

The Last Crusaders – The Hundred Year Battle for the Centre of the World
by Barnaby Rogerson.
Little Brown 2009.

The words Crusade and Crusaders conjure images of knights with their assorted rabble of followers rampaging through early medieval Europe on their way to do bloody slaughter in the Holy Land, but Barnaby Rogerson believes that they may be applied just as appropriately to the later titanic struggles between the forces of Christianity and Islam in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a period when much blood was shed as the soldiers of both faiths flexed their muscles and pitilessly wielded their arms against each other.

The Last Crusaders is divided into three sections: Birth of New Powers, Struggle, and Destruction. The first part includes the eclipse of Islam's last redoubt in Granada by the forces of Ferdinand and Isabella, the growth of Muslim piracy under the inspiration of the cruel Barbarossa and the transformation of the Ottoman Empire into a regional powerhouse. The second part takes in the expansion of Portuguese power, the bitter rivalry between the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V and the King of France, Francis 1st, and the consolidation of the power of Suleyman the Magnificent. The final part details the destruction of key Christian island redoubts in the Mediterranean, the great naval victory of the Holy Alliance at Lepanto, and the destruction of the Portuguese army in Morocco in 1578.

Rogerson is a lyrical historian, writing with a verve and passion for his subject that communicates itself to the reader, bringing great events down to a human level by focussing on key individuals at every stage and with a masterly grasp of the longer term implications of the momentous events he describes, echoes of which are still being felt today.

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