

# Death, Famine, War, and Conquest: The Black Death, The Hundred Years' War, and Popular Revolt in Barbara W. Tuchman's 'Calamitous Fourteenth Century'

**Carole M. Cusack**

## **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

The 1978 publication of Barbara W. Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14<sup>th</sup> Century* exposed tensions between popular historical writing and academic historians. Although Tuchman (1912-1989) won the National Book Award for History for *A Distant Mirror*, scholarly assessments criticized her reliance on translations and secondary sources, and expressed suspicion that a "narrative history" could be written about the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> This article revisits the fourteenth century with a specific focus on how the devastation of the Black Death (1347-1351, with later sporadic outbreaks) and the Hundred Years' War created conditions for revolt among urban and rural workers, middle class and peasant alike, via the dramatic reduction of the working populace, and widespread famine due to English armies ravaging France. Three revolts, that of the "tribune of the plebs" Cola di Rienzi (murdered in 1354) in Rome, the Jacquerie in France in 1358, and the Peasants (or Great) Revolt in England in 1381, which are briefly discussed in Tuchman's book, are here examined, with a focus on the religious ideas of apocalypse and millennialism, and the Biblical justification of an egalitarian social organization, that limited the power of monarchs and aristocrats.

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<sup>2</sup> Charles T. Wood, 'Review of *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14<sup>th</sup> Century*', *Speculum*, vol. 54, no. 2 (1979), pp. 430-435.

### **The Hundred Years' War and the Black Death**

The Hundred Years' War was an intermittent conflict that is generally regarded as starting in 1337 and ending in 1453 with the defeat of the English army at Castillon. The proximate cause was the death of the French monarch Charles IV in 1328. He was the third son of Philip the Fair to reign for less than six years and to die without an heir.<sup>3</sup> There were several claimants to the throne; Edward III of England was a grandson of Philip the Fair through his mother Isabella, but his claim was not welcomed in France in part because it was through the female line, and in part because his mother was not popular, as her soubriquet "the she-wolf of France" indicates.<sup>4</sup> Edward III pursued his claim because as King of England he was a vassal of the King of France, and if the crowns united that vassalage would have been annulled. The Count of Valois became king, as Philip VI and warfare broke out in 1337 after Philip VI annexed Guyenne, which was at the time an English possession. Edward III brought an English army to the Low Countries but failed to win a significant victory until the battle of Crécy on 26 August 1346. It was not possible to capitalise on this victory as the pestilence now known as the 'Black Death', but in the Middle Ages usually called the Great Plague or the Great Mortality, reached France in 1347 and England in 1348-1349, and the panic and devastation it wreaked resulted in a hiatus in military activity.

Modern gene sequencing research has shown that the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, usually accepted as the cause of the plague, originated in China, although the precise location is disputed between Yunnan and the Gobi Desert.<sup>5</sup> *Yersinia pestis* was usually carried by the fleas on the bodies of rodents such as marmots and rats. The spread of the pestilence was via trade routes to the west and south:

such as into West Asia through the Silk Road and Africa between 1409 and 1433 by Chinese travelers [sic] under explorer Zheng He. The Black Death made its way through Asia, Europe and Africa from 1347 to 1351, and probably brought the world's then 450 million population down to 350

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<sup>3</sup> Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14<sup>th</sup> Century* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979 [1978]), p. 44.

<sup>4</sup> See Sophie Menache, 'Isabelle of France, Queen of England: A Reconsideration', *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 107-124.

<sup>5</sup> William McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1998 [1976]), pp. 169-175.

million. Approximately 50% of China's population perished, while Europe's went down by a third [20 million] and Africa by an eighth.<sup>6</sup>

The plague takes three distinct forms. The most common, bubonic, is also the weakest, killing around 50-60% of sufferers. It has an incubation period of around six days and symptoms include enlarged lymph nodes filled with pus and infected blood from subcutaneous haemorrhaging called buboes. The second type, pneumonic, killed 95-100% of victims and could be transmitted from human to human. Robert S. Gottfried states that "after the two-to-three-day incubation period, there is a rapid fall in body temperature, followed by severe cough and consolidation in the lungs, rapid cyanosis, and the discharge of bloody sputum."<sup>7</sup> The third type of plague, septicaemic, was rare but 100% fatal, killing within hours, before buboes had time to form.

The impact of the plague was dramatic, and medieval theologians interpreted it as a sign of God's wrath being visited upon a sinful populace. Tuchman's book has as its central figure Enguerrand de Coucy VII (1340-1397), a man born just before the coming of the Black Death, and whose mother Catherine died during the second phase of the plague in 1349.<sup>8</sup> The de Coucy estates were in Picardy, the region in which the battle of Crécy, fought when Enguerrand was six years old, took place. For Tuchman Enguerrand fittingly encapsulated his century, in part because (despite his love marriage in 1465 with Princess Isabella of England when he was twenty-five and she thirty-three) he died childless, the last of his line.<sup>9</sup> The main source for de Coucy's life is Jean Froissart's *Chronicles*, a text that covers events from 1326 to 1400, and which elevates and celebrates chivalric culture. Tuchman's reliance on Froissart and her use of Edward Gibbon (1737-1794) and Jules Michelet (1798-1874), as much as her desire for a protagonist to place at the centre of a narrative history, prompted academic reviewer Charles T. Wood to term *A Distant Mirror* as a "curiously dated and old-fashioned work."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Christian Nordqvist, 'Origins of the Black Death Traced Back to China, Gene Sequencing has Revealed', *Medical News Today*, 1 November 2010, at <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/206309.php>. Accessed 28/02/2019.

<sup>7</sup> Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Nature and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 97.

<sup>9</sup> Henry L. Savage, 'Enguerrand de Coucy VII and the Campaign of Nicopolis', *Speculum*, vol. 14, no. 4 (1939), p. 442.

<sup>10</sup> Wood, 'Review of *A Distant Mirror*', p. 431.

## *Death, Famine, War, and Conquest*

Tuchman introduced the ‘calamitous’ century using the powerful Biblical image of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, who are usually identified as Conquest (alternatively Pestilence), War, Famine and Death. These figures are described vividly in the *Book of Revelation*:

And I saw when the Lamb opened one of the seals, and I heard, as it were the noise of thunder, one of the four beasts saying, Come and see.

And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

And when he had opened the second seal, I heard the second beast say, Come and see.

And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.

And when he had opened the third seal, I heard the third beast say, Come and see. And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand.

And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.

And when he had opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth beast say, Come and see.

And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.<sup>11</sup>

In the fourteenth century pestilence raged, with lesser outbreaks of plague after the catastrophic years from 1347 to 1351, and war between England and France created famine and disruption. Death seemed triumphant; those not killed by the plague lived to die in battles and of starvation, apart from the everyday incidence of death due to illness, childbirth, injuries and other mishaps.

Tuchman’s choice of ‘calamitous’ for the century recognised other societal and religious malaises, including the “Babylonian Captivity” of the Papacy, which was in Avignon and largely under the control of the French throne from 1309 until 1377, although resolution of the situation was delayed until Martin V was elected Pope in 1417.<sup>12</sup> Plague, war and famine sowed the seeds of revolt among urban and rural workers, middle class and peasant alike, via the dramatic reduction of the working populace. Villages were deserted as people gathered together to build viable post-plague

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<sup>11</sup> Revelation 6:1-8 (King James Version).

<sup>12</sup> Edwin Mullins, *Avignon of the Popes: City of Exiles* (Oxford: Signal Books, 2007), p. 227.

communities, and the traditional order of society was shaken, as there were fewer agrarian peasants, and also fewer skilled tradesmen in the cities.<sup>13</sup> Some wealthy merchants acquired castles that were abandoned when the noble family in residence all died of plague or moved to other estates. Other, less concrete, causes were touted for the uncertainty and upheaval. Philip IV of France had waged a vendetta against Boniface VIII, who was pope from 1294 to 1303. After Boniface's death Philip IV persuaded Clement V, who reigned from 1305 to 1314, to move the Papacy to Avignon, from which location the king could exercise some control over the church. Philip IV then outlawed the Knights Templar in 1307 on trumped-up charges of heresy, seized the wealth of the order, and on 18 March 1314 burned the Grand Master Jacques de Molay with three companions, Geoffrey de Charney, Hugues de Peraud, and Godfrey de Gonneville.<sup>14</sup> The tradition that de Molay cursed both Philip the Fair and Clement V is not historically verifiable, but the Pope died thirty-three days after the Grand Master, and Philip IV himself died on 29 November 1314. As noted already, the Capetian dynasty came to an end with the death of Charles IV in 1328 and the Valois dynasty came to power.<sup>15</sup>

### **Urban Rebellions: Jacob van Artevelde and Cola di Rienzi**

The Black Death intensified hostilities between the rural peasantry and their feudal overlords the landed nobility.<sup>16</sup> Urban workers, too, experienced tensions between the governors of their cities and aristocrats, both local and foreign. The rebellions that the 'calamitous' fourteenth century was beset by began before the pestilence arrived in western Europe. In the early phase of the Hundred Years' War a Flemish merchant from Ghent, Jacob van Artevelde (c. 1295-1345), who emerged as 'captain' of Ghent in late 1337, sought to create an alliance between the local

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<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of wages and prices, see John Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy 1348* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan Education, 1977).

<sup>14</sup> Julien Théry, 'A Heresy of State: Philip the Fair, the Trial of the "Perfidious Templars," and the Pontificalization of the French Monarchy', *Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, vol. 39, no. 2 (2013), pp. 117-148.

<sup>15</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> The earliest revolt of the fourteenth century is dated to 1308, when the hunter and shepherd Wilhelm Tell, essentially a "Robin Hood" figure, came to be "regarded as the leader and hero of the common struggle of Swiss peasants", František Graus, 'From Resistance to Revolt: The Late Medieval Peasant Wars in the Context of Social Crisis', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1975), p. 3. Tuchman mentions Tell only once, in passing. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 274.

population and Edward III, as England supplied the wool for the cloth trade on which the wealth of Flanders depended.<sup>17</sup> In 1338 the then middle-aged merchant addressed a meeting at the monastery of Bijloke, proposing that towns in Flanders form alliances with towns in Holland, Hainaut and Brabant so as to stay neutral during the war between England and France. Such was the economic power of these towns “that the princes had no other choice but to leave them an extensive autonomy.”<sup>18</sup> The allied towns negotiated a treaty with England, which ensure the vital wool trade. When in June 1338 Louis de Nevers, the Count of Flanders attempted to check van Artevelde’s power and was defeated in battle, after which he signed a treaty acknowledging the federation of the three towns.

By 1340 the federation of towns had expanded significantly, and the policy of neutrality was abandoned in favour of an alliance with England.<sup>19</sup> Edward III returned in June 1340 and was supported by van Artevelde, Count Guillaume of Hainaut and Holland, and Duke Jan III of Brabant at the battle of Sluys and in the siege of Tourbai. Kelly de Vries notes that “dissension broke out... at this siege after van Artevelde slew a Brabantese knight who had insulted his non-noble background.”<sup>20</sup> This resulted in Jan III abandoning the alliance and the ending of the siege. Van Artevelde returned to Ghent, where the city grew wealthier under his government, but he was murdered in 1345 after he intervened on behalf of the fullers in a dispute against the weavers in May. In July the weavers rose up and killed van Artevelde. Twenty-six years later, on 20 May 1371 the families of de May and van Artevelde signed a truce settling a quarrel, and in 16 May 1375 Walter de May “agreed to pay a sum of money annually to maintain a lamp which was to burn perpetually before the image of the Holy Virgin in the hospital of the Bijloke in expiation of the murder of Jacob van Artevelde.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 77.

<sup>18</sup> Jan Dumolyn and Jelle Haemers, ‘Patterns of Urban Rebellion in Medieval Flanders’, *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 31, no. 4 (2005), p. 378.

<sup>19</sup> Henry S. Lucas, ‘The Sources and Literature on Jacob van Artevelde’, *Speculum*, vol. 8, no. 2 (1933), pp. 125-149.

<sup>20</sup> Kelly de Vries, ‘Jacob van Artevelde’, in Clifford J. Rogers (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Medieval Warfare and Military Technology*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Lucas, ‘The Sources and Literature on Jacob van Artevelde’, p. 135.

The career of Jacob van Artevelde demonstrates that the urban middle class was aware of its growing economic and political power in the first half of the century. The next revolt also occurred in an urban setting, Rome, but was very different. Cola di Rienzo or Rienzi (1313-1354), born Nicola di Lorenzo, was the son of an innkeeper, Lorenzo Gabrini. His mother died around 1323 and young Rienzi then resided with an uncle in Anagni. He returned to Rome to study aged twenty and became a notary. At the start of 1343 he was sent as a representative of Rome to Clement VI in Avignon, to negotiate on behalf of the popular party which had just gained power.<sup>22</sup> The poet Petrarch (1304-1374) was in Avignon at that time and he and Rienzi became friends.<sup>23</sup> He soon won the favour of the Pope, who gave him notarial responsibility for the Roman treasury. After returning home in 1344, Rienzi began to plan a revolution that would return Rome to its ancient glory. His political plans were personal, too, in that his hatred of the nobles increased when his brother was killed in a skirmish between the aristocratic Colonna and Orsini families.<sup>24</sup> On 20 May 1347 he assembled the people on Capitoline Hill, at which he was greeted rapturously and acclaimed as dictator, and issued reforms of the taxation system, the political structure and the legal system that weakened the power of the nobility. He took the title 'tribune' from ancient Rome, and in August declared all Italians Roman citizens and proposed that an emperor be elected the next year.<sup>25</sup>

Tuchman's account of Cola di Rienzi's political career emphasised that his rise was framed by a sequence of disasters and was itself disastrous. She writes that "[f]ollowing the Florentine bankruptcies, the crop failures and workers' riots of 1346-7, the revolt of Cola di Rienzi... plunged Rome into anarchy, [and] plague came [in 1348] as the peak of successive calamities."<sup>26</sup> Rienzi was challenged; the Colonna and Orsini families plotted against him, and Pope Clement, who initially supported him, later

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<sup>22</sup> Ronald G. Musto, *Apocalypse in Rome: Cola di Rienzi and the Politics of the New Age* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003), p. 77.

<sup>23</sup> Hans Baron, 'Petrarch's *Secretum*: Was it Revised, and Why? The Draft of 1342-43 and the Later Changes', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, vol. 25, no. 3 (1963), pp. 496, 503.

<sup>24</sup> U. Benigni, 'Cola di Rienzi', *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/13052c.htm>. Accessed 28/02/2019.

<sup>25</sup> Petrarch, *The Revolution of Cola di Rienzo*, ed. Mario Emilio Consenza (New York: Italica Press, 1996), p. xvii.

<sup>26</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 96.

condemned him as a criminal and a heretic. He was forced to resign on 15 December 1347 and fled to Monte Maiella, where he hid in the hermitages owned by the Spiritual Franciscans (Fratricelli). The Fraticelli ('Little Brothers') were a splinter group of the Franciscan order that had been declared heretical by John XXII (Jacques of Cahors).<sup>27</sup> The Fraticelli were inclined to mysticism and interested in the predictions of Abbot Joachim of Fiore (c. 1135-1202). They offered Rienzi asylum because they interpreted his revolution in terms of Joachite eschatology. Eschatology, predictions about the 'end times', was a dominant theological trend in a world wracked by the Black Death.

Tuchman writes eloquently about the fate of Rome in the absence of the popes, drawing attention to the earthquake that accompanied the plague in 1348 and destroyed important church buildings:

Without its pontiff the Eternal City was destitute, the three chief basilicas in ruin, San Paolo toppled by the earthquake, the Lateran half-collapsed. Rubble and ruin filled the streets, the seven hills were silent and deserted, goats nibbled in the weed-grown cloisters of deserted convents. The site of roofless churches exposed to wind and rain, lamented Petrarch, "would excite pity in a heart of stone."<sup>28</sup>

In 1350 Rome thronged with pilgrims and Clement VI in Avignon was persuaded to declare a Jubilee Year, a special pilgrimage that involved the remission of sins, in part due to persuasion by the poet Petrarch (1304-134) in Avignon and Saint Birgitta of Sweden (c. 1303-1373) in Rome.<sup>29</sup> This proclamation was interesting as traditionally Jubilees were held only at the turn of the century and not on mid-century dates, but also because the pilgrims were mandated to process to three ancient basilicas, St Peter's, St John in the Lateran, and St Paul's.<sup>30</sup> As Tuchman observes, these churches were seriously damaged by the earthquake and had not been repaired at the time of the Jubilee, which was officiated by Cardinal Gaetani Ceccano, the Pope having declined to return to Rome.

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<sup>27</sup> David Saville Muzzey, 'Were the Spiritual Franciscans Montanist Heretics?' *American Journal of Theology*, vol. 12, no. 4 (1908), pp. 588-608.

<sup>28</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 119.

<sup>29</sup> H. Thurston, 'The Holy Year of Jubilee', *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08531c.htm>. Accessed 28/03/2019.

<sup>30</sup> Emilio Re, 'The English Colony in Rome in the Fourteenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 6 (1923), p. 83.

Rienzi spent two years in hiding and re-emerged in 1350 in Prague where he tried to win the support of Emperor Charles IV, who placed him in Clement VI's custody in July 1352. He was tried as a heretic but exonerated, and a new Pope, Innocent VI, sent him back to Italy in August 1354. He was reinstated as dictator but had grown erratic and unreliable; he levied unpopular taxes and neglected to pay his bodyguard of soldiers. On 8 October 1354 a crowd outside his palace called for his execution. He attempted to slip away disguised as a commoner but was recognised and taken to the Capitol, where he was stabbed to death. His corpse was displayed in the Piazza San Marcello for two days, then publicly burned.<sup>31</sup> Rienzi's attempted revolution began in 1347, the year before the Black Death struck Rome, but it was quickly overcome by eschatological events that continued long after his death.

The origin of the Flagellants, a radical penitential sect, can be traced back to 1290, but self-scourging became widespread during the Black Death, and sporadic outbreaks were witnessed until the sixteenth century.<sup>32</sup> By 1349 there were groups of Flagellants throughout Europe, and the rationale for their extreme behaviour (that the plague was a punishment by God for the sins of humanity) was widely understood and accepted by ecclesiastical and lay people. In the cities of Germany their theatrical processions were accompanied by brutal pogroms against Jews, as permitting non-Christians to live in Christian communities was identified as a particular sin that God abhorred. The Flagellants were also millenarians who believed that their penance would hasten the Second Coming and the reign of Christ on earth.<sup>33</sup> The crowds that watched Flagellant rituals were persuaded by the powerful demonstration of repentance. Philip Ziegler describes the scene as follows:

Then came the collective flagellation. Each Brother carried a heavy scourge ... the thongs tipped with metal studs. With these they began rhythmically to beat their backs and breasts ... the Master walked among his flock, urging them to pray to God to have mercy on all sinners. Meanwhile the worshippers kept up the tempo and their spirits by chanting the Hymn of the

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Cavendish, 'Cola di Rienzo Murdered', *History Today*, vol. 54, no. 10 (2004), p. 56. Rienzi enjoyed a revival of popularity in the nineteenth century, with the English novelist E.G.E. Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Rienzi* (1835) and Richard Wagner's opera *Rienzi* (1842).

<sup>32</sup> L. Toke, 'Flagellants', *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06089c.htm>. Accessed 28/03/2019.

<sup>33</sup> Robert E. Lerner, 'The Black Death and Western European Eschatological Mentalities', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 86, no. 3 (1981), p. 535.

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Flagellants ... Such scenes were repeated twice by day and once by night with a benefit performance when one of the Brethren died.<sup>34</sup>

Clement VI denounced the Flagellants in 1349 at the height of their influence, and the movement lessened and gradually came under the control of the church.

### **1358: The Urban Rebellion of Etienne Marcel and the Rural Jacquerie**

As the plague retreated the Hundred Years' War was resumed between England and France, and the English won a significant victory at Poitiers in 1356. The eldest son of Edward III, Prince Edward (later known as the Black Prince and a major chivalric figure in Froissart's *Chronicles*), captured the French King Jean II, who was taken to London with other prisoners of war in May 1357.<sup>35</sup> This is the context for the Jacquerie, an uprising that united agrarian labourers (named for the French stock peasant character Jacques Bonhomme or Jack Goodfellow, "the good natured fool")<sup>36</sup> with urban workers. Tuchman devotes a whole chapter of *A Distant Mirror* to the Jacquerie, which explains clearly the sequence of events. French society was divided into three 'estates' (the nobility, the clergy and the common people, or Third Estate). In November 1355 Jean II had approached the Estates General to raise money for the war against England, and wealthy cloth merchant Étienne Marcel (c. 1316-1358), Provost of the Merchants (a position equivalent to Mayor, which he held from 1354) proposed the funds be managed by the Assembly to wrest control from the crown.<sup>37</sup> After the king was captured, Marcel emerged in early 1357 as leader of a hostile Assembly that wanted to be rid of seven corrupt crown officials, and to gain tutelary control of the Dauphin, Charles, Duke of Normandy, who was Regent during his father's captivity. Marcel succeeded in getting the Dauphin to sign the Assembly's demands in March 1357, by threatening rioting in the streets, though his father Jean II rejected the entire reform agenda before he was taken to England.

Tuchman shrewdly notes that the elite merchant class, the skilled tradesmen, and the rural peasantry had little in common and were united

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<sup>34</sup> Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (London: Folio Society, 1997 [1969]), p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 154.

<sup>36</sup> Louis Raymond de Vericour, 'The Jacquerie', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 1 (1872), p. 297.

<sup>37</sup> Arthur Layton Funk, 'Robert le Coq and Étienne Marcel', *Speculum*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1944), p. 470.

only by “the fact of being non-noble.”<sup>38</sup> A peasant uprising began on 21 May 1358 near Compiègne. This was partly fuelled by a truce between England and France that resulted in large numbers of mercenaries fighting for the English pillaging the French countryside in their idle time, but also by the Dauphin’s demand that the peasants contribute to the repair and re-fortification of castles damaged in the conflict with England. Tuchman provides dramatic descriptions of meetings that followed, which added more and more disaffected peasants to the ranks of the revolutionaries, without romanticising the brutality of the struggle:

On 28 May 1358, in the village of St Leu near Senlis on the Oise, a group of peasants held an indignation meeting in the cemetery after vespers. They blamed the nobles for their miseries and for the capture of the king, “which troubled all minds.” What had the knights and squires done to liberate him? What were they good for except to oppress poor peasants? “They shamed and despoiled the realm, and it would be a good thing to destroy them all.” Listeners cried, “They say true! They say true! Shame on him who holds back!” Without further council and no arms but the staves and knives that some carried, a group of about 100 rushed in fierce assault upon the nearest manor, broke in, killed the knight, his wife and children, and burned the place down. Then, according to Froissart, whose tales of the Jacquerie would have been obtained from the nobles and clergy, “they went to a strong castle, tied the knight to a stake while his wife and daughter were raped by many, one after another before his eyes; then they killed the wife who was pregnant and afterwards the daughter and all the children, and lastly the knight, and burned and destroyed the castle.” Other reports say that four knights and five squires were killed on that night.<sup>39</sup>

The peasants moved swiftly through the countryside, torching castles and slaughtering their denizens, and acquiring a leader, Guillaume Cale, a farmer from the Beauvais area. The actions of the peasants and those of Marcel’s urban rebels coalesced in the mid-year, when two regional aristocrats, Charles II “the Bad,” King of Navarre and Count of Évreux (1332-1387), and Gaston Fébus, Count of Foix (1331-1391), entered the fray, seemingly in defence of the French crown.<sup>40</sup>

On 9 June the Parisian army of Marcel met the troops of Gaston Fébus at Meaux and were summarily defeated, and the next day Cale’s men were overwhelmed by Charles the Bad’s army at Clermont-en-Beauvaisis,

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<sup>38</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 157.

<sup>39</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, pp. 172-173.

<sup>40</sup> Vericour, ‘The Jacquerie’, p. 306.

and Cale was tortured and beheaded.<sup>41</sup> It has been noted that contemporary sources like the Dauphin's correspondence and Froissart's *Chronicle* emphasise the violence of the peasant insurgents and moderate the severity of the retaliation of the First Estate, though Louis Raymond de Vericour insists that the letters of the Dauphin

stigmatise the cruelties of the nobles, which appear in those indisputable documents to have been in much greater number than those committed by the peasants. The nobles long continued systematically to rob, plunder and indulge in the most abominable outrages.<sup>42</sup>

Tuchman's account of the uprising is vividly written, with details of the various characters supplied to grip the attention of her readers. She covers the activities of the companies of mercenaries raiding the countryside and sketches their 'captains' Sir Robert Knollys and Arnaut de Cervole, equals in ruthlessness and their encouragement of savagery among their men against the peasants. She is far less partisan toward the Jacquerie than Vericour, for example, thought her discussion of the peasant lifestyle is sympathetic and nuanced, indicating the various levels of peasant society, and the validity of many of their grievances.

Her portrait of Marcel is moderately critical, laying at his feet, for example, the dramatic murder of two of the Dauphin's marshals, Jean der Clermont and Jean de Conflans on 22 February 1358 (a crime similar to the *modus operandi* of Charles the Bad of Navarre, such that it was falsely attributed to him for some time after the event).<sup>43</sup> Yet Arthur Layton Funk has argued that the role of Marcel or his ally Robert le Coq, Bishop of Laon, in the murders remains doubtful.<sup>44</sup> Tuchman's even-handed dealing with the both rebels and the establishment is necessitated by the fact that her protagonist Enguerrand, the proud lord of Coucy, re-enters the historical stage at this time, aged eighteen. He was one of the chief suppressors of the Jacquerie in the north, as Froissart and the *Chronique Normand* attest, and he and his companions "put an end to them [the rebels] wherever they found them without pity or mercy."<sup>45</sup> As for Marcel, the defeat at Meaux destroyed his power base, and he sought aid from both the English and the French royalists before he was assassinated on 31 July

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<sup>41</sup> Vericour, 'The Jacquerie', p. 306.

<sup>42</sup> Vericour, 'The Jacquerie', p. 309.

<sup>43</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, pp. 170-171.

<sup>44</sup> Funk, 'Robert le Coq and Étienne Marcel', p. 484.

<sup>45</sup> Froissart cited in Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 181.

1358 at the Porte St. Denis in Paris. Tuchman notes that “[a]fter Artevelde and Rienzi, Marcel was the third leader of a bourgeois rising within a dozen years to be killed by his own followers.”<sup>46</sup>

The deficiencies of Tuchman’s popular narrative history, both its old-fashioned approach and limited use of primary sources, are apparent when compared to a recent study of the Jacquerie by academic historian Justine Firnhaber-Baker. She observes that the Jacquerie has been little-studied and that interpretations of late medieval rebellions have changed; what used to be seen as “explosions of economic misery, social hatreds, or millenarian mania” are now mainly viewed as “rational and predominantly political in their objectives and organisation.”<sup>47</sup> There are problems with both sources and with methodological frameworks; there are no documents from the rebels such as the letters of John Ball in the context of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381, and historians have disagreed as to what extent (or at all) the Jacques colluded with Marcel’s Parisians. Firnhaber-Baker examines remissions documents to demonstrate that the language characterises the Jacquerie as “apolitical, social, and emotional” whereas remissions from the Parisian revolt “portray their activities exclusively in political terms as treason, *lèse-majesté*, and an attack on the crown.”<sup>48</sup> Further, the chronicle evidence (Jean Froissart, and his near-contemporary source Jean le Bel, the English *Anonimale Chronicle*, and the Picardy peasant and monk Jean de Venette) all portray the Jacquerie as insanity or rage, a collective madness, and lacking organised leaders and planning.

Yet modern scholars have established this is false: “Samuel Cohn Jr. has shown there is copious evidence of planning and long-distance coordination in many large-scale revolts, including the Jacquerie as well as the Ciompi and the English Rising.”<sup>49</sup> Firnhaber-Baker reviews the evidence, concluding it is reasonable to see the Jacques operating in tandem with Marcel’s Parisian rebels, and to identify captains at the village level, with leaders like Calle operating as coordinators of the uprising at a regional level. It has even been suggested by David M. Bessem that the Jacques were part of a widespread anti-Valois movement that may have

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<sup>46</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 184.

<sup>47</sup> Justine Firnhaber-Baker, ‘The Eponymous Jacquerie: Making Revolt Mean Some Things’, in Justine Firnhaber-Baker and Dirk Schoenaers (eds), *The Routledge History Handbook of Medieval Revolt* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 55-75.

<sup>48</sup> Firnhaber-Baker, ‘The Eponymous Jacquerie’, p. 57.

<sup>49</sup> Firnhaber-Baker, ‘The Eponymous Jacquerie’, p. 60.

been controlled, in whole or in part, by Charles the Bad of Navarre.<sup>50</sup> The first identified action of the Jacquerie is the murder of nine people at Saint-Leu d'Esserent on 28 May 1358; Firnhaber-Baker argues that the number of nobles killed is smaller than expected, and mentions of rape and sexual violence in the chronicles are vague and non-specific. It seems "the bulk of the Jacques' violence... was focused on the destruction of fortresses, homes and goods."<sup>51</sup> She speculates that peasants may have attacked fortresses because they were a sign of the nobility's coercive power over the lower orders, but cautions that we should remain open to a polyvalent reading of the Jacquerie, as it is in a very real sense a new type of activity, and its brevity (about a month in May and June of 1358) further complicates attempts at interpretation. While it occurred eleven years after the Black Death and the pestilence must have been a contributing factor, it is seemingly devoid of religious and eschatological intent, although, as Firnhaber-Baker comments, "the negotiation of power in the Middle Ages encompassed realms of activity and thought habitually excluded from modern politics."<sup>52</sup> It is also the case that Marcel was closely allied with Robert le Coq, "a lawyer who had participated... in government administration for fifteen years before the revolt."<sup>53</sup> Yet in May 1358, le Coq had joined the cause of Charles the Bad, and it is impossible to cast him in the role of theological commentator on the rebellions, urban and rural, as he clearly acted as a politician and lawyer.

### **The Great Revolt or the English Uprising: The 'Peasants' Revolt' of 1381**

Between the Jacquerie in 1358 and the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 was the revolt of the Ciompi in Florence in 1378, an urban uprising named for the "lowest caste of workers, unaffiliated with any guild."<sup>54</sup> This struggle is mentioned only briefly by Tuchman, and its leader Michele di Lando is not named. She notes that workers at all levels suffered inhumane working conditions, earning subsistence pay for very long, gruelling days of work. This plight not explicitly linked to a reduced workforce in the post-plague world, but clearly was exacerbated by a diminished labour pool. The

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<sup>50</sup> David M. Bessen, 'The Jacquerie: Class War or Co-opted Rebellion?', *Journal of Medieval History*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1985), pp. 43-59.

<sup>51</sup> Firnhaber-Baker, 'The Eponymous Jacquerie', p. 64.

<sup>52</sup> Firnhaber-Baker, 'The Eponymous Jacquerie', p. 55.

<sup>53</sup> Funk, 'Robert le Coq and Étienne Marcel', p. 471.

<sup>54</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 366.

Ciampi staged mob protests in front of the Signorial palazzo in Florence and there was violence in the streets. Tuchman notes that the Signoria were intimidated and “the workers installed a new government based on labor’s [sic] representation in the guilds. It lasted 41 days before it began to crumble under internal stress and the counter-offensives of the magnates.”<sup>55</sup> By 1382 the status quo had been reasserted, and the Medici family rose to power in part because of fears about the stability of the city’s republican government.

Tuchman discusses the rebellion commonly called the Peasants’ Revolt in England in 1381 at length. The story is well-known, and *A Distant Mirror* is traditional rather than innovative in its telling. In 1981, just three years after Tuchman’s book was published, the Marxist historian Rodney Hilton argued that the attribution of the rebellion to “peasants” was due to two chroniclers only, Froissart and Thomas Walsingham, a monk at St Alban’s Abbey. His study of the “indictments of rebels and rebel leaders and the accounts by royal officials of the confiscated goods of those executed or in flight” revealed that all classes, with the exception of the nobility and the urban merchant elites, participated in what he termed the “English Uprising.”<sup>56</sup> Tuchman relies on the chronicles by Froissart and Walsingham, both of which were published, and is not aware of the primary sources in archives such as those Hilton identified, which are the same type of record that Justine Firnhaber-Baker employed in her reassessment of the Jacquerie. Despite the existence of primary sources to the contrary, Tuchman asserts that:

true revolt erupted in June 1381 in England, not out of the urban class but of the peasants. The third poll tax in four years, to include everyone over the age of fifteen, was the precipitant. Voted in November 1380 by a subservient Parliament to finance Lancaster’s ambitions in Spain, the collection brought in only two-thirds of the expected sum, not least because tax commissioners were easily bribed to overlook families or falsify their numbers. A second round of collecting became necessary ... At the end of May, villages in Essex on the coast northeast of London refused payment; the resistance spread with evidence of some planning and burst into violence in Kent.<sup>57</sup>

This uprising has become the stuff of legend, and the social context indicates a Biblical basis to the rebels’ fight against inequality on earth. Lollardy, a ‘heresy’ now viewed as a type of proto-Protestant Christianity,

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<sup>55</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 366.

<sup>56</sup> Rodney Hilton, ‘The English Rising of 1381’, *Marxism Today* (June 1981), p. 17.

<sup>57</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, pp. 372-373.

and its leader the Oxford theologian John Wycliffe (1330-1384), was strongly anti-sacramental and anti-clerical, demanding that the Church give up its wealth and worldly power.<sup>58</sup> John Bromyard, a Dominican friar, pronounced that on the day of judgement “the rich would have hung around their necks the oxen and sheep and beasts of the field that they had seized without paying for.”<sup>59</sup> Equality was a characteristic of the Christian afterlife and the rebel priest John Ball’s famous sermon, “When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?” gave a scriptural basis for political reform, and indicated ties with Wycliffe, most likely a common audience, though older ideas that Ball was a disciple of Wycliffe are not now tenable.<sup>60</sup>

The leaders of the revolt emerged as Wat Tyler (‘Watte Tegheler’), a Kentish tiler, the priest John Ball, and John Rackstraw or ‘Jack Straw’, an Essex man who was wrongly identified with Tyler in the *Chronicle* of Henry Knighton, a canon of Leicester, who wrote a history of England between 1378 and 1396, the year of his death.<sup>61</sup> These men marched with their followers to the capital, London, where they demanded the lives of Archbishop Simon Sudbury and Chancellor Robert Hales, who were held responsible for the poll tax and were executed on 14 June 1381.<sup>62</sup> Tuchman presents the Peasants’ Revolt as being motivated by political concerns: a developing idea of freedom; a desire to abolish bonds of servitude; “the right to commute services to rent, [and] a riddance of all the restrictions heaped up by the Statute of Laborers over the past thirty years in the effort to clamp labour in place.”<sup>63</sup> The Kentish and Essex contingents merged in London and the climactic events of the revolt took place between Thursday 13 June and Saturday 15 June during the week of the feast of Corpus Christi.

The main events of the rebels’ occupation of London are generally agreed upon, though there are numerous problems, gaps and conjectures in

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<sup>58</sup> John van Engen, ‘Anticlericalism Among the Lollards’, in Peter A. Dykema and Heiko A. Oberman (eds), *Anticlericalism in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden and New York: E. J. Brill, 1994 [1993]), p. 54.

<sup>59</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, pp. 374-375.

<sup>60</sup> R.B. Dobson, *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, 2nd edition (London and Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1983 [1970]), pp. xxxvii-xxxviii.

<sup>61</sup> G.H. Martin (ed. and trans.), *Knighton’s Chronicle, 1337-1396* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>62</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 376.

<sup>63</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 374.

building up an accurate chronology of the momentous three days. Tuchman lists the demands of the rebel leaders as the “abolition of the poll tax and of all bonds of servile status, commutation at a rate of four pence an acre, free use of forests, abolition of the game laws,” all of which they wanted confirmed by the young king, Richard II.<sup>64</sup> The *Anonimale Chronicle* claimed sixty thousand Essex men arrived on 12 April, released the prisoners from the Marshalsea Prison in Southwark, and attacked the Archbishop’s residence at Lambeth, burning “register books and chancery remembrancers’ rolls,” a tactic used throughout the uprising to destroy records of debts and obligations owed by the workers to their oppressors.<sup>65</sup> Meanwhile, sympathisers in the city opened the gates and bridges to Tyler’s men, who took over the Tower of London, executed Sudbury and Hales, burned the Savoy Palace (the residence of the hated John of Gaunt) at around 4 PM, destroyed the Temple, liberated the prisoners from the Fleet Prison and killed many, including detested foreigners such as Flemings and Lombards. The Essex men burned the Hospital of St John in Clerkenwell later that evening. Contemporary chroniclers claim that there were upwards of one hundred thousand rebels, but popular historian Juliet Barker has recently argued that an estimate of ten thousand is more likely, and that “Norfolk... produced the largest number of known rebels: 1214 have been identified from... existing records, compared with... 954 for Essex, 456 for Kent, 299 for Suffolk, 242 for Cambridgeshire and 389 for London and the rest.”<sup>66</sup>

It is this type of correction that contemporary historians are better-equipped than Tuchman to make. In 1983, shortly after the six hundredth anniversary of the “English Rising” R. B. Dobson noted that many primary sources were as yet unpublished and that careful archival work in the Public Record Office was still required on, for example, the poll-tax records or “the escheators’ inquisitions of property confiscated after the defeat of the rebellion” (which Rodney Hilton used to dismiss the stereotype that this was a “peasant” movement).<sup>67</sup> Tuchman is focused on the role of the fourteen-year-old king, whom she describes as follows:

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<sup>64</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, pp. 375-376.

<sup>65</sup> Dobson, *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, p. 155.

<sup>66</sup> Juliet Barker, *England Arise: The People, the King, & the Great Revolt of 1381* (London: Little Brown, 2014), p. 237.

<sup>67</sup> Dobson, *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, p. xxvi.

## *Death, Famine, War, and Conquest*

Richard moved in a magic circle of reverence for the king's person ... a charming boy robed in purple embroidered with the royal leopards, wearing a crown and carrying a gold rod, gracious and smiling and gaining confidence from his sway over the mob.<sup>68</sup>

Richard II did play a crucial role in the events of 13-15 June 1381. On Thursday 13 June, Corpus Christi Day, he went to mass in the Tower of London then took a barge to Rotherhithe, a royal manor to the east of the city. Seeing the rebels on the banks of the Thames, he attempted to speak with them, but was counselled to return to the Tower by the advisers accompanying him. On Friday 14 June the rebels gained control of the Tower and executed Sudbury and Hales, though the precise time of their deaths is uncertain.<sup>69</sup> That morning Richard II had met the rebels at Mile End (an event to which Tuchman's passage cited above referred), where according to Juliet Barker he "compromised the moral authority of both himself and his government."<sup>70</sup>

This was because Richard II seemed to sympathise with the rebels' situation. He asked Tyler what the rebels wanted, and Tyler demanded the abolition of feudal services, freedom to buy and sell every kind of goods, free pardon for any offence committed during the uprising, a limit on rent limit to four pence per acre, the abolition of feudal fines in the manorial courts, and that "no one should serve any man except at his own will and by means of regular covenant."<sup>71</sup> Tyler alleged the royal officers who had administered the poll tax were corrupt and should be tried and convicted. The *Anonimalle Chronicle* states that:

the king had the commons arrayed in two lines, and had it proclaimed before them that he would confirm and grant that they should be free, and generally should gave their will; and that they could go through all the realm of England and catch all traitors and bring them to him in safety, and then he would deal with them as the law demanded.<sup>72</sup>

Clerks were instructed to write letters and charters to this effect, with the result that many peasants dispersed peacefully, believing the king had licensed their actions, granted them immunity from prosecution, and had met their demands in full.

On Saturday 15 June after attending mass Richard II met Wat Tyler at Smithfield, and while discussing the rebels' demands Tyler was killed by William Walworth, the Mayor of London. Dobson argues that "the complete collapse of the rebels' confidence at Smithfield after Tyler's assassination brutally exposed – even without benefit of Richard's spirited ride to claim their

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<sup>68</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 376.

<sup>69</sup> Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, p. 40.

<sup>70</sup> Barker, *England Arise*, p. 256.

<sup>71</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, cited in Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, p. 161.

<sup>72</sup> *Anonimalle Chronicle*, cited in Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381*, p. 161.

loyalty – the inherent and inevitable fragility of the movement.”<sup>73</sup> Meanwhile Richard II was persuaded by his advisers to retract all concessions to the rebels, although it took him eighteen days to reach the conclusion that “his grants prejudiced and disinherited the crown, the state, the nobles and the Church; he therefore ‘revoked, quashed, invalidated and annulled’ them.”<sup>74</sup> Barker argues for the young king, granting concessions to the rebels without reference to Parliament or his advisers had been as empowering as it was for the complainants. Over the next few months, government forces suppressed what remained of the rebellion in various regions of England, and in November Parliament met for the first time since the English uprising. Barker makes the interesting point that at the Parliament Richard II appealed to the Commons, “over the heads of his councillors, as to whether his revocation of his ‘letters of franchise and manumission’ had been right.”<sup>75</sup> She argues that the king was sincerely concerned about the rebels’ problems, and had intended to address their demands with his concessions but was prevented by youth and inexperience from acting decisively to bring about change. That the Commons assured him of the rightness of the act, she suggests, was not enough.

### **Conclusion**

The fate of all the workers’ rebellions of the fourteenth century was to promise much and to deliver little to the urban and rural non-nobles who struggled after the devastation of the Black Death to gain an improved employment situation. Tuchman’s *A Distant Mirror* painted the fourteenth century as calamitous, which is hard to dispute. Yet her desire to write “narrative history” led her to place at the centre of her book Enguerrand de Coucy, a privileged aristocrat, in a century in which the common people were demanding a voice, a voice that is direct and powerful in the primary sources that survive from the English rising, particularly the letters of John Ball, who was hanged, drawn and quartered on 15 July 1381.<sup>76</sup> Ball’s clerical status and literacy point to deficiencies in Tuchman’s account of the popular uprisings in the fourteenth century, to wit her uncritical acceptance of sources like Froissart’s *Chronicle* and Thomas of Walsingham, which identified the rebels as ignorant, illiterate rustics, and minimised their understanding of both political systems and theological trends.

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<sup>73</sup> Dobson, *The Peasants’ Revolt of 1381*, p. 25.

<sup>74</sup> Barker, *England Arise*, p. 374.

<sup>75</sup> Barker, *England Arise*, p. 385.

<sup>76</sup> Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*, p. 377; James M. Dean (ed.), ‘Letters of John Ball’, *Medieval Political Writings* (1996), at <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/dean-medieval-english-political-writings-letter-of-john-ball-stow>. Accessed 28/03/2019.

It is uncontroversial to state that methodologies and interpretive frames have changed in the forty years since the publication of *A Distant Mirror*; Juliet Barker occupies the same space in the twenty-first century as Tuchman did in the 1970s as a ‘popular historian’, yet she is clearly less interested in Richard II, except insofar as she is concerned to determine how much he sympathised with the rebels and whether he intended to meet their demands. Barker is concerned to recover the identities of the rebels, and to document their sufferings, hopes, and dreams for a transformed world. The power of this imagined world for peasant rebels and urban revolutionaries alike in the wake of the Black Death and in the midst of the Hundred Years’ War has religious and spiritual overtones that are more obvious in the revolution of Cola di Rienzi and the English uprising than in the career of Jacob van Artevelde<sup>77</sup> or the combined forces of the rural Jacquerie and Marcel’s urban revolt in Paris. In the twenty-first century the impact of the internet and the decline of interest in sophisticated academic research opens a new space for popular history of the type practiced by Tuchman, whose books sold in the millions, and continue to influence popular perceptions of history. It is true that the criticisms of scholarly assessors were grounded in her disregard of academic convention. Yet as Charles T. Wood acknowledged,

Mrs Tuchman has done her homework, and if the framework within which she presents her vision of the fourteenth century is not that of most modern research, the choice is clearly defensible, and it must also be said that the errors in background and interpretive detail are genuinely minor, not of the sort that would vitiate the book as a whole.<sup>78</sup>

Forty years on this is still high praise. The value of *A Distant Mirror* is continually being enhanced by new editions, both hard copy and digital, and the market for second-hand copies online. It may yet prove to be the portal through which many non-expert readers encounter the Middle Ages, and hopefully graduate later to more scholarly perspectives and recent research findings.

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<sup>77</sup> Henry S. Lucas, ‘The Activities of a Medieval Merchant Family: The Van Arteveldes of Ghent’, *The Pacific Historical Review*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1940), p. 3 points out that the great merchant families also controlled the guilds, which, although they are often compared to modern trade unions were actually religious confraternities with important spiritual and social functions.

<sup>78</sup> Wood, ‘Review of *A Distant Mirror*’, p. 431.