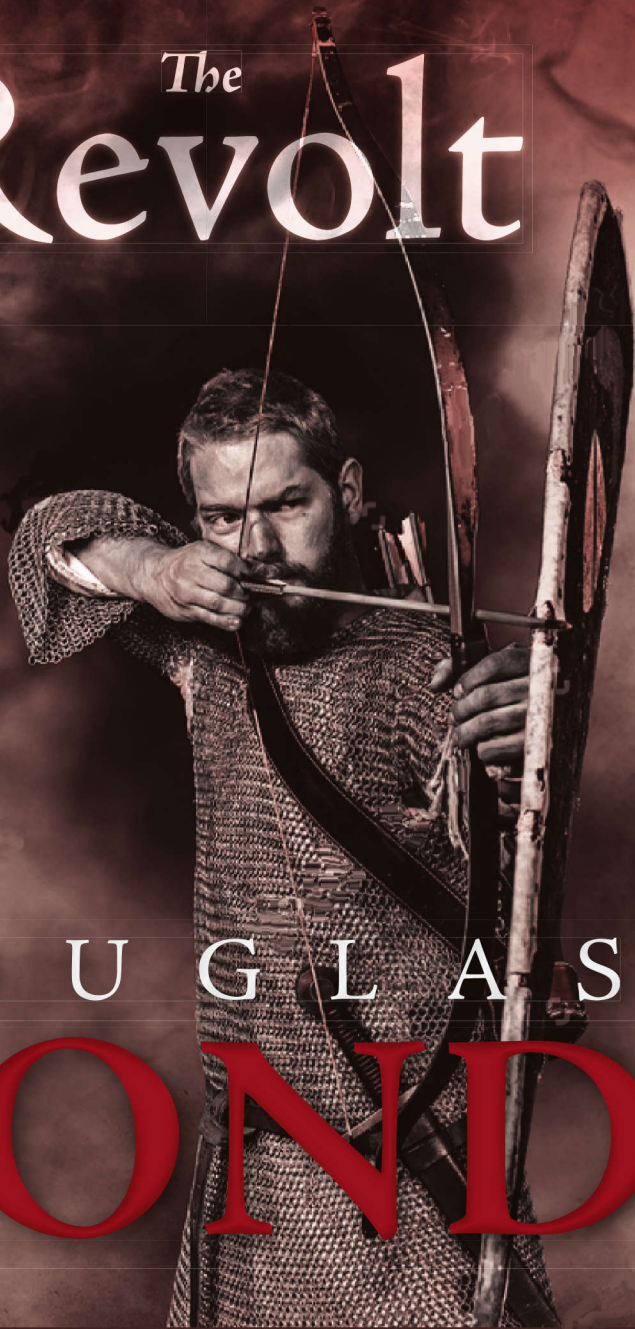


*A Novel in*  
WYCLIFFE'S ENGLAND

*The*  
Revolt



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*The*  
Revolt

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# *The* Revolt

*A Novel in*  
WYCLIFFE'S ENGLAND

DOUGLAS BOND



P U B L I S H I N G

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*For*  
*Gillian, Giles; Desmond and Shauna; Cedric and Ashley;*  
*Rhodric, Tori, Gwenna, and Amelia;*  
*Brittany and Jesse*

*With gratitude to my mother*

Wycliffe's Middle English, John 1:16-17:

“Of the plente of him we alle han takun,  
and grace for grace.

For the lawe is knouun by Moyses;  
forsoth grace and treuthe is maad by Jhesu Crist.”

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# Wycliffe's Fourteenth-Century England







## *Courage at Crécy*

AUGUST 26, 1346, WAS MY BIRTHDAY. I mused on how many other men—French or English—had birthdays on this day. Surely among 40,000 men there were others. Eighteen years ago on this day, I, Hugh West'all, was born. My innards revolting at the prospect, I wondered if this date—the anniversary of my first day on earth—would be my last.

The events of that fateful day are forever imprinted in my memory. For my ability to read and write, I had been pressed into service in the army of King Edward III of England and claimant to the throne of France. It was for that claim we English found ourselves on French soil that day, an invading army, intent on ousting King Philip VI of France and seating Edward in his rightful place.

Overhead, bulbous gray clouds roiled and thickened like a vast quavering brain. Forgive me the frankness of the comparison, but it was at Crécy where first I witnessed the cleaved skulls of men in battle and was struck by the similarity between storm clouds and the human brain. An ominous darkness descended over the broad ridge that connected the villages of Crécy and Wadicourt

and over the valley of the River Maye that would be the stage for the battle. Terrified as I confess I was that day, I could little know how famous that battle would become in history—as famous for the victors as it would be infamous for the vanquished.

Against the backdrop of that hovering darkness, yet another kind of blackness swept overhead. Now rustling and darting like a shadowy specter, the sky gradually became alive with a murder of encircling crows. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of them. Their screeching and cawing and the rustling of their wing beats filled me with dread.

Suddenly a bolt of lightning illuminated the eerie daytime darkness. The crows dispersed in a flurry. In that flash of light, I witnessed the grim faces and wide baleful eyes of nearly 2,000 yeoman, their longbows strung and at the ready. I blamed them not for their expressions of fear, for we were encircled by an army five times our numbers. A fraction of a second after, I felt in my bowels, more than heard with my ears, the gut-wrenching roar of thunder, followed by yet another kind of roar, this a wavelike roar as the rain descended in torrents.

As if from a spigot, water ran off my hood and shoulders. Grimly I watched the soil turn to mud at my feet. With a shudder, I wondered at the barrels full of blood that were sure to be churned into that mud in the hours ahead. The odds so opposed to us, I feared the blood of many English would color those clods of French soil that day—and mine with it.

I hugged my leather satchel to my breast, making to protect it from the deluge. Here I found myself surrounded by stout fighting men, men-at-arms girded with armor, armed with sword and mace, mounted on fierce chargers, champing to enter the fray. And here was I, Hugh West'all, secretary to the Earl of Oxford,

armed against a vast French army, I with nothing more lethal than a goose feather, a sheaf of parchment, a pot of ink—and my fears.

While I mused thus, with haste the yeomen surrounding my position unstrung their longbows and protected the hemp of their bowstrings from the wet inside their jerkins. I had learned from them that wet bowstrings were sure to launch arrows short of the mark, so each man guarded his string as if guarding his life.

Before the crows and the storm, I had heard King Edward with my own ears as he moved among his army, charging his nobles to “be friends without jealousy, and be courteous without pride.” I had hastily penned the words, so representative of how I was determined to think of my king. Though I had not witnessed this with my own eyes, I had it on good authority that he prayed fervently on his knees to God, not for victory, but that he would conduct himself with honor in the battle, and that all his men would do so. As he moved among us, the king spoke so sweetly, so comfortingly to his army; with such cheerful countenance did he charge us to guard his honor and defend his right in the battle about to be joined with France.

I must confess that when the heavens opened with the rumbling of thunder, the crashing of lightning, and the drenching of rain, I wondered if God was angry with our king, with us English, with our campaign against the French. After all we were an invading army, we the ones treading on their soil. Perhaps God was on their side, and we were doomed. Perhaps the storm was merely a foretaste of the coming destruction we were about to undergo in the battle. I feared it might be treasonous to give rein to such thoughts, but as secretary I had been required to swear an oath: “I, Hugh West’all, before God do swear to record everything I observe with the eyes

of my body, and everything I experience and feel in the bowels of my soul." I was at that moment very much experiencing and feeling the impending doom that awaited our beleaguered army. I had no sword, so I scribbled on fiercely with my quill.

As if in reply to my dour musing, the rain halted as suddenly as it had first descended upon us. The clouds parted and then dissipated into the blue sky until they were no more. In place of the gray and drabness, blinding sunlight now glistened on every helm. My spirits soared. It was a token from the heavens. God was once again on our side.

"For God and St. George!" The cry rang throughout our ranks.

Yeomen and Welsh marauders within our ranks fell to their knees, bending low and kissing the soil. I joined them. A priest walked solemnly among us, his black robe drenched and muddy, his sandaled feet squelching in the mud. "*Corpus Christi*," he chanted, making the sign of the cross as he strode among us. I knew this was to be the extent of our communion. The priest drank the blood of Christ for us, and we would receive the body of Christ in token by kissing the earth. As was fitting, the knights and lords, now accoutered for battle and mounted on their chargers, had communed and heard the last rites before arming themselves earlier that morning.

I blinked at the glare flashing on the armor of the knights behind us. Everywhere there was noise and movement. The snorting and neighing of horses, the shouts of orders given out, the clatter of steel as weapons and armor were readied, the barking of dogs, more shouting, the twang as men tested their bowstrings, the clattering of arrows, the grunting of men laboring to position artillery, the gaping mouths of the cannons aiming south and east.

I had, heretofore, avoided turning my gaze toward the French and their allies. I knew what would happen when I did so. My heart would sink again into fear. But it could not be avoided forever. Taking fear in hand, I turned and looked south and east. In vivid color, every detail sharp and clear, I saw them. By their standards, I knew them to be King Charles of Luxembourg, the Earl of Flanders, the Earl of Alençon, the Earl of Blois, nephew of the king of France, Sir John de Fusselles, the Earl of Auxerre, the Lord Charles of Montmorency, the Lord of Beaujeu, and King Philip VI himself. And before them were several thousand Genoese mercenaries armed with crossbows.

It was a fearful array of men, an army of grand proportion, but there was something amiss. Horses were stamping, circling, and several reared up on their hind legs, hooves pawing the air. Men ran and shouted. Amidst flailing arms and legs, knights were hurled from their mounts. Pikes held high wavered like grain on a gusty day and then clattered into heaps of matchwood. Chaos and disorder reigned in the French lines.

“My lords, the sun blinds them!” shouted the Earl of Oxford.

I turned around and looked behind me at the 800 men-at-arms led by the Earls of Warwick and Oxford, Sir Godfrey de Harcourt, Lords Cobham, Holland, Stafford, and Delaware. My eyes smarted and watered at the blinding flashes of sunlight reflecting off their armor. That’s what the French and their horses were seeing—and by which they were being blinded and thrown into confusion. Thrilling at the prospect, I wondered if the French might flee the field in confusion, battle ended, life preserved, victory ours.

Just as my hopes soared, the front line of the French army began forming into some semblance of order. The Genoese



footmen were now advancing on the position of the Black Prince, a youth of yet fewer years than I. As they came on, they raised their voices in a shout of defiance. I froze, my quill poised. The collective voices of 6,000 men marching toward me to my destruction, their crossbows loaded, terrified me. If it was intimidation for which they shouted, it was, indeed, most effective.

“Steady, men!” shouted the young prince. “Hold your positions!”

Another cry of defiance, and the Genoese came on. In our ranks, horses stamped in anticipation, visors of several hundred bascinet helmets snapped into position, yeomen fingered their arrows; men prayed aloud; some sobbed in fear.

To determine range and trajectory, the captain of our English archers ordered a trial shot. I was near to him and studied him closely. Our fate in the next moments depended upon this one man’s judgment. He knew what he wanted, what he needed. The Genoese could shoot their crossbows with armor-piercing accuracy up to 200 yards. But, deadly as it was, the crossbow was cumbersome. Ratcheting the bowstring into place with a bolt ready to fire took an average of two minutes. The English longbow, made from English yew wood by English craftsmen, was capable of launching ash arrows made by English fletchers, shot by English yeomen at a rate of one every five seconds. The captain was good at sums. He knew that though there were 6,000 crossbowmen, they could launch but 6,000 bolts in two minutes, while in that same time, his 2,000 archers could launch up to sixty arrows each for more than twenty times the firepower.

With another defiant shout, again the Genoese advanced. So close were they now, I heard the chinking of their chain mail.

I studied the faces of the yeomen closest to me. Most of them seemed hard and seasoned, though there was more than one youth

among them. One man had a tic that began forming, his right cheek hiccupping and his eye blinking rapidly. Other men fidgeted with the nock of the arrow on their bowstring, eager for the order to draw and fire at will. Some men jabbed their arrows in the mud and dung that everywhere littered the field. A bodkin thus soiled caused greater infection in the Genoese struck by such arrows. If the stricken man didn't die immediately, the wound would certainly putrefy from the filth of the dung and leave him to suffer a prolonged, agonizing death.

A young archer, his face smooth, his eyes wide, glanced nervously at the bearded man to his left. Their eyes met for an instant. Sunlight glistened in the older man's watery eyes. Reaching with a hand, he squeezed the young man's shoulder and said something. There was too much noise for me to hear his words, but I deduced from the movement of his lips that he said, "Courage," and then a name, or perhaps it was something else; perhaps it was the words "my son." I do not know which. And then they stood at the ready, awaiting orders.

The captain's eyes narrowed on the advancing enemy. He seemed to be counting, calculating the precise moment to order his men to fire.

Then the Genoese halted. No more shouts of defiance. Raising their crossbows into firing position, they took aim. I was maddened by it all. Our front line archers stood tall and unflinching, left foot forward, longbow and arrows at the ready. The young archer and the bearded one would surely be among the first to fall when the mercenaries let fly their hail of crossbow bolts.

Why didn't the yeoman captain give the order? To stand there doing nothing, surely many archers, many of his men—of our men—would be cut down in death. It was in that instant that

*Courage at Crécy*

the terrifying thought struck me. Might my breast be, even that instant, in the sights of one of those foul mercenaries?

*Icy fingers closed around my heart at his words. Wycliffe had said it where all could hear him. In public, he had blasphemed. He had declared the “Vicar of Christ” to be the antichrist. There could be but one result from such a declaration.*

**I**N HIS SHORT CAREER AS A BATTLE SECRETARY, Hugh West'all has come close to death many times. But when he leaves the war behind to enter the hallowed halls of Oxford, he meets John of Wycliffe and soon embarks on a mission even more exciting—and perhaps just as dangerous.

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