



Bloodfeud: murder and revenge in Anglo-Saxon England, Richard A. Fletcher, Oxford University Press, 2003, 019516136X, 9780195161366, 230 pages. On a gusty March day in 1016, Earl Uhtred of Northumbria, the most powerful lord in northern England, arrived at a place called Wiheal, probably near Tadcaster in Yorkshire. Uhtred had come with forty men to submit formally to King Canute, an act that completed the Danish subjugation of England and the defeat of Ethelred the Unready, to whom Uhtred had been a loyal ally and subject. But, as Richard Fletcher recounts in the electrifying opening to Bloodfeud, "Treachery was afoot." With Canute's connivance, Thurbrand, Uhtred's old enemy, ambushed and slaughtered the earl and his men. "This act of treachery and slaughter set in motion the chain reaction of counter-violence and yet further violence, a bloodfeud that lasted for three generations and almost sixty years." Those sixty years were also some of the most unsettled in English history. Tracing the bloodshed through three generations, Fletcher throws light on an Anglo-Saxon culture that would soon be wholly replaced by a new Norman regime. Fletcher shows us in minute detail the concerns of Anglo-Saxon life: how difficult it was to govern England, particularly the region north of the Humber River, the millennial power of the church, and the important role women and marital alliances played in renewing old feuds. Against this rich context the few reliable facts of the enmity between Uhtred and Thurbrand are "coaxed and entreated into utterance." Bloodfeud shows us a powerful historian at work piecing together what we do and don't know, what may be reasonably surmised, and where we must simply let the imagination take over. Fletcher presents with superb clarity and wit the most stimulating account of life in pre-Norman England to be found anywhere..

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