

Marc Morris,
William I: England's Conqueror
London: Allen Lane, 2016; xii+105 pages

In time for last year's 950th-year celebration of the Norman Conquest of 1066, this new addition to the Penguin Monarchs series provides an accessible study of the leader of that conquest, William, Duke of Normandy, who became William I or William the Conqueror (c.1028–1087). Although accurate information about William is "comparatively scarce" (p.6), Morris, an historian of the medieval world, has written a fine study of William that explains what set him on the road to the justly-famous Battle of Hastings that made William the king of England and how his subsequent reign brought seismic changes to the Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

When the English king Edward the Confessor, who was half-Norman, died in December of 1065, there is good evidence that he intended the throne to pass to his Norman kinsman William (p.22–24). The powerful earl Harold Godwinson (c.1022–1066), however, was able to take the throne and was crowned king in January of 1066. Ruling as Harold II, the Anglo-Saxon earl defeated an attempt by his brother Tostig to seize the throne, with the help of the "fearsome King of Norway, Harold Hardrada," at the bloody Battle of Stamford Bridge in the East Riding of Yorkshire on September 25 (p.45–47). Hard on the heels of this battle, William launched his own invasion of England and engaged Harold's army at Battle in Sussex on October 14, where he soundly defeated Harold, who was killed in the battle (p.48–50). Harold's death by an arrow in the eye was later depicted in the Bayeux Tapestry, commissioned by William's half-brother, Odo, bishop of Bayeux, though the Anglo-Saxon monarch may well have been cut down "by a dedicated Norman death squad, led by William himself" (p.50). William fully expected the Anglo-Saxon leadership that remained throughout England to submit to his rule, but there was resistance, and he was not actually crowned in Westminster Abbey till Christmas Day, 1066. Further Anglo-Saxon attempts to dethrone William continued until 1071, but his "martial skill and unshakeable faith" that "God was on his side" (p.88) enabled him to keep his throne.

His reign led to massive changes in English society, not the least of which was the replacement of the Anglo-Saxon elite by Francophone Normans. There was also the elimination of slavery throughout England shortly after William's victory at Hastings, since the Normans, unlike the Anglo-Saxons, had abandoned the practice of enslaving their enemies. It is estimated that some ten percent of Anglo-Saxon society were slaves (p.68–69). William also transformed the political atmosphere of England so that political executions became all but non-existent. Only one Anglo-Saxon earl was executed by William, and for the next 250 years none of the nobility were executed (p.84). Morris attributes William's refusal to engage in such killing to the influence of Lanfranc of Bec (died 1089), who had been William's spiritual advisor since his youth (p.84–85). Lanfranc, whom William installed as Archbishop of Canterbury, is best remembered for his defense of transubstantiation in his treatise *De corpore et sanguine Domini*, written in the early 1060s.

William's final years were difficult ones. His wife Matilda died in 1083, which was a devastating blow since "William was unusually uxurious" for his day (p.70, 86). And the previous year he had been forced to imprison his half-brother Odo, who had attempted to take

Norman knights to Rome where he hoped to make himself pope! (p.70). He also had difficulties with his eldest son Robert.

Although the Anglo-Saxons remembered William with deep bitterness—understandably—Morris sees the core motivation of William to have been that of a “religious zealot” (p.87) who was genuinely committed to the Christianity he learned from Lanfranc (p.84–85). It would be a similar sort of zeal, combined with martial expertise akin to that of William, which would lead the next generation of Normans to seek the conquest of the Holy Land (p.87).