



# STRONGBOW

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## Teaching Guide

By Irene Barber

### RATIONALE AND THEMES

Reading *Strongbow* with your class should be a worthwhile team-building experience, which will sustain established readers and encourage less enthusiastic and less able readers. The guided activities meet curricular needs in a fresh, interesting and varied manner. They are designed to stimulate reading, comprehension, analysis, evaluation, summarisation, imagination and empathy, and to hone oral and written expression. These activities will also develop research skills and encourage artistic expression. This thought-provoking novel has been selected for use in the senior classes of primary school and in the junior cycle of secondary school. The book deals sensitively with important and universal themes, such as:

- Family life/questioning of parental role model
- Conflict with authority
- Fulfilling personal potential/ambition
- Colonising and the overthrow of indigenous political systems by the invader
- Clash of social systems and cultures
- Young love: compromises and challenges

### SUMMARY

This is the story of the life and times of Strongbow, a Norman knight, and of Aoife, daughter of Dermot MacMurrough, King of Leinster. Alternate chapters tell the story from each character's perspective.

*Strongbow*'s difficult early years in Wales, both personally and politically, are detailed alongside the increasingly turbulent life of Aoife, daughter of Dermot MacMurrough, in Ireland. Unexpectedly, their lives and cultures come together when Dermot MacMurrough promises Aoife to Strongbow in order to lure him to Ireland to help defend and expand his Kingdom. This exciting story of conflict, revenge and love should appeal to girls and boys alike. The novel has won the two most prestigious children's book awards in Ireland: the Bisto Book of the Year (Historical Fiction) and the Reading Association of Ireland Award. *Strongbow* can be integrated into the history curriculum under the topics:

- Medieval Ireland
- Normans
- Bayeux Tapestry
- Norman Castles
- Norman Towns
- Feudal System

However, full of adventure and with a strong love interest, the book stands on its own as a good read.

**APPROACH** For the purpose of this class exploration the book is divided into five units. The pace at which the novel is read is entirely up to the teacher. It may be appropriate to read one chapter per day, or it may suit to

read longer sections. Discussion points and activities, mostly based on language, are listed at the end of each unit.

### PRELIMINARY WORK

- Read the book yourself in advance.
- With the pupils, if practical, study the appropriate chapters in their history text book.
- Identify the nearest Norman castle.
- If possible, arrange a visit.
- Photograph it.
- Sketch it.
- Identify each section: battlements, barbican, drawbridge, motte, keep, bailey, moat, portcullis.
- Find out who lived there.
- How did they defend their castle?
- From whom did they have to defend themselves?
- What did the knights wear when going into battle?
- What was the Bayeux Tapestry?
- What story does it tell?
- Who made it?
- Where is it now?
- Copy sections of the Bayeux Tapestry.
- What was the Feudal System? How did it work?
- What do the following terms mean? Fief, vassal, fealty, knight, squire, page, dubbing, chivalry.

## UNIT 1 STRONGBOW

### SUMMARY

Aoife idolises her father, Dermot MacMurrough. But Dermot may not be the kind, honourable man she supposes. Aoife's step-sister marries Donal O'Brien, son of the King of Thomond, thus creating an alliance with Munster. Richard de Clare lives with the scorn and contempt of his harsh father, the Earl of Pembroke, whose ancestors came to England with William the Conqueror. Richard reluctantly trains to be a warrior. His mother, his only kind sympathetic influence, dies at the birth of his sister Basilia, with whom Richard forms a strong bond. His father dies, leaving debts. Richard gains a reputation as a professional warrior, assumes the name his father gave him, 'Strongbow', and pledges alliance to King Stephen of England. When Henry II becomes King of England, Strongbow is out of favour. He then marries Isabella, whose family could give her a good dowry.

Read pp.7–38.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Contrast Aoife's relationship with her father to Richard's with his father. Was her assessment of her relationship with her father an accurate one?
- 'In years to come his name would be used to frighten naughty children' (p.7) Discuss the use of names to inspire fear/respect in children.
- Was Richard right to marry Isabella?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. CHARACTER SKETCH

Draw a detailed word-picture of Richard and write a list of adjectives that describe him (so far).

#### 2. DRAW MAP

Trace a map of Ireland and indicate the strongholds of:  
O'Connor (Connaught)

O'Brien (Munster)  
MacLoughlin (Ulster)  
MacMurrough (Leinster)

#### 3. RESEARCH

Find the names of six of Dermot's children: three girls' names and three boys' names.

U _____	D _____	A _____
C _____	D _____	E _____

#### 4. EVALUATION

'Today you're a man' (p.20).

Who said this?

To whom?

Why?

What do you think of the statement?

## UNIT 2 STRONGBOW

### SUMMARY

Isabella bears two children and dies shortly afterwards. Strongbow writes in vain to Henry II seeking restoration of his earldom. Dermot's ally, MacLoughlin, High King of Ireland, is murdered and replaced by Rory O'Connor supported by Tiarnan O'Rourke. Dermot loses his kingship. Through the intervention of Robert FitzHarding, friend of Henry, Strongbow is invited by Dermot to help restore him to power. Strongbow is offered lands, Dermot's title when he dies, marriage to Aoife and assurances of Henry's favour. It is an offer he cannot refuse.

Read pp.39–64.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- What was the cause of Isabella's unhappiness?
- What caused Dermot's downfall?
- Why did Strongbow agree to support Dermot?

### ACTIVITIES

#### 1. WORD PORTRAIT

Read top half of p.45. Draw a detailed word-picture of Aoife.

List all adjectives used to describe her.

#### 2. EVALUATION

Write 'Dermot MacMurrough' on top of a new page. Draw a line down the middle.

Write a list of the good things he did (so far) on one side and the bad things on the other side.

Do you like or dislike Dermot? Why?

#### 3. SCRIPT WRITING

Write the conversation you imagine took place between Dermot and Aoife when he tells her she is to marry Strongbow. Begin like this:

Dermot: Would you be willing to do anything I asked of you, Aoife?

#### 4. RESEARCH

Strongbow was famous for his skill with a bow and arrow.

Find out all you can about archery, write a brief account or present an oral report on your findings. Draw pictures of different kinds of bows and arrows.

## UNIT 3 STRONGBOW

### SUMMARY

Enna, Dermot's son, is blinded by O'Ruairc and O'Connor, to the outrage and devastation of his family. Advance parties of Normans arrive taking Wexford and Ferns and extracting revenge for Enna's blinding. Aoife reacts favourably to Dermot's deal with Strongbow as she sees in it a way to beat her enemies. Tension mounts as Strongbow gathers an army. Eventually he arrives with a great show of strength and takes Waterford in a bloody battle.

Read pp.65–96.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why did O'Ruairc inflict such a terrible punishment on Enna?
- Why was it so important to Strongbow to get Henry's approval to go to Ireland?
- Why was Strongbow's arrival in Ireland delayed?

#### ACTIVITIES

##### 1. IDENTIFY THE SPEAKER

Who said:

'Would you be willing to do anything I asked of you, Aoife?'

(D)

'Has he any wives across the sea?'

(A)

'What are the Irish like?'

(B)

'My lovely little sister! Could I ever give her the kind of life I wanted her to have?'

(S)

'I want your firm promise to give her to me as my wife before we leave for Ireland.'

(R)

Pupils may like to select their own quotes. (The quotes should contain a clue as to the identity of the speaker.)

##### 2. DEBATE TOPIC

Arrange a class debate on the motion:

'Arranged marriages have as good a chance of success as love marriages.'

##### 3. LETTER WRITING

Imagine that Basilia gave Strongbow a letter to deliver to her husband, Raymond le Gros. What do you think she would have said? Write the letter.

##### 4. ILLUSTRATION

Read the account of Raymond le Gros's landing and battle at Baginbun, Co. Wexford (pp.88–89).

Using the medium of your choice, illustrate the event under the title 'Normans at Baginbun'.

## UNIT 4 STRONGBOW

#### SUMMARY

Strongbow arrives, 'strutting like a peacock'. Aoife accepts him in marriage and a mutual respect develops. Strongbow finds out that Dermot's promise of the title King of Leinster is worthless because, under Irish law, a man cannot inherit property through his wife – or indeed, any woman. Strongbow plans the capture of Dublin but instead a truce is arranged by the Archbishop of Dublin Laurence O'Toole (Aoife's uncle) against Strongbow's advice. Dermot marches on O'Ruairc who retaliates by murdering three hostages, who are relations of Dermot's. Dermot dies and his nephew is elected King of Leinster. Henry orders Strongbow's return to England and the High King marches on Dublin.

Read pp.97–127.

#### DISCUSSION POINTS

- Why did Aoife and Strongbow get on so well?
- How did Aoife always get her own way?
- Strongbow said 'Dermot was a man to envy, having children who loved him so.' What do you think?
- Before her wedding, Aoife had admitted that she didn't want her life to change (p.99). In what ways, if any, did Aoife change her outlook and way of life following her marriage?

#### ACTIVITIES

##### 1. SCRIPT WRITING

Pretend you are a radio reporter. Write a conversation you had with an outraged Dubliner after the 'unofficial' looting by Raymond le Gros and others (pp.114–115).

Act it out with a partner.

##### 2. LIMERICK

Complete the limerick: There once was a Norman named Strongbow...

(Beforehand write down all the words you can think of that rhyme with 'Strongbow'. You'll need them for lines 2 and 5.)

##### 3. DEATH NOTICE

Write a modern death notice for Dermot, copying the format from a modern newspaper.

What is an obituary? Write an obituary for Dermot (pp.124–125).

##### 4. ILLUSTRATION

Read pp.106–107 and draw/paint a picture of the wedding of Aoife and Strongbow. Read pp.106–107 in which the wedding is described. Visit the National Galley of Ireland, in Dublin's Merrion Square, or search the internet for details of the painting The Marriage of Princess Aoife to the Norman Richard de Clare (Strongbow). Working in groups, do a fabric collage or large wall-painting on the subject.

## UNIT 5 STRONGBOW

#### SUMMARY

Strongbow attacks and defeats Rory O'Connor, High King of Ireland, and his allies, but his success arouses Henry's suspicions that Strongbow is seizing Ireland for himself. Strongbow agrees to hold Kilkenny but little else in return for submission to the king. In time he is given the title 'Guardian of Ireland'. He goes to France to fight for Henry while Aoife holds his territory at Kilkenny. Weakened by constant fighting, Strongbow's health declines and he dies in 1176. He is buried in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin.

Read pp.128–155.

DISCUSSION POINTS

- On his deathbed Strongbow said 'I hoped Ireland would be different'. What do you think he meant?
- Do you like Aoife? Why?
- What evidence is there to show that Normans lived in Ireland long ago?

**ACTIVITIES**

1. WRITE A REVIEW 

Write a short review of Strongbow. Include the following:

- (a) Title and author
- (b) Publishing details
- (c) Short summary
- (d) Your opinion of the book

2. CREATIVE WRITING 

Aoife said that 'Henry strode the earth as if he was better than any of us' (p.142). Write the account of his visit to Ireland from his point of view or from the viewpoint of one of his 'great train of followers'.

3. LETTER WRITING 

Aware that news of his death would 'encourage new risings among the Irish'

Aoife was forced to keep Strongbow's death a secret for as long as possible. Writing to Raymond le Gros, she described his death in coded language (p.153).

Write the letter or telegram you might send in a similar situation, making sure that the your enemies will not easily decipher your news.

4. COMPARISON OF IRISH/ NORMAN WAY OF LIFE

As a class activity, explore the novel to find out all you can about the differences between the Irish and Norman way of life. The following references will help. Record your findings and illustrate with cartoon-type pictures.

	Irish	Norman
Marriage	pp.8,25	pp.32,33,70
Fosterage	p.35	
Education	pp.10,61	p.16
Choosing of leaders	p.109	p.109
Warfare		pp.27,28,84
Language	pp.72,73	pp.72,73
Position of women	pp.66,77,103	pp.32,33,77
Hunting	p.128	p.128

USEFUL WEBSITES:


[www.irelandnow.com/castles.html](http://www.irelandnow.com/castles.html)

Or key in 'Irish castles' and browse!

For information on Norman castles, consult the non-fiction section of your school/local library under History (940 Dewey classification) and/or Architecture (720 Dewey classification).

4. FIELD WORK

Visit Strongbow's tomb and the casket containing Laurence O'Toole's heart in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin or visit [www.heritageireland.ie](http://www.heritageireland.ie) for information on Norman castles.

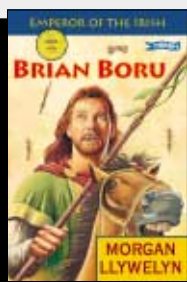
 Denotes activities that are suitable for both senior cycle primary school use and junior cycle secondary school use.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**



MORGAN LLYWELYN was born in New York City and grew up in Texas, where she began to ride horses at a young age and was shortlisted for the American Olympic team trials. She has written several international bestsellers for adults and in 1990 she turned to writing for the younger reader.

Additional historically-based fiction for children and young adults by Morgan include Brian Boru, The Young Rebels and Pirate Queen.



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