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The Firedrake



CECELIA HOLLAND

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Cecelia Holland's first novel follows the career of an Irish mercenary knight who joins the army of William the Conqueror and fights at the Battle of Hastings.

The Firedrake Details

Date : Published March 1st 2001 by Backinprint.com (first published January 1st 1960)

ISBN : 9780595175826

Author : Cecelia Holland

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Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Medieval

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From Reader Review The Firedrake for online ebook

Margareth8537 says

Really enjoyed her style of writing. Almost abrupt, using very few words but really getting across her description and her story

Curt Lorde says

1066. The Eleventh Century, unless you're a peasant, is a fascinating period. Byzantium is still a world power, though its foundations have been gnawed, and too much infighting has weakened it. The Seljuk Turks are riding westward out of the steppes. The ancient Middle East will soon know new overlords. The Sudanic Kingdoms and Ethiopia/Axum in East Africa and mighty Ghana in the West African savannas still stand; fabled lands of great wealth. Spain is a battleground of competing cultures. The West is a motley collection of feudal holdings, and kings wishing to revitalize the great empire of Charlemagne, if not Rome itself. And the rowdy descendants of the Vikings, the Normans, under William the Bastard (Don't call him that to his face unless you have an army behind you!) look hungrily at the prize of Angleland. Ms. Holland first took me to this age, where the lands were just then assuming their modern titles. Where an adventurer like the hero who like millions of others, saw the comet, Haley's it's name in the future yet to come, could literally carve out their destiny. You can learn why Basil Rathbone's Norman thought so ill of Errol Flynn's Saxon bushwhacker

Mary Ann says

This is a real stinker; dreadful style, so poorly written I could barely get through it; fortunately, it's short and only cost 99 cents! I have a great interest in the period, and a much better historical novel is Julian Rathbone's The Last English King.

Brandon says

The Firedrake is a short historical fiction novel about an Irish mercenary named Laeghaire (pronounced Lear) who becomes a captain in the army of William the Conqueror.

Holland has a very abrupt writing style, writing in short simplistic sentences. Don't expect any sprawling metaphorical details about the setting or the characters. I do think that her writing style pairs well with the character of Laeghaire. Laeghaire is, first and foremost, a fighter who doesn't put up with nonsense, and when he does talk, he is curt and honest. Laeghaire is a man who learns how to love during the course of the story. He learns that he loves war and fighting.

The Firedrake is an interesting read about war, and about what war means to men who love war.

Deborah Pickstone says

Readable but not exceptional. I have read one or two by Cecelia Holland that I loved but others leave me - relatively - flat. This is one of the latter.

Bcoghill Coghill says

What a good read. A substantial notch above most Historical Novels. A portrait of a character who is neither good nor bad. Much like a Clint Eastwood western hero.

Richard Stueber says

This is the first novel by Cecelia Holland who was only 22 years old when this was first published. It's a remarkable achievement for any age.

It tells the story of Laeghaire, which is the Gaelic spelling of Lear, as in King Lear. The events lead up to the Norman invasion of England in 1066. Laeghaire is from Tralee in Ireland and has been working as a mercenary for Heinrich the Duke of Thuringia. The ruler of Thuringia at that time was actually Landgrave Ludwig II (1128-1172), but we won't quibble about that. Laeghaire is on his way west to Flanders and on the way he picks up a young woman named Hilde.

In Flanders he goes to work for Count Baldwin V of Flanders (1012-1067). Duke William of Normandy (1028-1087), later the famous William the Conqueror takes a liking to Laighaire. Eventually Laighaire fights for William at the famous Battle of Hastings in 1066. After the battle he intends to leave Hilde behind, but does he really go? Question unsolved.

Tostig (d. 25 Sept 1066 in battle), brother of the Saxon King Harald Godwinson also appears in the novel. He was married to Baldwin's half-sister Judith of Flanders (1033-1094).

All of the historical people in this novel (not Laeghaire and Hilde) are my ancestors.

Mia says

Holland is the MASTER of the minimalist sentence. I haven't read any other works by her, so I don't know she employs this style throughout. It is deliberate. It is intentional. It is brilliantly executed. You would think it would be very dull reading sentences like "The knight spat." What happens instead is that Holland succeeds in painting a moving, visual scene inside your head. For all I know, this style is what is by screenwriters (just speculating there).

I found this writing style suited the subject content extremely well. The knight is a man of deeds. He is not a man of words. There is a starkness and a harsh clarity to the writing which I loved.

Janice says

This was an interesting book that took me a while to get into.

In the beginning, you're just plopped down with the main character with no background of what time period it is, or who he is, or anything really. This character, Laeghaire, is a mercenary, and it quickly becomes apparent that he's a mercenary some time in the Middle Ages. (BTW, we're told in the prologue that his name -Laeghaire- is the Gaelic spelling of Lear, as in King Lear, though I think that's where the resemblance ends.)

Turns out he's a mercenary in the 11th century. And he's going to end up at the Battle of Hastings with William the Conqueror.

Laeghaire is a rough and violent man, but he's also a soldier in a time where battles were rough and violent and face to face, for the most part. He has two horses that he loves, but they're never named, just "the black" and "the brown." He ends up with a woman because he saw her being beaten by her father (I think) and bought her from him for a doxy. He stands up to rulers, including William, and is frequently chastized by them for being mouthy or insubordinate. He has a reputation as a very great fighter. He likes fighting, and he likes roaming. One of his names is Laeghaire of the Long Road, because of his unsettled ways. He was born in Ireland, but hasn't been there in years.

It's really a character study, but told almost totally from outside Laeghaire's head. We almost never see his thoughts. We see his actions, and can, in some cases, infer what he's feeling from them.

I picked up a Cecelia Holland book because of hearing her on The Coode Street Podcast a couple of times. She primarily writes historical fiction (like this). While I didn't find the prose gripping, I kept coming back to see what Laeghaire was going to do, and what was going to happen with him. You can see some of the things that happen coming from a long ways away. Other things are more surprising.

I think The Firedrake was her first novel, published in 1966. I think it would be interesting to read a later book of hers to see how her writing had changed over the years.

As to the title: Vocabulary.com defines a firedrake as "a creature of Teutonic mythology; usually represented as breathing fire and having a reptilian body and sometimes wings". Not a literal description, but pretty good as a figurative one.

Lizzy says

Short, choppy sentences
Unappealing hero.

Charles van Buren says

Her first published novel

By Charles van Buren on July 1, 2018

Format: Kindle Edition|Verified Purchase

If you are not familiar with Cecilia Holland's writing, I strongly recommend that you not begin with this one. *FIRE Drake* is her first published novel (1966 I think), but the fourth that she wrote. Of the other three, *JERUSALEM* was later published after revisions and polishing. Parts of the other two were used in other works. Ms. Holland grew and matured as a writer. *FIRE Drake* shows some flashes of her developing skill but is not indicative of the great writer she became.

The writing style in *Firedrake* uses many short, choppy sentences. A sample: "The horse reared. He bolted. Laeghaire braced himself. The horse dragged him a few feet." This sort of thing is repeated throughout the novel. Another irritating thing is that a scene will end with the next sentence taking the reader elsewhere. No warnings, symbols or spaces. No division at all in the Kindle edition except for chapters.

Laeghaire is not a particularly likeable main character. Men fear him and follow him into battle but Ms. Holland does not give him many friends. He becomes close to William, Duke of Normandy, later styled The Conqueror. Then, for no apparent good reason, he.... Stop. No spoilers. Suffice it to say that I did not like the ending. Perhaps Laeghaire became frightened of possible success.

Nigel says

Laeghaire of the Long Road, from Tralee, no less, an Irish mercenary knight, a devil of a fighter and, well, a devil in general, finds his way, indirectly, into the employ of William of Normandy. The two make an impression on each other in the course of a Summer campaign, but to say much more than that might give things away, though I'm sure even the most casual student of history will work out where it's all headed.

This is Holland's first novel, and it shows a bit as in her first pages of terse, short sentences she's grappling with her craft and learning the difference between short sentences that are monotonous and repetitive, and short sentences interspersed with sentences of more varied length leading to an effect that would be praised as 'hard-boiled' in a crime novel, but which suits descriptions of deadly but prosaic men going about the business of warfare and statecraft. Laeghaire is an intense, morose, driven, haunted man who is beating off bandits one minute and buying peasant girls the next; pillaging a landscape one minute, doting on his son by the bought peasant girl the next; but on the whole, Laeghaire is not destined for happiness, whether by mischance or his own love of violence, and if a happy life eludes him, then violence he gets a-plenty, waiting for him on a hill outside Hastings.

Anyway, it's superb.

Carol says

This book about the events leading up to the battle of Hastings was Holland's first novel, and it shows all the typical elements of her books already firmly in place. The main character, Leaghaire, an Irish knight who ends up in William of Normandy's retinue, is a solitary man, gruff and smart but somewhat alienated from society. There are plenty of subtle personal interactions that carry political weight. Holland also shows her

ability to make historical events feel immediate rather than a foregone conclusion.

Karen McKeown says

Historical fiction has come a long way in the past 30 - 40 years.

While this book does a good job of capturing the historical detail, it ends up just feeling like a catalog/chronology. "This happened, and then this happened, and then this happened." It almost feels as if the author was so intent on being historically accurate that she feared that by injecting any feeling or interior monologues would lessen the realism.

I might try one of her later works another time, but not just yet.

Eruditus says

I read this 45 years ago and was impressed by the author's sense of life in 11th Century Europe. Reading it now, I am still impressed, but also more conscious of a few narrative lapses and a lack of character development. Still, I recommend it for gripping action and sense of time and place.
