In 1086 the Domesday Book, perhaps the most remarkable historical document in existence, was compiled. This tremendous survey of England and its people was made at the behest of the Norman, William the Conqueror. Michael Woods Domesday: A Search for the Roots of England is a study of the ancient manuscript and an attempt to analyse the world that the Domesday Book portrayed. He uses the Domesday record to examine Norman society, and also to penetrate beyond it to the Anglo-Saxon, Roman and Iron Age cultures that preceded it. Michael Wood is also author of In Search of the Dark Ages and In Search of the Trojan War.

I stumbled across this book as I was perusing the European History shelf. As a high school French Teacher, I look for ways to introduce my students to French history. I also try to instill an awareness of the nature of language, and the etymology of English. In this process, I have become aware of the Latin, French, and German and Scandinavian roots of our own language. Until I read this book, I did not understand how the English that we speak evolved from so many seemingly disparate cultures. Michael Wood did a masterful job of clarifying this for me, while drawing me into a fascinating account of English history. Wood opens with the purpose and content of the Domesday document, which in and of itself would be dry and dusty. Because the Norman Conquest was such a pivotal point in the history of England, many British historians have built on the premise that post-Conquest civilization was actually created and defined by the incoming French ruling class. Wood challenges this position, tracing the roots and institutions of English medieval society back to influences which pre-date the Norman Conquest by more than a thousand years. As an anthropologist, Wood uses a number of tools to reconstruct the development of this social fabric. Any one of these tools - tax records, geographical analyses, lists of village names - if considered in isolation, would be as opaque as Domesday itself. But with the insight and skill of a master storyteller, Wood uses clues provided by their data to sketch the evolution of a people, and then to paint an engaging portrait of the common man in 1086. Along the way, he introduces us to the native,
colonizing, mercenary, and migratory populations alike: Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Celts, Romans, Danes, French. We watch as the dynamics of domination, subjugation and assimilation characterize their interactions with one another. And we conclude with him that the Conquest was not the beginning of civilization, as some would have it, but the interruption and re-routing of the history of a very old, already well-defined society. Further, it is a testimony to the strength of that society that it survived and thrived in the wake of the devastation of the Conquest, maintaining the essential fabric of long-held beliefs and institutions. I find that many of my students share my fascination with the historical background behind the etymology of our modern-day languages. While I do not use this book directly in the foreign language classroom (it is an expository text), I have found it very helpful to give me a solid foundation for understanding the curiosities I try to share with my students. I highly recommend it to anyone who is interested in the link between history and the development of language.

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