



The Devil's Broker: Seeking Gold, God, and Glory in Fourteenth- Century Italy

Frances Stonor Saunders

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A vibrant history of Italy in the cataclysmic fourteenth century as seen through the life of a brilliant military strategist and bandit lord

At the dawn of the Renaissance, hordes of mercenaries swooped down on the opulent city-states of Italy and commenced to drain them dry. The greatest of all the bandits was Sir John Hawkwood, an English expatriate and military genius who formed his own army, cleverly pitted ancient rivals against one another, held the Pope for ransom, and set blood running in the streets.

In this gripping biography of the charismatic Hawkwood, Frances Stonor Saunders illuminates the fourteenth century as a time of plague, political schism, and religious mania offset by a gargantuan appetite for spectacle and luxury. Dazzling and addictively readable, *The Devil's Broker* is a riveting account of the fortunes gained and lost in a tumultuous time.

The Devil's Broker: Seeking Gold, God, and Glory in Fourteenth- Century Italy Details

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Oliver says

Long before Italian organised crime had become...er organised; a bunch of 14th Century Essex boys were pillaging, extorting, kidnapping, raping, murdering and betraying their way through the Italian City States with a vengeance. The most successful of them was "Sir" John Hawkwood, son of an Essex Yeoman whose meteoric rise as a Mercenary in the labyrinthine world of Italian politics led him to wealth, castles, royal in-laws, a state funeral in Florence and a big assed fresco in the Duomo that can be seen there still today. Stonor Saunders fantastically detailed biography of the Lance for hire "son of Belial" is an amazing portrait of 14th Century life. If you thought medieval wars were tidy things fought in open fields by willing combatants, think again. When Chaucer wrote about Knights "ridding out", he meant on raids - that is plundering and terrifying the civilian population, often burning crops and poisoning wells. Then as now, War by softening up the civilian population was common. Nonetheless an aspiring foot soldier could make his fortune through war after the huge social changes created by the Black Death in Europe. Not only were the spoils of war for the victors but the laws of chivalry expected high value captives to be ransomed back to their families. After Edward III's successful campaigns against the French at Crecy and Poitiers, many soldiers simply decided to not go home and sought fortune as the so called Free Companies, rampaging across Europe, holding the Pope to ransom in Avignon, and generally making a nuisance of themselves. The most fortunate soldiers found their way to Italy where warring city states and papal intrigues (the Papacy split at the end of the 14th C) provided amply coin for foreign Lances.

Since relatively little source material from Hawkwood himself remains, Stonor Saunders builds up a comprehensive picture of his contemporaries, the political scheming of the era, religious martyrdom, the philosophies of the age and daily life. She has a background in the Arts so she makes quite a lot of reference to the artistic output of the age and the birth of the Renaissance - think Orson Wells on the top that Ferris Wheel in The Third Man.

If that's not enough, here's some other things you will find in this book: the hallucinogenic effects of starvation and medieval bread, political poisonings, Chaucer's secret diplomatic mission in Italy, self-abusing extreme religious aestheticism, death, a civilian massacre of 8,000 people, the Black Death, feasting as display of wealth, what happens when lightning hits a field of armoured men, the canonised nun who was also a spy, more death, and the identifying insignia of medieval prostitutes in the Italian city states. All the key ingredients of a good Friday night out.

It a remarkable portrait of the paradoxes of the age, the realities of chivalry and the zeitgeist of a historical turning point.

Kotinka says

A fantastic book, completely engrossing. Using Hawkwood as her vehicle, the author invites you into the merciless world of 14th C. Italian politics, dealing the intrigues, personalities and scandals of the day with vivid storytelling. The book could easily have descended into a repetitive confusion (Hawkwood's life, as with his client states, was one of endless battling, extortion, ransoming, changes of allegiance, then more battling, more ransoming). Thankfully though, with her eye for the interesting detail and clear prose, this author has taken this tricky and messy period of history and produced a first class read.

Jan-Maat says

All books about medieval European individuals are bold - unless they are about St. Augustine, who alone felt the need to share his memories of his thoughts and feelings at length with posterity, for everyone else the best that can be achieved is a life and time flavoured with conjecture.

Hawkwood was an Englishman from Essex who led the White Company, a band of mercenaries, that operated in northern Italy during the fourteenth century. I found the book a disappointing read since I wanted more detail on how the mercenary company operated. It seems that the source material only dealt indirectly with Hawkwood and his activities and there didn't seem much of an attempt to look at comparable, but better documented contemporary military undertakings as a way of understanding how Hawkwood and Co went about their business. Nor was there any attempt to put Hawkwood in a wider context of how wars were conducted in the period.

On the other hand it is a reasonably written book for a general audience about a topic that is fairly obscure (the activities of an English mercenary company in medieval Italy) as well as inaccessible for most English readers and for that it deserves full credit.

The Tabby says

Absolutely fascinating account, not only about the life of the man, but also his times. I liked the writing style as well as the myriad details of life in the fourteenth century. Did not want to put it down. It stripped the glamour from the popular tales of chivalry and painted a stark portrait of the impracticalities of riding into battle encased in heavy metal armour. No mere recitation of dry facts and dates. "Lying face down in the mud encased in seventy pounds of armour was a disadvantageous position to be in". "In 1360, an English army ill-provisioned and in retreat after an unsuccessful blockade of Paris, found itself caught in a violent storm. Breastplates and chain mail became lightning rods, and many knights were fried in their saddles". Definitely a five star read, even for those not particularly interested in history.

Anna says

Wow; it's pretty grim living in the 15th Century, perhaps particularly in pre-unification Italy when every city-state is forming and then breaking alliances with every other city-state, and hiring mercenaries to do their slaughtering for them. That is, until the said mercenaries turn the tables on their employers and are hired by the enemy who is able to pay them a bit more than you do.. Meanwhile, each time, it is the civilian population who suffers the most as the way each little war begins is by the enemy soldiers pillaging the countryside and burning everything in their path.

This book is about one John Hawkwood, (Giovanni Acuto to the Italians who cannot pronounce his name) an Essex boy who stays on in Europe after the Anglo-French wars and makes a name and a fortune for himself by hiring himself and his company of mercenaries to the highest bidder. His is not an honourable trade but remarkably, by the end of his life he is honoured in Florence even if at earlier times he sent his company to lay siege to the Florentines. As Obelix would say: "These Romans/Florentines/Italians generally are crazy".

Quite.

The book is very readable if slightly repetitive, and gives a good overview of well-known Renaissance players, e.g. the Pope and the powerful Visconti of Milan among others.

David says

I feel that this book was far too focused on presenting the image of the Mercenary Captain John Hawkwood as one of the big players in Italian Politics in the third quarter of the 14th C, while the Italians themselves are presented as mere pawns of the mercenaries (though the author seems to want to gloss over most of them except Hawkwood). It tends to gloss over many other aspects of the political landscape and takes pains to emphasize tenuous political connections between parties (Catherine of Siena and Hawkwood, for example).

The author also unfortunately propagates some myths that are demonstratively untrue as well as misquotes some famous passages (the feats of Marshal Bouccicoult, in particular) to paint the English company of Hawkwood as a greater military force than its Italian counterparts.

That said, the writing style was enjoyable. If one was interested in a better discussion of the Condottieri, I would recommend Geoffrey Trease's 'The Condottieri: Soldiers of Fortune', because even though it is a more dry read, at least he at least is willing to spend more than a few paragraphs on the other major mercenary company commanders in the late 14th and 15th C, and how they as well as the political leaders of the time shaped the political and military landscape of late medieval Italy.

James says

Thorough and very engaging bio of *condottiere* Sir John Hawkwood, the subject of Uccello's monumental Duomo painting and, if Terry Jones is right, the model for Chaucer's Knight. I read it to learn more about someone in whom I became interested while reading *A Distant Mirror* and, indeed, identical in form and contiguous in subject matter, the entire book is sort of an appendix to Tuchman's monumental popular history. Saunders isn't coy about acknowledging the debt.

My interest in the 14th century was sparked by reading Shakespeare's history plays this spring, and, I have to say, I've been a little astonished by the extent of my ignorance about some really basic developments in European history. Italy, for instance. My understanding of Italian history between, say, Romulus Augustulus and Garibaldi could have been summed up by saying, as they do of relationships on Facebook, "It's complicated." I can't explain why I never wondered, with respect to the Renaissance, "Why Florence?." I guess I just assumed some sort of miraculous, fully-formed emergence of sophistication in this unaccountably blessed place. It never occurred to me to follow the money, as Deep Throat says. The florescence of Florentine art and culture was the ancillary fruit of the development of banking and modern warfare, and not due to a handful of oddballs reading Greek or some magical property of the Tuscan sun. That *those* two things (warcraft and finance) should have evolved hand-in-hand now, of course, seems obvious, but it struck me with the force of revelation.

Saunders' research is exhaustive and erudite, her analysis is sophisticated, and, apart from a few meandering paragraphs that could have used tighter edits, her prose is lucid.

Very impressed.

Gerald Sinstadt says

There is no doubt that John Hawkwood - later Sir John - was a significant figure in 14th Century France and, especially, Italy. His role was as the leader of an unlawful band of mercenaries, in variable numbers but often in thousands, who sold themselves to the highest bidder in a volatile country of warring Communes. Changes of side were frequent and cynical. The package came complete with all services: not just battles and sieges but pillage, rape and destruction. The sums paid were huge and made Hawkwood a wealthy man - or perhaps only a man through whose hands large sums of money passed. Which brings us to the problem with Frances Stonor Saunders' book.

Undeniably, Hawkwood is the thread that runs throughout, but the real subject is the battle for power and influence in 14th Century Italy; when the pope spent seventy years attempting to reassert his position in Rome from a court in Avignon; when for a while there were two men claiming to be the true pope; when city states were either seeking alliances or making war on each other. This was a situation clearly ripe with rich pickings for a man who could offer the services of an army, and Hawkwood was that man.

Unfortunately, the author seems to have had to rely on patchy sources. She paints a vivid and historically reliable picture of the turbulent times, but Hawkwood flits in and out of them. Periodically there are impressive statistics concerning men and money and murders. But worryingly, the reader encounters caveats and qualifications: "it can be assumed that" ... "it is probable that" ... "we can assume that" ... "it is also likely that" and so on. Even given that these suppositions can be justified, they merely emphasise that the 14th Century was a long time ago and surviving records may not present the full picture.

Taken as the portrait of a time, *The Devil's Broker* has a good deal to offer the reader who does not get either bogged down in trying to recall who last betrayed whom or bored stiff by the insufferably pious Catherine of Siena. But it leaves the impression that it would have been more rewarding had it been possible to sharpen the focus.

Nigel says

One thing is for sure: war is about money. Always has been and always will be. John Hawkwood was merely an excellent and unashamed practitioner of war as a revenue-generating activity. 1360, a treaty is signed and the Hundred Years War pauses, but people keep fighting, mostly English soldiers who stay in France to kill and burn and pillage because it beats going home and doing an honest day's work or dying of the plague. The soldiers coalesce into large companies who style themselves mercenaries, though instead of being paid to fight, they mostly just fight until they're paid to go away. Amongst the hordes laying waste to much of France is unassuming Essex man, John Hawkwood. They range far and wide until they finally threaten the pope, living in luxurious exile in Avignon. In sheer self-defence, the pope hires Hawkwood and tells him to go to Italy, and that's where Hawkwood goes, bringing an exciting new era of death and destruction with him.

Northern Italy is full of strong, prosperous city states like Milan, Florence and Siena, all of whom hate each

other, a situation which Hawkwood coolly and calmly and ruthlessly exploits. Soon he and his men are killing peasants, raping women, burning crops, ransoming nobles and even defeating the odd army here and there, collecting vast sums from various signoria to go away and bother the other guy. Then the pope returns to Rome and tries to take charge and more people die and Hawkwood keeps raking it in.

Hawkwood, oddly enough, remains a cipher. We only know him through his actions, his clever maneuverings, his carefully controlled slaughtering and kidnapping and, oh yeah, that one really big massacre at Cesena. He left no writings behind to provide any sort of insight into his character or personality, and mostly he just kept soldiering and ransoming and robbing and threatening and killing because that's what he was good at. Instead we have walk-on parts by the likes of Chaucer, Boccaccio, Petrarch and Catherine of Siena to bring the age to life and illuminate the minds and souls of the players and the landscape they moved through: wealth, poverty, famine, plague, war, not to mention the obscene iniquity of holy mother church, outdoing all others in the atrocity stakes as it gropes for secular power, while its cardinals and prelates are ardent practitioners of the seven deadly sins.

This is a deeply interesting book, written with a cool, clear detachment that occasionally turns acerbic. It is an edifying and sobering piece of history, and if Hawkwood remains an enigma, it may be because we don't yet understand how much of history is carved out by cool, ruthless bastards doing whatever the hell they wanted.

Matt says

14th century Italy was a battleground torn apart and ravaged by foreign mercenaries. Unfortunately, the city-states of the time depended on the mercenaries for individual survival and instead of kicking them out, they made war more profitable by hiring them. I loved this book because it helps me to better understand the political climate that Leonardo da Vinci grew up in and why his 8-foot bronze horse was destroyed.

What I love about the Devil's Broker is how outside of telling you the story of John Hawkwood, it covers some fascinating European medieval history that is quite comical at times. For example, the reason they call doctors "Quacks" is because of the face masks that they wore during the days of the plague. Not to mention, some of the "cures" were downright hilarious, and if the disease didn't kill you the doctor would. I was entertained all throughout this book, and the author does a great job of never letting up the pace for a minute.

This is a book that I would highly recommend to anyone who's looking to learn more about medieval history in an interesting way because it talks about John Hawkwood in a spectacular way while never losing sight of the big picture of this bloody chapter in Italy's history.

Bart says

Highly accessible history of late Medieval Italy. This is a superb read, one that is evocative of Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*.

Like Tuchman, Saunders frames her book around the life and times of an individual - in this case, English mercenary John Hawkwood, who found himself in rather constant employ due to the various feuds and wars among the city-states of Italy.

Through Hawkwood, we get a good look at several of the major players in the region during this time - Catherine of Siena, the Visconti "Vipers," various popes, and royalty from France, England and the Holy Roman Empire.

It skews heavily towards the politics of the age, without getting too bogged down in details. You do get some idea of what life was like, but mainly for the elite like Hawkwood. It touches on a few subjects like religious ardor and the importance of the Church in daily life, how warfare was conducted during the time, what the average person's sex life might have been like, and so on.

There's a ton of great anecdotes in here, too.

I still consider Barbara Tuchman's book the first thing you should reach for if you're interested in the 14th century - but her work focuses more on the French and English. When you're done with it, read this book to get an idea of the workings of Italy during this time.

Libby Beyreis says

Wow. This is an intense history of the English mercenary John Hawkwood, who pillaged his way up and down the Italian peninsula in the 14th century. The violence was frankly shocking at times - the massacre at Cesena was something I'd never heard about, and was dumbfounded by the gratuitous cruelty. The depiction of the sad state of the medieval church (before, during, and after the Schism) was also - well, depressing and fascinating in a sickening way, with definite echoes in the modern power elite. Still, it was a fascinating read, and I'd definitely recommend it to any of my friends who are interested in condottieri, 14th century Italy, the history of warfare, or finding out more about the man on the wall of the cathedral in Florence.

Joshua says

So you thought the 21st century was bad? Try living in Italy in the 14th century. Of course you had plague, famine, poverty, and bloodshed, but don't forget the social injustice, backwards medicine, poor hygiene, living in filth, and religious mania. Although this book paints quite the picture of life in Europe of the Middle Ages, the most incredible thing isn't how bad it really was, but that we managed to actually survive as a species through it all. But that's not really what the book is supposed to be about (or is it?)--it's really just the story of one man, a knight and mercenary by the name of Sir John Hawkwood.

Forget all your childish and naive notions of knighthood--that's really just a codename for murderer, bully, bandit, and oppressor. And Hawkwood was one of the best. After the loot became scarce in France during the Hundred Years War, he made his way to Italy and commenced to plunder and pillage his way to fame and fortune at the expense of everybody in his way. Kings and queens and popes were powerless before him for three or four decades until he mercifully died of natural causes and the Italian city-states, the papacy, the peasants, and the merchants could finally all let out a deep sigh of relief.

The story of Hawkwood, though, is just the tip of the iceberg. There are interesting subplots dealing with other famous characters of the time, like Geoffrey Chaucer, Catherine of Sienna, and the fascinating stories of three popes (one who died halfway through the book, one who was elected his successor, and one who attempted to usurp the "rightful" pope). (Reading this book made me want to read some papal history.)

This is crazy, compelling stuff, and a vibrantly told story as well. The only downside was trying to keep all the names and political factions straight, but maybe that's just me. Thanks to Mike for recommending it, I enjoyed it immensely.

Chris says

Interesting because the connection to Chaucer, but not really the biography it claims on the back cover. Also it seems to lose steam.

April Munday says

If there had been proper footnotes, this would have been a better book.

The book is more about late fourteenth century Italy than it is about Hawkwood and mercenaries. What's there is very interesting, but the diversions from Hawkwood's story make it hard to follow. It's also very easy to lose interest in some of the asides.
