



# The Handfasted Wife

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The Handfasted Wife is the story of the Norman Conquest from the perspective of Edith (Elditha) Swanneck, Harold's common-law wife. She is set aside for a political marriage when Harold becomes king in 1066. Determined to protect her children's destinies and control her economic future, she is taken to William's camp when her estate is sacked on the eve of the Battle of Hastings. She later identifies Harold's body on the battlefield and her youngest son becomes a Norman hostage. Elditha avoids an arranged marriage with a Breton knight by which her son might or might not be given into his care. She makes her own choice and sets out through strife-torn England to seek help from her sons in Dublin. However, events again overtake her. Harold's mother, Gytha, holds up in her city of Exeter with other aristocratic women, including Elditha's eldest daughter. The girl is at risk, drawing Elditha back to Exeter and resistance. Initially supported by Exeter's burghers the women withstand William's siege. However, after three horrific weeks they negotiate exile and the removal of their treasure. Elditha takes sanctuary in a convent where eventually she is reunited with her hostage son. This is an adventure story of love, loss, survival and reconciliation.

## **The Handfasted Wife Details**

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# From Reader Review The Handfasted Wife for online ebook

## Paula Lofting says

The Handfasted Wife is the story of the Norman Conquest from the perspective of Edith (Elditha)

Swanneck, Harold's common-law wife. The story begins with King Edward, the Confessor's demise. She arrives with her younger children at court for the Christmas celebrations only to find that the King, who has been on the throne for more than twenty years, is gravely ill. Edward has not even until now, proclaimed his successor but there is a name on everyone's lips - Elditha's husband, Harold, Earl of Wessex is ready to take the crown with the support of the Witan. Elditha dreams of being Queen, but Harold has other ideas. Although he professes to love her and only her alone, Elditha is shocked when her lifelong love chooses to put her aside, despite their marriage being legal in the eyes of the law, in order to marry Aldgyth, sister of the Northern earls, thus ensuring their greatly needed support. Elditha accepts this terrible slight with the resignation of a proud noble lady. She will always be loved, her husband tells her and sends her to one of his estates, Reredfelle, where she can live out her life with her children in peace and he will come to her when he can. Then something terrible happens that means that Elditha's life will never be the same again.

The opening chapters of this book entice the reader in through the gateway to another world, a world in which it is very much a man's world but told from the women of that world's point of view. Women in 11thc England were not necessarily the pawns and chattels they later came to be after the Norman invasion. They were permitted to own land and property independently from their husbands or menfolk, could bequest that property to whoever they so wished and could not be forced by law, against their will into undesirable marriages. And yet, it was the act of men who shaped their lives and because of this, their destinies would lay beyond their control, as we are about to see when Elditha's beloved Harold is killed upon the battlefield and she is forced to identify his body. From this awful tragedy, Elditha emerges a strong and determined woman, forced to flee the clutches of the Norman invaders and leave her precious youngest child in their grasp and her other children exposed to their designs for them. But Elditha will not give up her quest to ensure that they are given the freedom to determine their own lives and she conducts herself bravely without a thought to her own safety, in the face of danger which follows her wherever she goes, in order to fulfill her mother's instincts to protect her brood.

Elditha is a truly tragic heroine of her time. Based on the scant evidence there is for her, her story is surrounded in myth and legend and we can but only catch glimpses of her real story through the writings of chroniclers some years later. The Waltham Chronicle written in the late 12thc describes Edith Swanneck as being forced to search for the body of her beloved Harold through the wreckage torn and dismembered bodies on the battlefield. Imagine her distress. No doubt she would not have been alone in her torment. Women searching for their husband's bodies so they could bury them decently, would have covered the field of blood in the aftermath of that awful battle. It would have been enough to drive a woman insane to find her husband's body, bloodied, mutilated in the most horrific way and to be recognisable only by 'marks' known only to her. This is the poignancy of her story. The fact that she couldn't identify him any other way. What kind of trauma would that cause to the mind? It affects one so deeply and yet it cannot be comprehended by anyone who has never experienced such horror.

'May my lord's soul rest in peace .' She took a cloth from her belt and carefully wiped away the blood from around the marks.

And yet, this noble lady is determined not to waver. She keeps her sanity and her dignity as life heaps more

indignities upon her.

This book is full of courageous characters that throughout Elditha's story continue to support her and aid her in her quest for deliverance from whatever dastardly fate awaits her. Padar, her husband's own skald, who was Harold's most precious gift to her before he died, swears to keep her safe and never fails her; Connor, the Irish Earl of Meath, an old ally of Harold's too is there when she needs him; Alfred and his faithful wife Gertrude are simple folk who risk their own lives to save her, and there are many more. Above all, this is a book dedicated to the women of the day. For their men, their suffering ended on the battlefield, but for them, their suffering and trauma continues as England is spun into turmoil after that fateful day on October 14th 1066.

These are strong women, raised in an England, so alien to the Norman's sense of what womanhood was. It is a combination of their strength and humility that makes the characters human, capturing the readers hearts immediately. But the character who stands, aside from Elditha Swanneck, to the fore is Gytha, Harold's tragic and unfortunate mother. She will not let go of her city, Exeter, where she has built a safe haven from the Normans. When they are besieged by William and his army, she refuses to give up. Even when the merchants, worried for their livelihoods after William has seized their goods and ships, urge for peace and negotiations, does she stand strong against those that would betray her.

‘There will be no more of this. No agreement with the enemy. No talk with William. No fealty oaths. He’ll give your trade to his own. Your daughters will be raped and married off to common soldiers . Your sons will be pressed into their army, like those foolish traitors in their camps out there. The bastard son of a bastard mother will hang you all. And, if he doesn’t, when my grandsons arrive to relieve us come sailing time, if even one of you betray this town, you will all be dead men.’

For a time, her rousing cry convinces them and this formidable old lady, probably likely nearing 60, old for those days, remains stoic in her determination. The story increases in its excitement as the townspeople contemplate their futures and William and his army continue their onslaught.

The Handfasted Wife is a remarkable tale of courage, well researched and written by Carol McGrath. An epic tale of adventure, heartache and courage. Most of all, it is a tale about the aftermath of war seen through eyes of the women who it affected most, as rarely written about before. Men create their destinies, women create their future. Men die with their swords in their hands, women live with the consequences.

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## **Samantha says**

The Handfasted Wife is the story of Edith (Elditha as she is called in this novel), the first wife of Harold Godwinson. Since this book starts with King Edward near death and Harold soon follows him, the focus is on Elditha as she is forced to decide what to do as Norman invaders swarm through England.

The premise of this novel is certainly interesting. Little is known of what happened to Harold's wives and children after his death. Obviously, disappearing was the best way to save their own skin, so most of this novel is fictional creation loosely wrapped in factual settings. My biggest problem is that I couldn't admire Elditha or even understand her.

The plot followed Elditha through her wanderings and poor decisions made in an effort to escape England before King William could force her into a future she did not want. Little concern seems to cross her conscious for those who risk and give their lives to protect her. Her children's fate also seems to be little more than an afterthought to her. She doesn't seem to have any actual goal, as (view spoiler)

The detail of everyday life is exceptionally done in this novel. Women embroidering, dividing up rations during a siege, and other routine tasks are described in detail that some readers will appreciate. I felt a little inundated with the ordinary when I knew epic battles were happening outside the scene I was presented with.

Maybe it was because I read this at the same time as *The Norman Conquest* by Marc Morris that I just couldn't be content with the simple tale that was being spun.

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### **Ellen Ekstrom says**

Carol McGrath's novel brings to life a medieval woman very few people have heard of, let alone know from their history books - she is Edith (or Alfytha) Swannhaels - Edith Swanneck, the handfasted wife of Harold Godwinsson, the last Anglo-Saxon King of England. Little is known about Edith, other than what we know from the historical documents that survive the time and oral tradition. Ms. McGrath does an excellent job of giving us a betrayed woman who rises above her circumstance after the 'Great Battle,' the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Handfasted unions were a Danish tradition of the time. This allowed a nobleman to put aside his partner to marry for expediency and political gain, as it often happened, and marry in the Church. Handfasting was not recognized by the English church and therefore, Edith was considered by some, but not all, Harold Godwinsson's concubine. The Normans certainly thought as much. Never mind that Harold and she were married for twenty years before he took a Northumbrian heiress as his Christian/legitimate wife several months before the Battle of Hastings. But enough of the history lesson.

The author gives what I think is a three-dimensional, powerful portrait of Edith and all of the women portrayed in the story, also the men. The story begins in the winter of 1065 before Edward the Confessor's death and through to the fall of Exeter in 1068. We are shown the fear, desperation and courage of the English as they rebelled against the Norman invaders. We are shown Edith as she comes to terms with the death of her husband, with her on the horrific evening that she was brought to identify his mutilated body (apparently, she was the only one who knew about 'secret marks' on his person), watch as she courted by noblemen and almost forced into marriage with a Norman and stays true to the love and memory of Harold. We witness the determination to survive for the sake of her children and her love for them at all costs, one of them taken as hostage by William the Conqueror.

Because there is so little documented about Edith, save that she was Harold's wife and the mother of his children, Ms. McGrath used wonderful artistic license in filling in the blanks and makes it all plausible. She did such a credible job of storytelling that I referred to my copy of the "Anglo-Saxon Chronicle" and Oederic Vitalis' chronicle to see if I missed something.

Ms. McGrath is planning to continue the story and I hope the books will be as spellbinding as this.

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### **Krista Baetiong Tungol says**

An appreciation for Anglo-Saxon history and a moving tale about the repercussions of Harold Godwinson's death at Hastings are the two main elements of this novel by Carol McGrath. Through the perspective of Harold's common-law wife Edith Swanneck (Eldith in the story), the author has created a plausible storyline of England after the Battle of Hastings, the wife's struggles to keep her and her children safe from the conqueror's intimidation, and the many glaring divergence between old and new customs.

An insightful take on the woman who was known in history as the one who identified King Harold's mutilated body after the battle, and who in this story was painted as caring, brave, and resilient (and rightly so).

(Related fictional read on Harold Godwinson—and one that I highly recommend: Helen Hollick's *I Am the Chosen King*)

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### **Mike Heath says**

#### **HISTORICAL MASTERPIECE**

This book is a rarity - it is an intelligent, excellently researched piece of writing, combining a powerful story that is both classic and modern in construction. Everyone knows (or, at least, ought to know) the story of 1066 - the Battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest. What Carol McGrath has done so skilfully here, is to recount the background story from the point of view of the ill fated King Harold's hand fasted wife, Elditha. The story moves at pace and is an utterly compelling and powerful read.

Do Richard and Judy still do their authoritative Summer reading list? This is the ideal candidate.

Ang Lee, are you looking for excellent screenplay material? Look no further.

I hadn't heard of Carol McGrath before but I can hardly wait for her next novel.

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### **Melanie (Mel's Bookland Adventures) says**

This was such an odd book, I found it both dull and super fascinating. The things that fascinated me where finding out how the lives of women, especially Harold's handfasted wife Elditha panned out after Harold became King in 1065, how she was set aside, the battle and William becoming king. Really fascinating, the little details and well researched as to the importance of the weaving and general crafts for women, the managing of estates while men fought battles etc. All super interesting and yet at the same time the characters and the plotting was just dull. Glad I read it, but no need to continue on with the series.

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### **Donna says**

This is historical fiction that takes place in 1066 a.d. and the succession of the throne after the death of Edward, the Confessor. Harold Godwinson was next in line, but this isn't a story about him or even the throne. It was about his common law wife. I enjoyed this female POV. I loved the attention to detail the author gave to the time period. Trying to keep the family together, keep them safe, and to see them well married seemed like such a chore in these turbulent times. A mother's gotta do, what a mother's gotta do. I liked this one. So 3 stars.

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### **Deborah Swift says**

A substantial treasure trove of historical information about the 11th century, as well as a gripping story. Edith Swan-Neck is a character with stubborn integrity who remains faithful to her hand-fastened husband despite the Norman invaders. Forced to flee to Ireland, she undergoes a series of adventures which test her

courage and that of Padar, her companion. Equally suitable I would think for both a male and female readership this is a book that speaks for all those who have had to endure being exiles from their own land. It is beautifully written portrait of a more violent time and the many well-researched details bring the period lushly to life. I knew very little about this era in history, and as all the best historical fiction should, it both entertained and educated me. Every schoolchild has heard of The Bayeux Tapestry, but not everyone sees the women's stories behind it.

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## **Jane says**

This was a beautiful frame story: a nun [possibly Elditha herself] narrates to a group of other nuns declaring:

"My tale follows the fortunes of the woman whom Harold loved and who passionately loved him back; his handfasted wife Edith [called Elditha in the story], she of the elegant swan's neck. ... After he became king, he betrayed Elditha and sent her away. But that is not the end of her story. It is but a beginning."

This novel tells of the time of the Norman Conquest of England from the viewpoint of Edith Swanneck, Harold Godwinson's wife by handfast wedding ceremony, not church marriage. This moving story tells of her and Harold's love and their children. Battle of Hastings itself is given short shrift but a big battle scene doesn't serve the purpose of this novel. This is Elditha's story and thoughts: the aftermath after Harold's death, searching for his dead body, escaping a forced, loveless marriage with a Breton knight, fleeing to the Irish court to find two sons. She returns to England, lives through the three-week long siege of Exeter and makes her final decision about the rest of her life.

Exquisitely written and well paced. I felt for Elditha because of the tragedies in her life, how she rises above them and finally finds peace. Characters were well drawn, especially the women. The Bayeux tapestry is commissioned by Bishop Odo of Bayeux, <http://www.medievalists.net/2009/06/1...>

Elditha embroiders the scene of her burning estate. In my copy, that scene was shown on the cover. By the embroidery she feels the Godwins will always be remembered. I liked the epigraphs at each chapter head, an excerpt from something written in that period, e.g., The Anglo Saxon Chronicle; each one gave a clue as to what the chapter would be about.

Thank you, goodreads, for sending me this splendid novel in a first reads giveaway.

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## **Kelly says**

[I know I can't be mad at the author because I was disgruntled about the ending, but I was still disappointed. Of course, logically I know history doesn't really have a lot of tidy happy

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## **Alison says**

Edith Swan-Neck first came to my notice when I read Georgette Heyer's *The Conqueror* when I was a teenager. I remember thinking 'Who was that?' I looked her up in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (no Internet then) and read a few terse details. And that was it.

As Carol McGrath explains, there were few details recorded about Edith. She is one of the shadow women of history - an intriguing figure, important in late Anglo-Saxon England, but virtually wiped from the record. But the author has remedied this and uses the few facts skilfully and intelligently to give us a very logically developed account of what Edith's life may have been like, especially after the Conquest.

Not only that, this well-researched book describes through Edith's eyes and life the overthrow of the mature and pragmatic Anglo-Saxon society with country rituals, handfasted marriage, married priests, a mix of Saxon, Norse, Celtic and Danish communities. But Conquest brings a cold and harsh new way.

Two themes ran through - the importance, or more accurately, the dominance of religion in the lives of people at every level - incomprehensible to the modern reader - and the importance of the women's creative work of exquisite needlework, particularly embroidery. They converged, especially in the great religious houses such as Wilton.

As a keen thriller and action adventure reader, I can say this book has that elusive page-turning quality. As a historian and amateur embroiderer, I relished the cleverly placed rich historical detail woven into the book's fabric.

This will be one of my reading treasures of 2013.

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## **Anna Belfrage says**

I have a problem reading books where I know beforehand there is no happy ever after. In this particular case, I know Harold and his Elditha will never experience old age, seeing as he died at the battle of Hastings. It makes me sort of weepy, and I am ridiculously glad that, as per this book, they had some weeks together before the momentous events that would transform England forever.

Elditha Swanneck is an engaging character, mild but assertive, capable and wise. She handles her affairs in the way any wealthy noblewoman of the times would have done, she loves her children, her man. When Harold decides to marry – for real – she is understandably hurt, made fragile and invisible by his apparent disinterest. By choosing a new wife, Harold is sullyng their union, relegating her to the role of mistress rather than mate, and I think Ms McGrath has done a great job in conveying all these feelings, further complicated by the fact that Elditha can't stop loving Harold, the man she has loved for more than half her life. She wants to be angry and send him away, but misses him too much to do so when he finally comes to see her. Even after he is dead, Elditha will always carry this larger than life man in her heart, attempting always to remain loyal to his memory.

Ms McGrath does an excellent job in portraying all her central characters. From Elditha to Padar, from Gytha to Harold himself, these long dead people spring to life within the pages of her book, some of them so easy to love, some, like Queen Edith, portrayed as coldly pragmatic. To these vibrant characters must be added



beautiful descriptive writing, pitch-perfect dialogue and a vivid historical setting.

This author clearly knows the period she is describing so well that her details and artefacts, the glimpses she offers of interior design, of food and clothes, never become stilted or affected. She weaves harvest work and bee-keeping, herbal ointments and period pastimes into her text with such skill that I am no longer here, but there, entering bower halls where women sit and gossip as they work, following Elditha into the chilly interiors of churches, or into the welcoming warmth of a merchant's house.

Further to this, Ms McGrath really knows how to write. POV is distinct throughout, Elditha quickly acquires a presence and a voice of her own, and I find it quite impossible to put this book down, so entranced am I by the elegant writing and the story as such. Is there a happy ending? Well, that is not for me to reveal, but I can more than warmly recommend this book, and I for one hope we will not have to wait long for the next one in the trilogy to come out.

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### **Jane Holland says**

I found this an inventive read, the story of King Harold's first 'wife', joined to him by the ancient handfasting ceremony, whose marriage was dissolved after he became King because it had not been 'sanctified by the Church'.

Harold subsequently remarries, and his handfasted wife Elditha then begins a life of exile from court and her husband. This further disintegrates after Harold's death, when her unfortunate young children are taken hostage by William the Conqueror and she herself is threatened with unwilling marriage to a Norman nobleman. To escape this fate, Elditha decides to flee to Ireland ... The Handfasted Wife is the story of her many adventures and setbacks on the way to achieving this goal.

Mostly based on historical fact, though with some elements invented to fill those gaps where historians cannot follow, this is a richly detailed and well-researched historical read.

The novel is, necessarily, episodic in nature, with many daring escapes and desperate moments of capture, with Elditha in the company of Padar, her loyal and steadfast 'protector' throughout much of this book. That said, this is not a particularly romantic read; presumably that would have been a departure too far from what is historically known. McGrath's 'handfasted wife' remains loyal to Harold even after his death, and despite his cruel remarriage to a more noble and respectable lady.

But this element to Elditha's character reflects the key themes of the story: loyalty versus betrayal, old versus new. In The Handfasted Wife, McGrath explores the spiritual and emotional conflicts inherent in the transition between Anglo-Saxon England and the new Norman French regime. She highlights the comfortable remnants of ancient pagan ways versus the cold starkness of the newly dominant Roman Church by setting the loyal consort against the new wife, the settled Anglo-Saxons against Norman invaders, even the familiar (but married) village priest against the incoming fundamentalist monk with his vow of chastity and his hair-shirts.

Change is inevitable and not always for the better, McGrath is saying. But her characters cling to their integrity, for in the end, that is all any of us can do when faced with changes we can neither condone nor control.

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## **M.R. Graham says**

I received this book via Firstreads in exchange for an honest review.

Edith Swanneck has fascinated me since the moment I first heard a two-sentence summary of her life in the middle of an English history class. It amounted essentially to "She was married to Harold when he fell at Hastings, was remarkably lovely, and died in a convent. Finis." I knew immediately that there had to be more to her than that, as someone moving through one of the greatest turning points of English history and who survived to see all of it play out, but as McGrath notes, there is devastatingly little record of her. So when I read the description of *The Handfasted Wife*, I was eager to see how a diligent researcher would present her in fiction.

Unfortunately, the book read more like historical speculation than an historical novel. The prose was curiously didactic, as though its intent was less to convey a story about characters than to convey information about the life of noblewomen and refugees in 1065-1068. Elditha's travels feel like a vehicle for the facts of daily life, and I feel that a novel should be structured in rather the opposite way - information bolstering the narrative, not the other way around. I was not able to feel with Elditha or for her now any more than I did during that history class those years ago.

That said, the book is marvelously well-researched, and taken as a speculation, provides an interesting history to parallel the Norman invasion. I wish McGrath had put as much intricacy into her characters as into her setting, but I think I can understand a reluctance to assign a fictive personality to a real person about whom so little is known.

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## **David Ebsworth says**

Opening Line: "Tell us a story, you say. Then let us sit by our frames and listen to a tale while we work."

You could be forgiven, I suppose, for believing, from the opening lines, that this is a novel aimed primarily at a female market. But it is not! The prose is lyrical but relaxed, a well-paced narrative that takes us back to the Norman invasion of England in 1066, weaving just enough of the familiar background to keep us within the tapestry borders of the King Harold story - his rise to the throne, his dispute with William of Normandy, the battles of Stamford Bridge and Senlac - while superimposing the less familiar and equally interesting tale of Edith (Elditha) Swan-Neck, Harold's common-law (hand-fastened) wife. I enjoyed the thumb-nail references to Saxon culture and the perspectives of Carol McGrath's very credible characters, their astonishment and frustration at the relative ease with which they are conquered. Excellent book and enjoyed it immensely!

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