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Jean Froissart
The Chronicles



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The Chronicles of
JEAN FROISSART

(c. 1337-c. 1405)



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JEAN FROISSART



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The Chronicles of Jean Froissart



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The Translations



Valenciennes, a commune in the Nord department, Hauts-de-France — Froissart's birthplace



A depiction of Valenciennes from the early sixteenth century

The Chronicles: Lord Berners' Translation, 1535

Condensed and Edited by G. C. Macaulay

The great medieval court historian Jean Froissart was born in c. 1333 in Valenciennes, in the County of Hainaut, situated in the western tip of the Holy Roman Empire, bordering France. We know very little of his life, save for what can be gleaned from his writings. Traditionally, his father was believed to be a painter of armorial bearings, though there is little evidence for this. Other suggestions state that young Jean began working as a merchant, but soon gave that up to become a cleric. By about the age of twenty-four, he left Hainaut and entered the service of Philippa of Hainaut, queen consort of Edward III of England, in c. 1361. This service, which would have lasted until the queen's death in 1369, likely included a position of court poet or official historiographer. Based on surviving archives of the English court, scholars have concluded that this service was probably more a literary construction, in which a courtly poet dedicated poems to his 'lady' and in return received occasional gifts as remuneration.

By all accounts, Froissart took a serious approach to his writing. He travelled widely around England, Scotland, Wales, France, Flanders and Spain gathering material and first-hand accounts for his great work of history, the *Chronicles*. He journeyed with Lionel, Duke of Clarence, to Milan to attend and chronicle the Duke's wedding to Violante, the daughter of Galeazzo Visconti. At this wedding, two other significant writers of the Middle Ages were present, Chaucer and Petrarch. After the death of Queen Philippa, he enjoyed the patronage of Joanna, Duchess of Brabant among various others. He received several rewards, including the benefice of Estinnes, a village near Binche, and later a canonry of Chimay, which helped finance further travels, while providing additional material for his work. Froissart returned to England in 1395, but appeared to be disappointed by changes that he viewed as the end of the age of chivalry. The date and circumstances of his death are unknown, though the Abbey of St. Monegunda of Chimay in Hainaut might be his final resting place.

Froissart's fame nowadays is largely due to his colossal work the *Chronicles*. The text is preserved in more than 100 illuminated manuscripts, illustrated by a variety of miniaturists. One of the most lavishly illuminated copies was commissioned by Louis de Gruuthuse, a Flemish nobleman, in the 1470's. The four volumes of this copy contain 112 miniatures painted by several well-known Brugeois artists of the day, among them Loiset Lyédet, to whom the miniatures in the first two volumes are attributed.

A prose history of the Hundred Years' War, the *Chronicles* opens with the events leading up to the deposition of Edward II in 1327, covering the period up to 1400, recounting events in western Europe, mainly in England, France, Scotland, the Low Countries and the Iberian Peninsula, although at times mentioning other countries and regions such as Italy, Germany, Ireland, the Balkans, Cyprus, Turkey and North Africa.

For centuries the *Chronicles* has been recognised as the chief expression of the chivalric culture of fourteenth century England and France. Froissart's work is perceived as being of vital importance to our understanding of Europe at that time, particularly of the Hundred Years' War. Modern historians recognise that it may have

numerous shortcomings as a historical source, including erroneous dates, misplaced geography, inaccurate estimations of sizes of armies and casualties of war, and, more importantly, the work may be biased in favour of the author's patrons.

Although Froissart is often repetitive or covers seemingly insignificant subjects, his battle descriptions are lively and engaging. For the earlier periods he based his work on other existing chronicles, but his own experiences, combined with those of interviewed witnesses, supply much of the detail of the later parts. Although he may never have witnessed the battles in person, we know that he visited Sluys in 1386 to see the preparations for an invasion of England. He was present at other significant events, such as the baptism of Richard II in Bordeaux in 1367, the coronation of King Charles VI of France in Rheims in 1380, the marriage of Duke John of Berry and Jeanne of Boulogne in Riom and the joyous entry of the French Queen Isabeau of Bavaria in Paris, both taking place in 1389.

The early nineteenth century novelist Sir Walter Scott once remarked that Froissart had "marvellous little sympathy" for the "villain churls". Indeed, Froissart often omits to talk about the common people, which is largely the consequence of his stated aim to write not a general chronicle, but a history of the chivalric exploits that occurred during the conflict between France and England. Still, Froissart was not indifferent to the wars' effect on the rest of society. Book II focuses extensively on popular revolts in different parts of western Europe and the author often demonstrates a fine understanding of the factors that influenced local economies and their effect on society at large; he also shows great sympathy for the plight of the poorer strata of the urban populations of Flanders.

The *Chronicles* is a very extensive work — boasting almost 1.5 million words and being among the longest works composed in French prose during the late Middle Ages. The first English translation, dated to c. 1523, was made by the then-Lord Berners. According to the *Preface*, it was undertaken at the request of Henry VIII. Lord Berners writes of his passion for history: he was modest about his achievements, excusing his lack of "retoryke" and apologising for being a "learner of the language of the Frensshe," but the style of his translation is vivid and straightforward. Though largely abridged, it serves as one of the oldest historical prose works in the English language and greatly influenced succeeding writers. While not always the most linguistically accurate of translations, its style closely reproduces the colour and rhythms of the source text. Lord Berners' translation has been described as marking the highest point that English narrative prose had reached until this time. One academic of English prose writing, Sir Henry Craick, stated, "It is perhaps not too much to say that there is no one who, without producing a work of original genius or research, has laid English literature under such a debt of obligation as Lord Berners by his translation of Froissart."



Posthumous portrait of Froissart, 'Recueil d'Arras', sixteenth century



Drawing of Edward III as head of the Order of the Garter in the 'Bruges Garter Book', c. 1435



Depiction of Philippa of Hainault's coronation, 1328

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The execution of Hugh the younger Despenser, a miniature from the Gruuthuse manuscript of the 'Chronicles', c. 1470.



Charles VI of France attacks his companions in a fit of insanity, c. 1470



The first English translator of 'Chronicles', John Bouchier, 2nd Baron Berners by Ambrosius Benson, c. 1526

INTRODUCTORY NOTE



JEAN FROISSART, *THE* most representative of the chroniclers of the later Middle Ages, was born at Valenciennes in 1337. The Chronicle which, more than his poetry, has kept his fame alive, was undertaken when he was only twenty; the first book was written in its earliest form by 1369; and he kept revising and enlarging the work to the end of his life. In 1361 he went to England, entered the Church, and attached himself to Queen Philippa of Hainault, the wife of Edward III, who made him her secretary and clerk of her chapel. Much of his life was spent in travel. He went to France with the Black Prince, and to Italy with the Duke of Clarence. He saw fighting on the Scottish border, visited Holland, Savoy, and Provence, returning at intervals to Paris and London. He was Vicar of Estinnes-au-Mont, Canon of Chimay, and chaplain to the Comte de Blois; but the Church to him was rather a source of revenue than a religious calling. He finally settled down in his native town, where he died about 1410.

Froissart's wandering life points to one of the most prominent of his characteristics as a historian. Uncritical and often inconsistent as he is, his mistakes are not due to partisanship, for he is extraordinarily cosmopolitan. The Germans he dislikes as unchivalrous; but though his life lay in the period of the Hundred Years' War between England and France, and though he describes many of the events of that war, he is as friendly to England as to France.

By birth Froissart belonged to the bourgeoisie, but his tastes and associations made him an aristocrat. Glimpses of the sufferings which the lower classes underwent in the wars of his time appear in his pages, but they are given incidentally and without sympathy. His interests are all in the somewhat degenerate chivalry of his age, in the splendor of courts, the pomp and circumstance of war, in tourneys, and in pageantry. Full of the love of adventure, he would travel across half of Europe to see a gallant feat of arms, a coronation, a royal marriage. Strength and courage and loyalty were the virtues he loved; cowardice and petty greed he hated. Cruelty and injustice could not dim for him the brilliance of the careers of those brigand lords who were his friends and patrons.

The material for the earlier part of his Chronicles he took largely from his predecessor and model, Jean Lebel; the later books are filled with narratives of what he saw with his own eyes, or gathered from the lips of men who had themselves been part of what they told. This fact, along with his mastery of a style which is always vivacious if sometimes diffuse, accounts for the vividness and picturesqueness of his work. The pageant of medieval life in court and camp dazzled and delighted him, and it is as a pageant that we see the Middle Ages in his book.

Froissart holds a distinguished place among the poets as well as the historians of his century. He wrote chiefly in the allegorical style then in vogue; and his poems, though cast in a mold no longer in fashion, are fresh and full of color, and were found worthy of imitation by Geoffrey Chaucer.

But it is as the supreme chronicler of the later age of chivalry that he lives. "God has been gracious enough" he writes, "to permit me to visit the courts and palaces of kings, ... and all the nobles, kings, dukes, counts, barons, and knights, belonging to all nations, have been kind to me, have listened to me, willingly received me, and proved very useful to me.... Wherever I went I enquired of old knights and squires who

had shared in deeds of arms, and could speak with authority concerning them, and also spoke with heralds in order to verify and corroborate all that was told me. In this way I gathered noble facts for my history, and as long as I live, I shall, by the grace of God, continue to do this, for the more I labour at this the more pleasure I have, and I trust that the gentle knight who loves arms will be nourished on such noble fare, and accomplish still more.”

THE CAMPAIGN OF CRECY

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