

Five Historical Novels About Agincourt

The Battle of Agincourt was fought almost 600 years ago, on 25 October 1415, when Henry V totally defeated the main French field army, on his way home from Normandy, at the end of a hard campaign. Professor Anne Curry has recently revised the numbers of those who fought there – upwards, in the case of the English, downwards, in the case of the French. The fact remains that the English were outnumbered by 3 to 4, even if one accepts Curry's conclusions. Yet the scale of their victory is not in doubt: they inflicted many times more casualties than they sustained, and took a very large number of prisoners.

Historians worry about the detail. Novelists like a good story; and the plot thickened considerably with Shakespeare. The novelist cannot avoid him because he re-created the popular idea of Agincourt, at least in England and the English-speaking world. In *The History of King Henry the Fifth* (sic), first performed in the 1590s, he took two rather dull sources, the chronicles of Hall and Holinshed, and made them into a play which has imprinted itself on the English subconscious. *Henry V* (which has been performed continuously since 1738)¹ gave rise to several myths. Amongst them were the ideas that the Agincourt was a victory for the 'happy few'; that it witnessed the triumph of the longbow over the mounted knight, and of the yeoman over the aristocrat; that this was medieval England's 'finest hour'; and that it led immediately to Henry V's recognition as heir to the King of France. While the historian seeks to correct these myths and place them in context, the novelist is free to embroider them. It is not always easy to say where 'the truth' of the matter lies; and the public will always prefer a plain tale to a complicated theory.

This article considers five novels written between the 1890s and the 2000s about Agincourt. All of them are adventure stories and all have heroes who are male, in one case a boy. G. A. Henty (1832-1902)'s *At Agincourt, A Tale of the White Hoods of Paris* was published in 1897, at the time of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, when the British Empire was at its height, but questions were already being asked as to whether it would last much longer. Herbert Strang and John Aston's children's novel *Claud the Archer* appeared in 1928, when the mass casualties suffered in the First World War had turned many patriots into pacifists. Michael Cox's *Agincourt, Jenkin Lloyd, France 1415* (2003) gives a modern account of the battle, again for children but from a Welsh point of view. Bernard Cornwell's *Azincourt* (2008) again concerns an archer, Nicholas Hook. Pierre Naudin's *Le Bourbier d'Azincourt (The Quagmire of Agincourt)* is written from the French perspective.

Henty was a prolific novelist, whose name is associated with the 'ripping' yarns found in the *Boys Own Paper*, founded in 1879. He wrote for an audience which liked hearing about adventures and enjoyed happy endings. As the long title of his novel

¹ *King Henry V*, ed. Emma Smith, *Shakespeare in Production* (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

indicates, most of the action takes place in Paris rather than Agincourt. This provides the French context for Henry V's war, which was the civil war between Burgundians and Armagnacs. Henty's 'White Hoods' are the *Cabochiens*, the Burgundian-backed proletarians led by the butcher Simon Caboche, who take control of Paris in 1413. *At Agincourt* tells the story of Guy Aylmer, a youth of about 16, of relatively humble origin, who wins fame and fortune by his sword. At the end of the book, he even gets the girl, when he marries his sweetheart Katarina, the daughter of an Italian nobleman and astrologer, Count Montepone. Later he is made a banneret for his part in the Battle of the Seine (1416); and at the end of the book he is created Baron Peshurst. Along the way, the author gives us a series of history lessons.

The book displays the attitudes typical of late Victorian gentlemen. It was a man's job to fight and defend his family and his country, and a woman's place to stay at home. Society was divided between the lower orders and the 'better class'; and civilisation depended on the efforts of the latter. The British were the best people in the world and, since they were the most powerful, they were also best placed to govern it. They were always brave and steady, whereas the French have always been - shall we say - more 'complicated' and their country more 'troubled'. There is not a whiff of criticism of Henry V, the noble leader of a noble people. Henty's picture of the *Cabochien* revolt is painted in black and white: the rebels are a thoroughly bad lot, the predecessors of the bloodthirsty Jacobins who terrorised all Europe in the 1790s. The author's attitude towards 'the scum of Paris' may also have been influenced by the Anarchist outrages of the 1890s. His novel may be read as a warning to his contemporaries, as well as a reminder of the horrors of the French Revolution:

Many nobles quitted Paris at once, either openly in disguise, including many of the Burgundian party, who were to the last degree indignant at what was going on: for the mock trials were at once commenced, and many of the prisoners, without regard to sex, were daily either put to death in prison or drowned in the Seine. Some of the bodies were exhibited on gibbets, the heads of others were fixed on lances, and some of them were beheaded in the market place. ... None of the better class ventured from their houses and the mob were absolute masters of the city.

When we arrive at Agincourt, Henty reminds that (at least according to Shakespeare) Henry V 'fired' his troops with rousing speeches on the eve of battle. He has the king remind the troops of what the French have (supposedly) done to their comrades at Soissons:

When the [Armagnacs] had taken Soissons a few months before they had hung up like dogs 300 English archers belonging to the garrison. He told them they could expect no mercy, for that as the French in other sieges had committed horrible atrocities upon their own countrymen and countrywomen...

We shall return to the supposed connection between Agincourt and Soissons.

In 1928 Herbert Strang and John Aston published a novel for children (and again almost certainly for boys), *Claud the Archer* in Strang's *Historical Stories* series, which also included tales of William the Conqueror, Richard the Lionheart and Edward III. Ostensibly it was a simple tale, involving the triumph of good over evil. It tells how a young Englishman, Claud Thynne, meets with injustice, is forced to flee his homeland, joins Henry V's army by demonstrating his skill with the longbow, and redeems himself and his family's fortunes. For his service at Agincourt and at the sieges of Rouen and Melun, Henry V grants him land in his home county of Surrey.

There is more to the plot than a tale of virtue rewarded. *Claud the Archer* is of Anglo-Saxon stock, in contrast to the villain Geoffroy Delarche, who is the son of the local lord and French. Geoffroy is a bully and a coward, who likes to grind the faces of the English peasantry and keeps an English fool as a slave for his amusement. Before the Norman Conquest the Thynnes were thegns but they have since lost their estates, oppressed by the Delarche family, who were originally upstarts from Provence. By the time Henry V comes to the throne, the Thynnes have only a few acres left, and they are living in the ruins of their old manor house. Agincourt enables them to regain their former lands and status. The battle is the English revenge for Hastings, a victory for the Anglo-Saxon race as well as the longbow, a weapon originally used by the English (and Welsh) peasantry for hunting as well as for self-defence.

Strang's tale therefore resembles Henty's in some important respects; but curiously it paints a very different picture of Henry V. Strang wrote in 1928, when large numbers of English intellectuals were experiencing an intense reaction against the whole idea of war; and Henry V's belligerence and chauvinism had become distasteful. In *Claud the Archer*, the bravery and patriotism of the hero is not in doubt but Henry is portrayed as a warmonger, the war itself is condemned as unjust, the royal claims to French territory and the French Crown are regarded as 'preposterous'. This is a modern point of view, not a medieval one; and Strang's view of society is also modern. The Lollard rebel is regarded as 'the gallant Sir John Oldcastle'. The Lollards are regarded as champions of the poor and the oppressed, rather than as heretics and traitors. The hero associates himself with the fool, while the very practice of keeping a court jester is seen as oppressive. At one point the author even addresses the reader on the subject:

If our modern taste be in some things degenerate, in this, at any rate, it has bettered, that a gentleman does not think it necessary to keep a human being as a butt for gibes, or to provide mirth by low buffoonery and senseless practical jokes.

Michael Cox, who died prematurely in 2009, wrote *Agincourt, Jenkin Lloyd, France 1415* in 2003, primarily for children. The Agincourt campaign is presented as a journey and a meeting with destiny, the triumph of the little man over the bully (despite the fact that it was the English who invaded Normandy in 1415, not the

other way round). It is a good yarn though Cox commits at least one howler when his hero complains about *half-rotten potatoes* (when both the potato and the New World were as yet undiscovered). Like Bernard Cornwell's hero Nicholas Hook, Jenkin Lloyd is a commoner, but whereas Hook is English, Lloyd is Welsh. He comes from Tregarth in Gwent, his friends are all Welsh and he joins a contingent led by Davy Gam, an historical figure also mentioned in Shakespeare's play. Lloyd tells us that all these Welshmen were brought up in 'hovels and cottages' and none has any property, other than the clothes he stands up in. For this little band of Welsh brothers, Agincourt is the victory of the humble over the proud, rather than the triumph of one nation over another. Yet the hero adores Henry V. When he catches sight of the King one day he thinks:

I knew that if he commanded me to do so, I would follow him to the ends of the earth and die in his cause, as it was both his and God's will that I do so

Lloyd is a boy of 14 and, in the historical note at the end of the book, Cox states that 'many' archers were mere boys, aged between 12 and 17; but it is difficult to square the idea of boy-archers with the physical evidence which has come to light during the excavation of medieval grave-pits. These show that archers were men of great physical strength, some of whom developed deformities of the spine and arm as a result of repeatedly pulling enormous draw-weights.

At the end of the novel, Jenkin Lloyd knows that he has participated in a truly historic event. Michael Cox gives him lines which echo the verse of Shakespeare's St Crispin's Day speech:

And I've a feeling that, as the centuries pass and the world changes, and when I am long gone from this earth, this story of mine will still be told over and over again and will never be forgotten.

A large part of Bernard Cornwell's novel *Azincourt* (2008) is devoted to events in Soissons in 1414, the year before the battle. The hero, Nicholas Hook, is an Englishman of peasant stock, who is outlawed by a member of the gentry. He takes service as an archer and finds himself with the Burgundians in Soissons when the town is attacked by the Armagnacs. The English are then betrayed by their leader Sir Roger Pallaire, who is of Norman descent. Hook and his comrades are advised by the traitor to take refuge in a church, but Hook knows better than to take the advice of a Norman. When French troops enter the town and begin to round up their opponents, he attempts to hide in a house. He surprises the traitor in the act of attempting to rape a nun. He kills the villain, rescues the girl, and they hide together in the roof. From here they witness the sack of the town and the butchery of the English archers who tried to find safety in the church. After many adventures, Hook and his girl escape to England. He finds an opportunity to tell Henry V about the atrocity committed at Soissons; and the King vows that he will have his revenge on the French.

Why this emphasis, in novels about Agincourt, on the events at Soissons the year before? The sack of the city in 1414 became a byword for all that was worst about medieval warfare. The chronicler Enguerrand de Monstrelet wrote that there were 'full four hundred English archers' in the Burgundian garrison there; and Jean Juvenal des Ursins recorded that, when Henry V addressed the French prisoners taken at Agincourt, he said that:

He had not come as a mortal enemy, for he had not consented to burning, ravaging, violating nor raping girls or women, as they had done at Soissons.

Des Ursins also tells us that 'very many of the townsmen, English archers and soldiers of the garrison were hung on a gibbet without Soissons'. However, the story was a good deal more complicated than his account would have us believe. There is no mention in Monstrelet's account of English *archers* being present in Soissons in 1414. All he tells us is that English soldiers fought on *both sides* of the action, and their role was not exactly honourable:

During the storm, the commander of the English forces within the town, having held a parley with some of his countrymen in the king's [Armagnac] army, caused a gate leading to the river to be cut down, through which the Count of Armagnac's men rushed, and hoisted, on the highest tower, the banner of their count; and the greater part of the English suddenly turned against the townspeople.

Nor is there any mention of English archers at Soissons in the Chronicle of the Monk of St Denis. The Monk mentions the presence of foreign soldiery – *une soldatesque étrangère* – but these were Bretons, Gascons and Germans, and they fought on the Armagnac side, rather than the Burgundian. He also mentions a gibbet, which was set up near the King's lodgings, and from which 20 members of the garrison were hanged; but he does not say that these were Englishmen. Finally, he mentions that Soissons was a town which had a number of magnificent churches, and home to a valuable collection of relics, but he makes no mention of Saints Crispin and Crispinian.

Even if there was a massacre of English archers at Soissons in 1414, it is highly unlikely that this played any part in Henry V's decision to invade Normandy the following year. It is much more likely that stories about Soissons began to circulate *after* Agincourt, because the battle was fought on a day associated with Saints Crispin and Crispinian. (According to legend, these were two cobblers, martyred in Soissons many centuries previously, though there is also a Kentish tradition that they originated in Faversham).

Pierre Naudin has written a cycle of novels about the Hundred Years War, the ninth volume of which is *Le Bourbier d'Azincourt* [2006] (*The Quagmire of Agincourt*). This is a stirring tale and a worthy counterweight to Henty's. It is good to be reminded that

Agincourt played a part in French history as well as English. The underlying stratum of fact is that the Duke of Burgundy stayed out of the battle, and ordered his vassals to do the same; but many of them put their patriotic duty first and disobeyed him; and that the Duke's son only allied himself with the English in 1419, after his father had been murdered by the Armagnacs. Nevertheless, Naudin writes about the French civil war from the point of view of an Armagnac propagandist. He condemns the Burgundians and he is very hostile towards the English, especially the Lancastrian dynasty. When Henry V's father Henry IV dies in 1413, he writes:

Soon afterwards, the usurper of the throne of Richard II, the murderer of the true king, the author of numerous other murders, rendered up his black soul to the devil.

Naudin's Anglophobia is mollified, to some extent, when his hero Gui encounters a party of renegade Englishmen, led by a former monk William Olandyne, who has taken service with the French because Henry V has banished him. Gui joins forces with Olandyne and he clearly admires the rebel English for their spirit and professional skill. This incident has some basis in fact, since Olandyne is mentioned both by Tito Livio in his mid-fifteenth century biography of Henry V and in the anonymous *First English Life* of 1513. Curiously, at least from an English point of view, Joan of Arc also figures large in the novel, though she was only 8 years old in 1415 and her extraordinary career did not begin for another fourteen years. The author gives her a new identity as the sister of Charles VII.

In Naudin's account of the battle, the French have numerical superiority, and most of their army is composed of well-armed knights, whereas the English are represented as 'peasants', poorly dressed and lacking in equipment. All this is plausible enough but the novelist also repeats the curious French myth that some of the English archers stripped to the waist, and supposedly further, before action:

From his position in the centre of the army, Gui witnessed the deployment on the other side of a double line of 'Goddon' archers. To put themselves at their ease, some of them rolled up their sleeves of jerkins and in some cases you could see their naked torsos. In others they were completely naked.

The French knew that the English archers were lightly armed and in many cases wore leather jerkins rather than steel armour; but the idea that some of them were 'completely naked' is, to say the least, an exaggeration.

The French Constable makes the most elementary of tactical mistakes and the French are unable to utilise their numerical advantage. Their situation is not dissimilar to that which the French army was to find itself in at Sedan in 1870. A companion of Gui's remarks: *Nous sommes dans la boue et la merde.* ('We are in the mud, and in the shit.')

Naudin's is suffused with a popular hatred of the English which, if it existed in the Middle Ages at all, must have arisen after the English conquered Normandy and Maine, rather than before. The French heroes of the novel repeatedly refer to the enemy as *Les Goddons* – 'The Goddams' - after an oath which was commonly used by English soldiers; but the oath can only have been widely heard by the French at a date when they were living in close proximity to English-speaking soldiers; and that suggests an origin after 1417-19 in the case of Normandy, and after 1424 in the case of Maine. The term cannot have originated in the English Duchy of Aquitaine, because there were never any English settlers there, as there was in the North of France. Moreover, the Oxford English Dictionary cites Joan of Arc as the first person known to use the term 'Goddon', in 1431. This is likely to be true because she disliked swearing of any kind and is far more likely to have taken exception to the sacriligious nature of the 'Goddam' than the average Frenchman or woman.

There is another facet to Naudin's anti-English bias. He appears reluctant to concede that the English won the battle by their own unaided efforts, and constantly refers to Welsh archers (as Cox does) as the true heroes of Agincourt; but Anne Curry's studies of the records have shown that the Welsh contingents, though present at Agincourt, were in a tiny minority; and the excessive praise afforded to the archers in fiction ignores the essential role played by the King and his men at arms.

Historians may be able to demonstrate that Agincourt was not a decisive battle; that it was in no sense 'the English revenge for Hastings'; that there were very few Welshmen at Agincourt, and no Scots; that not all the yeomen archers who used the longbow to such devastating effect were landless peasants; that the yeomen did not comprise the entirety of the English army; and that the 'anthem for the common man' was not clearly heard before the twentieth century; but it is unlikely that this revisionism will ever undermine the myths altogether. They contain a core of undeniable fact and they are, in any case, too powerful. They will continue to inspire the novelist for some time to come, just as they inspired Shakespeare over 400 years ago.
