

A Hamilton Thompson

Alexander Hamilton Thompson (1873-1952)

John R. Kenyon

As many castellologists will be aware, 2012 marked the centenary of the publication of Ella Armitage's seminal book on early Norman castles.¹ Much has been written on Armitage's role in castle studies, notably by Joan Counihan and Ann Hamlin,² and the book was the culmination of her work, and those of other such as J. H. Round, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

However, 2012 was also the centenary of the publication of Alexander Hamilton Thompson's *Military Architecture*,³ often regarded as the first standard book on the subject in the modern era.⁴ Thompson was born in Gloucestershire,⁵ and at Cambridge he read classics and graduated in 1895 (MA in 1903). He became an extramural lecturer at Cambridge University in 1897 and remained in post until 1919, during which time he was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries (1910). After a short period in Newcastle upon Tyne as a lecturer in English (1919-22) he then moved to Leeds, becoming reader in medieval history in 1922, and eventually professor (1924) and head of department (1927), remaining in post until he retired in 1939. As one obituary stressed,⁶ he had a particular affinity with the history of Leicestershire, although not a native of the county, nor ever resided there, but he published more with that county's archaeological/historical society transactions than in any other journal.

His reputation rests to a large extent on his work on medieval records relating to church history, but his knowledge of medieval architecture led to his membership of the Ancient Monuments Board (1935-52) and the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (1933-52), and he was the author of a number of 'Ministry' guidebooks, such as those on the abbeys of Buildwas and Roche.

Thompson's book was but one in a remarkable series, mainly on church architecture, fixtures and fittings, edited by Francis Bond, who was also the author of most of the other titles in the series published by Henry Frowde of Oxford University Press, London, such as *Fonts & font covers* (1908).



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In the preface Thompson makes due reference to Ella Armitage's work, and also to Alfred Harvey's book that had appeared the year before.⁷ However, the preface opens with reference to G. T. Clark's *Mediaeval military architecture* (1884), stressing rightly that Clark's two volumes consist of a series of 'monographs' on individual castles. Thompson was writing something different, a systematic examination of the development of medieval castle architecture. Also, Thompson has a three-part bibliography at the beginning, with a list of original sources followed by general references, and then 'Special monographs' consisting of books, pamphlets and articles arranged topographically, from 'Acton Burnell' to 'Yorkshire castles'.⁸

The first two chapters in *MA* cover fortification before the Normans; thereafter we enter the realm of the castle, and the emphasis is on the military aspect, a theme that some would argue has bedevilled castle studies until more recently. Chapters cover the progress of attack and defence, square/rectangular and round keeps, the defence of the curtain wall in the thirteenth century, Edwardian castles and concentric castles, and military architecture in the later Middle Ages.

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However, the domestic aspect of castles is not forgotten totally, and the eighth chapter is 'The dwelling-house in the castle'.

I think that what stands out in Thompson's book is the depth of knowledge the author clearly had on castles in England and Wales, and to some extent the Continent. The book is also well indexed, with one on persons and places, indicating what is text and what is illustration, and a second covering subjects, even down to an entry for 'Centering of vault at Lancaster castle'. I suppose in terms of the treatment of castles it is the equivalent of R. Allen Brown's *English Castles*, or perhaps one should say Brown is a later equivalent to Thompson. In between, of course, in the 1930s and 1940s, we had Hugh Braun's work on English castles that ran to three editions.⁹

Thus, the book is as much a landmark publication in the field of castle studies as that by Ella Armitage.

Notes

1 E. S. Armitage, *The early Norman castles of the British Isles* (London, 1912).

2 See my *Bibliography 1945-2006*, author index, for details.

3 A. H. Thompson, *Military architecture in England during the middle ages* (London, 1912).

4 Of course, Alfred Harvey's *Castles and walled towns of England* appeared the year before in the Antiquary series, with a second edition in 1925, but this work is not in the same league as Thompson's.

5 Much of the following biographical information is taken from the entry on Thompson in the *Oxford dictionary of national biography*, written by J. C. Dickinson, and revised by Michael Thompson, author of *Decline of the castle* and other books. J. C. Dickinson, 'Thompson, Alexander Hamilton (1873-1952)', rev. Michael Welman Thompson, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/36484>, accessed 18 June 2012]. In 1948, on his 75th birthday, Thompson was presented with a bound address in his honour, which included a bibliography of his publications, over 400 items being listed, including reviews: *An address to Alexander Hamilton Thompson with a bibliography of his writings* (Oxford, 1948). His friends and fellow scholars involved in the presentation listed in

the book include the great historians and archaeologists of the day, such as Frank Stenton, an archbishop, the Dean and Chapter of Lincoln Cathedral, and even the present writer's great-great-uncle, Frederic Kenyon. A photograph of Thompson is included as the frontispiece of this book and there is also an image in the collections of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

6 'Professor A. Hamilton Thompson', *Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society* 29 (1953), 13-14.

7 A. Harvey, *The castles and walled towns of England* (London, 1911; 2nd edition, 1925).

8 The bibliography also listed general English castle studies by two other authors, namely J. D. Mackenzie's hefty two-volume *The castles of England: their story and structure* (London, 1897) and E. B. D'Auvergne's *The English castles* (London, 1908; there was a 2nd edition: London, 1926). Mackenzie's book, with some input from G. T. Clark (d. 1898), is a gazetteer with description of the main castles, county by county, including Monmouthshire, rather than an analysis of castle architecture. As D'Auvergne states in his preface to the first edition, Mackenzie's book includes 'the discarded and exploded views of Clark have been reproduced and adopted', and he hopes that the general summary of the castles he covers in his book would find greater general readership, Clark's 'mass of details' possibly having proved 'wearisome' to the general reader. D'Auvergne makes no mention of Thompson's book in his preface, however.

9 H. Braun, *The English castle* (London, 1936; 2nd edition, London, 1942-3; 3rd edition, London, 1947-8). There was of course the work of Sidney Toy, featured by Neil Guy in the last volume of this journal.