

Book review

BIOGRAPHICAL DICTIONARY OF CIVIL ENGINEERS, VOLUME 2, 1830–1890

M. M. Chrimes, R. C. Cox, P. S. M. Cross Rudkin, B. L. Hurst, R. C. McWilliam, R. W. Rennison, E. C. Ruddock, R. J. M. Sutherland and T. Swailes. Thomas Telford, 2008, ISBN 978 0 72773 554 6, £185, 1752 pp.

We are living in a golden age for biographical dictionaries of the British construction professions. A fourth edition of the late Sir Howard Colvin's dictionary of architects before 1840 is imminent; on land surveyors up to 1850 there is Sarah Bendall's dictionary (1997); Scotland can boast David Walker's on-line, free and regularly updated *Dictionary of Scottish Architects 1840–1980*; and the many relevant articles in the revised *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004) should not be forgotten.

To an esteemed place in that company the warmest of welcomes must be given to the second volume of the *Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers*. Such projects must be driven hard if they are not to bog down. Like the Victorian engineers they memorialise, the compilers of the *Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers* have been men in a hurry. Not until 1996 did the Archives Panel of the Institution of Civil Engineers (ICE) set up an editorial board under Sir Alec Skempton, yet the nearly 900 pages of Volume 1 came out just six years later as a memorial to 'Skem'. Six years exactly since then, and we have a second volume of similar length, published once again under ICE patronage. The band of editors has been slightly augmented, with Peter Cross-Rudkin and Mike Chrimes highlighted on the cover as having shouldered the brunt of the load.

Volume 1 ran from Henry VII to the end of the reign of George IV. Volume 2 covers only William IV and most of the reign of Queen Victoria. This is easily justified. Without disparagement to the pioneering Georgian giants, the Smeatons, Watts, Rennies and Telfords, the Victorian years self-evidently represent the climax of Britain's engineering achievement. During the railway age British engineers bestrode the world. Not the least valuable aspect of the book is to trace the careers of those who built abroad, both where the map was coloured pink and where it was not. The letter 'U' in the index leads the reader to projects in the Ukraine and Uruguay as well as the USA.

It follows that an almost imperialistic note is struck in many entries. In contrast to much modern historiography, the pervading tone of the dictionary is positivistic and optimistic, revelling still in the forward march of technology. Skempton, we

were told at the start of volume 1, thought that 'history is about people', so this is old-style history about men of achievement by men (and a very few women). Not that the entries lack high scholarship or sophistication. As most of the authors are or have been engineers, they know what they are talking about. If technicalities have been reduced to a minimum for brevity, a background in technique lends authority. When you read what James Sutherland has to say about the respective contributions of William Fairbairn and Eaton Hodgkinson to the Britannia Bridge, you can be sure it is right.

The big guns of the railway age are all present of course, and painstakingly covered. Yet it is not for the entries on Brunel, Locke, the Stephensons and so on that the *Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers*, volume 2 will most likely be valued, but for the hundreds of lesser engineers, not always lesser personalities, who throng the world of Victorian construction. George Parker Bidder ('the calculating boy') has a gracefully written entry (by E. F. Clark); the bigamous engineering journalist Zerah Colburn has an enthralling one (by Mike Chrimes, by far the most prolific contributor). Here too is that 'very jolly old fellow' Sir George Grove (by Robert Thorne), a railway engineer before he turned musical impresario and editor of another great compilation, *Grove's Dictionary of Music*. The disproportionate contribution of forgotten Scots to our infrastructure is also chronicled in a raft of articles by Ted Ruddock and Peter Cross-Rudkin.

Those are simply examples plucked at random. Who is in, then, and who is out? This is a difficulty. The editors cunningly have not seen fit to divulge the criteria for their very empirical choices. All that can be said is that most of those included had some affiliation with ICE. The institution, as the introduction reminds us, remained a broad church throughout the nineteenth century, endeavouring to embrace 'every branch of engineering except the military art' while witnessing professional fragmentation before their very eyes. Mechanical, mining, gas and sanitary engineers get in, but I could find no early electrical specialists. Some eminent locomotive designers (Robert Fairlie, Daniel Gooch and William Stroudley) are excluded, which will disappoint the railway buffs. Alongside many big builders, often ICE members, comes a rather quixotic selection of architects; some (David Mocatta, George Wilkinson) are included apparently just because they designed a few railway stations. Military engineers sneak in if they worked on civil projects, the naval dockyards or colonial development. It is all somewhat uneven.

One final criticism of a magnificent achievement can be made. Although it is reasonable that some engineers have lists of works after their entries and others do not, it is more serious that the index does not pick up everything in the text. This aspect seems to have been skimmed in the race to the finish. Might the

editors allow themselves another six months to get that right in volume 3?

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