

England The Autobiography. 2,000 years of English history by those who saw it happen. Edited by John Lewis-Stempel. Viking 2005.

England The Autobiography is an inspired anthology of 173 passages by the observers of and participants in 2000 years of English history, starting with Julius Caesar's account of landing on the English beaches and concluding with Jonny Wilkinson's version of winning the Rugby World Cup in Australia in 2003.

In between these iconic moments are many others, some that one would expect to find, such as the Battle of Hastings, the murder of Thomas à Becket, Elizabeth 1st's address to her troops before the Armada's arrival, the sinking of the Titanic, the escape from the Dunkirk beaches of the British Expeditionary force and many more. But there are others, just as entertaining, informative and engrossing, that are unexpected: a piece on the weather and its impact by the 13th century monk Matthew Paris, a court record of sexual proclivities in rural Worcestershire in 1300, a love letter from Henry VIII to Anne Boleyn, a 17th century post mortem report by the royal physician William Harvey on the body of a man reputed to be 154 years old, an ensign's account of the battle of Waterloo when he was captured by the French, the celebrations in London of VE Day in 1945 and on and on.

This is a book of delights to be savoured and dipped into repeatedly for there is something in it for everyone, whether lovers of history in general or that of England in particular. Some will naturally debate what was included and what was excluded by the editor, for objectivity in such an endeavour is almost impossible, but John Lewis-Stempel deserves praise for his selection which in this reviewer's opinion could hardly be bettered.

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