flanders, or Navarre, bit players endlessly snarled the affairs of the larger kingdoms—although in numerous instances either with France or England's complicity—and in the opinion of some, managed to artificially prolong the war. Sumption is particularly contemptuous of Charles of Navarre who, by playing France and England against each other, momentarily became the "arbiter of France's destinies" (p. 64).

Likewise, unpredictable factors, whether a storm at sea, the consequences of bad military intelligence, or the death or incapacity of a ruler, led to an unprecedented number of reversals of fate in this span of years, and a depressing, pointless circularity in the war. In southwest France, where geography dictated that conquerors had to pluck off strongholds perched high on promontories overlooking the Dordogne or the Lot one by one, the captured towns, to use Sumption's marvelous phrase, "bent before the wind" (p. 25). After a small degree of feigned resistance, the towns would open their gates first to one victor and then the other, ready to cry "Saint George" or "Montjoie Saint-Denis" as the situation dictated. The shocking massacre by the English at Limoges, however, was England's response to such French acts of self-preservation.

No doubt the contest between the policies of intermittently weak monarchs and the competing interests of their respective princes wreaked the greatest havoc in driving the central conflict, between England and France, repeatedly off course. And looming large, because of his pervasive presence in events, is the figure of John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster and father of the future Henry IV. In Sumption's telling, one is amazed that John of Gaunt remained a figure in English politics for as long as he did. Virtually every campaign he insinuated himself in turned to disaster. For eighteen years he pursued the dream of making Castile his personal kingdom, a venture that Sumption witheringly refers to as John of Gaunt's Iberian fantasies. After he married the daughter of the slain loser in the Castilian succession dispute, Pedro I of Castile, John signed documents thereafter "Yo El Rey," possibly the only Spanish he knew, Sumption remarks acerbically (p. 123).

Sumption depicts John of Gaunt as an ambitious man "never likely to be satisfied by the secondary role reserved for the younger sons of kings" (p. 116). Yet at the time of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 his personal wealth was second only to that of the king. So certain were the peasants that these splendid assets had come out of their own pockets, that they listed John of Gaunt among the nobility to be killed on the spot if located. In France, Louis I, duke of Anjou and second son of King John II, appears to be John of Gaunt's counterpart for his ruthless pursuit of tax monies. It took a popular rebellion to terminate Louis's extortionate practices and end his tenure as lieutenant of Languedoc. Unusually, however, Anjou was stricken by deathbed pangs of conscience for the hardship he had inflicted.

Sumption's history illuminates a crucial but possibly underestimated political feature of the war—the importance of the soil (foreign or domestic) on which it was fought. Naturally, England was obliged to fight abroad if it were to retain Aquitaine. The Count of Saint-Pol may have marveled at how such a small kingdom could have taken its war abroad. After all, the ships, the horses, and the mouths to feed required exorbitant amounts of money and England could never raise revenues on a par with the French. But Sumption's evidence suggests that the English liked it that way. Salaries were paid for only three or six months of a campaign, the expectation being that plunder and ransom would provide the balance. And the Chancellor of England once acknowledged that there was "much to be said for fighting on the enemy's territory," not the least of which was its guarantee against invasion of the homeland (p. 511). When such an invasion did occur, in the form of brief coastal raids along the southern coast of England, or was even merely threatened, the English fell into a panic. Fears became so magnified that some even claimed that the French sought to "eradicate the English tongue" (p. 143). No Englishman who had witnessed the war at first hand in France could have seen the utility of repeating such pervasive war devastation on English soil.

Unassumingly blended into Sumption's narrative lie forceful answers as to why the war continued. For the English, France held out the prospect of rich profits, beyond the obvious material and strategic benefits of retaining Aquitaine. By contrast, when forced to fight in Castile, English soldiers complained of a land filled with barren rocks and crags, deeming it unprofitable for war. Nor were the English immune to feeling cheated by the French. Charles V's debonair violation of the treaty of Brétigny was only heightened by his assertion that if he had made such promises at the time, it was only to get his father out of England. Another obstacle to winding down the conflict, according to Sumption, was France's inability to recognize the importance England attached to the issue of sovereignty. And if the duke of Gloucester is to be believed, the English fought both because they loved a good battle and in order to give meaning to the sacrifice of those who had fought before them--for generations, in fact--and who had emptied their treasuries and offered up their lives in order to conquer France. Ultimately, blind optimism also propelled the war, which Sumption adroitly describes as the "instinct that one more spasm of financial exertion, one more tremendous military offensive might enable the war to be brought to a close on acceptable terms" (p. 376).

Peace conferences in this period, which could prove more costly than a military campaign, amounted to no more than the mutual exchange of incompatible views. According to Sumption, "[B]oth sides conceived of the process as a sustained appeal for justice rather than a search for...fertile compromise" (p. 225). Moreover, the gatherings were tainted by pervasive cynicism: the arbitrators in attendance were either too low-ranking to enact binding treaties, or the monarchs' behavior, depending on their relative military and fiscal strength at the moment, proved that nothing enacted under duress was durable. Truces were unacknowledged "breathers" for taking stock and shoring up treasuries before resuming war.

Sumption writes with no posturing and no unnecessary drama, continuing to move his eminently readable account forward. If he moves matter-of-factly through the story of a lawyer drowned with the papers he was trying to serve hanging from his neck, or of a tearful not yet seven-year-old being packed off with her dolls to marry the king of England (to say nothing of the myriad hangings, beheadings, slit throats, and systematic massacres), it is because the events speak for themselves. Moreover, it will not be lost on the reader that the young Charles VI, so smitten with knighthood that miniature chain mail was made for him each year as he grew, was the same man who left his tents pitched at the battle of Damme to create the illusion of his presence, and then slipped away from the war.

Despite the broad evidence packed into this volume of human folly and the futility of war, the history of the Hundred Years War, and Sumption's telling of it, is mesmerizing. But the last word must go to Chaucer (cited by Sumption): "there is full many a man that crieth 'War! War! that woot full little what war amounteth" (p. 777).

NOTES

[1] Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years War*, Vol. 1: *Trial by Battle*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999 [1990], p. x.

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