



William Marshal: The Flower of Chivalry

Georges Duby , Richard Howard (Translator)

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Georges Duby, one of this century's great medieval historians, has brought to life with exceptional brilliance and imagination William Marshal, adviser to the Plantagenets, knight extraordinaire, the flower of chivalry. A marvel of historical reconstruction, William Marshal is based on a biographical poem written in the thirteenth century, and offers an evocation of chivalric life -- the contests and tournaments, the rites of war, the daily details of medieval existence -- unlike any we have ever seen.

William Marshal: The Flower of Chivalry Details

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From Reader Review William Marshal: The Flower of Chivalry for online ebook

Timothy says

A fascinating book; anyone interested in medieval European history should pick it this classic of microhistory. Duby approaches the material - a single, unique biographical poem - with a sensitive and vivid touch, providing insight into the subject's aspirations and moral calculus.

My one problem with this was that it wasn't as accessible as it seemed intended to be. There's a certain lack of historical context provided, but the bigger issue is Duby's oblique writing style that can make the narrative unnecessarily hard to follow. The book isn't all that demanding, but I worry that it would scare off more casual readers.

Sergio says

Magistrale ricostruzione di un'epoca lontana e di un cavaliere integerrimo di grandi qualità umane.

Jonfaith says

Who is ever alone at the beginning of the thirteenth century but the mad, the possessed--marginal figures who are hunted down? An orderly world requires that each man remains swathed in a fabric of solidarities, of friendships, in a corps.

A few detractors of this text cite that Duby appears more concerned with "the age of chivalry" rather than the specifics of Marshall's life. I suppose you can't please everyone. This is an astonishing portrait of the intensely intricate and complex set of social relations in the late 1200/early 1300s. As society became more complex, a fixed monetary system apparently flourished and social mobility became an increasing reality. This wasn't an option for most folks in this milieu. Thus the code of knightly honor and courtly love. Each is actually a sober response to set of unfair circumstances. William Marshall embodied this code to a fanatical end, despite ongoing menace he maintained an unyielding loyalty and was actually rewarded. Yes, he was an exceptional warrior. He was also rather lucky, not least by a healthy constitution which allowed him to outlive most of his royals, especially those sporting crowns.

This dovetailed nicely with the Plantagenets book I'm reading, and it wasn't a bad way to spend a frozen Sunday. Despite being 153 pages, the text does require concentration as well as an awareness of the various royal houses of the time.

Habemus_apicellam says

Un arrampicatore sociale al torneo medievale

Splendido esempio di saggio storico preciso, serio e documentato che non è mai pesante, didascalico o poco scorrevole. Duby ci presenta Guglielmo il Maresciallo, simbolo dell'epoca della cavalleria medievale, figura eccezionale per longevità e ascesa sociale. Il fatto notevole è che l'autore si basa su un documento del tempo per narrarci la sua storia, una fonte molto importante - la "Vita di Guglielmo il Maresciallo" - e la sa rendere viva e affascinante senza perdere di rigore storiografico. Cito solo alcuni aspetti che mi hanno colpito: - la fondamentale differenza tra cavalieri e borghesi nel rapporto con il denaro, disprezzato dai primi e accumulato dai secondi (il prestare a interesse era uno dei delitti più gravi!!) - la lealtà è solo e sempre verso una cerchia: familiare, di compagni in armi, di vassallaggi - l'idea stessa di lealtà verso tutti gli uomini è senza senso nel Medioevo - la descrizione dei tornei fa riecheggiare alcuni fenomeni collegato agli eventi sportivi di oggi - i matrimoni sono un privilegio dei primogeniti, mezzo irrinunciabile di scalata sociale e difesa del patrimonio

Jamie Collins says

A very interesting book, although not really a satisfying biography of William Marshal. Rather the author uses the story of Marshal's life to examine the ideals of chivalry and the hierarchical structure of medieval feudal society. Marshal seems to have been adept at managing the multiple and often conflicting bonds of loyalty and obligation.

He began life as a penniless younger son of a minor nobleman. He garnered fame for his prowess on the tournament field, entered into the service of kings, and eventually became the Earl of Pembroke by way of the wife granted to him by Richard the Lionheart. In his old age he served, supposedly under protest, as regent of England.

Speaking of marriage: "A man has a thousand times more worth than a woman, but he has virtually none if he does not himself possess a legitimate wife in his bed, in the heart of his own house." It's fascinating that women were themselves little more than chattel but could convey great wealth and lofty titles to their husbands. Kings collected stray heiresses and distributed them to their supporters as bribes and rewards.

Joan says

DNF. Due at library since there is a very restricted renewal policy.

Ryan says

William Marshal: The Flower of Chivalry

Georges Duby

Read it in paper-back at 168 pages, no appendix or biblio (there is one but it's actually suggested works.)

I really like Duby and the additions he makes to the field. The only other work that I have read by him was 'The Chivalrous Society' which was really fascinating. I have plans to read some of his other works as well. I had picked this up as an appetizer for Thomas Asbridge's 'The Greatest Knight' but that still woefully sits on my to-read shelf. William Marshal was an interesting guy who accomplished many a thing in his later life for the many kings he served but he was a knight first during the time of the greatest feudal cultural morph into

adopting what we coin as chivalry. In a way Marshal is the manifestation of those ideals and it helped that he was both relentless on the tournament scene (before the rise of the joust a Tournament was a mock war in which attendees attempted to capture enemies for ransom, horses, and gear) and a winner. He was courted by many for these skills at the height of the tournament scene.

In *The Flower of Chivalry*, Duby gives his interpretation from a source text written after the Marshals death and the bulk of which was collected as testimony from his friends and intimates, those of his Fidelis. "One hundred twenty-seven parchment leaves - not one is missing; on each, two columns of thirty-eight lines; nineteen thousand nine hundred and fourteen versus: you William had done things well. It took seven years to gather the material, to elaborate, to edit the work." Very well indeed. This is not a biography at all, other works fit that bill much better. Instead Duby follows Marshal amidst the document and provides clarity and expounds on the times and events as it relates. It's incredibly readable but does not include the original deeds/document in any form, there isn't even direct quotes from the source text. This rubs me raw a bit. It's still definitely worth a read if this time period is of interest and it's significantly less academic than a lot of other works on Marshal and while the reader will come away with knowledge of Marshals life its emphasis is more in line with the legend of the Marshal.

William Shep says

Biography of one of the greatest, if not the greatest, yet now almost obscure medieval knights, William the Marshall. He was one of the few knights ever to have unhorsed the great warrior king, Richard the Lionheart, and he lived to not only tell about it but went on to serve Richard, as he has served his father Henry II, and later John and John's son, the young Henry III. Perhaps William did no greater service than to rally the disaffected barons (in the wake of the revolt which resulted in Magna Carta) to support and save the regime of young Henry III in the face of invasions from both France and Scotland.

Helena Schrader says

Georges Duby uses the 13th century biography of William Marshal, commissioned by his eldest son immediately after his death and written within the lifetime of many of his companions, as a device to present an analysis of chivalry and knighthood in the late 12th and early 13th centuries.

In this book that opens with the last months of Marshal's life and describes how he prepares for death, Duby, a leading French historian and professor of medieval history, provides the reader with a wealth of information in very compact form. The book is particularly valuable for descriptions of melees, the rough-and-tumble pseudo-battles fought over rough terrain by hundreds of knights, which preceded the tame tournaments of later centuries. Likewise, Duby provides useful insight into life of "bachelor" knights of the period – the large, unruly pack of younger sons, who had no land, no income, and no wives. He shows how they had to live by their wits, their skills and by forming associations with other knights, relatives and sponsors.

However, the figure of Marshal himself is all too often lost in Duby's commentary. Although his source is a rare authentic record written in the vernacular, which when quoted is vibrant and evocative, Duby quotes it far too seldom. It is thus Duby's voice, not Marshal's or his biographer's, that dominates this work.

Duby is teaching his reader about the 12th/13th century, using Marshal's life as "Exhibit A." This is Duby's version of events, his interpretation of 12th century society, and to scholars familiar with the material, his arguments may not always sound convincing. More important to me, however, was simply that William Marshal, the supposed subject, comes too short in this book.

To be sure, enough of William Marshal's personality is revealed to be tantalizing, but the book left me unsatisfied. I felt particularly cheated by the way Duby rushes over Marshal's most exceptional achievements (that of retaining the favor of three successive, bitterly hostile and very different kings: Henry II, Richard I and John). Duby may be right that these events are "so well recorded in history" they need no explanation, but the book is sold as a biography of Marshal, and readers have a right expect that his entire life will be described. Duby's book left me feeling I would have enjoyed the original medieval "song" (at least in translation) more – and interested in finding a full-length biography of Marshal.

Davide says

Parla della vita del Maresciallo Guglielmo analizzando i caratteri della vita medievale: i tornei, i matrimoni combinati, ecc.

Michael says

According to my research I am descended (separately) from Marshal's four daughters. That gave me enough incentive to look him up and find out his story. There isn't much extant material on William Marshal save for a secondhand copy of his life story that he commissioned on his deathbed. As a result, we both know a lot about him (relatively speaking) and not much at all.

Duby manages to spread this thin knowledge out across 150 pages, much like a high school paper-writer spreads not much across a 600-word essay. However, to his credit, Duby also places Marshal in the context of the chivalric world. He makes the book more useful from an analytical context instead of a biographical context.

Stuart says

Duby's book begins and ends beautifully, but the middle drags a bit, and even at a brief 153 pages it feels a little long. This is partly due to Duby's chapters, of which there are only five, creating a strange sense of pacing, and his own interest more in the culture of chivalry (which is fascinating) and less in the actual life of William Marshall, which is also fascinating. He sticks very closely to his principal source material but changes the sequence of events to suit whatever aspect of chivalry he's exploring at the moment, be that the role of women, the childhood of knights, or the events of a tournament. The result is a narrative that can be frustrating given Duby's tendency to write like a novelist stylistically, but fail to really flesh out the personages which occupy his pages. Still, a strong piece of scholarship and worth reading for those interested in the time period, the life of William Marshall, and trying to understand the legacy of the 12th century in the modern imagination of the Middle Ages.

Michael says

This is a fantastic little book: quickly readable and absolutely authoritative.

Pam Shelton-Anderson says

I read this book not only because of the prominence in his day of William Marshal, but he is also my ancestor. Much of information is taken from a small group of sources and there is not a lot that is contemporary information. No footnotes used at all. The writing is very elaborate, so much so that it was flowery and not that easy to read. I appreciate the difficulties in writing about a non-royal person from so long ago, but I would have preferred a better annotated history.

Paul says

When I first began this text, I was confused. It started with William Marshal's death and all the pomp and ceremony due the man. It was a startling way to start a biography, as I was relatively uninformed about William Marshal. My main source of information was a randomly watched BBC documentary that captivated my interest in the knight of four Angevin kings.

Moreover, the text is a translation from French and the author is given to long run-on sentences. The topic shifts abruptly, the meter only broken by a surplus of commas. An overwhelming wealth of information is thrown at the reader at breakneck speed. Needless to say, it took me about 60 pages to get initiated in the writer's style.

What followed was one of the best history documents I have ever read. By the last 50 pages I was chomping at the bit to get to the end, my marvel and imagination running wild with the exploits of this legendary man.

A penniless knight for the first half of his life, he was cast between feudal lords and the rites of chivalry to lead a vagabond life. It was only in the tourney Marshall excelled, his fighting prowess establishing his reputation as one of the greatest fighting knights of all time. He led a retinue of followers, nobles included, that followed his poverty stricken exploits in each tournament he attended.

The man had to have his helmet extracted painfully from his head by a blacksmith several times due to the crumpling of it by blows on the tourney field. Where he bested over 500 knights. He was ransomed by Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine herself after she heard stories about his courage. He fought a two year campaign in the Crusades and was invested in the order of the Knights Templar. He slayed Richard the Lion Hearted's horse from under him. He stared down John Lackland in a pissing contest about fealty disputes. His seal is on the Magna Carta. He was awarded one of the richest holdings in England, Earl of Pembroke, on reputation alone. He saved England from the debt King John buried it under with his own personal holdings given freely. As Regent of England, he knighted a young King Henry III. At age 70, he led a horse charge that fought the French off at Lincoln and personally escorted Prince Louis of France, a captured hostage, to the coast to let him go in an amazing display of honour and political manoeuvring. The exploits goes on and on....

Now on to my next book about this man's amazing life. Good stuff.
