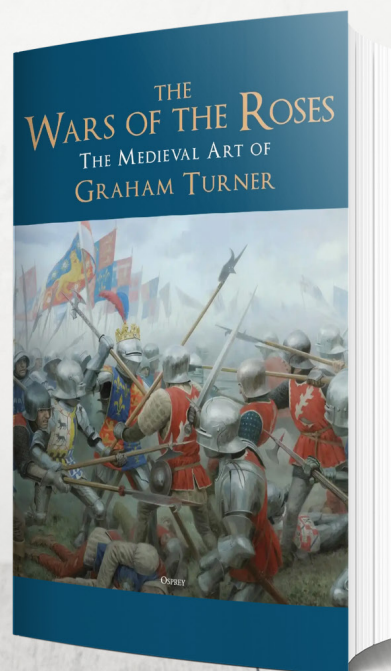


The Wars of the Roses

The Medieval Art of Graham Turner

Graham Turner, Osprey Publishing,
2024, 288 pages



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The Wars of the Roses, or the Civil Wars by which it was known at the time, took place in England in the mid-fifteenth century (1455–1485).¹ As a series of civil wars fought over control of the English throne, the Wars of the Roses was one of the most dramatic and turbulent time periods in English history. Supporters of two rival cadet branches of the royal House of Plantagenet, Lancaster (red rose) and York (white rose), who both claimed legitimacy to the throne vis-à-vis the sons of Edward III, fought the wars, which eventually resulted in the extinction of the last male line of the House of Lancaster.² The (probable) murder of King Henry VI in 1471 in the Tower of London paved the way for the Tudor family to inherit the Lancastrian claim to the throne; once Henry Tudor married Elizabeth of York, both houses' claims to the throne were united, resolving the tumultuous series of battles.³

Author and illustrator Graham Turner conducts a visual symphony of historical detail and stunning imagery in his book *The Wars of the Roses: The Medieval Art of Graham Turner*. With nineteen chapters that begin with Henry V's formidable legacy and end with the ascendancy of Henry VII of the House of Tudor,

each chapter contains titles that summarize the chapter's contents. In addition to the rich textual detail that paints verbal images of the important events in these wars, there is a chorus of photographs, images, and over 120 original paintings that highlight battles, places, and key individuals.

There is standard back matter such as a bibliography, endnotes, and an index, but the added sweetener is a unique "painting diary," which catalogues the necessary steps required to paint the dynamic illustrations featured in this substantial book. Turner contends that the time spent on each painting "depends on many factors, not least size, medium and complexity, and then there are the countless hours spent on research and observation: people, landscapes, skies, buildings, all things that can be observed around us and which are crucial to creating a convincing image of a real past."⁴ The painting diary is only a few pages out of the book, but it is packed with information and useful "drafts" of one of the paintings so readers get a sense of the time and effort it takes to compose just one of these images. The painting diary is arranged in alphabetical "stages" from A to L, and Turner carefully comments on each stage.

In addition to the insightful details contained in the painting diary, the index is exceptionally effective. It is arranged alphabetically by keyword, and the page numbers listed in bold refer to the illustrations. The bibliography is organized into alphabetical primary and alphabetical secondary source categories, which makes for smooth searching among all the sources. There are numerical endnotes for every chapter, and the numbers start over with each chapter. There is diversity among the sources, which demonstrates that it is as textually well researched as it is thoroughly illustrated. Unfortunately, there is no index specific to the paintings, photos, or other images, but there are thorough cutlines that accompany each image, adding a rich context that boosts the visual, illuminating the text.

Complementing the book's usual front matter of a preface and introduction is a chronology that condenses the bulk of the book's key events into a manageable, visual format. Readers can follow along the contextual time frame from 1422 to 1487 with little difficulty, as the chronology is organized and easy to interpret.

For Turner, *The Wars of the Roses* is the "culmination of more than a quarter of a century's research and painting."⁵ And during that twenty-five years there have been "discoveries that have added to and altered our collective knowledge and interpretation of the past," as Turner's own knowledge and understanding (of the subject) continued to grow and evolve.⁶ But as richly detailed as his accounts of the battles and events are, the paintings are the focus of the book's intrigue.

Turner approaches the story of the wars with a chronological arc, beginning with the death of King Henry V and ending with Henry VII's victory at the Battle of Stoke. Despite the more gruesome aspects of war politely described in the text, the paintings are not particularly bloody. His images are gritty without gratuitous bloodshed, and they depict not only scenes of struggle, of desperation, of loneliness or loss but also of chivalry, persistence, courage, and victory. Turner seems to go to great pains to avoid glamorizing war, but some paintings evoke a sense of woeful despair, while others shine with the aggression of battle. With a muted palette of natural, earthy colors, the paintings tell the story of the wars as readers move through each chapter; the paintings give faces and life to textual details. Relevant quotes from some of the primary sources used to trace the battles are presented in the original Middle

English and often accompany the paintings and other images: "And on Ester day in the mornynge, the xiiij of Apryl, ryght erly, eche of them came uppone othere; and ther was suche a grete myste, that nether of them myght see othere perfytely."⁷

To enjoy this book, an appreciation for the Middle Ages is required, but knowledge of the history is not. Turner ensures that even the layman will have the opportunity to learn something new about the Middle Ages. Those familiar with medieval warfare will enjoy the smaller details contained in the text, and those less familiar with the history will appreciate the straightforward and precise way that Turner delivers the narrative. Turner's prose is polished yet conversational. For example, in chapter 11, Turner says, "We don't know when Edward and Elizabeth [Woodville] met, or why he chose her as his queen. It could well have been a romantic and impulsive love-match, but another theory that subsequently gained favour was that marrying her was the only way she would give in to his advances."⁸ He follows his speculation with a passage from the fifteenth-century chronicle, *Gregory's Chronicle*, about how men marveled at Edward's renown prowess with women; such marvel might have contributed to the boundaries Elizabeth established with Edward.⁹ At any rate, Turner's prose is smooth and informative, and contains enough details about medieval intrigue to keep the reader reading.

The Wars of the Roses occupies the same literary space as countless other tomes and essays on the subject, but what makes this book stand out is that each painting is uniquely crafted to tell a small part of a much longer, tumultuous, historical narrative. Its greatest strength is the craftsmanship of the illustrations, which communicates that Turner doesn't really need words to tell a detailed story. Unfortunately, there is a lack of index specific to the paintings, which would be useful, especially to a student of art.

The Wars of the Roses gives faces to the vague

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May-June 2025 **MILITARY REVIEW**