

Agincourt Sermon

This address was delivered by Christopher Tyerman, Lecturer in History at New College, Fellow of Hertford College, Professor of the History of the Crusades, on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Agincourt, 25 October 2015, in New College Chapel.

Today marks the 600th anniversary of the battle of Agincourt. Much is being made of the anniversary, in exhibitions, books, documentaries, newspaper pullouts and, indeed, in this service. What, however, are we commemorating- and why? The contemporary Agincourt Carol we heard part of earlier is in no doubt: 'England give thanks to God for the victory'. In the fifteenth century, commemorating Agincourt meant celebrating national prowess and England's special place in God's favour as a new Israel. This perception presents problems for twenty-first century sensibilities. Thus modern commemorations, beyond honouring the memory of those who died, emphasise reconciliation, in contradiction, almost denial of the historical reality. This reality comprised a battle fought at the climax of a broken-backed campaign of violent conquest of one Christian nation by another, over an issue of dynastic conceit- Henry V's dubious claim to the French throne- today of complete irrelevance. Fought between armies, each fortified by the comforts of the church, numbering respectively *c.* 12,500 and *c.* 8,500, the battle saw about 2,000 French and 100 English perish. Agincourt led to no immediate territorial gain; revived a possibly malign martial legacy for subsequent English rulers; and, in Henry V's ordering the massacre of unarmed prisoners, encompassed a possible war crime even under the laws of arms operating at the time. Given the wholly different moral universe of the fifteenth century, what possible resonance can the historical Agincourt sound for us here, in this chapel, 600 years on?

There may be a number of possible answers to this. One might be called the heritage argument. Knowledge of Agincourt extends public awareness of the past. As a patriotic brand, as it were, it still carries cultural clout. Agincourt was a great event, a military victory against the odds. It fostered a legend of English exceptionalism, resilience and pluck, alive in Shakespeare's time, almost two centuries later, and far beyond. Thereafter, for a nation regularly fighting wars against the French, the image of Agincourt was obviously useful. Later still, Agincourt presented a model of victory for the underdog, an inspirational symbol of patriotism, powerfully deployed by Olivier's film in the 1940s. Yet such nationalistic readings are obviously problematic, encouraging a selective, borderline-xenophobic view of England as top dog, of military victory as self-validating, even providential, and of war as a necessary test of public and private virtue. Commemoration of such bloodletting must always be a delicate matter; commemorating Agincourt has distinctly queasy aspects. The attitudes of 1415 challenge modern assumptions. By way of illustration, I'd like to indulge in some I hope appropriate parochialism by looking at three New College men who were associated with the events in Picardy that autumn of 1415.

When Agincourt was fought New College was new, this chapel only 30 years old. One of those who was a member of the college when the chapel was consecrated was Henry Chichele, son of a Midlands grocer, one of William of Wykeham's hand-picked earliest scholars. A civil lawyer, after Oxford he pursued a very successful professional career, notably in royal service, his reward, in 1414, the archbishopric of Canterbury. In 1415, Chichele was the chief architect of, to use modern jargon, the dossier for war. An early example of a New College man made good, when Chichele came to found his own Oxford college, All Souls College, he did so in part to commemorate those who had fought and fallen in the French wars. Chichele unapologetically represented the case for the justice of the war, depicted as a restoration of rights denied or usurped, in tune with Christian just war theory propounded by Augustine of Hippo a thousand year earlier and richly garnished ever since. Establishing a morally and legally just cause was Chichele's job; but he found no ethical or intellectual difficulties in that. All protagonists in wars seek justification for their actions. However, the obvious problem, in 1415 as elsewhere, lies in what is deemed just by one side is seen as unjust by the other. Where in the English invasion of France, where amongst the slaughter of Agincourt is justice, morality; where the Christian message?

Such questions were addressed by our second New College figure, Nicholas Upton. Upton, from Devon, had become a fellow of New College in 1415. Like Chichele he studied not theology but civil law. Although ordained, he went on to make his name as a herald, employed in English armies to adjudicate on matters of honour and to design appropriate coats of arms for those knighted on the battlefield, a task to which he brought a degree of pawky almost end-of-the-pier humour. His hefty four volume *magnum opus*, *De studio militari*, A Study of Knighthood, emphasised the positive moral and martial virtues necessary for true nobility, a sort of Manners Makyth Man in plate armour. War, if conducted with discipline and according to the laws of arms, provided a touchstone of personal virtue. Upton's connection with Agincourt rests in Book IV of *De studio* where he praises Henry V's disciplinary ordinances for the conduct of his troops. These had been effective. Even French observers noted how well behaved the English army had been as it trudged towards Agincourt. For all his elevation of martial virtue, Upton's strictures on the necessity of just conduct recognised the brutality and degradation of war in an attempt to chart a way through the ethical morass of military behaviour, at once noble and sordid. With images from Abu Ghraib still in our minds, this distant effort may touch a chord.

The conduct of war leads to my third New College man, another Devonian, Richard Hankford, whose grandfather, a judge, had known the Founder. Admitted to the college in September 1414, Hankford left in July 1415, the first- but far from last- recorded scholar to leave, so the college register states drily, 'being minded to give up study'. He almost certainly left to join Henry V's army and fought at Agincourt itself, a unique link between the battle and someone who had worshipped in this place. Hankford went on to pursue a very successful military career, seeing in war a noble vocation as well as a means of self-advancement. Hankford's own dynastic success may be measured by his direct descendants who include Elizabeth I and, so I am assured by fabpedigree.com, his 16th great grandsons President Lyndon Johnson of the USA, Prince Charles and David Cameron.

Chichele, Upton and Hankford; these three New College men demonstrate how far and how quickly William of Wykeham's scholars moved beyond the Founder's intentions for a religious community producing an educated pastoral clergy, towards public life, secular service, the law and even the military. They also encapsulate the awkward legacy of Agincourt: its justification, its conduct; its lived experience. War for all three provided a justification for power and social standing, its values, backed by religious sanction, the guarantee of gentility, civility and moral worth. A foreign country indeed. That alone should give us pause before we embrace the history-lite cosiness of the heritage industry.

However, recognising conflicted or anachronistic responses to war may itself provide a reason to commemorate if not celebrate Agincourt. The memory of Agincourt touches difficult, uncomfortable concerns, universal dilemmas of moral judgement and human ambition, communal pride and personal empathy, the mutability of secular and religious values; not all truths are timeless. Such concerns challenge the complexities inherent in the human condition itself so, perhaps, after all, across 600 years, Agincourt can speak directly to us, here, today.

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