

The Devils Broker: Seeking Gold, God, and Glory in Fourteenth- Century Italy By Frances Stonor Saunders

On the other hand it is a reasonably written book for a general audience about a topic that is fairly obscure (the activities of an English mercenary company in medieval Italy) as well as inaccessible for most English readers and for that it deserves full credit. Although this book paints quite the picture of life in Europe of the Middle Ages the most incredible thing isn't how bad it really was but that we managed to actually survive as a species through it all. After the loot became scarce in France during the Hundred Years War he made his way to Italy and commenced to plunder and pillage his way to fame and fortune at the expense of everybody in his way. Kings and queens and popes were powerless before him for three or four decades until he mercifully died of natural causes and the Italian city-states the papacy the peasants and the merchants could finally all let out a deep sigh of relief. There are interesting subplots dealing with other famous characters of the time like Geoffrey Chaucer Catherine of Siena and the fascinating stories of three popes (one who died halfway through the book one who was elected his successor and one who attempted to usurp the rightful pope). Augustine who alone felt the need to share his memories of his thoughts and feelings at length with posterity for everyone else the best that can be achieved is a life and time flavoured with conjecture. It seems that the source material only dealt indirectly with Hawkwood and his activities and there didn't seem much of an attempt to look at comparable a treaty is signed and the Hundred Years War pauses but people keep fighting mostly English soldiers who stay in France to kill and burn and pillage because it beats going home and doing an honest day's work or dying of the plague. Soon he and his men are killing peasants raping women burning crops ransoming nobles and even defeating the odd army here and there collecting vast sums from various signoria to go away and bother the other guy. He left no writings behind to provide any sort of insight into his character or personality and mostly he just kept soldiering and ransoming and robbing and threatening and killing because that's what he was good at. Instead we have walk-on parts by the likes of Chaucer Boccaccio Petrarch and Catherine of Siena to bring the age to life and illuminate the minds and souls of the players and the landscape they moved through: wealth poverty famine plague war not to mention the obscene iniquity of holy mother church outdoing all others in the atrocity stakes as it gropes for secular power while its cardinals and prelates are ardent practitioners of the seven deadly sins. It is an edifying and sobering piece of history and if Hawkwood remains an enigma it may be because we don't yet understand how much of history is carved out by cool ruthless bastards doing whatever the hell they wanted. Like Tuchman Saunders frames her book around the life and times of an individual - in this case English mercenary John Hawkwood who found himself in rather constant employ due to the various feuds and wars among the city-states of Italy. Through Hawkwood we get a good look at several of the major players in the region during this time - Catherine of Siena the Visconti Vipers various popes and royalty from France England and the Holy Roman Empire. It touches on a few subjects like religious ardor and the importance of the Church in daily life how warfare was conducted during the time what the average person's sex life might have been like and so on. He became the leader of great Companies of unemployed mercenaries who preferred not to return back to England during the Hundred Years War most notably the famous White Company that grew so large it was truly the size of a small army. 9780060777302 A vibrant history of Italy in the cataclysmic fourteenth century as seen through the life of a brilliant military strategist and bandit lord At the dawn of the Renaissance hordes of mercenaries swooped down on the opulent city-states of Italy and commenced to drain them dry. The greatest of all the bandits was Sir John Hawkwood an English expatriate and military genius who formed his own army cleverly pitted ancient rivals against one another held the Pope for ransom and set blood running in the streets. In this gripping biography of the charismatic Hawkwood Frances Stonor Saunders illuminates the fourteenth century as a time of plague political schism and religious mania offset by a gargantuan appetite for spectacle and luxury. The Devils Broker: Seeking Gold God and Glory in Fourteenth- Century Italy As the title implies this book is a biography of John Hawkwood an englishman who following the Treaty of Brétigny becomes a freebooter and sells the services of himself and his company of mercenaries to whatever Italian city-state offers more. The most

successful or them was Sir John Hawkwood son of an Essex Yeoman whose meteoric rise as a Mercenary in the labyrinthine world of Italian politics led him to wealth castles royal in-laws a state funeral in Florence and a big assed fresco in the Duomo that can be seen there still today. After Edward III's successful campaigns against the French at Crecy and Poitiers many soldiers simply decided to not go home and sought fortune as the so called Free Companies rampaging across Europe holding the Pope to ransom in Avignon and generally making a nuisance of themselves. The most fortunate soldiers found their way to Italy where warring city states and papal intrigues (the Papacy split at the end of the 14th C) provided ample coin for foreign Lances. Since relatively little source material from Hawkwood himself remains Stonor Saunders builds up a comprehensive picture of his contemporaries the political scheming of the era religious martyrdom the philosophies of the age and daily life. She has a background in the Arts so she makes quite a lot of reference to the artistic output of the age and the birth of the Renaissance - think Orson Wells on the top that Ferris Wheel in *The Third Man*. If that's not enough here's some other things you will find in this book: the hallucinogenic effects of starvation and medieval bread political poisonings Chaucer's secret diplomatic mission in Italy self-abusing extreme religious aestheticism death a civilian massacre of 8000 people the Black Death feasting as display of wealth what happens when lightning hits a field of armoured men the canonised nun who was also a spy more death and the identifying insignia of medieval prostitutes in the Italian city states. The book could easily have descended into a repetitive confusion (Hawkwood's life as with his client states was one of endless battling extortion ransoming changes of allegiance then more battling more ransoming). 9780060777302 This book is tentatively about the life of the famous English condottiere John Hawkwood who made a life for himself and his White Company robbing blackmailing betraying and fighting all around Italy in the XIVth century. But since records in the XIVth century were pretty scarce there is not a huge amount of information out there about Hawkwood himself so in order to fill the voids the book deals with the political and military history of XIVth century Italy. The corruption of the Papal States was at an all time high Popes were selling indulgences starting wars causing massacres torturing people and extorting states and men for all their worth. Instead sometimes the author goes on providing lengthy lists which are completely unnecessary for example providing a list of all the food on the menu at a Visconti wedding or an endless list of loot captured by mercenaries after a certain war. Saint Catherine of Sienna is somehow built up into a main character of the book and the author theorizes that she might have met John Hawkwood at one point but there is very little evidence to prove that. In conclusion from a historical point of view the book is great as a summary of the XIVth century Italian politics and warfare but it does have some flaws which reduce the overall enjoyment,

But better documented contemporary military undertakings as a way of understanding how Hawkwood and Co went about their business: Nor was there any attempt to put Hawkwood in a wider context of how wars were conducted in the period, John Hawkwood was merely an excellent and unashamed practitioner of war as a revenue-generating activity. 1360.

So you thought the 21st century was bad? Try living in Italy in the 14th century, Of course you had plague famine poverty and bloodshed but don't forget the social injustice backwards medicine poor hygiene living in filth and religious mania. But that's not really what the book is supposed to be about (or is it?)--it's really just the story of one man a knight and mercenary by the name of Sir John Hawkwood. Forget all your childish and naive notions of knighthood--that's really just a codename for murderer bully bandit and oppressor, The story of Hawkwood though is just the tip of the iceberg, (Reading this book made me want to read some papal history. )This is crazy compelling stuff and a vibrantly told story as well: The only downside was trying to keep all the names and political factions straight but maybe that's just me: 9780060777302 All books about medieval European individuals are bold - unless they are about St: Hawkwood was an Englishman from Essex who led the White Company a band of mercenaries that operated in northern Italy during the fourteenth

century, I found the book a disappointing read since I wanted more detail on how the mercenary company operated. The soldiers coalesce into large companies who style themselves mercenaries though instead of being paid to fight they mostly just fight until they're paid to go away: Amongst the hordes laying waste to much of France is unassuming Essex man John Hawkwood: They range far and wide until they finally threaten the pope living in luxurious exile in Avignon. In sheer self-defence the pope hires Hawkwood and tells him to go to Italy and that's where Hawkwood goes bringing an exciting new era of death and destruction with him: Northern Italy is full of strong prosperous city states like Milan Florence and Siena all of whom hate each other a situation which Hawkwood coolly and calmly and ruthlessly exploits. Then the pope returns to Rome and tries to take charge and more people die and Hawkwood keeps raking it in: We only know him through his actions his clever maneuverings his carefully controlled slaughtering and kidnapping and oh yeah that one really big massacre at Cesena. This is a deeply interesting book written with a cool clear detachment that occasionally turns acerbic. This is a superb read one that is evocative of Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*, It skews heavily towards the politics of the age without getting too bogged down in details, You do get some idea of what life was like but mainly for the elite like Hawkwood, I still consider Barbara Tuchman's book the first thing you should reach for if you're interested in the 14th century - but her work focuses more on the French and English. When you're done with it read this book to get an idea of the workings of Italy during this time, 9780060777302 Hawkwood is one of those books that contains so much information by the time you get to the end you've forgotten the beginning, It's amazing how the author has discovered so many historical threads from over six hundred years ago, Of course a quick look at the bibliography reveals a tremendous amount of research. John Hawkwood was one of the most successful mercenaries of his time and lived to the ripe old age of 74 apparently dying in his bed. What surprised me the most was that the freelance Companies were much more of a fixture in Italy than in France, They were employed by first one city then the other only taking sides with the best paymaster. Even the pope found their services useful: The bribe that had first propelled the White Company into Italy had been paid by the pope, Indeed while Innocent VI continued to denounce the mercenaries as devils in human shape he was their chief employer, To protect the papal patrimony in Italy much of which had been usurped by petty princes the Avignon popes were constrained to conduct frequent wars, Of course once the mercenaries found out how profitable their sojourn into Italy was they were impossible to dislodge: Apparently no matter how much protection money they demanded the beleaguered Italians found the means to pay them. Florence especially made use of their services to excess; toward the end of the century they offered Hawkwood a wonderful palace a pension and even dowries for his three daughters. Throughout his decades in Italy Hawkwood was the go-to man whenever some duke or count or pope or city had a quarrel with somebody else: The destruction perpetrated upon the helpless population was terrible to read about: But as far as the Companies were concerned it was strictly business—and a profitable one too, (Alas money slipped through Hawkwood's fingers like water and by the end of his life he was impoverished. ) Anyway I wonder if Italy suffered more than France as a result of the Hundred Years War. This comprehensive volume is not the kind of book you would generally read for entertainment but for informational value it is exceptional, Dazzling and addictively readable *The Devil's Broker* is a riveting account of the fortunes gained and lost in a tumultuous time: It isn't only about Hawkwood the man though but so much more; Saunders also gives a portrait of the times he lived in: It is a brief and not very penetrating portrait but a lot more balanced than than the popular image of the 'Dark Ages': For as she points out these are the times not only of famine war superstition and misery but times of intense life culture and joy, er organised; a bunch of 14th Century Essex boys were pillaging extorting kidnapping raping murdering and betraying their way through the Italian City States with a vengeance. Stonor Saunders fantastically detailed biography of the Lance for hire son of Belial is an amazing portrait of 14th Century life: If you thought medieval wars were tidy things fought in open fields by willing combatants think again. When Chaucer wrote about Knights ridding out he meant on raids - that is plundering and terrifying the civilian population often burning crops and

poisoning wells, Then as now War by softening up the civilian population was common. Nonetheless an aspiring foot soldier could make his fortune through war after the huge social changes created by the Black Death in Europe: Not only were the spoils of war for the victors but the laws of chivalry expected high value captives to be ransomed back to their families: It a remarkable portrait of the paradoxes of the age the realities of chivalry and the zeitgeist of a historical turning point: Using Hawkwood as her vehicle the author invites you into the merciless world of 14th C. Italian politics dealing the intrigues personalities and scandals of the day with vivid storytelling: Thankfully though with her eye for the interesting detail and clear prose this author has taken this tricky and messy period of history and produced a first class read: 9780060777302 Interesting because the connection to Chaucer but not really the biography it claims on the back cover: And what a history it is! The wars between the various city states of Florence Milan Pisa Lucca Siena the Papal States etc: were incredible in the sense that the alliances were constantly shifting and that they all used expensive and unreliable mercenary armies who changed sides all the time, First the Papacy was in exile in France and then there were two Popes accusing each other of being an antipope and excommunicating each other, The problem with the book is that it is not written particularly well. The subject matter is fantastic and interesting the stories themselves are almost unbelievable, John Hawkwood participated in some famous battles and would have liked some better descriptions of those battles and also some maps as well, For some that may be interesting personally I care much more for actual history rather than that sort of trivial minutia: And if even if there was it really does not add to the history: The author also provides passages in middle English which are barely readable and provides the modern translation in the endnotes (instead of having the passages directly in English). 9780060777302 One thing is for sure: war is about money. Always has been and always will be. And Hawkwood was one of the best. Thanks to Mike for recommending it I enjoyed it immensely.Hawkwood oddly enough remains a cipher. 9780060777302 Highly accessible history of late Medieval Italy. There's a ton of great anecdotes in here too. 9780060777302 Long before Italian organised crime had become. All the key ingredients of a good Friday night out. 9780060777302 A fantastic book completely engrossing. Also it seems to lose steam. 9780060777302

