# THE TWO HUNDRED YEARS WAR

MICHAEL
LIVINGSTON

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## THE BLOODY CROWNS OF ENGLAND AND FRANCE, 1292-1492




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This book is dedicated
to Kayla

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Ten thousand bloody crowns of mothers' sons
Shall ill become the flower of England's face,
Change the complexion of her maid-pale peace
To scarlet indignation, and bedew
Her pastures' grass with faithful English blood.

— Shakespeare, *Richard II*

It is the magic of nationalism to turn chance into destiny.

— Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*

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# Preface: A New History, a New War

*Labelling History | Keystones of History | Names in This Book*

Henry V at Agincourt. Edward III at Crécy. The Black Prince at Poitiers. Joan of Arc at Orléans. The Hundred Years War is a generational conflict bursting with some of the most famous figures and fascinating fights in history. Across this age of war, England and France bore witness to uncountable deaths, unbelievable tragedy and uncompromising glory. It's the stuff of remarkable movies and some of the best damn lines in Shakespeare.

And no one knows what it is.

The traditional definition is clear enough: The Hundred Years War was a 116-year period of conflict between England and France that began in 1337 and lasted until 1453. Trouble is, no one at that time believed they were engaged in a 'Hundred Years War'. No one declared it begun. No one declared it ended. No one who fought and died in the Hundred Years War would have even *called* it that. The label 'Hundred Years War' didn't exist until it was coined for a chapter heading in a French textbook in 1823, some 370 years after the struggle's supposed conclusion.[1]

Modern historians typically date the start of the war as 24 May 1337. This is the day on which King Philippe VI of France declared that English-held lands in France were forfeit to the French crown. Three years later, King Edward III of England responded by declaring himself, rather than Philippe, to be the rightful king

of France, going so far as to quarter the English royal coat of arms with the *fleur-de-lis* of France to show how serious he was.

Starting the war in 1337 also roughly fits a statement from Jean de Rinel, a Frenchman in the service of the English king, who said in 1435 that 'for one hundred years, by battles and other deeds, evils and irreparable damages have continually multiplied both by sea and on land', in a war fought 'over the right and title to the crown of France'.[2]

But the fighting wasn't over in 1435. Historians typically mark the end of the Hundred Years War almost two decades later, on 19 October 1453. This was the date when French forces seized control of the city of Bordeaux, the last major English holding in the French region called Gascony, after a massive French victory at the Battle of Castillon that summer. Yet if we accept this as our end point, then not only was Jean de Rinel wrong about the war's end date, he was also mistaken in thinking that it was fought over the crown of France. The English claim to the throne of France didn't technically end until the start of the nineteenth century. It was in 1800 – eight years after the French Revolution violently ended the monarchy of France – that King George III had the *fleur-de-lis* at last removed from the royal arms.

If we accept the traditional dates, in other words, the only thing the longest military conflict in the history of Europe can coherently be said to be about is the physical presence of English administrators in Gascony. That is what started it. That is what ended it.

But this would be a strange way to understand a violent age that tore Europe apart. Blood was spilled far beyond the borders of England and France. The Low Countries (in particular those parts constituting modern Belgium) became war zones. Italy was swept up. So, too, the Holy Roman Empire, the Iberian peninsula, Scotland and Wales. We may think of the Hundred Years War as a fight between two crowns, but the reality is much larger, much more complicated and infinitely more interesting. These years of conflict drove enormous leaps forward in military technology and organization. They helped build political systems and national identities. They forged myths and fundamentally

shaped multiple modern states. Few periods in history have done so much to create our world.

## Labelling History

If you've heard of anything associated with the Hundred Years War, odds are that it will be related to its four most famous military engagements: Edward III's victory at Crécy in 1346, the Black Prince's victory at Poitiers in 1356, Henry V's victory at Agincourt in 1415 and Joan of Arc's victory at Orléans in 1429. Three won by English leaders. One by a French girl who heard voices. It's telling, in that regard, that three of the four are England's greatest victories in the war. And the fourth, while an English defeat, is generally remembered outside France not for its role in an English loss, but for what it says about gender, faith and hope.

It's natural that English speakers, raised and educated in England or in countries historically tied to England (as mine is), should have an England-centred view of the past. It surely helps explain why so many have understood the conflict as reflecting English interests alone, like Edward III's claim to be the rightful king of France. But when we step back and try to see the bigger picture of what was happening, one of the first things we notice is that the English did not start the fight. The French did.

The events that we have collectively labelled the Hundred Years War are best seen as a sequence of steps in France's struggle to define itself: its borders, its powers, its place in the world. For much of this period, France's primary obstacle to growing and coalescing as a state was indeed England. But this was by no means its only rival. Burgundy stood in the way, too. So did Brittany. The king of England wasn't even the only sovereign at the time who argued he had a better claim to the throne of France than the French king did. Around the same time the king of Navarre (a region of modern Spain) said the same thing and probably had a better case.

Recognizing France as the engine driving the war – and recognizing that the war was about far more than just control of Gascony – also requires us to take a wider view of when the conflict began and ended. By my reckoning, the war didn't last 116

years, 4 months, 3 weeks and 4 days. The Hundred Years War as I will define it actually lasted two full centuries – from 1292 to 1492.

Not a Hundred Years War, but a *Two* Hundred Years War.

I do not make this claim lightly. I am not trying to be bold. My redefinition of one of the most famous periods in history simply follows from the facts as I see them, and a recognition that *any* after-the-fact label we put on history says more about the interests of the person (or persons) doing the labelling than it does about the period being labelled. Our attention to the present fundamentally shapes our definition of the past. As we change, as our interests change, so does our understanding of our history.

The Middle Ages themselves are a case in point. This historical label has roots in fourteenth-century Italy, where figures like the poet Petrarch saw themselves as rebirthing (this is what the word *renaissance* means) 'proper' culture into a world that had lost its way after the 'fall' of the Roman empire. For Petrarch and others of like mind, the period 'in the middle' between Rome and their own modern age was quite literally the Middle Ages, and it was not looked upon favourably. It's easy to see Petrarch's vested interest in defining history in ways that made him and his country the centre of things, but the basic implication of his idea has been hard to shake. People still use the word *medieval* (which comes from the Latin *medium aevum*, meaning 'Middle Ages') to refer to things they think are dirty, backward or just plain wrong. Meanwhile, the larger periodization of human history into the categories of ancient, medieval and modern has stuck, too, despite the fact that there's no agreement at all on just how *any* of these periods ought to be defined.

It would not be fair for me to speculate too much on the intentions of those who created our old definition of the Hundred Years War in the nineteenth century. What I can do, though, is lay my own cards on the table as I propose a definition for the period I'm about to study.

The best way to do that is with a story.

On 22 July 1274, the king of Navarre and count of Champagne died – somehow choked on his own fat, so the stories said – leaving his titles in the hands of his one-and-a-half-year-old daughter.

Her name was Jeanne, and she and her mother, who was acting as regent for the little girl, immediately found themselves under attack from those who wished to take advantage of Navarre's perceived weakness. Jeanne's mother hurried her daughter into the protection of her cousin, King Philippe III of France. Navarre was made safe with French support, and in return France negotiated for a treaty. It ensured that the child-queen of Navarre would marry one of Philippe's two sons when she was older.

It was a shrewd political move.

On 16 August 1284, the terms of the treaty that Navarre had signed at last were met. The eldest surviving son and namesake of the king of France married Jeanne, the queen of Navarre and countess of Champagne. The groom was sixteen. The bride a mere eleven. On that day, the young man taking his vows married into the rule of both her kingdom of Navarre and her county of Champagne.

Only a few decades later, the poet Dante Alighieri, in the second of the three books of his *Divine Comedy*, describes meeting two rulers in Purgatory. Both of them, he says, are for ever fixed in abject grief, because as

> Father and father-in-law to the plague of France,
> They know his foul and filthy life.
> Thus are they saddled with sorrow[3]

The two men are King Philippe III of France and King Henry the Fat of Navarre. The plague that they lament setting upon France – and, by Dante's thinking, upon the world – is Jeanne's husband, who, less than fourteen months after becoming king of Navarre and count of Champagne, succeeded to his father's throne and took the crown of France as Philippe IV in 1285.

Philippe IV managed to do a lot during his subsequent 29-year rule as king of France. Dante despised him for causing the movement of the papacy from Rome to Avignon – and all the political and religious turmoil that resulted from it. Philippe opened up major, bloody conflicts against both England and Flanders as he tirelessly centralized power to the French throne. In so doing

he became one of the people most responsible for the cruelties and calamities of the centuries of war to come.

So, as I define the war he did so much to birth, I could pick any number of dates as its start. Is it the year Philippe IV became king in 1285? Or would it be better to pick his marriage to Jeanne the year before, since that was the moment he first pulled new territory into the French domain? Or, given that their marriage hinged on the treaty that was signed when Jeanne had to flee her home, should *that* be the start date? Every happening relies on what happened before.

To define a war, we surely ought to seek a particular flashpoint. Human history is marked by seemingly endless competitions for power – whether that power is political, economic, cultural or something else – but *wars* happen when that existing struggle for power breaks into active, violent conflict at scale, as one group or state tries to wrest power from the hands of another that tries to claw it back. The moment can be small, if what follows is large. The First World War, for example, is often said to begin with a single death: the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914.

In the case of the Two Hundred Years War, I don't see the beginning in a royal court in 1337. Instead, it starts with a murder during a chance encounter between mariners seeking water on a desolate island in 1292.[4] That first killing fed generations of death that only ended with the Peace of Étaples in 1492.

## Keystones of History

This book is a traditional narrative history, recounting the events and characters of the story in chronological order.[5] But which events, and which characters?

We often talk about history as a chain of events, in which every action depends upon the action or actions that came before it. Since one cannot recount every event like this, we might do better to think about history in the image of an architectural feature that would have been very familiar to the people living in the Middle Ages: the stone arch.

Each block of an arch is held in place by the blocks around it. For all its graceful beauty and remarkable ability to support a structure, an arch is only as strong as those individual blocks, and they all need to be there: pull just one out and the entire arch will collapse. Unlike a chain, in which the links are truly all the same, there is one block in an arch that is different from the rest: the keystone. A wedge slotted between the curving uprights to either side, the keystone sits at the apex of an arch. The keystone does not need to be the strongest of the stones. It can actually be the weakest, since it bears less weight than any other piece in an arch. But what it *must* be is a perfect fit. When an arch is being built, external supports hold up the two sides as the blocks are stacked one upon another, slowly curving inward. Throughout this process, an arch-to-be is in constant danger of collapse. Once the perfect keystone is slipped into place, however, those delicate, unstable stacks of stone become a single, stout structure. The scaffolding that supported the construction can be pulled away. Put simply, the keystone defines the arch.

It is the essential job of those who study the past – from archaeologists working in the field to archivists working in the library – to find as many stones as possible, to touch and catalogue them, preserving every possible sliver of history's graceful arc. No discovery is too small. The historian then sifts through the incomplete set of interconnected stones that remain – the myriad bits of data about the events in question – in order to determine the shape of the arch that they create. This shape allows us to re-create the missing pieces that must have been there to make it complete. And that shape, as I've said, is ultimately defined by the keystone, the single piece that makes the whole thing click into place.

This would be a very long book if we were to look at *every* stone. Of necessity, we must focus largely on the keystones, those events that, establishing one arch after another, can ultimately hold up the edifice of the story we are trying to understand. But we will also take moments to dive into the details – not just to explain how we know what we know, but also to help us understand the realities of this war. The casualties of the Two Hundred Years War are quite literally uncountable. The majority of them were innocents.

In the years of writing this book, I've studied that violence and horror. I've lived with it as best I can. The blood spilled and the lives shattered are heart-breaking and mind-boggling. I will have failed if I do not share this, too.

## Names in This Book

I am writing this book in English, but I am *not* writing an English-centred history. I'm not interested in writing a book favouring *any* identity. I am presenting a story of these years as they would have been known to those who lived them in England, in France, in Spain and elsewhere.

Some of the differences will be obvious. Others will be subtle, like a small but important shift in how I will talk about the key players of our story: I may not use their names as you know them. Already I have called the king of France Philippe VI, not Philip VI. He was French, and I use his name as he would have known it. This may make things a little harder for you if you are an English speaker, but I hope you understand why this is important.

That said, this is a guideline and not a rule. Looking back, you can see that I've referred to the amazing young woman who lifted the siege of Orléans as Joan of Arc, when by my guideline I ought to have written Jeanne d'Arc. Rightly or wrongly, I feel like her identity is so deeply engrained in popular culture that to force a linguistic adjustment in her case would interrupt the flow of the story. For similar narrative reasons, I also generally refer to dukes, earls and the like by their titles or nicknames rather than their given names. Likewise, I've done everything I can to streamline the events and the cast in this story. For instance, I might refer to 'the English' in a battle, even though the force in question might hold Gascon, Castilian and other unit components.

There has also been a question of how to refer to the names of places that have changed over time. When there is a difference, I have opted for modern names. Though these may not be the names familiar to the people in the story, they are the names that we will find on maps today, and I strongly believe in using the

present landscape to bring us into contact with the past. Henry V spoke of the castle at Agincourt, but I'll be referring to the town as Azincourt since that's where you'd go to see it today. That said, I'll still call the *battle* Agincourt for the same reason that Joan is Joan. Thus the Battle of Agincourt in 1415 took place near today's town of Azincourt.