

William the Conqueror Short Guide

William the Conqueror by Thomas Bertram Costain

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

William the Conqueror Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Social Sensitivity.....	6
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14

Overview

A fictionalized biography of the French-born warrior-king who changed the course of British history, William the Conqueror tells the rags-to-riches story of an orphan who became one of medieval Europe's most powerful rulers. Drawing upon the few known facts about William's life, Costain uses both his skill as a novelist and his knowledge of history to paint a rounded picture of a man seemingly born to be a leader. Costain's account of William's life—his narrow escapes from assassination as boy, his training to become a knight, and his military campaigns in England and France—reads like an adventure story. All in all, Costain takes a familiar figure from history, breathes life into him, and shows the elements of character that made William a great king. Additionally, Costain informs his readers about the nature of life in the Middle Ages, describing the food, the clothing, and the uncomfortable living conditions that even the most powerful and wealthy individuals had to endure.

About the Author

Thomas Bertrand Costain was born on May 8, 1885, in Brantford, Ontario, Canada. He began writing novels while a teen-ager, and after publishing a mystery story left school to become a newspaper reporter. After nearly two decades of work as a journalist and editor, Costain moved to Philadelphia in 1920 to become associate editor of the popular magazine *Saturday Evening Post*. He tried to save enough money to become a full-time author, but lost his savings in the stock market crash of 1929. While serving as an editor for a film studio and a book publisher, he began work as a part-time novelist, retiring from publishing in 1946 to devote himself to writing. By this time, Costain had published his first three novels: *For My Great Folly* (1942), *Ride With Me* (1944), and *The Black Rose* (1945), which would later become a popular motion picture. All of these reflect Costain's usual technique of focusing his books on an important person or event from history.

Over the next eighteen years he produced many novels, the most famous of which was *The Silver Chalice* (1952), a story centering on the cup used at the Last Supper. This book, too, was made into a successful film. During this period Costain produced two histories of the Middle Ages, *The Three Edwards* (1958) and *The Last Plantagenets* (1962), and also wrote two books for young people, *The Mississippi Bubble* and *William the Conqueror*. Costain is best remembered as one of the finest historical novelists of the twentieth century. He died on October 8, 1965, in New York City.



Setting

The biography begins in France in about 1038, as the aptly named Robert the Devil, Duke of Normandy, addresses his vassal lords. A successful leader who has maintained a relatively violence-free state, Robert is now determined to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, presumably to atone for the sins that earned him his nickname "the Devil." Robert's nobles are aghast at the plan because they know that few people survive such a journey; the country needs a strong leader, and the nobles ask Robert to designate an heir. His choice of William—a young boy born illegitimately—shocks the company, but slowly and reluctantly they swear allegiance to their boy-lord.

At this time in history, nations as we know them really did not exist. Under the feudal system only the most powerful nobles could hope to rule. Normandy was really a confederation of smaller baronies—something like countries—whose leaders often feuded with and raided each other. The Norman barons wanted a strong leader to protect them not only from foreigners but also from each other. Most European battles and wars of the time were fought for the possession of land. Areas with fertile land were the most desirable, which is why William so wanted to conquer England. The story of William's life takes the reader from Normandy to Paris to Belgium and finally to England, providing a panorama of medieval Europe.

Social Sensitivity

The feudal system was not democratic, and people were not treated as equals. Because one of Costain's primary concerns is accuracy of detail, his treatment of politics, religion, violence, and the relationships between men and women reflects the era about which he writes. As a result, some readers could fault him for being too nonjudgmental on matters of social concern. Although Costain does not emphasize the conflicts between church and state, he does note that William was excommunicated upon his marriage, but that the next pope lifted the decree. Costain is never brutally graphic, but he does reveal the violence of the period in his battle scenes, and England's Harold dies from an arrow through his eye. Women play a subservient role in this work: William's wife, Mathilda, is depicted essentially as an object whose primary role is motherhood; and William's mother is barely mentioned except in regard to her physical beauty.



Literary Qualities

Costain's technique is essentially the same in *William the Conqueror* as it is in his historical novels for adults. He performs exhaustive research into the background of his subject to find authentic details. *William the Conqueror* is filled with specifics, including technical terms for weapons, an analysis of military tactics, and descriptions of clothing styles. Costain even includes information about which social classes could use specific types of hunting birds. By blending general historical research with specific biographical fact, Costain enhances the realism of his settings and his action.

But *William the Conqueror* is also a fictionalized biography. Costain builds upon the few known details of William's life to create a vivid, believable character. Indeed, much of Costain's material must be described as speculative. Although Costain does not tamper with historical fact, he constantly introduces dialogue or internal monologues for which no evidence exists. As a result, *William the Conqueror* is not a scholarly work for professional historians, but rather a compelling portrayal of a great warrior-king intended to delight young readers while teaching them about a historical period.



Themes and Characters

Costain's biography follows William's life from boyhood to old age, using examples from his life to highlight those qualities most desirable in a medieval ruler. From the first, William possesses unusual potential. He maintains icy poise as he accepts the allegiance of his father's followers, and he shows considerable presence of mind in evading attempts on his life before he is thirteen.

As an orphan, but ward to the King of France, he undergoes training for knighthood, a status he attains at the unusually early age of fifteen because he is stronger and more skillful than his fellows in horsemanship and the use of weapons. Costain depicts William as a "fighter by nature"; no one else has the strength to draw his bow, and he can leap into a saddle in full armor, while most knights need assistance. William's most important leadership qualities are his skills in battle and his ability to lead soldiers, which he uses to his advantage in subduing the rebellious Norman barons and in pacifying and unifying his duchy by the age of twenty-one.

One of William's obligations as a ruler is to take a wife in order to produce heirs and thus establish succession to his throne. Because medieval kings' marriages are often arranged for political or military reasons, William's ideal wife would be a daughter of the king of England, but Edward the Confessor—the West Saxon King who rules England from 1042 to 1066—has no daughters.

William decides on Mathilda, daughter of the Count of Flanders. She, however, is not as eager to marry, and she delays the wedding for seven years. Eventually, they marry and have many children.

Through his portrayal of William, Costain shows that not all medieval rulers were absolute monarchs. William has to trick or cajole his allies into assisting him in his various campaigns. He persuades the King of France to assist in the pacification of Normandy, and he secures backing for his invasion of England by promising his followers large, prosperous estates if the venture is successful.

Costain does not, however, sugar-coat the life of his protagonist. William has many admirable qualities: intelligence, exceptional strength, and bravery. Few of his contemporaries match his level of education; most nobles are illiterate, but William can read, write, and apply mathematical principles toward the design of ships and castles. William is not, however, an example of ideal human virtue. He can be violent, cruel, arrogant, and covetous of others' wealth. Like many medieval rulers, he is relatively unconcerned with the plight of the common people. He is capable of destroying peasants' crops in an effort to defeat a rival lord, or of starving a walled city into submission.

Despite William's personal flaws, his invasion of England in 1066 and its aftermath bring out many of his most impressive qualities. He shows his organizational skills in amassing his army and—thanks in part to luck—getting his fleet to the south of

England. Here he establishes a beach head, defeating King Harold at the Battle of Hastings, and, finally, in his old age, consolidating his base in England. Although history has recorded him as William the Conqueror, Costain reports that he is more commonly referred to by his people as "William the Great."

Topics for Discussion

1. What kinds of obstacles does William have to overcome as a boy?
2. How are William's childhood sports related to his later career? How does Costain reveal William's unusual strength? What evidence reveals both his intelligence and his learning?
3. How does William gain the respect of his peers? Cite examples from his childhood and his adulthood.
4. How do ideas about marriage in the Middle Ages differ from modern ideas about marriage?
5. What different strategies does William use to defeat his enemies? Why does he believe that he has a right to the throne of England?
6. Do you think William's sole motivation as a ruler is his own personal gain?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Show how the events of William's first twenty-one years prepare him for his greatest exploit, the conquest of England.
2. Compare and contrast William with other rulers who appear in the biography.
3. Read one of Costain's other historical books, such as *The Black Rose* or *The Silver Chalice*, and compare his integration of historical fact and fictional speculation in that book to his technique in *William the Conqueror*.
4. Rewrite one of the scenes in *William the Conqueror* from the point of view of one of the nobles who served William.
5. Research and report on the Battle of Hastings and its impact on the course of British history.

For Further Reference

Frederick, John T. "Costain and Company: The Historical Novel Today."

College English 15 (April 1954): 373379. Analyzes Costain's work in the context of other historical-based writing.

Martine, James J., ed. Dictionary of Literary Biography. Vol. 9, American Novelists 1910-1945. Detroit: Gale Research, 1981. Contains a biographical entry on Costain.

Van Gelder, Robert. "Interview with a Best-Selling Author: Thomas B. Costain." *Cosmopolitan* 18 (October 1947): 201. Costain discusses his method of writing historical novels.

Related Titles

Although Costain wrote no sequels to *William the Conqueror*, all of his other titles—both the novels and the histories—are appropriate reading for high school students. These books, with settings that range from the first century A.D. (*The Silver Chalice*) to the Napoleonic era (*The Tontine*), all feature interesting plots and provide readers with a sense of a specific historical period.



Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996