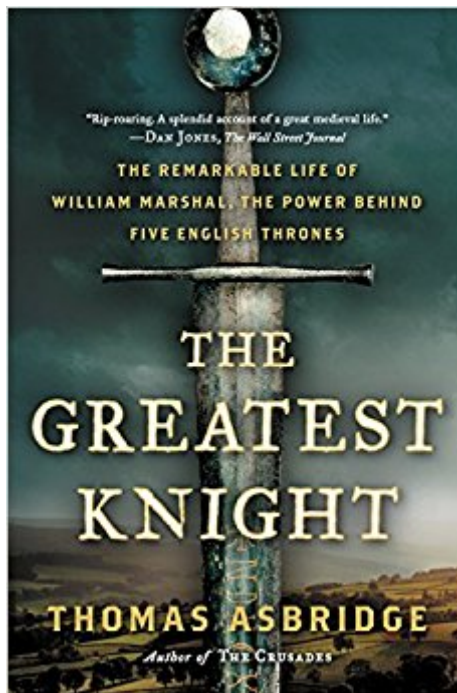




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# The Greatest Knight: The Remarkable Life Of William Marshal, The Power Behind Five English Thrones



## Synopsis

A renowned scholar brings to life medieval England's most celebrated knight, William Marshal, providing an unprecedented and intimate view of this age and the legendary warrior class that shaped it. Caught on the wrong side of an English civil war and condemned by his father to the gallows at age five, William Marshal defied all odds to become one of England's most celebrated knights. Thomas Asbridge's rousing narrative chronicles William's rise, using his life as a prism to view the origins, experiences, and influence of the knight in British history. In William's day, the brutish realities of war and politics collided with romanticized myths about an Arthurian "golden age," giving rise to a new chivalric ideal. Asbridge details the training rituals, weaponry, and battle tactics of knighthood, and explores the codes of chivalry and courtliness that shaped their daily lives. These skills were essential to survive one of the most turbulent periods in English history—an era of striking transformation, as the West emerged from the Dark Ages. A leading retainer of five English kings, Marshal served the great figures of this age, from Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine to Richard the Lionheart and his infamous brother John, and was involved in some of the most critical phases of medieval history, from the Magna Carta to the survival of the Angevin/Plantagenet dynasty. Asbridge introduces this storied knight to modern readers and places him firmly in the context of the majesty, passion, and bloody intrigue of the Middle Ages. The Greatest Knight features 16 pages of black-and-white and color illustrations.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Mr. Asbridge has written a rip-roaring new life of Marshal, which will leave readers hungry for a generally splendid account of a great medieval life.” (Wall Street Journal) “The Greatest Knight gives us a moving portrait of one man’s struggle, ascent and final (peaceful) demise.” (The Sunday Times (UK)) “Big, readable, and enlightening a rousing history.” (The Dispatch) “Asbridge has fashioned a rare and fascinating tale: a biography of a medieval knight told with all the rich detail, dialogue, and action that is usually possible only for figures from later periods. Asbridge is a wonderful guide to the complex politics and history of medieval England.” (Christian Science Monitor) “The term ‘medieval biography’ doesn’t necessarily conjure up a lot of excitement among the general book-loving population. But . . . it really should. This blood, guts, gore and gallantry romp through medieval history, following the great knight William Marshall . . . is way more fun than it should be.” (New York Post) “A rich and elaborate tapestry a story about how medieval knighthood worked; the interlocking web of obligation and fealty, friendship and loyalty... [The Greatest Knight] will appeal to history buffs as well as fans of fiction set in the medieval period.” (Library Journal, starred review) “A valuable biography of an important figure in a distant, violent, barely comprehensible era.” (Kirkus Reviews) “A rare kind of history book ... There are enough epic journeys here to satisfy Tolkien lovers, enough backhanded politics to engage fans looking for the next Game of Thrones book, and enough excitement for any reader to believe that true history is the greatest story of all.” (Portland Book Review) “This is medieval history at its very best - a compelling story told by a historian whose knowledge is both thorough and extensive, and whose enthusiasm for the subject rings out on every page.” (Ian Mortimer, author of Time Traveler’s Guide to Medieval England) “Captivatingly written and eye-opening informative, The Greatest Knight is ... a first-rate history told by a master of the craft. Read this book, and you’ll never forget the name William Marshal-nor will you ever think of the Middle Ages in the same way again.” (Toby Lester, author of The Fourth Part of the World and Da Vinci’s Ghost) “History doesn’t come more exciting than this. Thomas Asbridge has written a page turner about William Marshal, the Zelig of English history, a man who was indispensable to five kings, and had a hand in practically every important event during those turbulent and eventful reigns.” (Danny Danziger, author of 1215) “England’s greatest knight puts Game of Thrones to shame A riveting new biography Asbridge takes the reader through an eye-opening account His account is an entertaining reminder that sometimes, the truth really is better than fiction.” (Daily Beast)

A thrillingly intimate portrait of one of history's most illustrious knights – William Marshal – that vividly evokes the grandeur and barbarity of the Middle Ages. William Marshal was the true Lancelot of his era – a peerless warrior and paragon of chivalry – yet over the centuries, the spectacular story of his achievements passed from memory. Marshal became just one more name in the dusty annals of history. Then, in 1861, a young French scholar named Paul Meyer made a startling discovery during an auction of rare medieval manuscripts. Meyer stumbled upon the sole surviving copy of an unknown text – the first contemporary biography of a medieval knight, later dubbed the History of William Marshal. This richly detailed work helped to resurrect Marshal's reputation, putting flesh onto the bones of this otherwise obscure figure, yet even today William Marshal remains largely forgotten. As a five-year-old boy, Marshal was sentenced to execution and led to the gallows, but this landless younger son survived his brush with death and went on to train as a 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, a regent of the realm. William Marshal befriended the great figures of his day, from Richard the Lionheart and Eleanor of Aquitaine to the infamous King John, and helped to negotiate the terms of Magna Carta – the first "bill of rights." By the age of seventy, the once-forsaken child had been transformed into the most powerful man in England, yet he was forced to fight in the front line of one final battle, striving to save the kingdom from a French invasion in 1217. 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 follows Marshal on his journey from rural England onto the battlefields of France, to the desert castles of the Holy Land and the verdant shores of Ireland, charting the unparalleled rise to prominence of a man bound to a code of honor, yet driven by unquenchable ambition. 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, when the West emerged from the Dark Ages and stood on the brink of modernity. 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. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

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 Marshall the man rather than just the historical figure. Thomas Asbridge uses all these different sources to craft a truly remarkable read.

I am a fan of English history. If you are of a similar bent then you will delve into this book with relish. Asbridge is a noted author of similar works covering medieval England, the rise of its rulers and the violence they meted out (or suffered) to attain rule and power. His writing is detailed but presented in a narrative which intrigues and enhances the story. The scheming and backstabbing, the negotiations and treachery, the lies and deceit: all present in the everyday strife of power struggles, were the lifeblood of the power mongers, great and small, throughout the country. Those aristocrats scattered throughout England which was only recently and unevenly ruled through a central king, craved land, the ability to tax, the army of men they could lead to war, and the alliances of marriage and blood kin. Theirs was a common compulsion: the insatiable quest for power. The greatest knight achieved this power not by becoming a king, or through war. He grabbed power and used it more effectively than had he wielded a sword. He used guile and intelligence to become the greatest knight.

Thomas Asbridge gives us an excellent biography of William Marshal, medieval knight of the realm who served five kings loyally - even when he served a losing cause. William Marshal served what the book refers to as "English" kings when they, as well as he, were French/Norman. Most of the story takes place in what is today France. Even so, "France" didn't exist and parts of northern, western and southwest France were parts of the Angevin Empire, ruled by the Plantagenet family. In early life, William Marshal's father was, like many of his era, ambitious and took opportunity during a civil war to grab what land and titles he could. He even gave young William as hostage and betrayed his promise, almost getting young William hung for it! William was fortunate to be sent to a relative in Normandy who would take on the burden of training the young man as a knight - an armored, horse riding warrior who would serve a liege lord as a vassal. William was a powerful, bright and courageous man and was able to find service with King Henry II's son, "Henry the Young". In this time, Marshall would learn chivalry and the ideals of unflinching loyalty to one's lord as well as competing in tournament and acquiring wealth from these contests. From this point

onward, William would loyally serve his masters, whatever the cost to himself. His loyalty generally served him well even when his cause was a losing one because even the winner realized that Marshall was not only a warrior of the first order, but one who could be trusted implicitly. The book chronicles his rise through knighthood to higher rank and positions of authority. Marshal would learn how to play the battle of court politics and it was here that his abilities and loyalties would be tested most. William Marshall served five kings ably and well. This is a fitting biography of a knight during the age of knighthood, an age that often fell very short of the ideals of chivalry it espoused. It's a five star book to be enjoyed.

I have been fascinated with Medieval English history long before George R. R. Martin borrowed its themes for Game of Thrones. I've read biographies of Eleanor of Aquitaine, the Plantagenet dynasty, the participants in the War of the Roses and the Tudor Dynasty that followed. "The Greatest Knight" details the life of one of the forgotten heroes of this era, William Marshall, the man who served and guided five kings until his death at the great age of 72. The younger son of a relatively minor knight, Marshall survived a dangerous childhood to become a successful knight in the days when the foundations of chivalry were being established. Through the next five decades he managed to navigate the deadly politics of the Angevin court and rose to become the Protector of the Realm when the young Henry III succeeded King John to the throne. He was universally mourned as a husband, father, and one of the greatest statesmen England had ever seen when he died. Regardless of the subject a matter, histories such as this can be deadly boring, but Thomas Asbridge has written in an almost novelistic style, making the reader want to read "just one more chapter" at 2:00 in the morning. It would be difficult to understand the significance of William Marshall's life without an understanding of the major players and events of the time. Asbridge has done an exceptional job of weaving together the history of the times with Marshall's personal story. I highly recommend this biography to anyone with an interest in English history. I especially suggest that fans of Game of Thrones and other medieval fantasies sink their teeth into this well-written book to see what it was really like!

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