



The Later Middle Ages, 1272-1485 (Norton Library History of England)

George Holmes

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English life in the thirteenth century was characterized by: a single Christian Church owing allegiance to Rome and living on the revenues of its estates; kingship with difficulty kept intact in the face of scheming magnates jealous of their privileges; a countryside divided into thousands of small estates, tilled by peasants--some of them serfs--and owned by lords with considerable power over their tenants; armies of knights fighting on horseback; Gothic cathedrals; monasteries; castles; town gilds. Professor Holmes describes this medieval society and its evolution, after the Black Death, into a somewhat different kind of society in the late fifteenth century. He argues that the population decrease as a result of the plague, beginning in 1349, brought about fundamental transformations: village life changed, serfdom disappeared, the great estates became less important, industry grew, and the commodities and directions of trade changed.

Professor Holmes also examines the politics of these years--the relations of the kings of England with neighboring rulers and with their own subjects. This period includes the successful conquest of Scotland, the series of wars with France known as the Hundred Years' War, and the War of the Roses, which brought Henry VII, the first Tudor, to the throne in 1485. Here also is an exploration of the heretical movement initiated by Wycliffe in the thirteen-seventies, which began a tendency toward loosening the power of the Church, and a study of the beginnings of parliamentary government in the later fourteenth century, its collapse in the following century, and the emergence of a strong self-sufficient monarchy.

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