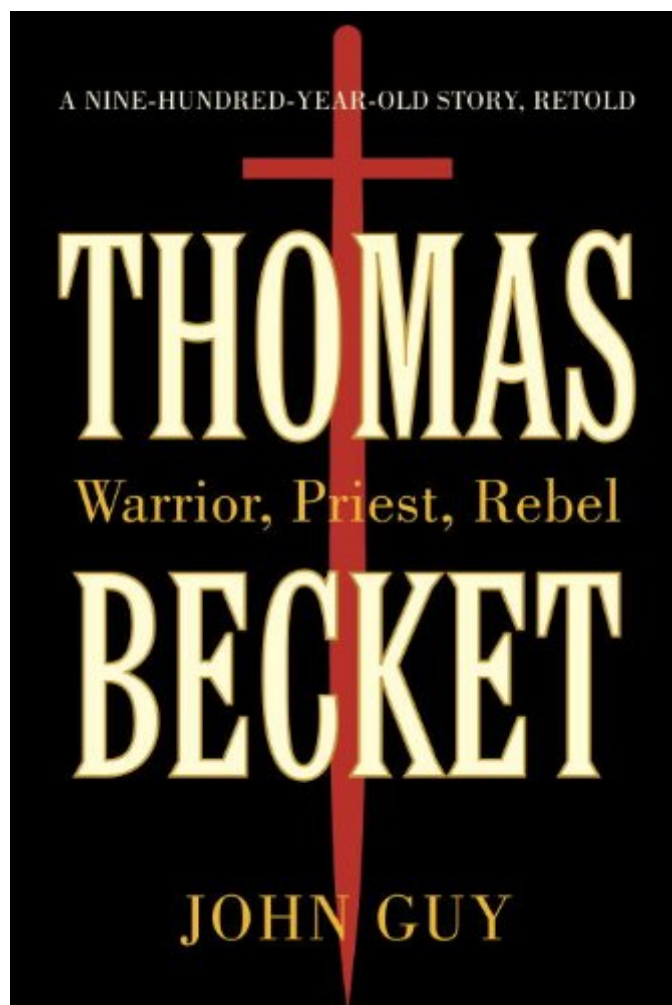


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Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel



Synopsis

A revisionist new biography reintroducing readers to one of the most subversive figures in English history—the man who sought to reform a nation, dared to defy his king, and laid down his life to defend his sacred honor — **NEW YORK TIMES** BESTSELLER — **NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY KANSAS CITY STAR AND BLOOMBERG** Becket's life story has been often told but never so incisively reexamined and vividly rendered as it is in John Guy's hands. The son of middle-class Norman parents, Becket rose against all odds to become the second most powerful man in England. As King Henry II's chancellor, Becket charmed potentates and popes, tamed overmighty barons, and even personally led knights into battle. After his royal patron elevated him to archbishop of Canterbury in 1162, however, Becket clashed with the King. Forced to choose between fealty to the crown and the values of his faith, he repeatedly challenged Henry's authority to bring the church to heel. Drawing on the full panoply of medieval sources, Guy sheds new light on the relationship between the two men, separates truth from centuries of mythmaking, and casts doubt on the long-held assumption that the headstrong rivals were once close friends. He also provides the fullest accounting yet for Becket's seemingly radical transformation from worldly bureaucrat to devout man of God. — Here is a Becket seldom glimpsed in any previous biography, a man of many facets and faces: the skilled warrior as comfortable unhorsing an opponent in single combat as he was negotiating terms of surrender; the canny diplomat — with the appetite of a wolf — who unexpectedly became the spiritual paragon of the English church; and the ascetic rebel who waged a high-stakes contest of wills with one of the most volcanic monarchs of the Middle Ages. Driven into exile, derided by his enemies as an ungrateful upstart, Becket returned to Canterbury in the unlikeliest guise of all: as an avenging angel of God, wielding his power of excommunication like a sword. It is this last apparition, the one for which history remembers him best, that will lead to his martyrdom at the hands of the king's minions—a grisly episode that Guy recounts in chilling and dramatic detail. — An uncommonly intimate portrait of one of the medieval world's most magnetic figures, Thomas Becket breathes new life into its subject—cementing for all time his place as an enduring icon of resistance to the abuse of power. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

John Guy has written some brilliant historical biographies, including *A Daughter's Love: THOMAS MORE AND HIS DEAREST MEG* and *Queen of Scots: The True Life of Mary Stuart*, so I was really looking forward to his latest work - the story of Thomas Becket and what a fascinating story it is. Although really it is not only the story of Thomas Becket, but also that of Henry II, as their lives, and fates, were so entwined with each other. Thomas Becket was born to middle class, but fairly humble beginnings. His early life showed very little of what was ahead - surprisingly he was not academically minded as a young man, nor was he ambitious intellectually. It was interesting that he enjoyed the friendship of a Norman aristocrat fairly early on and was introduced to another way of life - enjoying hawking and hunting. Indeed, he was wonderfully human, enjoying himself while studying in Paris and seeming neither overly serious nor particularly pious. A critical choice in his life and career was joining the household of Archbishop Theobald of Canterbury and learning the craft of a right hand man, becoming invaluable and taking his studies seriously. He also learnt an important lesson when he witnessed Theobald forced to flee for his life, which led him to take precautions when faced with a similar situation. It is once Henry enters the picture that the book really comes alive.

But for his dispute with Thomas Becket, which on both sides became obsessive and led to Becket's murder, Henry II has generally been regarded as what Sellar and Yeatman in *1066 & All That* called 'A Good Thing'. The 'nineteen long winters' of the reign of his immediate predecessor, Stephen

(Grandson of William the Conqueror), left England in a state of anarchy. Powerful barons ran their own fiefs, justice was a mockery and the country was subject to invasion from Scotland and Wales. It was Henry's attempts to tackle these problems, coupled with his own and Becket's initially friendly but ultimately incompatible personalities, that led to Becket's martyrdom. In *Thomas Becket: Warrior, priest, rebel, victim*; a 900-year-old story retold, John Guy does a first rate job of detailing Becket's life and relations with the king, and of painting-in the background crucial to understanding why and how the disputes came about. England was still feudal in structure; the church was a hugely powerful force; virtually all the key players, including Becket, the king, the barons, and most English bishops were second or third generation descendents of Normans who had crossed the English Channel with or following the Conquest, in many cases maintaining their links with France; and, London and Canterbury apart, much of the action of this story takes place in France. It is also relevant that the Pope of the time, as keen as Becket to defend the church's property, income and privileges in England, and generally supportive of Becket, was himself under great pressure from an anti-Pope and his sponsors, and obliged to live in exile from Rome.

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