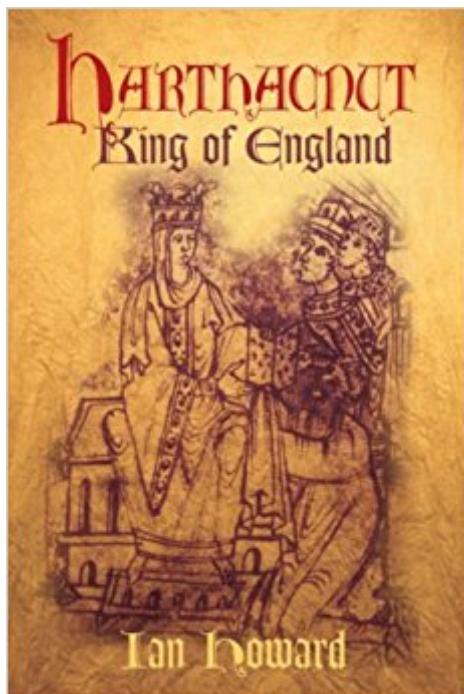


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Harthacnut: The Last Danish King Of England



Synopsis

The first biography of one of the most unpopular kings of England whose harsh taxation prompted Lady Godiva's naked protest

Book Information

Paperback: 256 pages

Publisher: Tempus Publishing Ltd (August 1, 2008)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0752446746

ISBN-13: 978-0752446745

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 0.4 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 9.9 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.5 out of 5 starsÂ See all reviewsÂ (2 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #2,446,924 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #95 in Books > History > Europe > Scandinavia > Denmark #6031 in Books > History > Europe > Great Britain > England #209112 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs

Customer Reviews

This is a clear, short and interesting book on a little known character - Harthacnut, one of the sons of Cnut - who was indeed the Last Danish King of England but only effectively ruled for about two years from 1040-1042 and died aged 24, possibly of tuberculosis. The book is written in a clear style and everything is done, including the provision of maps and illustrations to which the author refers to in his narrative, to make this book entertaining and interesting for a general reader. I found that the effort was mostly successful, with the exception of one element, which might be due to poor editing: the story told by Ian Howard tends to be repetitive. Sometimes, especially when these repetitions occur on the very same page, this tends to become annoying. More generally, it almost seems as if the author felt obliged to rehash the same points over and over again just to make sure that he has not lost us "dumb readers" along the way. Having mentioned this, this book has a number of significant qualities, which, because it is so unprepossessing, you might not even realize at first. Rather than being a "biography" of Harthacnut, of which we know comparatively little, it is the story of the life and times of this character and of his parents - King Knut and Emma. Through this little book, you are treated with an eminently readable and summarized account of the history of England and Denmark from about 1014 to 1042. There is also more to it. This little book contains a very useful and clear presentation of international relations between the Scandinavian Kingdoms

(Norway, Denmark and Sweden), the relationships of the first two with England, and the relationships of the second with the German Emperor.

This is a highly readable and well-written account of the life and times of the last Danish king to rule England. His name is Harthacnut in modern English but is sometimes spelled Harthacanute. The problem with doing any of the very early English kings is limited resource material. Major source material such as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles, the Chronicle of John of Worcester, and the work in praise of Queen Emma (Encomium Emmae Reginae) are sketchy and, even in the parts that are not just brief sketches, as much propaganda and religious proselytizing as history. Ian Howard does a great job of carefully reviewing what is available, including work of other historians, and he makes a coherent story line out of this material that gets as close to what actually happened as one can get. I think what really make this book work are the 38 maps and images lumped together in numerical order and placed in the center of the book. No matter how clear the prose, the early medieval world was so radically different from ours that it would be virtually impossible to follow the family history of Harthacnut without visual representations of England and Scandinavia at that time. Howard has several maps of both areas and has arrows and guidelines showing courses of travel or where important events took place. He usually refers to these in the text by number and they are extremely helpful. He also has images taken from the relevant medieval documents such as the death scene of Harthacnut's half-brother Alfred in the monastery at Ely and Queen Emma pointing to her son Harthacnut as the next king. Howard also lists several lineages which are useful for the reader in following the disputes about who should be king. Each of these visual aids has a paragraph next to it explaining it and tying it into the text.

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