

***Mad Dogs and Englishmen: An expedition round my family***, [Sir] Ranulph Fiennes [Bart.]. Hardback, xii, 386pp., genealogical table, colour plates. Hodder & Stoughton (ISBN 978 0 340 92502 4), £20.00.

Above all this book is a good read. And it is obvious from the author's description of it as "a simplified squint at the history of my country, England" that it is not to be taken too seriously. Ranulph Fiennes manages to cover an astonishing range of English history from its beginnings (around the fifth century, according to him) to 1944 when he was born, and he mixes it with walk-on parts for many of his ancestors. Since he can, and does, trace his ancestry back to Charlemagne, and being a Twisleton-Wykeham-Fiennes can incorporate the Twisletons, the Wykehams and the Fiennes into his narrative, as well as numerous Sayes, Seles and Saye & Seles, he has a prodigious number of ancestors to include. Among them are a King of Jerusalem, three signatories of Magna Carta, the grandmothers or mothers of several medieval English kings, William of Wykeham (of Winchester and New College fame), important Puritans in the Civil War and a host of owners and occupiers of Broughton Castle. Given how dull family histories can be, it is a major achievement to keep up the reader's interest across more than ten centuries of the author's relations. Since the Fiennes family originated in France, there is a fair smattering of French history as well, not least when in the Hundred Years War sections of the family were fighting on opposite sides.

Ranulph Fiennes's view of history owes much to the school of *1066 and All That*, with a strong emphasis on kings and queens, most of whom are labelled good, bad or mad, and plenty of derring-do and violent deaths, and statements such as "the peasant could not win, so he naturally revolted" (in connection with the Poll Tax of 1380). The author is prone to make overblown claims for the importance of some of his ancestors – for instance describing William Fiennes, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Saye and Sele, alias "Old Subtlety", as "undeniably the chief architect of the Puritan movement to which the United States looks for its origins and to which England owes three centuries of constitutional government"; and Major General Thomas Twisleton who played an important part in quelling the Gordon Riots in 1780 as the one man who "in the face of imminent catastrophe....held the line between revolutionary madness and democracy" – and he perpetuates the myth that Celia Fiennes was the original "fine lady on a white horse" who rode a cock-horse to Banbury Cross [she wasn't]. He also has a taste for fruity mixed metaphors, such as "hoist by her own rapacious petard"; "civil war flickered on in see-saw fashion"; "armies like snarling cats"; and "like worms at dawn, a clutch of claimants surfaced".

As long as you don't mind that sort of thing, any reader from Banbury with an attachment to Broughton Castle and the Saye & Sele family (which must include most members of the Banbury Historical Society) is likely to enjoy the book. Ranulph Fiennes clearly enjoyed "rootling about with the history of my ancestors, of Broughton and of my country" and he urges others to follow his