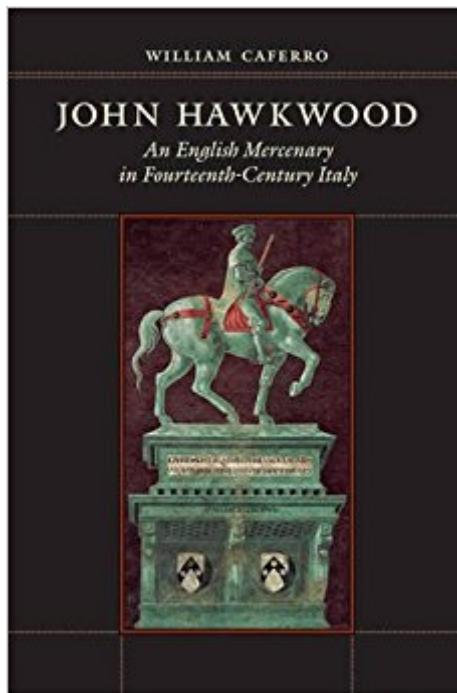




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# John Hawkwood: An English Mercenary In Fourteenth-Century Italy



## Synopsis

Winner, 2008 Otto Gröndler Book Prize, The Medieval Institute  
Notorious for his cleverness and daring, John Hawkwood was the most feared mercenary in early Renaissance Italy. Born in England, Hawkwood began his career in France during the Hundred Years' War and crossed into Italy with the famed White Company in 1361. From that time until his death in 1394, Hawkwood fought throughout the peninsula as a captain of armies in times of war and as a commander of marauding bands during times of peace. He achieved international fame, and city-states constantly tried to outbid each other for his services, for which he received money, land, and, in the case of Florence, citizenship—a most unusual honor for an Englishman. When Hawkwood died, the Florentines buried him with great ceremony in their cathedral, an honor denied their greatest poet, Dante. William Caferro's ambitious account of Hawkwood is both a biography and a study of warfare and statecraft. Caferro has mined more than twenty archives in Britain and Italy, creating an authoritative portrait of Hawkwood as an extraordinary military leader, if not always an admirable human being.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This is much more than a biography in the ordinary sense of the word... An excellent contribution to our understanding of both the mercenary phenomenon and the history of Italy in the late fourteenth century." (Speculum)"Engaging book... Caferro has made sense of the life of a mercenary captain, who during his career influenced diplomacy, altered finances, and changed lives in fourteenth-century Italy." (Duane Osheim Renaissance Quarterly)"A model of clear writing and an

authoritative treatment of the military and political situation in Italy from the 1360s." (John E. Law History)"It is... so well written and provides such a gripping account of John Hawkwood and his milieu that it will surely gain a wide audience among general readers as well." (David S. Bachrach Historian)"The depth of Caferro's archival research has established him as Hawkwood's preeminent biographer." (Dane Swango Comitatus)"Meets a real need... well researched and clearly presented, an important work for everyone interested in fourteenth-century Italy and medieval war." (John Lerner English Historical Review)"Superb biography... Sterling piece of work." (Niccolò Capponi Journal of Military History)"A useful read for anyone interested in Renaissance Italy, the evolution of the practice of war, and even the interrelationship of art and society." (NYMAS Review)"Caferro's archival research in England and throughout northern and central Italy has given us a firm historical picture of a mercenary who during his lifetime was already becoming the stuff of legend. Unlike King Arthur and Robin Hood, Hawkwood was a historical figure about whom there was a great deal that really could be discovered, and Caferro has done the discovering. This is a readable book that is broadly informative about warfare and its techniques immediately after the Hundred Years' War and an outstanding work of scholarship." (William J. Connell, Seton Hall University)

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late fourteenth century." • Speculum William Caferro, the Gertrude Conaway Vanderbilt professor of history at Vanderbilt University, is the author of *Mercenary Companies and the Decline of Siena* and *Contesting the Renaissance* and the coauthor of *The Spinelli of Florence: Fortunes of a Renaissance Merchant Family*.

I won't complain about the 5 star reviews on this page. I am writing my review from the point of view of a casual military history reader who, whilst keen to pick up items of historical relevance and facts about the principal characters, also likes to be entertained along the way. This book is an extremely scholarly production full of names, dates and places, and left me bewildered trying to follow Hawkwoods movements and actions along the way. My Kindle edition also had no readable maps, or illustrations for that matter so I consider finishing the book an achievement for me. Hawkwood spent way more time in politics, mainly scheming and conniving to screw more money out of the Italian City statesmen rather than actual military campaigning. He was a shrewd warrior and successfully attracted a number of useful, known subalterns into his service; men who were certainly not renowned for their loyalty. However, it was very common for a colleague in one campaign to be the foe in the next. Fourteenth Century Italy was a nightmare of treachery, shifting alliances and downright skulduggery. That Hawkwood was one of the success stories here may give a clue as to his devious character. Bottom line for me was that the book revealed almost nothing about Hawkwood himself. Very little information was forthcoming on his relatives and friends, but this is likely due to the scarcity of actual historical sources. I was ultimately left frustrated and confused by the whole reading experience. My speed reading technique did improve however. If you have an exam to take on Italian Fourteenth Century Politics and Conflicts, then this might just be your book. Any casual history reader will likely be disappointed.

Every few years I read a book that is transformative; a book that unlocks or explains history in a way that is both exciting and aesthetic, like reading a great novel. William Cafferro's book on Hawkwood and 14th century Italy is such a book. I have probably read it four times; it is the basis for a series of historical novels I have written. I write novels for a living, and books like this are what help me breath believable life into the past. Thanks, and please write more!

A very detailed account. A good read.

Great read!

As another reviewer had the honesty and the (rare!) humility to acknowledge, because he also authored a biography on John Hawkwood, this book is now the reference on the most famous and most successful of the English condottiere who fought in Italy during the fourteenth century. However, it is also MUCH more than that. It is a reference on the condottiere in Italy during this period which nicely completes the works of Michael Mallett which are mostly centred on the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. It also completes the work of Kenneth Fowler on the Great Companies of the 1360s. These were made up of unemployed English, Gascon, Breton and French soldiers (although they were others as well including Catalans, Flemish and Germans). Many of them followed Du Guesclin and went to fight with him in Spain. Some stayed in France and continued their rampages, but many others and John Hawkwood and a few thousands of English soldiers went to fight in Italy for new paymasters, once the Kingdoms of England and of France were at peace after the treaty of Bretigny (in 1360). I do share another reviewer's little quibbles. Although I do not believe they are sufficiently important for rating this book less than five stars, there are a few things in the book which made me jump. One was the reference to the heir apparent to the throne of England as the "English Dauphin". It should, of course, have been the Prince of Wales, with the term "Dauphin" who was initially the lord of the Dauphiné, being the heir apparent to the throne of France. Also, Henry IV was not the heir apparent of Richard II, since he usurped the throne. Finally, and in addition to a couple of "Americanisms" ("Essex County instead of "the county of Essex" and "Thames River" instead of the "River Thames"), the proper name of "Enguerrand Coucy" was Enguerrand VII de Coucy, last lord of the place bearing the same name, one of the four most powerful barons of France who did in fact marry one of Edward the Third's daughter and died a prisoner of the Ottoman Turks in 1397 after the failed Crusade that ended in disaster at Nicopolis. However, the book more than make up for these few little slips simply because its contents are outstanding in many ways. The author's aim and contention was to show to what extent the condottiere phenomenon in general, and the English ones in particular, influenced and were influenced by Italy politically, militarily and economically. This is essentially what William Caferro manages to demonstrate quite convincingly throughout his book which is much more than just the biography of a successful mercenary and foreign captain. One of the main points is to show that the mercenaries in Italy were initially mostly foreign (initially largely Germans). They were recruited by the various city states, duchies and kingdoms (papacy included) precisely because they were foreign and because the various governments were reluctant to rely on civic militias. The author also shows rather well to what extent the "business prospects" for these "soldiers of fortune" were

excellent in Italy given the numerous powers which were endemically contending, squabbling and fighting between themselves. A related point was the development of the condottas, the detailed contracts that the various city-states signed with the various bands of mercenaries when enlisting them. Another point very well made is that the cost of hiring these bands was often huge and this, together with these bands' exactions, could significantly impoverish many a city, with Sienna (on which the author has written a special monograph) being a prime example. A fascinating theme is the interactions between the various companies of condottiere and their various employers. The former have earned an awful reputation throughout the centuries because of their behaviours, including wholesale and indiscriminate looting, burning, killing and raping of the enemy of the moment but also of the populations and subjects of their employers. As William Caferro shows extremely well through the example of John Hawkwood, this was at times part of their "terror tactics" and "bargaining ploys" to extract better conditions from their employers, especially when their contract was about to expire, or simply to extract "protection money", vast amounts of cash against the rather uncertain promise that they would not pillage the countryside, its towns and its villages. However, these depredations largely (but not always) took place because they were often not paid on time, not entirely paid what they were due by their employers and not adequately provisioned. It was also a way of living (or rather of surviving) when they were out of a job and turned into "free companies" (read robbers, bandits and outlaws). John Hawkwood became a master at this kind of game and skilfully extracted fortunes from many of his employers for both himself and his men. Another point made by the author and one of the basic appeals of becoming a mercenary in Italy (this was also true about fighting in France during the Hundred Years War, although perhaps to a lesser extent) was, to quote, that "service overseas blurred traditional markers and distinctions." Not only could simple soldiers and commoners who may have started off as archers become rich, but they could also in some cases become lords and own land and castles of their own, as Hawkwood and a few of his associates and "colleagues" managed to do. A further point is the close links and lasting associations that were formed in these bands of mercenaries, with the author making the point that Hawkwood attracted to his service men from his home county of Essex. However, other mercenary warlords and their companies (for instance the Gascons, the Bretons, the Germans and the Hungarians) seem to have functioned on what the author calls "the patron-client system" so that this may not have been as remarkable as the author makes it out to be. Another major point that is made is to show that Hawkwood always considered himself an Englishman above all else and that both he and his soldiers insisted that their contracts contain clauses that would allow them to return home when they wished. They were also rather reluctant to

fighting against other companies made up of Englishmen. Here also, and although the author only makes the point explicitly for the Germans, this was an attitude shared by other "nationalities" of mercenaries. For instance, Bertrand Du Guesclin was, perhaps even more so than Hawkwood in Italy, serving the King of France when campaigning in Spain to put on the throne a "pro-French" candidate with the help of the "Great Companies". Even better made is the point that these foreign mercenaries provoked a patriotic sentiment on the side of their Italian employers with the author given several examples of "anti-company" leagues of cities, but also a growing "Italianisation" of the condottiere phenomenon to the extent that most of the captains were Italians by the end of the 14th and during the 15th century where they had been mostly foreign between 1320 and 1370. Other major points developed by the author are the lack of political cohesion in Italy and often within each political entity, which was something that Hawkwood skilfully exploited by relying on exiles and disaffected lords against the communes, the huge income that a successful mercenary warlord like Hawkwood could obtain when he was in a position to name his price, and how many of these mercenary captains sent part of their gains home and used them to buy up land. A further set of points is to show how the tactics developed on the English side during the first phase of the Hundred Years War, and the habit of dismounting to fight battles in particular, were "imported" to Italy and became generalised. I will end this review here, because it is getting overlong. I could go on for quite a bit more simply because I have not mentioned a number of other fascinating points discussed and developed in this valuable book. However, I guess that, by now, I should have made my point in demonstrating that this book is easily worth five stars.

This book will undoubtedly replace Sir John Temple-Leader's 'Sir John Hawkwood (L'Acuto) Story of a Condottiere' (1889) which remained the essential biography for over one hundred years. It is a better book than Frances Stonor Saunders's 'Devil's Broker' (2004) and - sad to say - it is also better than my own biography (2008). William Caferro is a careful student and spent sixteen years in producing this book. It was worth it. Despite his modesty, we learn many things we never knew. The book is first-class as well as being a thoroughly good read. Caferro's conclusions are soundly based in a study of many archives and will seldom be proved wrong. Stephen Cooper

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