RAID

THE GREAT CHEVAUCHÉE

John of Gaunt's Raid on France 1373

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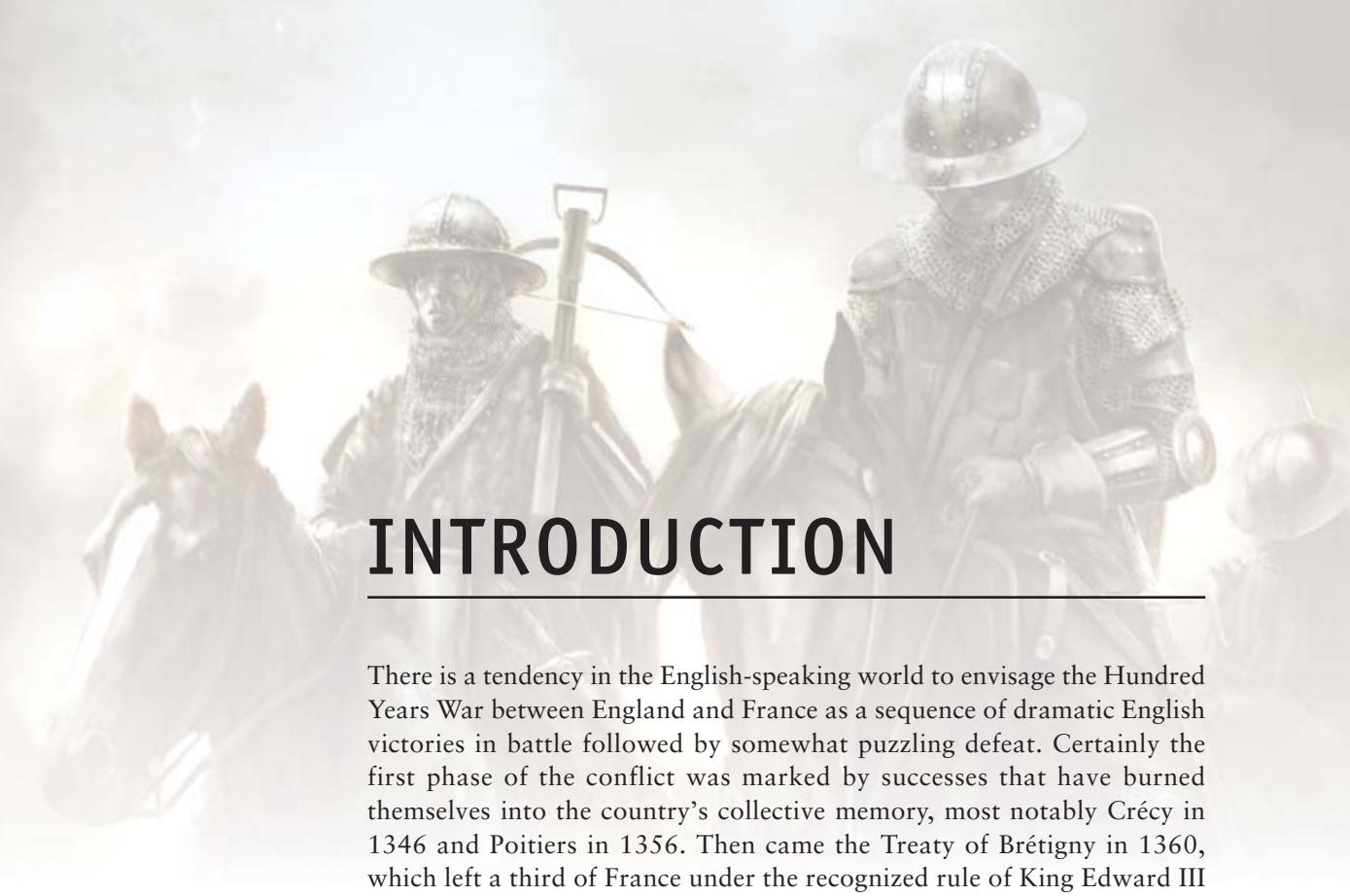

INTRODUCTION

There is a tendency in the English-speaking world to envisage the Hundred Years War between England and France as a sequence of dramatic English victories in battle followed by somewhat puzzling defeat. Certainly the first phase of the conflict was marked by successes that have burned themselves into the country's collective memory, most notably Crécy in 1346 and Poitiers in 1356. Then came the Treaty of Brétigny in 1360, which left a third of France under the recognized rule of King Edward III of England.

Yet by the end of the 14th century, English rule had been reduced to a few small – in some cases tiny – coastal enclaves. How this happened tends to be glossed over in British history books. It represented a collapse marked by few battles on land, none of which involved large armies, and one major naval defeat, which is even more embarrassing for a proud maritime nation. On the other hand the English did not simply roll over. In fact the second phase of the Hundred Years War, from 1369 until 1396, saw several major efforts by the English, on land and sea, to restore their position in France. Perhaps the most ambitious, remarkable and indeed heroic was the Great Chevauchée commanded by John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, in 1373. Yet it also failed in its primary objectives, and was followed by an English collapse in Aquitaine.

A number of other events had an even greater impact on the course of these first two phases of the Hundred Years War. Above all there was the Black Death, a series of epidemics of bubonic plague that wrought havoc across much of the known world. Reaching France in 1348 and most of England the following year, the plague returned again and again, the last major outbreaks being in 1369 and 1375. John of Gaunt's Great Chevauchée was therefore launched between two epidemics. Military casualties were tiny when compared to those caused by the Black Death, and although plague mortality was less among the elite than amongst ordinary people it was nevertheless still high, leading to a reshaping of the aristocratic social and military fabric in both countries. Indeed it was

The Tuchins, who rose in revolt across much of southern France in the 1360s, reflected the desperation of the people and the ravages caused by war. The rugged nature of the terrain, such as that seen here at Pont du Rastel, also meant that decades passed before government authority was restored. (Author's photograph)

often necessary to promote new men and families to aristocratic status with its attendant military obligations. The economic impact of the Black Death also meant that the value of many aristocratic estates, even those of royal families, fell and had not recovered at the time John of Gaunt was desperately searching for money to finance his ambitious new campaign in France.

France had been the richest country in Europe at the start of the Hundred Years War and despite defeats and plagues its rulers still seem to have had relatively little difficulty raising money for increasingly professional, mercenary and expensive armies. In fact it seems that the continuation of the war often benefited the surviving nobility and urban oligarchies, as well as the government bureaucracy in France. But it was of no benefit to the peasantry, amongst whom it came to be said that '*Les bois sont venus en France avec les Anglais*' (Forests came to France with the English) because a steep decline in the rural economy led to an increase in wooded areas at the expense of agricultural land.[1]

Yet it is interesting to note that the war had little impact on the level of crime in France, many violent crimes actually being acts of resistance by supporters of one side or the other. What is clear is that the conflict enabled the French legal system to strengthen ideas of loyalty to the crown rather than to local lords. Indeed in both England and France kings and their governments increasingly expected unflinching obedience in what might be interpreted as the dawn of modern nationalism. Significant cultural changes also had a military impact by changing attitudes amongst military elites.

In England, for example, French remained a language of culture and gentility even in the later 14th century. However it was now a prestigious but

1 Favreau, R., 'L'enquête pontificale 1373 sur les Hospitaliers dans la diocèse de Saintes', in A. Luttrell & L. Pressouyre (eds), *La Commanderie*, Paris (2002), p.271

The battle of La Rochelle, in which an English fleet was defeated by France's Castilian allies within sight of these harbour towers triggered a collapse of English power in south-western France, which in turn prompted John of Gaunt's epic raid of 1373. (Author's photograph)

foreign tongue, rather like Latin. Even amongst the higher aristocracy, who were so proud of their Norman or French origins, the stumbling Anglo-Norman French of the nobility was becoming something of a joke, especially as the Hundred Years War encouraged increasing francophobia across England. Meanwhile English was establishing its superiority among the country gentry and lower aristocracy, despite the fact that its use was hampered by a huge variety of dialects and spellings. Chaucer noted this problem in his great poem *Troilus and Criseyde*, which he completed just over ten years after the Great Chevauchée:

> And for ther is so greet diversitee
> In English and in wryting of our tonge,
> So preye I god that noon miswryte thee,
> Ne thee mismetre for defaute of tonge.[2]

In England, these years similarly saw a significant rise in the power of Parliament, though the institution itself could hardly yet be called democratic. In the year of the Great Chevauchée the merchants of England proclaimed that Parliament rather than various mercantile assemblies represented their wishes, and in 1373 or 1374, according to the *Eulogium*

2 Chaucer, Geoffrey (W.W. Skeat ed., S. Boston tr.), *Troilus & Criseyde*, London (1990), verse 257

Historiarum, a great council took place in Westminster in the presence of Edward III's eldest son, the Black Prince, and the Archbishop of Canterbury concerning the validity of papal taxation. Whether it really took place is a matter of debate, and the story might simply be anti-papal propaganda.

Less than a decade later southern England was convulsed by the Peasants' Revolt, but by then France had suffered more prolonged violence from the 'lower orders'. The bloody Jacquerie uprising of 1358 was worst in areas north of Paris and stemmed largely from dissatisfaction with an aristocracy that had failed in its primary roles as defender of the kingdom and upkeeper of law and order. It involved many other groups of society in addition to the traditional agricultural peasantry and, although the Jacquerie was soon crushed, it had stirred up terrifying class hatreds. The Tuchin revolts of the 1360s were more prolonged but were confined to the south of the country. Having flared up in the Haute Auvergne about 1360, these revolts eventually spread to towns around 1378, and were seen across much of the Languedoc. The Tuchins reached their peak in the winter of 1382–83 before finally being suppressed in 1385. By then, of course, the Great Chevauchée had not only marched right through the worst-hit heartlands of the Tuchin revolt but, by spreading still more devastation, disruption and despair, had contributed substantially to its causes.

ORIGINS

The origins of the Great Chevauchée lie in the period of relentless English setbacks from the failure of the Treaty of Brétigny to the fall of La Rochelle in September 1372. Brétigny had recognized the English king, Edward III, as the sovereign ruler of about one third of France, and not as a vassal of the French king as had previously been the case for 'English' territory in France. King Jean 'the Good' of France, having been captured at the battle of Poitiers, eventually agreed to the Treaty of Brétigny but died four years later. He was succeeded by his son Charles V, who, though cautious and unwarlike, wanted revenge for the humiliation of Brétigny without the risks of full-scale war.

Within a year of coming to the throne he won a significant victory over King Charles of Navarre who, like the English monarchs of earlier centuries, owned large territories within France and had resisted the authority of the French king. However this was promptly followed by a less successful campaign in Brittany, where Charles's most famous commander, Bertrand du Guesclin, was captured – not for the first time in his remarkable career – by an Anglo-Breton army at the battle of Auray.

Despite this setback, the pro-English Duke Jean IV of Brittany was for a while driven out. Nevertheless, this complex conflict, known as the War of Breton Succession (1341–65) ended with Jean IV returning as Duke and coming to terms with Charles V. The English and French kings next supported rival claimants to the crown of León and Castile in Spain, where they fought another 'proxy war'. Meanwhile the English were committed to the unprofitable occupation of extensive territories in France, where their presence was widely, though not universally, resented.

As if this was not enough, there was further Anglo-French competition in Flanders, which was currently going through one of the most tumultuous periods in its tumultuous history. While most of Flanders was either ruled or dominated by France, within the country the wealthy and economically advanced cities dominated the rural countryside. Indeed Flanders had much in common with early Renaissance Italy in political, economic and social, if not yet cultural, terms. Like much of Italy, much of Flanders was also hugely