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William the Conqueror

Modern-day history has its fair share of eccentric billionaires. Whether they have their hearts set on flying into space or diving down to the Titanic, many of these titans of industry have as much time to lay as they have time to earn their fortunes. Roll back the clock a thousand years and history tells us of a different story. At the turn of the first millennium, the richest man in the world had very different priorities than we would recognise today — but that doesn't make him any less mind-bogglingly wealthy.

Hi, and welcome back to Nutty History! We're all about the parts of history you may not know about, and today we're talking about one of the richest people in recorded history King William I, the first Norman king of England. Also known as William the Bastard, and William the Conqueror, he amassed a fortune that, when adjusted for inflation, totalled about \$230 billion. If he were alive today, his fortune would put his comfortably between Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos in terms of total net worth. Today, we're leaning who was William the conqueror, and how did he find his fortune?

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Who Was William the Conqueror

William the Conqueror was born in the duchy of Normandy in about 1027, the illegitimate son of Duke Rober I of Normandy, and the daughter of a tanner named Herleva. For much of his young life, William was known by an inappropriate nickname based on the circumstances of his birth — William the Bastard. The name became a sore spot for William for the rest of his life, felt it was disrespectful towards his loving mother. In about 1050, when William invaded the town of Alençon, the residents of the town allegedly hung animal hides on their walls, mocking William's grandfather's occupation as a tanner. In response to their mockery, William ordered their hands and feet cut off! From then on, those who dared to use his original nickname did so at their own risk — or behind his back.

Since Duke Robert I of Normandy had no legitimate children, he proclaimed William as his heir and when he died in 1035, William inherited the duchy of Normandy from his father — at the tender age of 8. The child was not fit to rule and this period of unstable regency here chaotic for Normandy, as many usurpers attempted to take over from the young duke.

William was protected by a train of guardians, most of whom were killed by his enemies, until he was finally knighted by his uncle, Archbishop Richard III, at the age of 15. From then on

the responsibility to suppress rebellions and defend Normandy from the French fell squarely on the shoulders of the young William

What's in A Name

William quickly built a solid reputation as a military commander as he succeeded in driving back armies from Normandy, eventually successfully uniting the Duchy and putting a healthy amount of fear into the hearts of his enemies. This reputation helped him in negotiating his marriage to Mathilda of Flanders, Daughter of Count Baldwin V of Flanders, providing him with a powerful ally in the neighbouring county of Flanders. Their marriage strengthened William's position in Normandy and increased his influence beyond its border, laying the groundwork for his future ambitions.

He built a solid reputation as a formidable military leader, with an expanded network of alliances, and by his own account, in 1051 Edward the Confessor, King of England, promised William the English throne upon his death. Edward had no legitimate heirs, had a distant family connection to William, and had an affinity towards Normandy — making William the perfect candidate to take over as king upon his death. Some historical accounts add that the king's brother-in-law, Harold Godwinson, swore he would support William as the new King of England.

When Edward the Confessor died suddenly in 1066, England's Witengamot convened and declared Harold Godwinson the new king instead of William. Word quickly spread back to Normandy, and William sent a letter reminding King Harold of his sworn oath of loyalty to William, and Edward the Confessor's promise of a throne. The letter apparently went unanswered, so William did the next obvious thing — he began preparations to invade England. The invasion occurred in September of 1066 at the Battle of Hastings. During the first assaults by Norman forces a false rumour spread that William was killed and in response, he rode through the ranks of his military with his helmet lifted to prove that he was alive and well — and ready to continue the battle. Leading a strong army that included archers and a cavalry against King Harold's weary Anglo-Saxons, William quickly defeated the usurper king. Harold was killed by a Norman archer and William was finally crowned King of England on Christmas Day in 1066. This invasion, later named the Norman Invasions by historians, became the origin for William's nickname of, The Conqueror, but it would not be the only event in his life where William would live up to the moniker.

Conquerer of the Heart

Fun Fact Time! William the Conqueror was, at first, rejected by his wife, Matilda of Flanders. When he first asked for her hand Matilda refused, citing the illegitimate circumstances of his birth. William received word of her response and immediately travelled from Normandy over to Bruges and pulled Matilda off of her horse by her braids before riding off and away from her. Something about the incident made Matilda change her mind because she immediately returned to her father and proclaimed she wouldn't marry anyone but William the Bastard. Could this be the origin of boys pulling a girl's braids when they have a crush? That, we don't know, but we do know that Matilda and William had a happy marriage; and Matilda even took on the responsibility of governing Normandy in her husband's name whenever he was in England. He's unique in the history of English kings as a husband who never strayed from his marriage and had no children apart from the eight he shared with his wife. Her death in

1083 brought about a period of grief for William, who had conquered love as well as land and riches.

On The Defence

The Norman Invasion was just the beginning for William the Conqueror. He spent the next few years in England consolidating his power, replacing noblemen who had been killed in the invasion with Norman allies. In 1068, the first of many rebellions took place leading to a campaign called the Harrying of the North. One last Anglo-Saxons nobleman had encouraged his Danish allies to help with a rebellion against William the Conqueror. When William caught word, he promptly bribed the Danish noblemen to go back home, leaving no one but the remaining few Anglo-Saxons. They stubbornly refused to meet William on the battlefield — probably because they knew he'd win and they'd either be killed or stripped of their land — so rather than invade with the force of his armies, William starved them out. He lay siege to the northern territories that are now Yorkshire, Durham and Northumberland during the harsh winter of 1069. William also ordered all of their crops to be burned using scorched earth tactics, devastating his enemies' ability to feed their armies and peasants. Historians estimate that about 100,000 people died in the Harrying of the North which, while devastating and ruthless, secured the North of England for William, who installed his Norman allies as governors of the land once it finally came under his control.

No One Can Be In Two Places at Once

Somehow, the Harrying of the North was not enough to show William's enemies that anyone who dared rebel against The Conqueror would be brutally vanquished. In 1070, Sweyn of Denmark raided the eastern territories of England, around Humber and East Anglia. Once William swiftly put down this attempt at an invasion, he had to quickly swing down south to Normandy to suppress a revolt in the town of Le Mans. The next year William was back in the north of England as King Malcolm of Scotland invaded the border, attempting to claim Northumberland for himself. William's response was to invade him right back, moving himself into Scottish territory until King Malcolm agreed to retreat from Northumberland and have peace with the English king. Just when William thought he could finally put his feet up, he was called back to the town of Le Mans to defend Normandy against invasions from the neighbouring County of Anjou. Once again, William's powerful army pushed them back, as their leader was looking over his shoulder as his wife's uncle started to accumulate power in the French court. In an attempt to give his allies some leverage over William, the French king gave Edgar the Aethling — one of Williams' sworn enemies — an island in the English Channel. It wasn't an invasion, but it was a threat; a reminder that France had its eyes on Normandy, and wouldn't hesitate to invade should they be given the opportunity.

William was able to relax for a whole year in 1074, spending quality time in Normandy with his beloved wife, but in 1075 he was back in England to suppress yet another rebellion! Ralph de Gael, the Earl of Norfolk; and Roger de Breteuil, the Earl of Hereford, had been installed in their positions by William in his effort to populate the nobility of England with his Norman allies. As it turned out, those two could not be trusted as they conspired to overthrow William in the Revolt of the Earls. This time William left the revolt to his army, who swooped in when one of the Earls left his castle for Brittany and promptly took over. William

didn't have to officially make the trip until 1075 when all that was left was to shoo away some of the Earls's Danish supporters, who arrived too late to the fight and decided they would raid the English coast as a consolation prize.

So, why was William nicknamed William the Conquerer? His neighbours in Normandy and the noblemen in England might have an answer for you. In a few short years William became renown for his skilful and disciplined army who put down each and every rebellion, revolt, and invasion throughout William's English reign.

A Different Domesday

Wherever William went he made sure to secure his claim by replacing the deposed noblemen with his allies and encouraging the local population to swear fealty to their new lords. England would look very different today if it hadn't been for William building Norman-style castle all over England, and with his new castles and oaths of loyalty William built the groundwork for the system of serfdom that would be used throughout the middle ages. William made sure to install his Norman allies in these castles as they took over lands previously held by William's English and Danish enemies.

After a few decades of William's rule, he realised that the many invasions and rebellions from the previous years caused immense confusion when it came to land ownership and taxation. Medieval record-keeping was hard already, even harder when noblemen kept dying and their lands were re-parcelled and divvied out amongst William's allies. Beginning in 1085 and finishing in 1086 William ordered and oversaw an extensive survey of England to catalog the country's various holding at their value. The survey was named the Domesday Book, but it didn't have the same aura of doom and gloom that we might have thought. In Medieval Latin the word "Dom" was associated in law and order, which is just what William set out to do with his extensive survey — he wanted to make sure the new Norman nobles were accurately paying taxes on English land.

The survey was careful to note that all of these lands were under the ultimate ownership of the English king, making all of their riches his as well. The survey encompasses everything, from the fees paid on the land, tenants in chief, all the way down to the numbers of livestock on the land. In total 268,984 people were tallied in the Domesday Book, as well as 13, 418 "places", or parcels of land, making the Domesday Book the first complete census of medieval England. When the survey was completed, the king had a more accurate and up to date record of all his assets including land wealth, taxes to be paid, resources that could be sold, and debts to the crown. It is based on the information in the Domesday Book that historians are able to determine just how immensely wealthy William the Conquerer was. Through his conquests and the battles won to secure his land, William the Conquerer earned both a historical nickname and a fortune that has landed him high on the list of the richest people in history. He fought off invasions after invasion from enemies without and within, slowly growing his wealth, ruling over a comfortable fortune that would be worth over \$230 billion today. He died in 1087 at the age of 59, five years after his wife, and left the territories of Normandy and England to his sons, Robert II of Normandy and William II of England. William the Conquerer's remarkable journey, from his illegitimate birth to becoming one of the most influential figures in English history transformed the country's language, culture, and governance leaving a lasting mark on English society.

Do you think William earned his nickname of “The Conquerer”? Or would you have chosen a different nickname for the king? Perhaps William the Billionaire would have been appropriate, or William the Battler? Let us know in the comments, and we’ll see you next time for another, Nutty video!