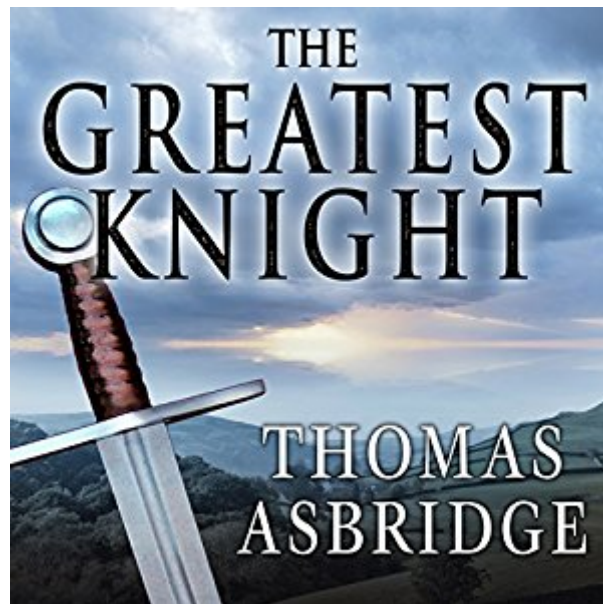


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The Greatest Knight: The Remarkable Life Of William Marshal, The Power Behind Five English Thrones



Synopsis

In *The Greatest Knight*, renowned historian Thomas Asbridge draws upon the thirteenth-century biography and an array of other contemporary evidence to present a compelling account of William Marshal's life and times. Asbridge charts the unparalleled rise to prominence of a man bound to a code of honor yet driven by unquenchable ambition. Marshal was the true Lancelot of his era - a peerless warrior and paragon of chivalry. As a five-year-old boy, William was sentenced to execution and led to the gallows, yet this landless younger son survived his brush with death and went on to train as a medieval knight. Against all odds Marshal rose through the ranks - serving at the right hand of five English monarchs - to become a celebrated tournament champion, a baron and politician, and, ultimately, regent of the realm. This knight's tale lays bare the brutish realities of medieval warfare and the machinations of the royal court and draws us into the heart of a formative period of our history. It is the story of one remarkable man, the birth of the knightly class to which he belonged, and the forging of the English nation.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This biography reads like a novel with a momentum that makes you turn the page. While it is something of an academic work supported by extensive research of royal and church documents of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries the storyline is fascinatingly supported by a biography commissioned by William Marshall's oldest son and written soon after Marshall's death.

Rediscovered in the late 19th century this biography provides a remarkably intimate portrayal of a

leading figure during a period that created the foundation of British Parliamentary Government. Based upon what can only be described as interviews with friends and family the biography shows you William Marshal the man rather than just the historical figure. Thomas Asbridge uses all these different sources to craft a truly remarkable read.

There were men who lived in a time dominated by the belief that the greatest failure was to be forgotten after death. But for a single text, rediscovered in 1861, this might well have been the sole legacy of William Marshal. Thomas Asbridge's account of the nearly forgotten Marshal is not the first book to recount Marshal's exploits, but frankly may be one of the very best. The challenge for Asbridge in "The Greatest Knight: The Remarkable Life of William Marshal, The Power Behind Five English Thrones" was to give a fresh interpretation of Marshal, whose story is represented primarily by one contemporary biography. In the wake of that primary source, several modern works are in print, any one of which could easily have pulled Asbridge into a rut of repetition. Not unlike his subject matter in this book, this is a challenge Asbridge ably accepts and readily accomplishes. To pull off a book of this type, Asbridge had to balance the need to present an engaging and colorful view of Marshal which remains true to the historical sources available, with the need to portray the foibles of a human being in the context of his own time without being a biographer/apologist championing the legacy of the subject. To his credit, Asbridge masters this balance in a seamless text. There are a few fleeting moments when Asbridge falls short of the mark. At times, the narrative feels too beholden to the ancient text "History of William Marshal" in that Asbridge's work feels as though it will become a 400 page book review of a centuries old work. Asbridge largely avoids this though, and quickly herds the narrative back into place in the few instances that it strays. The result is an entertaining, educational work that ensures the name of William Marshal will survive at least one more generation. This review is based on an advance reader's copy provided free of charge by the publisher in exchange for a fair and honest review.

If you're interested in Medieval history and the rule of the Angevin Kings, this is a pretty decent book. If you're interested in learning about the person it's supposed to be about, William Marshal, it's still a pretty good book. The Greatest Knight by Thomas Asbridge is not, however, exactly a page turner. There's an obvious amount of work and knowledge that Asbridge has put into the book and he provides a lot of useful back matter to back up his work. It's just that the book meanders in focus. The first quarter is as much about what life was like in the late 12 century as it is about Marshal. The next half is a lot about the various kings Marshal worked for and with. The final quarter

seems to be a little more focused on our main player, but only just. When considered as a whole, the book is a decent history about a time when there isn't always good source material to reconstruct. I learned a lot about the early days of knighthood, a bit about the Crusades, plenty about the kings of the period, both English and French, and the occasional reconstruction of what William Marshal's life was like. This is a book of more broad swaths and the occasional speculation rather than digging into specifics all the time. Since Marshal lived for 72 years or thereabout, a lot of ground is covered and it's incredible that he survived through so much. Not definitive, but if the topic is of interest, worth checking out.

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