

## Earl Charles Spencer, 9th Earl Spencer in Conversation with Claudia Rubenstein

- Welcome back, everybody. It is my great pleasure to welcome and introduce Charles Spencer, 9th Earl Spencer, and Claudia Gold, who will be discussing his book, "The White Ship." Earl Spencer IX was born in 1964 and is an author, public speaker, broadcaster, and journalist. Charles Spencer is the author of seven nonfiction books, including two Sunday Times Bestsellers, "Blenheim: Battle for Europe." His latest work is "The White Ship." In business, he helped establish Althorp Living History, a handmade fine furniture line faithfully reproducing pieces from the collection at Althorp.

In charitable and humanitarian affairs, he served as a trustee of Nelson Mandela's Children Fund from 1998 to 2005. He is patron of the Friends of Cynthia Spencer's Hospice, the Brain Tumour Trust, and Thomas' Fund in England. He's on the board of Whole Child International in the U.S.A. Charles Spencer was educated at Eton and at Oxford University where he earned his MA in modern history. He served as a Page of Honour to His Majesty the Queen in the 1970s and has been one of her deputy lieutenants for Northamptonshire since 2005. He has seven children, isn't that wonderful? And two stepchildren. And is the brother of the great late Diana Princess of Wales. Welcome, and thank you for joining us.

Claudia Gold is the pen name for Claudia Rubenstein, director of Jewish Book Week. Claudia writes historical non-fiction. Her first book, "Women Who Ruled," tells the stories of 50 of the world's most famous and often notorious woman rulers. Her second book, "The King's Mistress," is a biography of the extraordinary woman who became England's first Georgian queen in all but name. Her latest book, "King of the North Wind," is a biography of Henry II, King of England and lord of much of modern-day France. Claudia also writes for a number of publications, including "The Spectator," "The Times Literary Supplement," and "The Aldi." Welcome to both of you, and I am now going to hand over to Claudia and to Earl Spencer. Thank you.

- [Charles] Thank you.

- Thank you, Wendy. It's such a pleasure to be speaking at the Lockdown University and a very warm welcome to Charles Spencer and to all of you watching this evening from all over the world. It's a very special evening tonight because Charles is going to be talking about events that happened just about now, exactly 900 years ago. By any measure, Henry I should be considered one of England's most exceptional monarchs. He was a brilliant strategist, soldier, and administrator, and he brought unprecedented wealth and power to the crown. But Henry's been neglected by popular culture.

He remains little known, except among mediaeval historians and enthusiasts, and we haven't seen his character starring in a popular drama such as "The Tudors." And neither has he attracted a playwright of the calibre of James Goldman, who wrote the brilliant "Lion In Winter." Henry I deserves to be just as famous as the royals we've all heard of, his grandson, Henry II, his descendants, Henry V, Henry VIII, Elizabeth I, and Victoria. But Charles Spencer has finally

put Henry I on the map with his excellent book, "The White Ship: Conquest, Anarchy and the Wrecking of Henry I's Dream." He tells the story from Henry's father, William the Conqueror's conquest of England to the crowning of his grandson, Henry II, 19 years after his death. Charles and I will be talking about the book for about 45 minutes or so, at which point, he would be pleased to take your questions.

If you have a question, just type it into the Q&A box at the bottom of your screen. Charles, a tragedy is at the heart of your book, and you've referred to it as the greatest maritime disaster of the Middle Ages. I want to discuss in depth what happened, but first I'd like to start by going back a few years. Who was Henry I and how did he come to be king?

- Well, thank you Claudia, and thank you also Wendy. Lovely introductions, both. Well, Henry I is one of our greatest monarchs. There's no doubt about that. He was never expected to be king. And I think really, he was the fourth son of William the Conqueror. And we don't know exactly if it's the case, but it seems like he was destined for the church, not for real power in the lay community. We know that because he was educated by a bishop and he was considered a bit of an intellectual in his family because he could read. Small barriers to great things in those days. But what I think is so interesting about Henry is his character.

So on his father's deathbed, he was dutifully there when William the Conqueror was edging towards the end. And the Conqueror told Henry, I'm leaving England to your brother William, William Rufus, and I'm leaving Normandy to your eldest brother, Robert Curthose. But to you, I'm just leaving silver. A lot of silver, but not a life-changing amount if you were a member of the royal family. And Henry was rather upset about this and asked his father why he wasn't getting anything more substantial. And William the Conqueror, apparently said on his deathbed, "Well, because you will amount to more than your brothers." And it was a prophecy that came true. Henry had a rather, well, it wasn't a very substantial youth.

He was very much at the beck and call of his two more powerful elder brothers. They used him and abused him. One of them even imprisoned him. But he stayed the course. And he was with William, his brother William Rufus, in August, 1100 when William Rufus was killed in a hunting accident. A stray arrow struck William Rufus in the chest, and he fell without a word to the ground on his knees and then buckled forward and died without a word. And Henry, rather than looking after his brother's corpse, ran, sprinted, on horseback to Winchester to grab the treasury and then onto Westminster Abbey where he was crowned. And he became an incredibly successful king as you touched upon.

This is the man with a very, very firm grip of financial importance. He realised that the coins that his crown produced had to be of the highest quality. England had always had a particularly good reputation for its coinage and he wanted to maintain that. And within the first few months of him becoming king in 1100, he told the 60 people who had the licence to make the coins around the different parts of England. He told them, do not tamper with the quality because if you do so, it'll be at your own penalty. And some of them were not really paying attention, it seems. And Henry

had them brought to Windsor Castle, they thought for a celebration, but actually it was to have their right hands and their genitals removed. Henry was hard-nosed.

At the same time, again, with finance, he's the one who founded the Exchequer. The Exchequer that's still used in England today as the basis for this country's finances. And this was a way of making sure that what was due to the crown was paid in. Each county had a sheriff who was in charge of the county's finances and, essentially, its law. And twice a year they had to come to the king, to the Exchequer, where they had a giant form of an abacus, really, on a huge checkerboard table. And it was shown how many farthings, pennies, shillings, pounds, or tens and hundreds of pounds were owed by that sheriff to the crown.

And it was very clear to see what was missing. And they were sent away with a bill to say, bring it in. So he was very successful in that. He was a great churchman. He built and championed religious buildings and he was very clever diplomatically. He kept peace with the Scots and he fought very violently against the French. So he was an all-rounder.

- You portray a picture of a fascinating man, brutal, ruthless. Can you tell us a bit about England's relationship with Normandy and what happened to Henry in Normandy?

- Yes. So, William the Conqueror in 1066, as we know, set off from Normandy to claim England. It wasn't really a conquest. He believed it was his by right anyway. And by splitting the inheritance in two at his death, by giving one son England and one Normandy, that seemed to be the end of it. It didn't seem possible that the two parts would be bound up together again until Henry managed, first of all, to, as I mentioned, become King of England.

And then six years later, he kept looking across the Channel and seeing what an appalling job his eldest brother, Robert Curthose, called Curthose 'cause he had short legs and short trousers or short clothing anyway. And so we have this elder brother who is failing and Henry dives in and beats him in battle, puts Robert Curthose in prison for life. A very long life. He lives into his 80s. And Henry sets about ruling Normandy too. And, again, with a sort of ruthless efficiency. Now, I think to be fair, as you know, Claudia, you study this period.

I mean, you could be ruthless at this time and it wouldn't be thought of as appalling. In fact, quite the opposite 'cause most people just wanted peace. They wanted security about their daily lives. And you needed a very, very strong monarch to produce that foundation for life in these rather precarious times.

- Absolutely. I mean, there's a terrible story which you talk about in the book with his daughter, Juliane. One of his illegitimate, many illegitimate daughters, Juliane. I don't know if you'd like to say a little bit more about that. It's rather-

- It's appalling. This is the worst story about Henry I, and I am an admirer of him, except this story, of course, as you all understand, is so appalling. I don't understand how he could have

done it. But, in his defence, I believe he had a very fixed code of behaviour that everyone had to adhere to. And if you think about really the weakness of royal governance, except by example and except by insisting on certain standards, I think that's the background to it, but it's still going to chill your bones, I'm afraid. All of you. Yes. Juliane was made to... He used his children, he had 22 illegitimate children. And he used them for marriage alliance in convenient places. And there was a part of France where he wanted to have control. Juliane married a baron and there was a constant running sore between that baron and a neighbour.

So Henry I decided that the two couples should swap children as hostages. Now, Juliane for some reason, and her husband lost patience with the boy who was their hostage and had him blinded. And the father of the boy outraged, of course, and furious went to Henry and he said, "Well, I demand my side of the bargain." And unbelievably, but you know, sticking to his code rather extraordinarily religiously, Henry ordered his two granddaughters to be blinded and to have their noses cut off because they were in the wrongful party. So I cannot get my head around that. So if you hear me talking very warmly about Henry I, I really do have to leave that to one side because, as a father, I find that truly astonishing and I can't get my head around it.

- Hmm. I mean, they were an unbelievably brutal family, the Normans in many ways. I mean, locking up brothers and fighting cousins, and as you say, mutilating granddaughters. You write incredibly interesting about characters like Robert de Belleme. And I love the way that you really tell the whole brutal, bloody story of the Normans and how successful they were. And Henry's relationship with him was fractious, to say the least, wasn't it?

- Yes. Well, thank you. I'm so glad you picked up on that, Claudia. So I find it much easier to use characters to explain trends than I do to go into dusty long paragraphs. So I plucked out Robert de Belleme, who is this extraordinarily powerful nobleman. He had inherited vast estates from both his mother and his father, and he was ruthless. He also had this extraordinary gift, if you can view it like that, where he didn't actually believe in God. So this left him free of conscience and the expected behaviour of a senior aristocrat.

And we learn with him, for instance, he was always upsetting the church. And the church went to him to ask him why, in the period of 40 days of Lent in the spring of each year, which is meant to be a time of self denial in Christian culture, why he wasn't obeying this. And he said to the monks who had come to see him, "Well, what am I meant to do?" And they said, "Well, you know, one thing is to eat a lot less just to show your religious devotion." And as a sort of, I don't know, I'm afraid it's a sort of sign of huge defiance to the church, he had 300 prisoners in his dungeons starved to death as a sort of, to upset the church for having asked of him such a favour. But this is a man of such power, as I touched upon, that he wasn't worried about this new king, Henry I, young king, who everyone underestimated when he came on this throne. Nobody really had taken him into consideration.

And so he set up. Robert de Belleme started to build castles around England and really flex his independent muscle. And Henry had enough of it and called his bluff and summoned him to

answer for his crimes. And it came to a showdown. And Robert de Belleme and his very powerful brothers were exiled from England and eventually were toppled in Normandy as well. So yes, Henry was more ruthless than the ruthless people who were fighting him.

- Yes. Well, ruthless and a brilliant strategist. I mean, as you say, he made a wonder, I mean for him, he made possibly the best marriage that he could have done with another Matilda of Scotland. There's lots of Matildas.

- Yes. I think that period is sort of ordeal by Matilda. Everyone's called Matilda. Yes but Matilda of Scotland's a fascinating choice of wife. And as you say, a very cunning one. You know, chroniclers at the time do say that this was a love match, which is possible. Matilda of Scotland was, despite being of Scotland, she was very much, through her mother, of the royal Anglo-Saxon line. She was a direct descendant of Alfred the Great, for instance. And this played very well with the English who had been conquered by the Normans. It was seen as a way, by Henry marrying her, it would bind the two sides together.

And I must say, Claudia, I really enjoy when I'm dealing with these sort of quite sort of dark subjects, is going off at the odd parallel. So excuse me if I just mention Macbeth, you know, because it's in fact Matilda of Scotland, the Queen of England to Henry, it's her father who kills the real life Macbeth. And I was so fascinated to learn about Macbeth, that he really wasn't this sort of shrill, neurotic of Shakespeare's tragedy. He was a very, very highly respected and able monarch who was powerful enough to leave things settled in Scotland and go to Rome on pilgrimage and impress the Romans with his great generosity towards the poor.

Anyway, so she came from this fascinating bloodline. And she was a great woman in her own right, a great patron of the arts. This is a period of very strong women. They were held back to a certain extent by expectation. For instance, as we'll see probably, that it was impossible for people in the early 12th century to think of a queen ruling as the current queen does with a consort. It was all about kings marrying women. But she did a lot in terms of the arts and culture. She did everything from founding the first public loo in London to building bridges and founding a hospital for lepers where she tended the lepers herself and kissed and bound their wounds. You know, fascinating people.

But her main function, of course, in this very simplistic time was to produce an heir. And she produced, first of all, a daughter, another Matilda, and then her son, the longed-for male heir was called William. And he was known as William the Aetheling, which is a term rather similar to Prince of Wales, in that it means you're the designated future ruler. And with her job done, they then sort of really lived very separate lives and she was, towards the end of her life, you know, when she died, they considered her for sainthood, which her mother had achieved.

But she just didn't quite make the grade. But, you know, the tragedy which we are going to be dealing with tonight does stem very much from the point that she finished her breeding programme when she had produced the heir. She was not interested in carnal lust. She was

very spiritual and she had had enough. And only having one son was going to be a problem.

- There were some stories, weren't there, that circulated that she'd actually taken the vow, she'd become a nun before she married Henry. Although I thought her excuse was rather brilliant. As you say in the book, I believe it was her, she said that she was defending herself against, I dunno, rampaging Normans such as Henry's own older brother, William Rufus, which I thought was-

- Yes. She was so interesting. There are so many things I learned while researching this book. And one was that William Rufus, this sort of, you know, the heir to William the Conqueror, was a complete brute, really. He was a really rough soldier. I think William the Conqueror chose him to be the heir in England because he was an able soldier and he would hang on to this rich prize of England. But you know, it's quite clear from the Chronicles that people feared William Rufus' court coming into their vicinity because it was rape and pillage.

And yes, Princess Matilda of Scotland said that she donned the habit of a nun to protect herself really from being ravaged. And it's probably so. But this actually is such a fascinating thing you touched upon because people did suspect her of not being entirely honest about this. And there was a theory among a lot of people that she had actually taken a vow to God and therefore had insulted God by subsequently rejecting him and becoming queen. And this could have led to some of the problems later on.

- So this is very interesting. They stopped at two children, but Henry, of course, went on to have 22, or had already had several, before his legitimate children were born. And I find it very interesting how you pull out in the book what he, how he used these illegitimate children as another one of his tools in his arsenal of kingship and the marriages he made.

- He's a very unusual man, Henry, because a lot of royal and aristocratic figures at this time had a lot of illegitimate children. It was quite normal at this time. But what was abnormal was what Henry did, which was to recognise them. And I think, first of all, he did love his children. It's quite clear from his letters that he had a paternal love that we would recognise today. But at the same time, quite right, you're quite right. He was using them for as diplomatic pawns. And actually, several of his sons turned out to be useful soldiers as well.

So, yes, obviously some of them didn't live for that long 'cause you know, life expectancy was, it was all over the place at that time. But there's a lot who made a decent, well, a plus in his statesmanship by having them marry the right people. And yeah, he wasn't afraid to use them in that way. And, in fact, why not? You know, at the time, he was a very clever operator. And so he had, the ultimate feather in his cap was his one legitimate daughter, Matilda, marrying the most powerful man in Europe, effectively the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry V. That was an incredible pat on the back for a man who, like Henry, he had just seized, he'd been an opportunist and seized the English throne.

To have that man recognise his bloodline in such a way was quite something. But Henry wasn't a total snob. You know, we heard from the Juliane situation, she was used to marry a simple baron in France 'cause it was useful there. He had another one marry one of the Lowland kings in Scotland. It was where they were most useful that he married them off.

- So you've got this brilliant strategic king, has cross-Channel domains, a kingdom in England and a dukedom in Normandy. One of the things that I really enjoyed about your book is, first of all, your language is incredibly lyrical and I found that water is a theme that comes up throughout the book. You even have a chapter entitled The Sea. And would you like to say a little bit about what Henry and his contemporaries' relationship was like with the sea? I mean, you've got these beautiful things, you talk about sea goats and sea elephants and...

- Yes. Well, it's so interesting going back this far and seeing the world through that prism. And, of course, people didn't know what was below the wave, beneath the waves at all. Absolutely no idea. So, you know, a seasoned captain of a ship would have a rudimentary grasp of the stars and an experienced eye for the wind and currents, but he wouldn't know much else. And for your average person, the sea was... I looked at the poetry at the time, it was a place of enormous beauty, but terror as well. Absolute terror.

And there are so many shipwrecks just in this period I cover. Not just the White Ship having its terrible moment, but there's a shipwreck that undoes the man who becomes King Harold, the one who supposedly dies with an arrow through his eye at Hastings. There's an army lost to William Rufus in a shipwreck. Matilda of Scotland. The only reason she's of Scotland is 'cause her mother was shipwrecked off the coast of Scotland. So the sea was something that could kill you very quickly, and particularly at a time when there was no concept of swimming as a pastime. I looked and looked and looked. The only people I could find who could swim were those who were directly connected to the sea, sort of fishermen really, who had to retrieve nets that were snagged off rocks and things like that.

But nobody else. And the poetry is so clear about this that they say... We happen to know from science that drowning, although I'm not belittling drowning, but it is actually not a painful way to go. It's a terrifying way, but not actually painful to the body. But to the mediaeval mind, it was considered the peak of physical agony because it was such an appalling concept. And as you touched upon, this was a place, the sea, in which lurked endless creatures who could destroy you or your boat. And they did believe in sirens luring you onto the rocks. And they did believe in every form of terrifying animal having a counterpoint under the sea, which was going to tear you apart. You look at the maps of the time, you'll see that, yeah, sea goats off the coast of Scotland. Doesn't sound very frightening, but apparently it was.

But, you know, the whole thing was a terrifying concept. So if you were going to, if you were lucky enough to be on a prestigious vessel, you could expect the monks to come and bless your voyage before you left. It was thought an important thing to bring God into the bargain if you were going to be on a voyage.

- And I think we can't avoid it any longer. And tragedy is at the very centre of your book and you begin your book with a prologue with a heartbreaking title, which is called A Cry in the Dark. Can you take us through the events of 900 years ago tonight?

- Yes. Well, where are we? 900 years ago tonight in France, it'll be 9:30. And the King of England and his royal party had arrived in Barfleur. Barfleur is east of Cherbourg. And Barfleur, at this time, was the great harbour for those travelling to England from Normandy. If you go today, it's a simple, very pretty fishing village. But it was much more important than that back then. And when he arrived, a man stepped forward and he announced that he was the son of the captain of William the Conqueror's flagship on the invasion in 1066 of England.

And he said it would be his equal honour to take Henry I, who had just spent the previous three or four years defeating the French under their wonderfully named King Louis the Fat, that finally brought him to peace in defeat. And this was a sort of moment of great triumph. And it would be this captain's absolute joy to take him back to England in the great vessel of the day, the White Ship. And Henry heard this. But Henry is a rather straightforward character and he had made his plans. So this time 900 years ago, tonight, he had already set off an hour ago and he was heading to Southampton, expecting a very uneventful voyage, 10 or 12 hours with the right winds still going.

But he left behind his son and heir, William Aetheling, who we met last as a baby. But he's now a 17 year old, apparently very spoiled, but, you know, probably suffering from all sorts of adolescent agonies, surrounded by hangers on. And Henry I, although he won't go on the White Ship, commits his one son and heir, two other children, a nephew and a niece, 18 ladies of the countess title or above, and the great men of his army, great barons, churchmen, bureaucrats, 250 of them get onto the White Ship, which has a crew of 50. And they stay in Barfleur Harbour on this cold evening, and they get uproariously drunk.

And sadly and rather stupidly, they get the crew drunk too. And after a lot of revelry, they decide suddenly, the brilliant idea occurs to these drunk people, who, by the way, chase away the monks who've come to bless the vessel. This is seen as a rather reckless thing to have done. And they push off into the night and the cry goes up that they must try and beat Henry back to Southampton. And so the rowers are known for their experience and their power. There's 50 of them and they bend their back. And then the captain, who is drunk, makes an absolutely crucial mistake.

If you've been to this part of Normandy, it is very picturesque, but it is also a rocky coast and they make the mistake of dropping the sail too early before they're clear of all the rocks. And I think the helmsman was drunk. I think he miscalculated the combined power of the oarsmen and the speed given to the ship by its mast being filled with wind. And they hit this rock, which still exists, the Quillebœuf Rock, about a mile northeast of Barfleur, and it staves in the side of the White Ship. And then I'm afraid that is the beginning of a period of utter catastrophe with



people stumbling into the icy waters. And actually, thank goodness for history, there is one man who survives. The humblest passenger onboard, we think.

And he's called Berold, and he's a butcher from Rouen. And he manages to pull himself out of the Channel and onto a bit of broken mast. And he witnesses the prince being bundled into the one rowing boat onboard the White Ship by his bodyguards. And they start to make back to the land at Barfleur when the prince hears screams. There's a lot of screams, of course, but there's one that he hears particularly piercing through the night, and it's his half sister, one of Henry's many illegitimate children, Margaret of Perche, and she's calling out for help and actually insulting her brother for being so cowardly as to row away.

And William orders the bodyguards to turn around and go and collect her. But you can imagine for these people, terror struck and drowning in the water, they see what looks like salvation and they make their way as best they can to it. And they try and clamber on board and they take the rowing boat down and the prince with them. And it's a night of cold. But in the morning, Berold the butcher is retrieved by three local fishermen and he has this terrible, terrible tale to tell of this catastrophic loss.

- And how does Henry find out and when does he find out?

- Well, we've established that Henry's not one for taking things in a very good way. And do you know, people were terrified of telling him. He had made it uneventfully to Southampton and then he'd gone, like all the Normans, he absolutely loved his hunting, and he'd gone to one of his hunting lodges in the New Forest to wait for everyone else to catch up with him. And imagine this, you know? The people around him started to get these reports within a few hours of what had happened. And nobody dared to tell the king. Meanwhile, they had to hide their own grief. They'd all lost people.

This was a tightly-knit court and they'd lost relatives and friends in the shipwreck. They had to keep their grief away from him. And essentially nobody wanted to tell him, and then a little boy was ordered to go in and tell him. And the king fell to the ground bellowing in grief and had to be taken away. He could not believe, because not only had he lost all these people who mattered so much to him, including three of his children, but he'd lost the future, he'd lost his dynastic future in that one legitimate son. And that was, he must have felt that just as keenly as his personal loss.

- And it's a tragedy in many ways that's so, it's heightened almost because you could argue that just before the White Ship went down, it was the zenith of Henry I's power. And do you want to tell us what he'd actually been doing in Normandy?

- Yes. So he had done so much, you know. You are absolutely right. This is a Greek tragedy. This is an extraordinary tale of loss, of hubris maybe, but also of achievement. You know, Henry had, it had taken him forever to have his son recognised by Louis VI, Louis the Fat of France.

And Louis was terrified of the combined force of England and Normandy. I think we had to remember what the kingdom of France looked like at this time. You know, the actual piece of France that the King of France had full power over was what we call Ile-de-France, a large chunk around Paris. But still, you know, it is just a chunk around Paris. The rest, whether it's Anjou, Maine, Blois, Normandy, Brittany, these are all satellites that he has a feudal hold over, but doesn't actually technically rule.

Well, he does technically but not practically. And Normandy was the really difficult neighbour for France, because it was full of, you know, the descendants of Vikings and they were very good warriors and they were very troublesome. And that was annoying when they were just Normans, but when they had harnessed the extraordinary wealth and power of England to their cause, that was too much. And Louis saw it as his life's work to separate England and from Normandy. And he had not acknowledged William Aetheling, Henry I's son, as the future Duke of Normandy. He had chosen Henry's nephew, another William, who was the son of Robert Curthose. So the long-imprisoned elder brother had a very dashing son, William Clito. And William Clito was the lightning rod for all the opposition to Henry. And he had huge support from all the people who wanted to bring Normandy down.

But Henry had, in a battle in the summer of 1119, he had defeated all his enemies at the Battle of Bremule. And it was the end for Clito. He realised it was the end for him. But now he was back in play after the loss of William Aetheling and it brought all the foreign policy problems that Henry thought he had put to bed by the time he'd got back to England in 1120, they all resurfaced. And Henry had a really brutal remaining 15 years of his life trying to produce an heir, apart from anything else. Within two months of the White Ship tragedy, Henry, who was a widower at this stage, had remarried a great beauty.

She was known as the Fair Maid of Brebant, a girl called Adeliza of Louvain. And this poor girl was made to traipse around with Henry and the expectation that she would produce an heir. She didn't. And there comes a point in the 1120s, after half a dozen years of no child from the royal marital bed, where Henry decides that he's got to look to plan B. And that is his one other legitimate child, his daughter, the Empress Matilda

- Yes, let's talk about Matilda. Absolutely, because Henry, I mean he is devastated by William's death. And I believe that he never sailed from Barfleur again, even though it was the most convenient sailing point. But he was too grief stricken. And he got on with it and he married the beautiful Adeliza, who was only 17, I think the same age as William had been. But then he's got Matilda and she's conveniently available from 1125. But like maybe you'd like to say a bit more about that.

- Yes. So she has been essentially empress of Europe in many capacities, really. And she'd been very able. You know, her husband had many duties which took him in all the directions of the Holy Roman Emperor, Empire. And she had proved to be an incredibly good regent when left with these tasks. And she had expectations. So she comes back as a widow. Her husband,

Henry V, dies of cancer as a young man. And she comes back and is very eligible. And Henry I doesn't really listen to her. You know, she's a woman of about 30 by this stage or in her late 20s. And she is made to marry a 15-year-old because he is the Count of Anjou. And Henry is determined to peel off Anjou from the alliance around the French king against him.

She's furious with this match. Not only is she going from empress to countess, which is quite a downgrade, but also she's hoisted in a marriage to this rather petulant young man. But she obeys her father and he spends the remaining 10 years of his life, up until 1135, insisting that she will be his successor. And do you know, it's interesting considering what happens, but all the barons and the bishops, they're very happy to agree to this, both in Normandy and in England. But it turns out they didn't really mean it. And as soon as Henry died in December, 1135, supposedly from eating too many lampreys, a rather disgusting looking water animal that looks a bit like an eel but doesn't even have teeth. It just sucks on its prey.

But he ate too much of this. It was quite a rich flesh and it seems to have done in his digestive system. And at that moment, I think, you know, quite rightly, Empress Matilda thought that she would become queen. But there's an element of sliding doors in this true story because the one man who'd got off the White Ship before it went on its doomed voyage was Henry I's nephew, Stephen of Blois. And Stephen had married a woman who ruled Flanders. He shot across the channel and managed to get himself crowned.

And it's interesting, you know, in a very religious culture such as this, as soon as you were crowned and anointed during your coronation, very hard to topple you because people believed you were touched by the Christian God, you know, as His representative. And you were removed from just being a humdrum human being. So that reduces England, for 19 years, to a really desperate civil war. The Victorians looked back on it, and without exaggeration, actually, they called it the Anarchy. It was a time of absolute bloodshed as the armies of Stephen and Matilda just ground each other into the dust and I'm afraid the civilian population suffered terribly.

- Hmm. So you get this move from very strong kingship and a reasonably, well, a stable government and a stable society to the rule of Stephen, which is quite disastrous. And I think of interest to our audience tonight will be Henry's relationship with his Jewish community. And I think it's fascinating that it's under Stephen's watch, weak kingship, that you have the first blood libel, which you could argue, I mean it certainly didn't happen under Henry II, and it certainly didn't happen under Henry I, but how good was it for the Jews of England under Henry I?

- Well, I think with Henry I, he took a rather sort of what he would've considered, I think, a practical view of the Jews in England. They were very much confined to London. They were allowed to travel, I think, mainly for business purposes. They were allowed to travel without paying tolls. He honoured the chief rabbi of London and also he used some of the Jewish people, his subjects, for his own financial benefit, in fact. And he really made it clear that he saw the oath of a Jewish citizen as being, in fact, turns out 12 times stronger than that of a Christian.

And he was, I think, tolerant to, you know, we're dealing in mediaeval times here.

He was tolerant to a point in that he allowed Jewish subjects to swear on the Torah and not just on the whole Christian Bible. So there was a sort of understanding that Jewish people had a place in Henry I's reign. And yes, it worked, I think. I'm not saying it was great, but you are absolutely right. His strong kingship meant that Jewish subjects were safe under him. And Stephen, who really hadn't got a plan. He was just an affable, slightly dim soldier who was charming. People liked him. He could talk to anyone of any rank, but he had no statecraft. He had no vision for his rule. And the wheels came off. And, as you say, I'm afraid the Jewish subjects were among the ones to suffer the most, I'm afraid.

- I mean, Henry I's physician, Petrus Alfonsi, was quite an interesting character who I'm sure that you know all about. But I think it shows, to a certain extent, the internationalism. I think Henry goes beyond just the borders of his Anglo-Norman realm. I mean, how international was Henry in his outlook, do you think? If you think about the Latin Kingdom, and obviously-

- Yes, he was international. So, you know, the Normans had settled very effectively into what we'd consider Southern Italy. And he had a strong association with the Norman families over there. His brother had married a bride from there. And it's very easy for us at this distance to think of England as this little tiny bottled up state, but it wasn't. And then you have, you know, just before Henry took the throne, the Crusades, the First Crusade took place. And there was a constant flow from the Southern Italian Norman lands to England and back.

And looking further north, where Henry was incredibly clever, because most of his campaigns relied on everything being quiet at home. Yes, he settled England, but at the same time he also made, he never had a problem with Scotland. He had three consecutive kings of Scotland who were his brothers-in-law and he remained on very good terms with all of them. This was incredibly clever and it meant that he could do things in Normandy. If he had had a problem behind him in the north, he couldn't possibly have been so effective in Normandy.

- Hmm. I mean, Henry's grandson who eventually succeeded, eventually succeeded Stephen, he always referred to his grandfather's exemplary kingship. And he had a standard phrase in his charter, "By confirming the rights and beneficiaries of everything that King Henry, my grandfather, gave him." Would you like to say a little bit about what you think the legacy of Henry I was and why this story is so important today, 900 years later?

- I think Henry I had a very clear view of what his kingship was about. And do you know, it's interesting. So when he took on the throne in 1100, he basically revealed a manifesto to his people as to what he was going to do, the laws from Anglo-Saxon times that he was going to honour, the new introductions that he was going to have. During his reign, you have the first sort of codification of law. And I think that this is essential and I've already mentioned his eye for the financial security. He was a very clever man and he knew where all the bits fitted.

Now what was his legacy? Well, part of it, you know, his Coronation Charter, this great manifesto, if I can call it that, was the bare bones of Magna Carta. So he was respected 115 years after he had come to the throne for having hit upon really key principles of what mattered. And I think Henry II shared the same level of energy. They were incredibly energetic men. And I know with your Henry II, for instance, people said they never saw him sitting down except when he was eating or on a horse. And Henry I had that same restless ability.

This didn't necessarily carry on and ended with disaster for people like King John. But the thing is, Henry's legacy was still respected. I was reading a book the other day about Edward IV, so we're a long way back. And the court papers there are talking, probably with some rose-tinted spectacles, about the exemplary rule of Henry I. That was when England was solid and safe. That's when, as they said at the time, a young maiden with a purse full of gold could walk from one end of the land to the other unmolested. And that is a huge contrast with Stephen. I think Henry II particularly valued his grandfather because of what had come between their two rules, which was utter carnage.

And people knew that anarchy was bad. That this is why Henry I was obsessed with having lost his son in the White Ship. That's why he was obsessed with finding another heir who could be acceptable, because the one thing you didn't want was that sort of anarchy. It was a disaster for everyone.

- Mm. Mm. Absolutely. And lessons for all of us today, lessons for kings and leaders today. I have one more question for you, Charles, before I think we need to open it up to the floor, but I just wanted to ask you, you've written about Charles I, Charles II, now Henry I. What's next? Do you have another project in the pipelines at the moment?

- I do. I don't feel constrained by... I used to do the Stuarts. My last four books were the Stuarts. But I just love a good story and I love a story that illuminates an age. And, look, of course, I'm not making light of the tragedy of 900 years ago tonight. But it really does explain so much, you know, the necessity of a dynasty and the tragic void. And so you tell a huge story and through a flashpoint and I think I found one and I think it's 20th century, but that's all I can say.

- Thank you so much. I would talk to you for hours about this, but I think we've let people in. So...

- Thank you.

Q&A and Comments:

Q: Somebody's asked a very interesting question. Did Matilda ever become queen?

A: Ah. Well, so it is very interesting 'cause Matilda seems to have had a slight stumbling block when it came to her actual title. So she called herself Empress Matilda, although she had never

actually been officially crowned empress. Did she become queen? Well, she didn't actually, although it was so close. So in 1141, so six years after Henry I died, there was a battle, the Battle of Lincoln. And Stephen, King Stephen, was captured. And this really was an amazing moment because that seemed to be the end of the civil war. And at this point, Matilda moves to London. She's in her palace getting ready for her coronation, having a feast. But it's quite a reflection on the misogyny of the time. People had begun to get very upset with her because she was ruling, well, she was on the verge of ruling like a king.

And I know this sounds ridiculous to us, but there was no concept of a queen ruling like this. And the three or four very powerful men who had championed her cause were all expecting her to be a mere cypher with them pulling the strings. So you find the chroniclers calling her horribly arrogant and unacceptable in every way, but she was behaving far better than William I, II, or Henry had done. But it just wasn't acceptable. So King Stephen may have been in prison, but his wife wasn't. And she's this fantastic figure, another very strong female character from this time, Matilda of Boulogne. And she whips up a mercenary army the other side, the south side of the Thames.

And the people of London decide, look, there's a lot of carnage coming their way. They don't like this woman anyway, and they storm in and destroy the feast she's having for her coronation. And she flees. And that's the nearest she actually got to it. The war went on for a very long time, 19 years in all, but that's the time she nearly became queen. But no, she doesn't.

Q: And it is fascinating, you touched on this, how many strong and independent women there are. And all of the, well, Matilda, Matilda of Flanders. And somebody would like to know is, is there a tradition in England to have a crowned queen? And if there wasn't, is this one of the reasons why Matilda wasn't accepted?

A: Yeah, there was not. There was no tradition of a crowned queen, as in the one we have now where the queen is the senior party of the union. So there is... The word queen comes from an Anglo-Saxon word, which is *cwen*, C-W-E-N. And that is very much the wife of a king. It is not a independent ruler. And I just think... Look, again, it's trying to find a reason even though I don't understand it. So the reason I think is this, that to your average noble or knight in mediaeval England or Normandy, the king was the person who led you into battle.

And we know, for instance, there's another fantastically strong woman in this book, she's called Adela of Blois. And she's the youngest child, the youngest daughter anyway, of William the Conqueror. And even the people who write these great poems about her gifts, they do stop, they say she's perfect, she could be a ruler, but of course she could never put armour on and lead us into battle. So I think that was the stumbling block for Matilda and others at this time. There was no, there just wasn't the mindset to have a woman in charge. I know it's very non PC, but this is 900 years ago.

Q: And I think we could finish with a bit of counterfactual question. What would it have been like

if William had lived and if William had come to the throne? Which is difficult to answer.

A: It's difficult to answer, but I have thought about it. So I'll give it a stab. I think England would've been much more just a small island race in the North Sea. I think it was Henry II, your man, Claudia, who brought us into a much more international sphere by marrying Eleanor of Aquitaine and becoming lord of much of France. And I think, you know, we could have stayed, we maybe hung onto Normandy as well. I think the timing of the Reformation would be different. I think that the culture would've been different because the whole chivalric ballads and all sorts of things would've been very, very different. We know that.

And on the other side, we wouldn't have had, we know we wouldn't have had, we may have had similar, we wouldn't have had Magna Carta, we wouldn't have had King John, we wouldn't have had Richard the Lionheart. All these amazing kings and figures and moments would not have happened. So it really is, it's absolutely astonishing to me that here we are sitting, talking tonight, exactly 900 years after this catastrophe which led very, very soon after it, in terms of history, to the Plantagenets taking over. And the Plantagenets ruled from 1154 to 1485. They are the bit between the Normans and the Tudors. And they only came to power because of this shipwreck. It really is astonishing.

- It's fascinating. Charles, I know that Wendy wants to come on and say a few words, but I'd just like to thank you so much and to thank the Lockdown University for hosting us and thank you all of you for watching. Thank you.

- [Charles] Thank you.

- Thank you very, very much. Thank you, Claudia and thank you, Charles. That was absolutely the most splendid presentation. So interesting. And, you know, to quote Bryson, "A terrific book, written like a thriller. Once you start reading it, you're completely gripped." And Helen Kessler, she says, "Here is a story marvellously told of the post-conquest kings and one almost queen of England. Unpredictable, violently dramatic, and never less than compelling." So congratulations on a brilliant book. I urge-

- Thank you.

- Everybody to go out, to buy it, and to read it. How long did it take you to research it?

- It took me two years to research 'cause it's not my period. You know, it took a year of general reading and then a year of drilling down on the story. It's taken three years to write and read and everything. So yeah.

- Wow. Fantastic. And it's so exciting that you did your presentation today, the very day.

- Well, I'm so thrilled. What a joy for me. You know, the whole reason I wrote this book now was

because of tonight and this anniversary. So to bring it to you is such a privilege for me to share this passion with you and have Claudia, who's been so kind about the book and was such a brilliant interviewer, and you, Wendy, as this great, the emcee of all emcees. It's been a wonderful evening. And what a way to, you know, I'm going to be raising a glass later to the lost souls on that ship. But what an incredible thing to think what came from that one moment of catastrophe.

- Incredible. Absolutely unbelievable. Well, thank you very, very much. And Claudia, thank you. You're a credit to your mother, Trudy, who is watching tonight. Exactly. This is really family affair. And as I mentioned to you earlier, Charles, I do know your gorgeous daughter, Katie, who's beautiful inside and outside. And so a credit to family.

- Thank you so much.

- And to success of your wonderful book.

- [Charles] Thank you very much indeed.

- Thank both of you for joining us tonight and to all our listeners, thank you very much. And on that note, I will say bye-bye and goodnight.