



# The Greatest Knight: The Remarkable Life of William Marshal, the Power Behind Five English Thrones

*Thomas Asbridge*

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## **The Greatest Knight: The Remarkable Life of William Marshal, the Power Behind Five English Thrones** Thomas Asbridge

A renowned scholar brings to life medieval England's most celebrated knight, William Marshal—providing an unprecedented and intimate view of this age and the legendary warrior class that shaped it.

Caught on the wrong side of an English civil war and condemned by his father to the gallows at age five, William Marshal defied all odds to become one of England's most celebrated knights. Thomas Asbridge's rousing narrative chronicles William's rise, using his life as a prism to view the origins, experiences, and influence of the knight in British history.

In William's day, the brutish realities of war and politics collided with romanticized myths about an Arthurian "golden age," giving rise to a new chivalric ideal. Asbridge details the training rituals, weaponry, and battle tactics of knighthood, and explores the codes of chivalry and courtliness that shaped their daily lives. These skills were essential to survive one of the most turbulent periods in English history—an era of striking transformation, as the West emerged from the Dark Ages.

A leading retainer of five English kings, Marshal served the great figures of this age, from Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine to Richard the Lionheart and his infamous brother John, and was involved in some of the most critical phases of medieval history, from the Magna Carta to the survival of the Angevin/Plantagenet dynasty. Asbridge introduces this storied knight to modern readers and places him firmly in the context of the majesty, passion, and bloody intrigue of the Middle Ages.

*The Greatest Knight* features 16 pages of black-and-white and color illustrations.

## **The Greatest Knight: The Remarkable Life of William Marshal, the Power Behind Five English Thrones Details**

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## From Reader Review The Greatest Knight: The Remarkable Life of William Marshal, the Power Behind Five English Thrones for online ebook

Nicole~ says

*A knight there was, and he a worthy man,  
Who, from the moment that he first began  
To ride about the world, loved chivalry,  
Truth, honour, freedom and all courtesy.  
Full worthy was he in his liege-lord's war,  
And therein had he ridden (none more far)  
As well in Christendom as heathenesse,  
And honoured everywhere for worthiness.*  
(The Canterbury Tales - Chaucer)

Relying on *L'Histoire de Guillaume le Maréchal*, the first and only biography known to describe the life of a medieval knight, written by John of Earley and commissioned by William's eldest son after his father's death in 1219, historian Thomas Asbridge, like many others before him, takes us on a journey of *The Greatest Knight* from his impoverished childhood years when, at the age of five years old, he was held hostage and nearly executed by King Stephen.

Asbridge illuminates a medieval world of complex and conflicting royal duties, of perilous battles and boundless responsibilities. By the age of thirteen, William had arrived at Tancarville, to acquire skills in arms, *to learn the business of war and ultimately to join the ranks of Europe's new military elite by becoming a knight.* *L'Histoire* describes him as tall and handsomely built, fitting well then to this career. Years later, William would show outstanding skill at tournament circuits - international games considered valuable for social networking. Such gatherings also served as means of improving a knight's wealth, honing and showcasing a warrior's prowess. It is at one of these tournaments that the funniest 'William' anecdotes of the book occurs where he is pummeled by sword and mace, crushing his helmet down to his scalp. He won the fight but when the prize was awarded, he was nowhere to be found.

*Two knights and a squire eventually tracked him down to a local forge. There they found Marshal on his knees, his head lain upon an anvil, as a blacksmith struggled to pry his 'smashed and battered' helmet off with an assortment of 'hammers, wrenches and pincers'. It all made for a laughable scene – one that William evidently remembered with great affection.*

Marshal was politically flexible, possessing a natural ability for governmental diplomacy. Moving in earnest like a highly treasured inheritance from one king's dominion to another, Marshal served as royal household attendant and fought alongside Henry the Young King when the latter rebelled against his formidable father, yet immediately upon Henry's death, easily secured a worthy place as a champion warrior during the old King's battle with the French King Philip and his own son, Richard - a battle in which William could have killed the Plantagenet heir.

*[William] spurred straight on to meet the advancing [Duke] Richard. When the [duke] saw him coming he shouted at the top of his voice: 'God's legs, Marshal! Don't kill me. That would be a wicked thing to do, since you find me here completely unarmed.'*

*In that instant, Marshal could have slain Richard, skewering his body with the same lethal force that*

*dispatched Patrick of Salisbury in 1168. Had there been more than a split second to ponder the choice, William might perhaps have reacted differently. As it was, instinct took over. Marshal simply could not bring himself to kill an un-armoured opponent, let alone the heir-apparent to the Angevin realm, King Henry II's eldest surviving son. Instead, he was said to have shouted in reply: 'Indeed I won't. Let the Devil kill you! I shall not be the one to do it', and at the last moment, lowering his lance fractionally, he drove it into Richard's mount.*

William went on to serve Richard I after the old King's death and assisted in regaining power over strongholds in England, Normandy and Flanders, recapturing them from the French King. When Richard was on Crusade and captured, William defended the king's realm with Queen Eleanor, ensuring the Angevin succession.

The author acknowledges that in these times, knights of Marshal's caliber would acquire wealth and lasting fortunes as payment for their services and allegiances through solicitous means, and this was not beneath even the most chivalric William Marshal. During the reign of King John, the king history has dubbed the most treacherous monstrous monarch, *"it is likely that Marshal applied the same wheedling pressure for reward, remarked upon by Henry II in 1188, to the new heir-apparent John – currying favour and bidding for preferment."*

William's loyalty to King John never wavered despite the latter's growing rancor toward him and backstabbing attempts to deprive him of power and lands, particularly those in Ireland. Even so, his most important roles were realized because of John: in 1215, participating in the creation of and signing Magna Carta - the first Bill of Rights - and, when King John died leaving a child as heir to the throne, Marshal became guardian to the 9 year old King Henry III, and Regent of England. At the remarkable age of 70 years old, he fought the most important battle of his career, a battle that saved England from baronial rebellion and French invasion, thereby securing the English royal line and ensuring an independent identity for England. By the end of his adventurous life, Marshal was known as one of the most powerful men of his generation, and was eulogized by Stephen Langton as *"the best knight who ever lived."*

Asbridge extracts an extraordinary life from the shadows of Plantagenet history with some effort but there is quite enough substance to buff up a resplendent shine on William Marshal, 1st Earl of Pembroke, *The Greatest Knight*, and enough to entertain the most eager of Marshal fans.

Read Jan 8th, 2015

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## **Rindis says**

It's an act of hubris to be able to pronounce the 'greatest' anything, much less the 'greatest' knight, a class of people that was fairly large and existed over centuries, but it is certainly fair to say that William Marshal is the best known knight, and actually a good contender for the title on his own merits.

Long-lived and successful, Marshal rose from obscurity as a second son to being the regent of England in all but name. Even so, he'd hardly be known at all today if not for a biography of him written in the early Fourteenth Century, and rediscovered in the Nineteenth. This has been of great use in learning more of the Twelfth Century, but it does present the problems of a biased document (having been commissioned by his son). Asbridge has studied other records from the time, and used them to check some of the biography's claims, which generally stand up to scrutiny. (There are a few things where the records show that something couldn't have happened as described; but it's generally a case of being off by a year or two, which is pretty good considering the author seemed to be going off of other people's reminiscences.)

Ashbridge's biography also serves as an introduction to the Twelfth Century as a whole. There are two layers of subchapters in the book (subchapters and sub-subchapters), and while some of them serve other purposes, many of the sub-subchapters are taking time out to take a look at an aspect of the time. He gives a description of how the system of household knights worked at the time, describes the general form of early tournaments (which was vastly different from the more familiar late- or really post-Medieval version). This points up that the book is meant for a fairly general audience, and some of these asides will be familiar to people who only have a moderate appreciation of the Middle Ages. But it makes for a much more well-rounded book than just a focused examination of Marshal himself, and is structured in such a way that it does not detract from the main focus.

However, the general-audience target of the book means that the only footnotes are basically long parenthetical asides or clarifications. There are no detailed notes of where information came from, and many cases of unsupported assertions interleaved with others that are taken apart and examined in some detail. For all of that, Marshal himself only dimly comes across as a person, as Asbridge seems to have trouble coming to any solid conclusions as to what he was like. Part of this seems to be an inability to believe that Marshal could really have been motivated by a deep-seated loyalty to a person, or perhaps, the crown of England itself (which is something that would likely have evolved over time). This shows up early, when he doesn't even consider such a concept as an explanation as to why his father was apparently willing to blithely toss his younger son away when he was held as a hostage.

Keeping in mind the real audience though, this is a well-constructed book, and does a good job with many of secondary characters as well, for instance giving a more nuanced view of King John than he habitually gets.

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## **Jeanette says**

Fabulous research and source materials, photos, landscapes, period tombs for William Marshal's life.

The 12th Century was a time of great change. Very definitions and categories for and pursued by the noble or gentle classes! Those pursuits also for all kinds of power display and influence became pageant heavy.

Five kings, and he wasn't always on the "side" of any of them? Or was he?

Long-lived in a time when life (and in his specialty double that) was often elderly disability and/or becoming long in the grave before 60.

I've heard and read these histories of Eleanor's and Henry II's sons multiple, multiple times. But this one gave me the most insight into their eldest Henry (so unfairly treated in so many dismissive and uncomplimentary asides and fiction stories) and also to John. Everyone has done the Lionheart, but many fewer detail the other brothers to this degree of actual print inquiry.

It also taught me some French words I have heard and have read and now I finally understand their connotations. Not fully translatable to English. And also about the armor and the clothing which, like the warhorse, was a gifted and absolute necessity.

These were Normans and Anglo-Saxon mixes and English was not as English became.

Very good study of a life that was completely outlier. And this is truly worth a read for any serious history pursuers of the period.

## Orsolya says

If you are a devotee of Medieval English history; more than likely you have a crush on William Marshal (if you are interested in men). This man is everything that the stereotype of a knight-in-shining-armor entails (even though shiny armor plates didn't exist yet): loyalty, bravery, and chivalry. The question is whether William Marshal truly encompassed these traits or if that is an exaggerated portrayal in hindsight. Acclaimed author and medieval studies lecturer Thomas Asbridge highlights the life of this much-loved warrior in, "The Greatest Knight": The Remarkable Life of William Marshal. The Power Behind Five English Thrones".

Let's make one thing clear before even diving into details regarding the content of Asbridge's work. One would expect "The Greatest Knight" to be a full-blown biography or manifesto highlighting the life of William Marshal. Sadly, "The Greatest Knight" is not that. The content of Asbridge's pages mostly discuss the surrounding political and social spheres during the life and times of William Marshal (such as the reign of King Henry II) with Marshal feeling a bit pushed to the back burner. Pages meander by without even a mention of this famous knight which means that readers do not get a true sense of who Marshal was and don't get to look into his life. Yes, facts are learned but it is hardly what is expected from the heady title of the book.

That being said, in general, when history books claim to portrait a singular figure and hardly do so; the overall text takes a hit and isn't strong with a negative feedback as a result. "The Greatest Knight" somehow manages to avoid this. Even though Asbridge doesn't fully reveal Marshal, the pages are well-written, enjoyable, informative, and have an entertaining pace. This allows for some forgiveness in the absence of a true Marshall biography.

"The Greatest Knight" also contains some speculative "could have" and "must have" – statements which aren't welcome when the pages already don't feature William Marshal enough. On the other hand, Asbridge does occasionally attempt to debunk some myths involving Marshal and uncover some lesser-known facts; thus, slightly offsetting the disappointment of former speculation.

There is evidence of repetition throughout "The Greatest Knight" leaving the reader to think, "Okay, we get it. We have covered this". Perhaps this is due to not enough material available covering Marshal but it also could merely be poor editing.

Towards the latter half of "The Greatest Knight", Asbridge shifts the focus more onto a detailed view of Marshal (which may be reflective of more source material for this period). Although this section reveals the career and political machinations of Marshal and also opens up his personal life a bit more; there is still a missing element of matching the bright star to Marshal. Basically, Asbridge aims to prove the greatness of this figure but this falls short and is never properly credited or demonstrated.

Asbridge's conclusion to "The Greatest Knight" is particularly emotive with a strong portrayal of Marshal's involvement with the Magna Carta and the Battle of Lincoln greatly capturing his personality. This flows into an 'Epilogue' exploring the Marshal's death, the impact on his family members, his legacy, etc. Without a doubt, this epilogue is an epitaph and is the 'best' part of "The Greatest Knight" where Marshal is revived, vindicated, and brought to life. In this way, Asbridge finally meets his thesis. If only, the entire book was like this...

Asbridge includes a timeline, genealogical charts, light notes, two sections of color photo plates, and sporadic illustrations throughout "The Greatest Knight" to graphically delight readers.

William Marshal is the stuff of legend and the epitome of a chivalrous knight. Sadly, "The Greatest Knight" doesn't reveal the extent of Marshal's worth or capture him enough for readers being that much of the text doesn't even discuss him. Yet, Asbridge has a lovely writing style with an academic edge which does introduce Marshal and the time period, wonderfully. Usually a book claiming to portrait a figure but mostly speaking of the surrounding environment has a negative feel and weak impact but Asbridge manages to excel. Thus, "The Greatest Knight", despite his flaws, is suggested for William Marshal –lovers and readers interested in medieval England.

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## **``Laurie Henderson says**

I've been wanting to read this book and learn more about William Marshal for a long time now and author Thomas Asbridge didn't disappoint. This reads more like a work of historical fiction than history as there was never a dull moment in this fast paced book relating this unlikely tale of rags to riches.

I first ran across William Marshal back in the early 1980's when I read Thomas Costain's book: *The Conquering Family and The Magnificent Century*. Costain was clearly in awe of William Marshal and his many amazing deeds. If you read this biography of Marshal's you will understand why.

William's life did not start out very promising as the youngest son of a Norman Count, during the civil war between King Stephen and the Empress Matilda. Somehow the elder Marshal, through many nefarious deeds came out ahead in this war which ruined many others.

The Civil war began upon the death of King Henry I, son of William the Conqueror. His only living heir was his daughter Matilda, young widow of the Emperor of Germany. Matilda returned home upon his death fully expecting to reign as the Queen of England and the rightful heir to King Henry.

Her cousin Stephen's mother, was a younger sister of King Henry I and her son Stephen felt he was the rightful king of England not Matilda. He gained many supporters and was quickly crowned king before the return of Matilda.

Thus began the Civil War that would continue for the next 20 years; almost bringing England to ruin. Matilda turned out to be a bit of a virago which didn't help her cause at all.

Before her father's death he had arranged for her to marry Geoffrey Plantagenet, Count of Anjou, Touraine and Maine. He was only 19 at the time of their marriage and several years younger than Matilda. The dashing Geoffrey was quite the lady's man as well as a sharp dressed man who wore a sprig of the broom plant (*Planta Genesta*) in his hat thus earning his surname Plantagenet.

Unfortunately Geoffrey couldn't stand Matilda either but did his duty and sired the future King of England, Henry II Plantagenet.

Henry II was somewhat of a child prodigy upon returning to England to win back his mother's crown while at the young age of 15.

King Stephen was near death when he named the 19 year old Henry II his heir, finally ending the civil war.

His father, Geoffrey, had recently conquered Normandy, leaving Henry a not so little empire in France with the titles of Duke of Normandy, Count of Anjou, Touraine and Maine.

Before returning to England after Stephen's death, Geoffrey and Henry stopped at the court of King Louis of France, who was married to the ravishing Eleanor of Aquitaine. Apparently some sort of agreement was reached between Henry and Eleanor, who was 11 yrs Henry's senior; like father, like son I suppose.

Eleanor had been demanding a divorce from King Louis, refusing to give him a male heir in her desperation to be quit of him. Eleanor had apparently been caught in an adulterous romance with her Uncle Raymond, when she accompanied King Louis on Crusade in the Middle East. Shortly after she met Henry at court she obtained her divorce and returned home to begin her rule as the heir to the kingdom of Aquitaine.

Whether Henry abducted Eleanor or whether she was a willing participant in her abduction, she wed Henry a few weeks later and returned with him as England's Queen. She promptly gave birth to several sons and daughters while Henry was busy ruling his Angevin kingdom, Aquitaine and England. He stayed on the road most of the time and rarely had time to visit his family, which would come back to haunt him in later years.

Meanwhile, back to the English Civil War and William Marshal. His scheming father was in deep trouble with King Stephen, who had demanded one of his sons as a hostage to secure the Count's loyalty. 6 year old William, his youngest son, was handed over and then the Count promptly returned to his nefarious ways.

The outraged King threatened to kill young Marshal who was loved by his soldiers by this time. Stephan had also become fond of Marshal saying that anyone who could kill this child would have to be a monster indeed.

At the age of 14 William left home to begin a new life in the household of a distant Norman relative and began training to be a knight. The author described the arduous training that William would have endured to become a knight.

At the age of 18 William had proven his worthiness and was dubbed a knight. His Uncle had no further need of his services and William was released from duty with only a horse and saddle to his name. By this time his parents had died and his older brother had inherited all of his father's lands. William began fighting in numerous tournaments to pay his way in the world.

It wasn't long before William had mastered the art of tournament fighting and with his many wins soon became well known and respected in the European tournament arena.

With his improved financial situation William decided to return home to England to learn the art of real warfare. The duchy of Aquitaine had revolted against Angevin rule and the King gathered his army and sailed to France to wage war on the rebellious nobles.

William joined the household of another uncle, the Earl of Salisbury's retinue during the Aquitaine campaign.

Eleanor, the duchess of Aquitaine, had followed her husband to war and in 1168 William was guarding her royal cortege along with his uncle Salisbury's troops when they were attacked from the rear by a large company of rebels.

William fought so bravely during this action that the duchess paid his ransom and he became part of her household.

From that point on William would serve the Plantagenets until his death at the age of 71.

William was noticed by king Henry who wanted William to join the household retinue of his eldest son. William was a few years older than the young Henry and they quickly became life long friends with William serving him loyally.

William would go on to serve King Henry II, King Richard I, King John I and John's son Henry III. His life was so closely entwined with the Plantagenets that his life relates their history as well as his own.

Upon King John's death his kingdom was left in turmoil with a small child as his heir. William was feeling his age at 70 having retired several years earlier, but at this moment William was the only man that could save the crumbling Angevin empire.

It's hard to believe that William was still capable of riding off on his horse many miles to rescue the hostage young King and then returning him to London at the age of 70. It must have been exhausting but William had always had the strength of Samson, which attributed to his success in tournaments and warfare.

William had ascended from the depths of being a child hostage, to the highest position in the land as the ruler of England during the minority of King Henry III.

He had lived through the Angevin empire as well as its demise. William died at the age of 71 after bringing order back to England after the disastrous reign of King John.

William Marshal is regarded as the greatest knight of the Middle Ages and after reading his story I have to agree.

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## **Suzanne says**

Confession time. One of my regrets in life is making the ridiculous decision at 15 not to continue with studies in history because I didn't like the teacher for the upcoming year. I blame my parents for not overruling me. (Smugly sidesteps all responsibility and crosses fingers that own children won't try something so silly.) Consequently, I have rather embarrassing gaps in my knowledge of British history. "The Greatest Knight" did an excellent job of filling in some rather crucial details involving Eleanor of Aquitaine, the Crusades, the Magna Carta and just how a ceremony involving tapping someone on the shoulders with a sword and announcing in a regal voice "I dub thee Sir xxxx" came about.

I'd never heard of William Marshal before this book and you can see why he makes such an interesting subject for a book. First of all, the man all but disappeared for around 600 years apart from some brief historical mentions. "The Greatest Knight" opens with the tale of how a rare medieval manuscript about William Marshal was discovered, then lost again for twenty years before being tracked down by a dogged scholar of early manuscripts (no less than Paul Meyer, a key witness (for the defense) in the notorious Dreyfus Affair).

Secondly, William Marshal managed to live to the ripe old age of 71. This was in the early 1200s! The man had super genes or something. Even better, the guy managed to put on armor two years before his death and lead an army in a crucial battle. And not only did he live long enough to provide a life story covering the reign of five kings, he actually knew those kings. To kick things off, he's sentenced to death by hanging at the tender age of five. Honestly, if someone had tried writing this story as a movie, people would have laughed and said it wasn't realistic.

Really interesting way to learn about this period of time, understand the beginning of the rules of chivalry, knights and tournaments, and how hard it is to rule a kingdom that stretches from Scotland to the Pyrenees when the fastest mode of transport is horseback. There was a bit too much riding from battle to battle every now and then, and the number of players can get a bit overwhelming, but then the story picks up again or you learn something else new about medieval life and the pages keep turning.

## **Deborah Pickstone says**

A good read, though I was irritated of a slight sense of being patronised at times. Like, for instance, referring to 'Vikings' when we know the word is a verb not the name of a people. A simple explanation of this would have sufficed rather than ....writing simplistically is the only way I can think of to try to describe my gripe :)

The lack of proper referencing was a great irritant, also - I like to research questions that come up as I read - and the proof reader should be shot! It's OK that the author may make malapropisms or misspellings but they should have been picked up on; for instance - "Longchamp.....had a great tendency to horde power." I believe that should have read 'hoard'.

I would recommend the book as an adjunct to research on Marshal. I liked his treatment of the Young King, actually admitting he had some sense and ability! My biggest problem was Historical Howlers. I wonder which universe his Middle Ages were in?

If I marked this on history I might have given 2 stars but it read easily so I was generous. I updated this review because I had forgotten the bit about Henry, the Young King until I read another review of the book and wanted to be fair.

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## **Louise says**

What was it like to be a knight in the age of chivalry? What was it like to be up close and personal to Henry II, his Queen Eleanor and their sons? Thomas Abridge brings it all to life in this engagingly written biography of William Marshall.

While born a noble, William Marshall was not a first son. His father supported King Stephen's cousin's claim to the throne and was willing to make William a hostage in the 14 year civil war. William survived execution orders and the general poor and uncertain conditions of being a hostage. Perhaps he survived because he was adorable child or maybe because King Stephen was as a sympathetic monarch.

Freed upon King Steven's death, the young William was sent to a relative in Normandy where he began his training as a knight. Here the reader learns of the life of "mesnie" and the roles and responsibilities of knights and their lords. The reader learns how knights were trained and how the expenses of getting and keeping a horse, mail, shields, swords and daily living were met. While there is a lot on the pomp and pageantry, Marshall's own dubbing was a make shift affair since a battle was expected.

Asbridge illustrates the "career paths" and options for knights through the Marshall's setbacks. When Marshall loses his horse and patron he trades his cloak for another (not a war horse, these cost in today's terms as much as a house) and enters tournaments. After building a reputation, some wealth (from prizes) he was ready for war when it came. Through the war he came into the service of Henry II and eventually a trainer for the crown prince, Henry, who is also, technically, a king. He serves each crowned member of this dysfunctional family as they make war, sometimes on each other.

Behind each of the five administrations, Henry II, the shadow King Henry, King Richard I, King John and Henry III there is William Marshall, attempting to uphold the ideals of chivalry when right and wrong are hardly clear. You see William time and again, choosing loyalty.

If you don't know the story of Henry II and his sons it will be a page turner with each battle and episode of intrigue. If you know the story you will learn a lot on the role of the knights in this period and gain perspective on how Henry II's poor parenting begat Richard I and eventually John and the Magna Charta.

This is a wonderfully written book. It is easily accessible for those who don't know about this period and can add perspective for those who do. I highly recommend this for anyone interested in this period.

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## **Marita says**

I learned a great deal from this interesting and well-written book, and not only about William Marshal.

The Preface of this book describes how a manuscript at Sotheby's caught a French Scholar's attention, but was then sold and disappeared from view for many years. The French man pursued his search for the manuscript which turned out to be a thirteenth century biography of a knight by the name of William Marshal. (Be sure to read the fascinating Preface!)

## **Who was William Marshal?**

William was born in England "around 1147" during the reign of King Stephen and at a time of civil war in England. He was to become not only a knight of great renown, but an important baron. He served five English kings, and acted as Regent for the last of these, Henry III. He lived to a ripe old age and worked (and fought) to the last, but died in his own bed surrounded by his family.

## **King Stephen (reign: 1135-1154 with interruptions)**

Thomas Asbridge provides a good overview of the events that led to the reign of King Stephen and the turmoil that followed. He tells the story of the ill-fated *White Ship* and the loss of the heir to the throne, followed by the king's death and the subsequent struggle for the throne. It was during this period of civil war that William was a hostage at the age of five and was very nearly executed. (This is not a spoiler, as it appears in the blurb.)

## **King Henry II (reign: 1154-1189)**

In 1160 William was sent to Normandy to train as a knight:

"So it was that, as William Marshal entered his teenage years, he set off for northern France, seeking in the words of the History 'to win an honourable reputation'." "He had arrived at Tancarville, aged around thirteen, to acquire skill at arms: to learn the business of war and ultimately to join the ranks of Europe's new military elite by becoming a knight."

Asbridge then describes the evolution of the medieval knight, the history of knighthood and what one had to do to become a knight. There are sections on his education and the learning of etiquette, clothing, horses and armour as well as the ritual of knighthood. We also learn about tournaments, chivalry and William's first skirmishes.

In the late 1160s William returned to England and the narrative switches to Henry II and his queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine. In 1168 William was part of the group assigned to accompany and guard Queen Eleanor, when the party was attacked and after fighting furiously he was captured and held for ransom. The queen duly ransomed and employed him. This was the start to a long career.

"One thing is certain: by 1170, Marshal had cemented his reputation with Queen Eleanor as a

valiant and skilful warrior and was regarded as a trusted member of her entourage."

Many interesting details are provided about the reign of Henry II and his family, including Eleanor's eventful life prior to marrying Henry.

### **The Young King Henry**

King Henry II anointed his son Henry as king during his own lifetime, but never handed over the kingdom. Henry died before his father, but during his lifetime William Marshal was chosen to serve the Young King. During this period there were many upheavals, but William always remained a loyal retainer.

### **King Richard I (reign: 1189-1199)**

Prior to Richard's reign, William had an encounter with Richard in which the latter could easily have been killed by the knight, but instead William killed Richard's horse. Fortunately Richard did not hold it against William, and there was a position available for the latter when Richard became king. During Richard's reign William married an heiress, and their relationship seems to have been long, happy and fruitful.

### **King John (reign: 1199-1216)**

There were two claimants to the throne, but John prevailed and had the support of William. John was not politically astute, and lost much French territory which had serious ramifications. France's wily king Philip Augustus seized every opportunity given him to reclaim English held territory. Under John's rule William had to be very careful as John had a reputation for being capricious, and William's loyalty would be severely put to the test. William had some nasty experiences with King John. During this time William was also involved in the drawing up of **Magna Carta** and subsequent revisions thereof.

### **King Henry III (reign 1216-1272)**

Henry was crowned king at the tender age of nine years. William knighted the young lad and helped ensure that he became king of England. William acted as Regent, and although he was at this stage no longer young he continued serving loyally and even participated in battle at the age of seventy.

William Marshal's most outstanding quality was his loyalty to these kings no matter what. He became very powerful, rich, famous and had a long happy marriage which produced several children. However, the author clearly shows that William was, in spite of all this glamour, an ordinary man who often acted from selfish impulses.

To conclude:

"But William Marshal was not merely a politician. He was also a warrior and a knight; a man who had lived his long life in accordance with the ideals of chivalry, pursuing and preserving honour."

Please note that any mistakes in this brief outline are entirely mine. The book is packed with information regarding the time and rule of each of these monarchs. There are maps, family trees, many illustrations, notes and references. **Highly recommended.**

Effigy of William Marshal, 1st Earl of Pembroke in Temple Church, London, England.

Tombs of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine in Fontevraud Abbey, France

Tombs of Richard I and Isabella of Angoulême (John's wife) in Fontevraud Abbey, France.

## Summer says

What a book! I am so thankful that the record of his life was found and studied by Paul Meyer. This is such a golden look into a time in English and European histories from 1066- 1219, that is really quite remarkable. It takes us through the life of William Marshal a boy given for ransom to King Stephen. It then goes on to explain the world William grew up in, as the world of knights grew from its infancy. This is a very detailed account of his life and times that could read horribly dry, but you don't get that feel at all reading/listening to it. It is fascinating the way Christianity had such a bearing in the life of a knight and all things chivalrous. I learned a great deal, as I do not know a lot of real life of this time beyond the great tales of Arthur and his Knights. It would be a great adult companion book to read while your children are reading of this time. As it adds a depth to the time that is almost all encompassing. The twists and turns one had to make to be held in high regard, by the ever changing throne is almost Machiavellian. Yet, somehow despite his often perceived gain for self-glory there was a wisdom in warfare and court warfare that William seemed to perfect. Those trained and that had served William greatly respected him. Even his enemies.

He was a help or aid to five Kings of England: Henry II, Henry the Young, Richard I (the Lionheart), King John and then Regent to the throne for Henry III.

P.S. Disney did very well inaccurately portraying both King Richard the Lionhearted and then his brother King John.

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## David Dinaburg says

Tragedy inspires ownership. It is not one of humankind's prettier reactions. To stake a claim—this was what I was doing when JFK was shot, when the towers fell—seems natural; an attempt to subsume inexplicable circumstances within a comprehensible narrative. Yet, there's something rankling about those on the periphery of a widely disruptive event claiming proximity or personal discomfiture; an inherent and seemingly inevitable competitive response replaces sympathy or commiseration, radiating outward from those most impacted to those that might have heard of someone involved at one point.

Such is not the case with William Marshal, who always seemed to be embroiled in the thick of things:

[William] spurred straight on to meet the advancing [Duke] Richard [the Lionheart]. When the [duke] saw him coming he shouted at the top of his voice: 'God's legs, Marshal! Don't kill me. That would be a wicked thing to do, since you find me here completely unarmed.'

In that instant, Marshal could have slain Richard, skewering his body with the same lethal force that dispatched Patrick of Salisbury in 1168. Had there been more than a split second to ponder the choice, William might perhaps have acted different. As it was, instinct took over. Marshal simply could not bring himself to kill and un-armoured opponent, let alone the heir-apparent to the Angevin realm, King Henry's eldest son. Instead, he was said to have shouted in reply: 'Indeed I won't. Let the Devil kill you! I shall not be the one to do it', and at the last moment, lowering his lance fractionally, he drove it into Richard's mount. With that 'the horse died instantly; it never took another step forward' and as it fell, the Lionheart was thrown to the ground and his pursuit of the king brought to an end.

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I was reading *The Greatest Knight: The Remarkable Life of William Marshal, The Power Behind Five*

English Thrones when a building about thirty feet away from me exploded. During the ensuing chaos, it was the tearful urgings of my girlfriend that prodded me from my stupor and out of what would soon become a seven-alarm fire. The flames would devour three building in Manhattan's East Village and leave another building—the one that shared a wall with me—with enough structural damage to likely be torn down. Two people died.

It irked me, later, when I saw people on facebook lamenting the destruction of Pommes Frites, the Belgian fry shop caught in the conflagration. Its collapse served as a firebreak, likely saving my girlfriend's apartment building. But why should it rankle me? Pommes Frites was their connection to the East Village. They are allowed to feel sad it is gone. Allowing space for others to express their distress is not an admission that yours is somehow lessened—even if theirs is might be silly were you to directly compare the two.

The Marshal has been idealized, if not idolized, by the document that recorded his life. Written a generation removed, the character revealed within its pages doesn't begrudge others their responses or reactions, nor seem to seek the spotlight. His glory is not tarnished by allowing others to find fame—if anything, it serves to reflect that light back upon him two-fold. William Marshal always seemed to choose the difficult and laudable path:

With his eyes focused solely upon the dogged pursuit of power, the Lionheart had betrayed his family, sided with the Angevins' avowed foe and waged open war upon his kin. Now all his cherished ambitions had been fulfilled and Henry [II]'s corpse lay cold and lifeless before him...At last, Richard turned from the body and 'asked for the Marshal to come to him immediately'. With only the Old King's chancellor, Maurice Craon in tow, the two men rode out into the verdant countryside surrounding Fontevraud.

The *History* preserves a dramatic record of this tense encounter. After a long pause, Richard finally broke the silence, apparently saying: 'Marshal, the other day you intended to kill me, and you would have, without a doubt, if I hadn't deflected your lance with my arm.' This was a dangerous moment. Should William accept this comment, he would allow the Lionheart to save face, yet at the same time admit to having sought his death. According to the *History* at least, he chose the harder path, replying: 'It was never my intention to kill you ... I am still strong enough to direct my lance [and] if I had wanted to, I could have driven it straight through your body, just as I did that horse of yours.' Richard might have taken mortal offence at this blunt contradiction. Instead, he was said to have declared: 'Marshal, you are forgiven, I shall never be angry with you over that matter.'

Marshal's act of mercy was not later diminished by the Lionheart's boastful self-importance, and his iron rebuttal seemed neither whinging nor gleeful. In fact, it was quite daring. Perhaps there is a lesson here, on how to handle the issue of proprietary suffering—to keep in mind that the hardships of others remain hardships, no matter where they fall in relation to your own.

I will not be able to disentangle reading The Greatest Knight from clutching it to my chest as I inhaled the acrid smoke draped across Washington Square Park, heavy with a century's worth of burning building materials. I can't explain why I grabbed it alone from amongst my belongings. It's a really well-written account and an excellent piece of non-fiction; it has the up-close feel and snappy pacing of casual fiction. The Greatest Knight is, apparently, a book I would take with me during an emergency.

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## **Elizabeth says**

I confess that before I read Thomas Asbridge's **THE GREATEST KNIGHT** I was already curious about

this new biography of William Marshal. The lives of John FitzGilbert the Marshal and his son William are a lifelong study subject for me outside my novel writing career. Since this work shared the title of my 2004 novel *The Greatest Knight* the life of William Marshal and even the same font and cloudy background as my UK cover, my interest was naturally piqued even more!

William Marshal, circa 1246-1219 has been called the Greatest Knight who ever lived and we know about him through a rhyming biographical poem of over 20,000 lines commissioned by his family and written by a poet simply known as John.

Despite the often highly positive spin the biography puts on the Marshal's life, much of the "Histoire de Guillaume le Mareschal" still rings true in its basics and the reader receives a strong flavour of the vigour of the Marshal's character. It's a vivid glimpse into the world of the 12th and 13th century aristocracy – their cares and concerns, their pleasures and politics. It's the first secular biography of an Englishman and a work of incalculable value, not least because of its survival, which is a story in itself.

That survival is the starting point of Thomas Asbridge's work - how it was rediscovered at auction by historian Paul Meyer in the 19th century and how he lost the bid, but doggedly followed the manuscript's trail, found it again, and translated it into the modern French of his own era along with a commentary. It's a fascinating story that draws the reader in and is one of the book's most positive and interesting aspects. Thomas Asbridge tells his tale in a strong, linear style that is entertaining and very readable which gives it wide appeal. You don't have to be an academic to enjoy the writing. He mostly relies on the "Histoire de Guillaume le Mareschal" as his source material and puts his own interpretations on the story, sometimes with results that might raise the eyebrows of those who know William Marshal well, but probably won't be noticed by those who don't. I have to say that general readers may be misled at times about the Marshal's character because the interpretation, and indeed some of the stated 'facts' do not always stand up to scrutiny. Asbridge never seems to quite grasp the nuances. For example, John FitzGilbert, William's father is portrayed as a brutal weathercock. But he was no more brutal than any other baron at the time, and it could be argued much less of a weathercock than a good number of his compatriots. Once he swore for the Empress he stuck to his word even though it meant the loss of an eye at Wherwell, and the potential loss of his son at Newbury, when John was the last man standing between King Stephen and the castle at Wallingford. The reader isn't told this. Asbridge tells us instead that King Stephen was 'determined to punish John's presumption' and so in the fading days of his power, came to seize John's castle at Newbury. But it was more than just royal displeasure and vindictiveness that brought Stephen to Newbury. The point of the Newbury incident is that Stephen needed to get to Wallingford before the future Henry II returned from Normandy, but he knew if he marched directly to Wallingford from his current base at Reading that John FitzGilbert would come from Newbury, attack him from behind and he'd end up sandwiched between the defending garrison at Wallingford and the Marshal forces in the rear. So in order to have a good chance of success at Wallingford, he had to take out John Marshal first. John Marshal knew there was no one else; he was the last man standing between Stephen and the destruction of Wallingford. That puts the whole situation in a very different light.

There's the moment when John attacks his rival neighbour, Patrick of Salisbury. Asbridge tells us that this shows John's capacity for 'ruthless brutality' – to attack a troop of more lightly armed men. What he doesn't tell the reader is that these lightly armed men were actually on their way to slaughter John and were carrying their heavy armour with them ready to put on just before they attacked him. But John got wind of their intent and hit them first. Again, the reader is only told half the story and thus the nuances are changed.

When it comes to William Marshal himself, I began to wonder how much notice Thomas Asbridge had actually paid to the *Histoire* although it seemed to be his main source of information. For example, he tells us that "The Marshal himself seems to have shown only limited interest in the likes of dancing (and) music." In direct contradiction of this the *Histoire* tells us that William's singing voice had a 'pure, sweet tone' and that he willingly sang for his comrades at a dance at a tourney and that it gave them 'much pleasure and delight.' (Lines 3471-3483) Many years later on his deathbed, William said one day that he felt like singing, as he had not in three years. This suggests that he had enjoyed song for most of his life. He also specifically called his daughters to sing for him and instructed them how to do so to the best of their ability and then joined in with them.' (lines 18532-18580). This is a man with only days to live. It's very, very obvious that he loved music, understood its technicalities, and it would have been one of the few joys left to him.

Asbridge alters one scene in the *Histoire* itself by not reading the text in primary source and by misunderstanding the English translation, hence the matter of the pike. At a tourney at Pleurs, William Marshal got his head stuck inside his helmet and went to the smithy to have it prised off. In the meantime he had been judged 'man of the match' which means he had won the main tourney prize, of a fish – a large pike. The *Histoire* tells us this in the original Old French word for the creature "luz" It's in prime condition and more than two and a half feet long. Pikes and swans were common tourney prizes at this time, as were other animals. One particular tourney even had a bear as the prize. Asbridge tells his readers that William has won a two and a half foot long spear! Common sense would surely tell one that a spear of two and a half feet in length isn't actually a spear and not a useful thing to win, especially not for the champion of the show! Asbridge dresses William in an odd way too. He tells us he would have worn a shirt with detachable sleeves, a 'fact' that appears to be picked up almost verbatim from the Danziger and Gillingham book "1215". Asbridge says that William would have worn "a shirt, often with detachable sleeves." Danziger and Gillingham's line (p22) says "a shirt with long sleeves that were often detachable." Now then, neither Danziger nor Gillingham are clothing historians but I happen to know a few, and I challenge anyone to find any time in the 12th or 13th century when shirts with detachable sleeves were worn; tunics perhaps, later on under Renaissance influence, but never, never shirts.

The description of the Young King, eldest son of Henry II is almost identical to the one on Wikipedia and the problem here is that the reader can't know if this information is reliable because Asbridge doesn't give proper sources or footnotes. There is no bibliography section, rather the books consulted are mentioned in the end notes which are far from reader friendly. They are arranged in a chapter by chapter format, but are quotes from pages without reference numbers, leaving the reader utterly baffled and having to hunt through the entire chapter for the lines in question.

I was somewhat surprised at some of the dates Asbridge uses. Eleanor of Aquitaine receives the older research birthdate of 1122 instead of the now more usually accepted 1124. King John's birth year is cited as 1167 when it looks more likely to be 1166. (See "Eleanor of Aquitaine Lord and Lady," edited by John Parsons and Bonnie Wheeler, the chapter by Andrew Lewis on revising the birth date of King John. This also gives the revised birth date of 1124 for Eleanor of Aquitaine. Gerald of Wales also indicates the birth date of 1166 for John). William Longespee's birth date is erroneously given as 1167 when we now know it was somewhere between 1175-80, shortly before his mother, Ida de Tosney married Roger Bigod, Earl of Norfolk.

The reader is told that Eleanor of Aquitaine was at the coronation of her son the Young King in 1170.

However she was in Normandy at the time, trying to prevent various agents of Thomas Becket making the crossing and preventing the coronation. (William FitzStephen *Life of Becket*).

Asbridge has William setting off for the Holy Land in September 1183 and suggests that he just possibly may have arrived there in that same month in time to fight Saladin – which is patently impossible given even a jet propelled horse.

Asbridge suggests in one of the many 'may have' moments occupying the narrative that Richard the Lionheart was determined to build a glorious reputation for himself in liberating Jerusalem and didn't want William along on crusade with him in case the Marshal stole his limelight – he was jealous of him! That begs the question then, why did he promote William and his affinity to such prominent positions in his government? Why not just dump William if he was worried about the threat to his own glory? Asbridge also speculates as to whether William would be considered a coward for staying at home, but since someone had to rule the country and since William had already made the pilgrimage, it's an argument that skates on thin ice – in my opinion.

Asbridge accuses the Marshal of 'grumping, wheedling and whining' to Henry II for promotion and makes him sound like a child having a whinge in a supermarket. While the Marshal might have been pro-active in seeking promotion, and we know he complained to Henry II, "grumping, wheedling and whining" does not convey the resonances of the period and the way in which the reciprocation of patronage played out. Would Henry II, famous for his impatience, have listened to and sought the advice of a man who grumped, wheedled and whined? Absolutely not.

Positives? The aforementioned story of the discovery and rescue of the manuscript is well written and fascinating. Dr. Asbridge also gives a fine reassessment of the Young King which is long overdue and puts

him in his full political context. Rather than a foolish, spendthrift 'Hooray Henry,' this eldest surviving son of Henry II comes over as a politically astute young man frustrated by his father's controlling, micro-managing policies. That aspect of the biography is excellent and recommended as food for thought. It's a great balancer to the more usual negative assessments of the Young King.

Ultimately, Asbridge's "Greatest Knight" is an uneven work that doesn't really get under the surface of the Marshal's personality and there are some rather bizarre interpretations of the motivations behind some historical events without credible evidence to back them up.

If it is taken too seriously or seeps into the public mindset, it has the potential to set back the progress made by more scholarly works of our understanding of the Marshal. If you do read this one, make sure you also read David Crouch on the Marshal to get a fully rounded picture.

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### **Juliew. says**

First off I won this in the First Reads here at Goodreads but this in no way effected this review. From a military and political stand point this was like having a front row seat to the reigns of five english kings. William Marshall served these kings with honor, dignity and bravery as this book shows throughout. Despite that I received an uncorrected copy with the occasional left out word or out of order sentence it was filled with detail on most every aspect of his long career. I especially enjoyed the historical background on knights, the military campaigns and the glimpses of the many monarchs in action. It is a fascinating account and if you like knights, the medieval era or english history please do not hesitate to take a look at it.

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### **Rio (Lynne) says**

Having read Chadwick's books on William Marshal a few years ago, I enjoyed reading and revisiting this non-fiction book on his amazing life. Some who have read Chadwick made comments....that there is no way this happened and the author just had a love affair with William. Well, at first read I thought the same, so I investigated. Well, it's there written in a medieval biography that was almost lost to history. We are lucky that a French scholar came across this "rubbish aka hidden jewel" at an auction. William survived 4 Kings, championed Eleonor of Aquitaine and became regent to Henry III. His remarkable story has almost been forgotten. I'm happy his story has been resurrected. Thomas Asbridge simply wrote the facts. He didn't lay claim his opinions were the truth and that's how non-fiction books should be.

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### **Chris says**

I received this book as part of GoodReads First Reads giveaway. And I read an Uncorrected Proof copy.

Edited: I originally quibbled about the lack of references but I only did not see them because I read an uncorrected proof so I have no qualms or reservations about this book. It's a straight up great book, very informative and extremely interesting.

Well that was fascinating. This book is a biography of the life of William Marshall along with a whole lot of other information to give context. It takes us from William Marshall's boyhood as a hostage when his father decided to risk William's life in order to defy the king (you'd think that would cause some issues down the road) to his death as both an earl and regent for King Henry III of England.

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Seriously, this guy goes from being a second son set to inherit nothing to being the most powerful man in England by being a canny political operator and by his skill on the battlefield both as a combatant and later as a tactician and strategist. And in the process the man shaped history. By throwing his weight one way or the other he influenced the outcomes of succession crises and civil wars.

And more than just a biography of William Marshall's life, it's a history of England and France (and the rest of the world to an extent). Asbridge goes into the details of the culture, the military tactics, the chivalric ideals, everything. This was a truly informative and interesting read.

So, if you're interested in medieval history or just how knighthood worked, I'd heartily recommend this book.

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