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the

GODWINS

FRANK BARLOW



THE GODWINS



THE RISE AND FALL OF
A NOBLE DYNASTY

The family of Earl Godwin of Wessex stands among the most famous in English history. Owing their rise to Godwin's outstandingly successful career during the reign of the Danish King Cnut (1016–35), they became even more prominent in the time of Edward the Confessor (1042–66). Godwin's daughter, Edith, became King Edward's wife, his son Harold inherited his father's earldom of Wessex, his son Tostig acquired Northumbria and other sons also became earls. Over the century they accumulated great wealth and established enormous influence.

However, Edith and Edward could not have children and ultimately this destabilised the monarchy, exposing the problem of the royal succession after Edward's death. Harold took the throne soon after but was defeated and killed at the Battle of Hastings in 1066; Queen Edith lived in England until her death in 1075, and other survivors of Godwin's family faded into obscurity.

Frank Barlow places the Godwins at the centre of this unstable world, charting the family through to Harold – the last Anglo-Saxon king – and finally the crowning of William the Conqueror during the Norman Conquest.

Frank Barlow is the author of many books including the bestselling 'The Feudal Kingdom of England'. He is Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Exeter and Honorary Fellow of St John's College, Oxford; CBE, FBA, FRSL.

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE



The family of Earl Godwin of Wessex must be among the most famous in English history. Owing their rise to Godwin's outstandingly successful career during the reign of the Danish King Cnut (1016–35), they became even more prominent in the time of Edward the Confessor (1042–66). Godwin's daughter Edith became the king's wife, his son Harold inherited his father's earldom of Wessex, another son Tostig acquired Northumbria, arguably the next most important earldom in the kingdom after Wessex, and other sons also became earls. In 1065, under Edith's patronage, an anonymous Flemish monk began the so-called *Vita Ædwardi Regis*, a text intended to be a tribute to the family's greatness. Yet within little more than a year, all was in ruins. The childlessness of Edith's and Edward's marriage always threatened to open up the problem of the royal succession after Edward's death. Harold and Tostig quarrelled. Although Harold took the throne after Edward's death and defeated an invasion led by the King of Norway and his brother Tostig, he was himself defeated and killed at the Battle of Hastings. On 25 December 1066 William the Conqueror was crowned king of the English in Westminster Abbey. Queen Edith lived on in England until her death in 1075. Other survivors of Godwin's family faded into obscurity. Even the location of Harold's physical remains became the subject of uncertainty. The most tangible, if frequently inscrutable, direct record of the family's rise and fall is the truncated text of the *Vita Ædwardi*, its author grappling painfully with the disasters which had engulfed his subjects while he was writing.

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As Frank Barlow points out in an introductory historiographical survey, it has always been well nigh impossible to detach the history of the Godwin family from the history of the Norman Conquest. This is partly because some of the main sources on which we have to rely were written to praise William of Normandy, and so vilified his rival. It is also true that modern historians' perceptions of the Conquest have frequently influenced the way they view Godwin and his offspring. It is Professor Barlow's achievement in his deservedly famous *Edward the Confessor* and in the present book to set out to assess his subjects' actions freed from hindsight, without any connection to an event which they could not possibly have foreseen. As the modern editor of the *Vita Ædwardi*, Frank Barlow tells their remarkable story from the basis of a long and unique acquaintance with this allusive and difficult source. The complexities of politics are as a result explored with remarkable subtlety and sensitivity, and the undoubted simplifications of the Norman sources are rejected. Godwin is presented as a crafty survivor, Harold as the more able of the two brothers and Edith as an educated, capable, but sometimes unsympathetic personality. The ambivalence which Edward must often have felt towards his wife's seemingly all-pervasive family is made manifest. The context of an English kingdom linked by long history and dynastic claims to Scandinavia and the troubled politics of a kingdom disrupted by regular succession crises is clearly set out. There are intriguing commentaries on the family's treatment in modern fiction and on the fate of their descendants. And Professor Barlow's recent new edition of another crucial source, the *Carmen de Hastingae Proelio*, is used to provide an original and challenging account of the Battle of Hastings.

Frank Barlow's *The Godwins* is an exceptionally welcome addition to the Medieval World series. As the editor of some of the central sources for his subject, the author of many books and articles on the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and in particular

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of three outstanding medieval biographies of Edward the Confessor, William Rufus and Thomas Becket, he is superbly qualified to write the authoritative history of a great noble family and to assess the wider significance of their role in English history. Here he reminds us that Harold is often thought of as an English national hero. Yet while the family's fall is unquestionably seen as possessing elements of tragedy, *The Godwins* provides a masterly display of how to unravel sources written in a very different thought-world from our own and of the complexities of the world of eleventh-century politics.

David Bates

PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION



For this edition I have corrected one error and made a number of small revisions. A good number of these are due to correspondents who have kindly provided me with information or offered opinions. I wish to thank especially Miss Dinah Dean of Waltham Abbey, the author of a novel about Harold's daughter, Gytha, called *Daughter of the Sunset Isles*, and Mrs Patricia A. Millward of Heddon on the Wall. The Editor-in-Chief, Heather McCallum, and the Development Editor, Magda Robson, continue to guide my steps.

F.B.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE



When I was an undergraduate, my tutor, Austin Lane Poole, once accused me of laziness. This was, I think, a little unfair, as, after four years spent in the excellent History sixth form at Newcastle High School under the admirable Mr Lush, I was finding it easy to relax and enjoy all the pleasures that Oxford had to offer. Poole had the excuse that a whole line of history scholars at St John's had recently gone astray — one had even become a disciple of the Satanist, Aleister Crowley. But the charge rankled, and I have spent many years proving him wrong. It was, therefore, with great pleasure that I received the invitation from my former pupil at Exeter, David Bates, to contribute a book on the Godwins to his Medieval World series, for this would not only round off my studies of England in the eleventh century but also keep me occupied in my old age. It also means that I have almost turned full circle, for after dallying for some years in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it was in 1962 that my edition of *The Life of King Edward who rests at Westminster* made its first appearance and my *William I* was commissioned by A.L. Rowse for his Teach Yourself History series.

In writing this book I have profited from a good number of publications, both old and new, devoted to some aspects of the Norman Conquest; and I hope I have acknowledged my indebtedness in the notes. I have had an interesting correspondence with Rhona Beare, with a gift of some of her articles, on the enigmatic poem in *Vita*. I am indebted to Hubert J. Grills for a photocopy of the article by Lundie W. Barlow, which

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otherwise I would have missed. I have been encouraged and helped by Professor Bates and aided by all the editorial team. Alison Bowers copy-edited my text and very kindly contributed the Bibliography. The Editor-in-Chief, Heather McCallum, and Magda Robson guided my steps to publication. To all those who have helped me, my grateful thanks.

F.B.

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ABBREVIATIONS



- ANS* *Proceedings of the Battle Conference on Anglo-Norman Studies*, vols 1–11 (1979–89), ed. R. Allen Brown, vols 12–16 (1990–5), ed. M. Chibnall, vols 17–24 (1996–2002), ed. C. Harper-Bill.
- ASC* *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A collaborative edition in 23 volumes* (Cambridge, 1996–). Trans. D. Whitelock, in *EHD*, i. 109–110, 135–235; printed separately as *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, ed. D. Whitelock with D.C. Douglas and S.I. Tucker (1961).
- Barlow, *EC* F. Barlow, *The English Church, 1000–1066* (London, 2nd edn, 1979); *The English Church, 1066–1154* (London, 1979).
- Barlow, *Edward* *Edward the Confessor*, Yale English Monarchs (New Haven and London, 1997).
- Barlow, *William Rufus* *William Rufus*, Yale English Monarchs (New Haven and London, 2000).
- Brevis Relatio* *Brevis Relatio de Guillelmo nobilissimo comite Normannorum*, ed. E.M.C. van Houts, Camden Miscellany, xxxiv, Camden 5th ser., x (1997), 1–48.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>BT</i>	<i>The Bayeux Tapestry</i> , ed. F.M. Stenton (London, 2nd edn, 1965).
<i>Carmen</i>	<i>The Carmen de Hastingsae Proelio of Guy bishop of Amiens</i> , ed. and trans. F. Barlow (OMT, 1999).
<i>DB</i>	<i>Domesday Book</i> .
<i>EC</i>	see Barlow, <i>EC</i> .
<i>EHD</i>	<i>English Historical Documents</i> , i (c. 510–1042), ed. D. Whitelock (London, 1968); ii (1042–1189), ed. D.C. Douglas and G.W. Greenaway (2nd edn, 1981).
Encomiast, the	The author of <i>Vita</i> .
<i>Encomium Emmae</i>	<i>Encomium Emmae Reginae</i> , ed. A. Campbell (Royal Hist. Soc., Camden 3rd ser., lxxii, 1949).
<i>FNC</i>	E.A. Freeman, <i>The History of the Norman Conquest of England</i> (i, ii, 2nd edn, 1870; iii–v, 1st edn, 1869–75).
Freeman, <i>NC</i>	See <i>FNC</i> .
Gaimar	<i>Lestoire des Engleis par Geffrei Gaimar</i> , ed. A. Bell, 3 vols (Anglo-Norman Texts Soc. xiv–xvi, Oxford, 1960).
<i>GG</i>	<i>The Gesta Guillelmi of William of Poitiers</i> , ed. and trans. R.H.C. Davis and M. Chibnall (OMT, 1998).
<i>GND</i>	<i>The Gesta Normannorum Ducum of William of Jumièges, Orderic Vitalis, and Robert of Torigni</i> , ed. E.M.C. van Houts, 2 vols (OMT, 1992–5).
<i>GR</i>	William of Malmesbury, <i>De Gestis regum Anglorum</i> , ed. N.E.S.A. Hamilton (Rolls ser., 1870) (used here); ed. and trans. R.A.B. Mynors,

ABBREVIATIONS

	R.M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (OMT, 1998).
John of Worcester	<i>The Chronicle of John of Worcester</i> , ii, ed. R.R. Darlington and P. McGurk, trans. J. Bray and P. McGurk (OMT, 1995).
K/Kemble/KCD	J.M. Kemble, <i>Codex diplomaticus aevi Saxonici</i> (London, 1839–48).
Keynes	S. Keynes, <i>The Diplomas of King Æthelred ‘the Unready’, 978–1016</i> (Cambridge, 1980).
<i>King Harald’s Saga</i>	In Book III of Snorri Sturluson’s <i>Heimskringla</i> , trans., with introduction, by M. Magnusson and N. Pálsson (Penguin, London, 1966).
Körner	S. Körner, <i>The Battle of Hastings: England and Europe 1035–1066</i> (Lund, 1964).
Lloyd	J.E. Lloyd, <i>A History of Wales from the Earliest Times to the Edwardian Conquest</i> , ii (London, 3rd edn, 1939).
OMT	Oxford Medieval Texts.
OV	Orderic Vitalis, <i>Historia Ecclesiastica</i> , ed. M. Chibnall, 6 vols (OMT, 1969–80).
Rolls ser.	Chronicles and Memorials of Great Britain and Ireland during the Middle Ages, published under the direction of the Master of the Rolls (London, 1858–96).
Sawyer/S.	P.H. Sawyer, <i>Anglo-Saxon Charters: an Annotated List and Bibliography</i> (R. Hist. Soc., 1968).
Stafford	P. Stafford, <i>Queen Emma and Queen Edith</i> (1997). Blackwell, Oxford.

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Vita</i>	<i>The Life of King Edward who rests at Westminster</i> , ed. and trans. F. Barlow, 2nd edn (OMT, 1992).
<i>Vita Haroldi</i>	Ed. W. de Gray Birch (1885), trans. M. Swanton, <i>Three Lives of the Last Englishmen</i> (1984), 3–41.
<i>Vita Wulfstani</i>	<i>The Vita Wulfstani of William of Malmesbury</i> , ed. R.R. Darlington, Royal Hist. Soc., Camden 3rd ser., xl (1928).
Walker	I.W. Walker, <i>Harold, The last Anglo-Saxon King</i> (Stroud: Sutton, 1997).

INTRODUCTION



The Godwins were one of the grandest noble families in England in the first half of the eleventh century. The eponym married the sister-in-law of King Cnut; his daughter Edith married King Edward the Confessor; five of his sons became earls, and one of them, Harold, succeeded Edward on the English throne. The family came to possess vast estates almost throughout the English shires. It was, however, a meteoric rise — and fall. Not only is Godwin's ancestry uncertain, but also the whole dynasty crashed to ruin in the battles of 1066, merely thirteen years after his death and fifty years after the beginning of his climb to power.

It was a period of violent upheavals in English history.¹ Viking attacks in the ninth century, which had threatened to take the kingdom within a Scandinavian orbit, if not empire, were checked by Alfred the Great (king, 871–899). But after the 'imperial' triumphs in Britain of Alfred's grandson, King Æthelstan (924–939), and the peaceful reign of Alfred's great-grandson, Edgar (957–975), the rule of Edgar's son, Æthelred 'the Unready' (978–1013, 1014–1016), was a disaster. It saw the resumption of viking raids which culminated in the conquest of England by Danish kings, first Swegen Forkbeard (1013–1014) and then his son Cnut (1016–1035). Cnut, after initial barbarities, reestablished orderly and consensual government; but his dynasty was not long extended by his two sons who ruled in turn, Harold Harefoot (1035–1040) and Harthacnut (1040–1042); and it was left to Æthelred's son, Edward the Confessor (1042–1066), Anglo-Norman by blood,

to reconfirm the Old-English monarchy. But Edward's childlessness in the end again destabilized the monarchy and led to the Norman conquest.

The chequered history of the monarchy between 1016 and 1066 contributed to a similar instability in the aristocracy. Dynasties rose and fell. For example, a Mercian family headed in Æthelred's reign by Eadric Streona was destroyed by Cnut. But by and large until 1066 there was considerable biological continuity among the nobles (thegns) and their élite, the ealdormen, the provincial governors. Among these, the Godwins were the most successful and the best publicized by the chroniclers. The Norman conquest, however, unlike the Danish conquest, did not modify, but virtually destroyed the existing Anglo-Danish nobility. Although today it is not unusual for an English family to claim, usually fancifully, that its ancestor came over with William the Conqueror, few even attempt to push their pedigree further back into Old-English society.²

To appreciate the status and careers of the Godwins it is helpful to have an understanding of the social set-up in the kingdom of England in their time. This political entity had evolved out of the Germanic conquests and settlements in Roman Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries AD. In the beginning there had been a multiplicity of petty kings and kingdoms; but between the sixth and the tenth centuries, through amalgamations and the extinction of royal dynasties, the kingdoms had been reduced to three, Wessex, Mercia and Northumbria; and in 927 Æthelstan, king of the West Saxons and Mercians, annexed Northumbria. However, memory of the ancient kingdoms, several perpetuated as shires, persisted; and in times of stress, such as the viking eras, the united kingdom could easily break up again on ancient fault lines. Nevertheless, there was a strong consciousness of an English people in an English kingdom. As early as 731 the Venerable Bede had written his famous *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (*Anglorum*

gens). And ruling the kingdom of the English were English kings — whatever their racial origins may have been.

The victorious royal dynasty, that of the West Saxons, traced back to Cerdic (a Celtic name), who died in 534; and Cerdic was described as the ninth generation from Woden, the Germanic god of war, after whom the fourth day of the week, Wednesday, is called. Woden signifies ‘the furious’ or ‘the mad-man’, and was rather strangely identified by the Romans with their god, Mercury. Succession to the West-Saxon kingship, although hereditary, was not according to the rules of primogeniture; and, if the obvious successor did not emerge, there could be conflict or a division of the lands between rival claimants. Occasionally a candidate appeared unexpectedly from a collateral branch of the family and fought his way to the throne. In the period 1013–1066, owing to the Danish conquests and Edward the Confessor’s childlessness, succession to the English throne was exceptionally disturbed and unsettling.

The king ruled over subjects who, according to the law codes and treatises, were strictly stratified. In the eleventh century the main strata were ealdormen (earls), thegns and ceorls (churls); and each had rights and duties defined by the law. Beneath these was a large layer of slaves, who had no legal rights. Earls and thegns formed the nobility, and the ceorls were the ordinary freemen. The ealdorman was the royal officer in charge of a territory, usually one of the old kingdoms or sometimes one or more shires. In the post-Danish period, through the influence of the corresponding Scandinavian title *jarl*, the vernacular word became *eorl* (earl). In the witness lists in royal charters written in Latin, he is *dux*, which can be translated as ‘duke’; but after the Norman Conquest he was reduced to *comes* (count). The thegns formed the mass of the nobility. The literal sense of the word is ‘mature’ or ‘strong’; but in the witness lists the thegn is styled *minister*, which means a servant, particularly an armed retainer, a warrior; and this links his rank with his relationship

to his master, the king. There were also thegns in the service of earls and even of other thegns. After the Norman Conquest the Latin equivalent was *miles*, a knight. The value of a ceorl's life (his *werigild*) in Mercia was 200 shillings, that of a thegn six times as much (1200 shillings); and an earl's may have been thirty times as much (6000 shillings).³ The value of their oaths in a court of law was in the same proportions. It would seem that in the eleventh century the English aristocracy obtained greater revenues from their estates and displayed their new wealth conspicuously. This was to be seen not only in their clothes and food but also in new buildings, including churches.⁴

None of these hereditary social classes was homogeneous or completely exclusive. According to a treatise on status written at the beginning of the eleventh century,⁵ ceorls and merchants could so prosper as to become entitled to the rights of a thegn. The qualification needed by a ceorl was the full possession of five hides of land, a church and kitchen, a bell-house and a fortified gate-house, and a special office in the king's hall. A trader qualified by three crossings of the open sea at his own expense. Similarly, a thegn, if appointed to an earldom by the king, enjoyed an earl's rights. Hence, although society was divided into hereditary castes, with the law defining the value of their lives and oaths and most other rights and duties, a limited amount of mobility was envisaged and must have occurred. The legend that Earl Godwin was the son of a Sussex churl, and that the family progressed from churl to king in three generations, wonderfully exemplifies these aspirations.

In a tripartite division of society the king and the nobility were the *bellatores*, the warriors, as distinct from the *oratores*, the priests, and the *laboratores*, the manual workers. And the king and his earls were expected to lead the armed forces against the enemy. In the war against vikings the English army was called by the annalists a *fyrð*, the Danish a *here*. Both words are unspecific and cover anything from a small raiding party to an