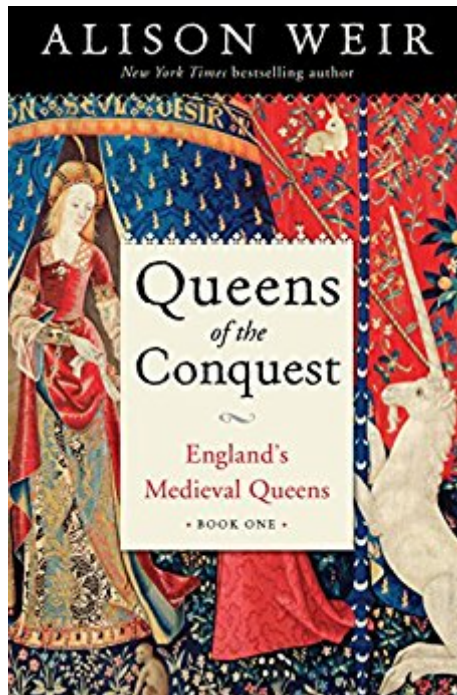




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Queens Of The Conquest: England's Medieval Queens Book One: 1



Synopsis

In the first volume of an exciting new series, bestselling author Alison Weir brings the dramatic reigns of England's medieval queens to life. The lives of England's medieval queens were packed with incident—love, intrigue, betrayal, adultery, and warfare—but their stories have been largely obscured by centuries of myth and omission. Now esteemed biographer Alison Weir provides a fresh perspective and restores these women to their rightful place in history. Spanning the years from the Norman conquest in 1066 to the dawn of a new era in 1154, when Henry II succeeded to the throne and Eleanor of Aquitaine, the first Plantagenet queen, was crowned, this epic book brings to vivid life five women, including: Matilda of Flanders, wife of William the Conqueror, the first Norman king; Matilda of Scotland, revered as the common mother of all England; and Empress Maud, England's first female ruler, whose son King Henry II would go on to found the Plantagenet dynasty. More than those who came before or after them, these Norman consorts were recognized as equal sharers in sovereignty. Without the support of their wives, the Norman kings could not have ruled their disparate dominions as effectively. Drawing from the most reliable contemporary sources, Weir skillfully strips away centuries of romantic lore to share a balanced and authentic take on the importance of these female monarchs. What emerges is a seamless royal saga, an all-encompassing portrait of English medieval queenship, and a sweeping panorama of British history.

Praise for Alison Weir

The Lost Tudor Princess—This is a substantial, detailed biography of a fascinating woman who lived her extraordinary life to the full, taking desperate chances for love and for ambition. It will appeal to anyone with an interest in the powerful women of the Tudor period.—Philippa Gregory, *The Washington Post*

Weir balances historical data with emotional speculation to illuminate the ferocious dynastic ambitions and will to power that earned her subject a place in the spotlight.—The New York Times Book Review

Elizabeth of York—Weir tells Elizabeth's story well. . . . She is a meticulous scholar. . . . Most important, Weir sincerely admires her subject, doing honor to an almost forgotten queen.—The New York Times Book Review

In Weir's skillful hands, Elizabeth of York returns to us, full-bodied and three-dimensional. This is a must-read for Tudor fans!—Historical Novels Review

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Customer Reviews

Alison Weir is my favorite historian dealing with royalty, and her breathtaking historical fiction is as robust and entertaining as any modern novels I can think of, and far more interesting than the dry academic volumes that wring the life out of historical figures. This is a big book, and only the first volume in a projected series. *QUEENS OF CONQUEST* covers the earliest of England's Queens and the medieval era during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. As in her novels, the author brings these early English queens to life with grand stories wrapped around the historical figures, making her subjects come alive as living, breathing people enmeshed in the remarkable events of their day. Beginning with Matilda of Flanders, Queen of William 1, and ending with the Empress Maud, this is a lively, rollicking, fascinating trip through the history of England's Queens written by the foremost author of historical sagas. I can't wait for the next volume in this series!

As I was reading this book, I was quite prepared to give it four or five stars. However, the last few narrative pages of this book (as opposed to the bibliography, index, et al.) were so infuriating and irresponsible that I contemplated giving it one star. I suppose I will compromise, especially as I have an advanced copy and there may be changes in the final edition for sale. This is the first of a planned four volume set dealing with the medieval queens of England. You might call this volume *Æthel* the book of the Matildas, as it covers: Matilda of Flanders, who was married to William the Conqueror. Matilda of Scotland, the first wife of Henry I. Adeliza of Louvain, the second wife of Henry I. Matilda of Boulogne, who was married to Stephen of Blois. Empress Matilda (Maud),

the daughter of Henry I. It is a fascinating study and, until the ending, a very welcome compilation of what we actually do know about these women. Weir makes the point that the early queens actually had much more power than the later queens. In addition to the expected religious and charitable contributions, they served as regents and judges and witnessed many charters, but most acted in the conventional manner. Reading about the many charters and grants and such can be a bit dry, but certainly when we get to Matilda of Boulogne and the Empress Matilda, things really heat up. These were two amazing, strong and determined women, and their stories cover about half the book. I was especially interested in how Weir proposes, unlike most other historians, that the fact that the Empress was a female was not the major reason Stephen of Blois was able to seize the throne from her. Weir also does make the point that Stephen owed his eventual success in large part to his steadfast wife, Matilda of Boulogne. I couldn't help but think that if those two Matildas had joined forces, they could have ruled the world. Instead, we have chroniclers (and Weir) admiring Matilda of Boulogne because she acted for her husband's benefit whereas the Empress Matilda acted for her own benefit and so was reviled by many (apparently, including Weir). Weir ends her book by making some of the most sexist and narrow-minded comments imaginable. The kings covered in the book were violent and brutal. Consider one example. Here are the words of one medieval chronicler, quoted below from Wikipedia, which describes William I's harrying of the north: "The King stopped at nothing to hunt his enemies. He cut down many people and destroyed homes and land. Nowhere else had he shown such cruelty. This made a real change. To his shame, William made no effort to control his fury, punishing the innocent with the guilty. He ordered that crops and herds, tools and food be burned to ashes. More than 100,000 people perished of starvation. He also beat his wife half to death on more than one occasion. His male descendants were just as bad. As Weir points out, several of the other men in the book had extremely bad tempers and committed horrendous, vicious acts (having someone's eyes gouged out seems to have almost been a hobby, and if you are squeamish, there are several passages in the book you will want to skip), and they did stupid things. William Rufus was, quoting from the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, "hated by almost all his people and abhorrent to God." Stephen of Blois was essentially weak and foolish and made bad decision after bad decision (and is remembered as a nice guy despite the fact that his usurping the throne caused intense suffering and countless lives all across England while Christ and his saints slept). Few people wanted his son Eustace crowned king because of his vile personality (as stated by another chronicler, quoted from Wikipedia, "He was an evil man and did more harm than good wherever he went"). And this volume doesn't cover it, but we

all know about Henry II and the trouble his bad temper got him into. Weir accepts all this. After all, they are brutal men in a brutal age, so, apparently, they acted correctly. But then Weir inexplicably, illogically, irresponsibly and inexcusably chooses to vilify the Empress Matilda for having a temper! Yes, she ends her book with an incredible theory that the Empress, although she may have inherited a bad temper from her father and his forebears (really, is a temper genetic?), she sometimes acted badly (specifically, the incident in London where she didn't talk nice to the men who had fought against her) because she was female. She suggests that the Empress either was suffering from the ill effects of childbearing (with zero evidence) that left her with a hormone imbalance or that, at the age of 37, she was suffering from early menopause (again, zero evidence) and tells us that menopausal women can suffer extreme and intense mood swings resulting in rage, aggression, irritability and impatience--which may actually be true for a few women, but I have never encountered it. But, apparently, Weir really believes this foolishness. Now, why doesn't she suggest that William the Conqueror (a vile, vicious and brutal man, if there ever was one, as you can see from the quote above) was suffering from a hormone imbalance and so was not fit to rule? Of course she doesn't. It is entirely acceptable for him and his male descendants to be despicable creatures (which they were), but if a girl isn't sugar and spice and everything nice, it must be because there is something wrong with her "and that, for circular reasoning, is she is a female and therefore has female hormones. I am still angry, and it's been almost a week since I read that "that's how long it took me to calm down enough to write this review. I might point out that most of what we know about the Empress and her temper (again, the main example being the incident in London) comes from her enemies. We never heard her side of the story, which I suspect would have been quite different. Consider what the people of London did to her. And then consider what William I or Henry I would have done in her place. It would have been a bloodbath. Does anyone really believe that if the Empress had smiled and been a proper, humble, good girl that the Londoners would have accepted her as ruler and everybody would have kissed and made up and sang songs and shared desserts and lived happily ever after? I don't think it mattered one bit what she did at the time. I should mention again that I have an advance reading copy of the book, and so it is possible that someone at the publishers will stop those last pages from being printed in the sale edition. However, what my eyes have seen cannot be unseen. I generally enjoy Ms. Weir's books (I own each and every one), and sometimes I disagree with her (which is okay), but never so strongly as in this case. I certainly intend to read the next volume in the series.

I pretty much like Alison Weir's work. I already have many of her nonfiction books. From Elizabeth of

York on, it is pretty clear who the queen is. Keeping track of the previous queens can become confusing, especially when trying to keep track of who is queen of where when there is more than one nation involved. The lives and powers of queens were tenuous, pawns in a world ruled by men. Some queens had better sense than their husbands, and the best kings made the best use of the resources a smart queen brought to the throne. They were not fully appreciated in their time, yet some had the strength to convince others to follow. No one book can be a complete source, so I know there will be more to come in this topic.

I have given this book 4 stars just for the detailed research alone. Wow! Alison Weir has done her homework on this one. She definitely knows her stuff when it comes to British history and in this work it really shows. This is the first in a new series she is coming out with concerning England's medieval queens. It covers from the Norman Conquest 1066 to 1154 when Henry II succeeded to the throne. The bibliography and appendixes attached covers over 100 pages of this 550 page book. If you are an Alison Weir fan as I am, this will be right up your alley.

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