

Kelly DeVries

*The Norwegian Invasion of  
England in 1066*

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The year 1066 saw not only the successful seizure of the English crown by the bastard William Duke of Normandy but also an invasion some months earlier by Haraldr Harðráði, king of Norway. This earlier invasion resulted in the defeat and death of the Norse king alongside his English ally, the outlawed earl Tostig. In this book Kelly DeVries, an assistant professor at Loyola College in Maryland, attempts to describe and explain the train of events leading up to the Norwegian defeat at Stamford Bridge on the 25<sup>th</sup> September 1066. In many respects, then, this book resembles the myriad of other volumes of greater or lesser academic quality that have, over the years, rehearsed the events leading up to the Norman Conquest; one thinks, in recent years, of Nick Higham's *The Death of Anglo-Saxon England*. DeVries' volume differs in that the first of the principal characters to be assessed is Haraldr Sigurdsson of Norway and in the *coitus interruptus* that leaves the reader stranded on the road to Hastings at the beginning of October. For much of the work, however, the 'Norwegian bias' is not particularly evident and to some extent one becomes suspicious that DeVries' main motivation is to end the story

with his real hero, Harald Godwinson, king of England and *quondam* earl of East Anglia and Wessex, alive and victorious at the end of the book.

DeVries is primarily a military historian of the later Middle Ages and in this work he returns, as he tells us, to the work of his undergraduate Honours dissertation. As a military historian, he is interested in logistics and command and he applies this in the present work through his analysis of various characters as 'warlords'. This term emerges as a quasi-technical term from his prose and his main thesis is that early medieval rulers either had to be warlords or had, like Edward the Confessor, to rely upon them. It is certainly true that in the early Middle Ages the successful ruler had to be a successful military leader; but the problem with DeVries' articulation of this point is his distancing of military activity, skills and leadership from other functions of leadership in Dark Age society. One of the great transformations of the Middle Ages concerns the relationship of warfare to the polity. At the beginning of the period warfare was profitable and raiding one's neighbours or appropriating their territory was the way in which chieftains gained the disposable wealth which they could then redistribute to their neighbours. The key to sustainable economic growth, as every barbarian leader knew, was genocide. By the end of the Middle Ages warfare, funded by cash taxation, was an enormous burden on the economy of most of the countries of Christendom and dissatisfaction with kings' attempts to finance increasingly professional armies

was one of the main factors behind most regicides and rebellions. The eleventh century lay on the cusp of this transformation with some regions, such as southern England, already in the 'tax and spend' mode and others, such as the Scandinavian and Celtic lands, and probably Northumbria, still being run as redistributive chiefdoms financed by booty and the slave trade. This distinction is not brought out at all in DeVries' work; he discusses all military ventures as if they were modern or late medieval enterprises and when comparing the English and Norwegian 'military' (and he does use that word), he does so principally in terms of technology and tactics as if these were simply the result of command decisions. The lack of any kind of anthropological perspective to his analysis of the 'warlord' is particularly disappointing and after a while this reader began to feel a sense of unease every time the term appeared.

This slightly anachronistic and socially naive approach also emerges in the second chapter dealing, we are told, with 'Anglo-Scandinavian England'. The title might encourage one to expect a chapter dealing with the social or ethnic links between Scandinavia and England in the eleventh century; but instead one is simply fed a brief narrative of Viking attacks on the bottom end of the island. We are also told that pre-Viking England contained 'towns' (15) and, an old chestnut, that the first Viking raid on England occurred in 789 in Wessex (14), rather than in the course of a thirteen year reign which began then. Viking settlement began, it seems, in the eighth century (16) and changed

the language of England from a 'Germano-Celtic to a [sic] Anglo-Scandinavian mixture' (17). By 878, we are told, Anglo-Saxon England had become Anglo-Scandinavian England (17), despite the fact that settlement had only begun two years earlier. In Chapter Three on Harald Sigurdsson we are told that, despite being a ruthless warrior, the Norwegian also appreciated poetry (24), as if these two areas of activity ought to be incompatible! We are told that Iaroslav of Kiev maintained a strong army because 'peace yielded prosperity' (26), when in fact the prosperity of the Rus' lay in their ability to extort tribute from the surrounding Slavic and Finnish tribes under military duress. One could go on. The book is packed with anachronistic statements and judgements and with illegitimate inference. There are also some downright inaccuracies. We are told, for example, (42, n.92) that Sveinn Estriðsson was the son of Harald's half-sister and given as a reference a note in Magnusson and Pálsson's translation of *King Harald's Saga* where a completely different relationship is described. Sveinn, indeed, seems to have confused the author a great deal as does the relationship between the Wends and the Slavs. And on page 47 it is not at all clear that DeVries realises that Niðaross, the mouth of the river Nið and Þrándheimr are all the same place. On page 111 we are told that Bosham (Sussex) is near to Dartmouth (Devon). DeVries consistently refers to Edward the Confessor's nephew Ralph of Hereford as a Norman when he was in fact from the Vexin, a county answerable directly to the

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French crown, and also makes this same error with regard to Count Eustace of Boulogne, Ralph's step-father, who was a Fleming. This is not a minor error since it affects his analysis in which these two characters are presented by the author as supporters of William the Bastard's claim to the English throne when they are far more likely to be pursuing Ralph's own, far better, claim. Ralph's death in 1058 is what removes him from the equation 1066.

All this said this is a meticulously researched book and DeVries knows his way around the primary and secondary material. The extensive footnotes and bibliography alone make this a useful book to own. In this lies the real crux of the problem. With its anachronistic approach to rulership and warfare, its somewhat boys own lionising of heroes like the two Haralds and its attention to the detail of military equipment and tactics this book reads like a very good semi-popular work aimed at a middle-brow audience. Its format, however, with long footnotes and detailed attention to primary sources, and its publication by Boydell whom we have come to associate with the highest standards in Early Insular history lead one to expect more than one, ultimately, gets.

*Alex Woolf*