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Book Review

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Book review

An Encyclopaedia of British Bridges, 2nd edn

David McFetrich. Pen and Sword Books Ltd, Barnsley, UK, 2019, ISBN 978-1-5267-5295-6, £60-00, 444 pp.

David McFetrich is a civil engineer. Educated at Durham, he worked for Halcrow and then for contractors but moved into management consulting in 1970. He continued collecting books and studying bridges.

The passion for bridges takes many forms. For most people, bridges come by serendipity. People bump into them through work or travels, are introduced to them by friends and come across them in travel guides. A glossy book entitled *An Encyclopaedia of British Bridges* could be many things, and it is, indeed, several. This is the second edition, although I haven't seen the first.

The core is a catalogue of about 1500 bridges on 300 pages, many with photographs. I say 'about' because the bridges are beyond counting to a reviewer and various numbers are cited in the text. It is possible that the 1350 mentioned in one place is from the first edition and a further 250 making that up to 1600, but some entries include more than one bridge at a location.

The assembly of such a catalogue is surely a life's work. Has David McFetrich visited all the ones listed? It is certainly possible.

The catalogue is in alphabetical order of place names. There are further lists in different forms to help a reader find what they might want.

The introductory pages provide a basic guide to the engineering behind bridges and set out how the contents were chosen from the estimated million bridges across Britain. One note that struck me in particular is that the bridges are dimensioned in the units in which they were built. As society moves into a world where all teaching is done in SI units, the round figures and sensible dimensions of old are often hidden in false precision of inappropriate units. Working, as I do, with masonry bridges, it becomes

clear that usually the span and rise, and often other dimensions such as radii, were in round numbers of feet.

One can see many potential uses for such a book. In the course of one evening, I found a viaduct on the Lynton to Barnstaple railway. I was in the area this Christmas and didn't find it myself. The catalogue includes many such examples, and I will need to refer to it before making trips in the future.

I also had a chase through looking for railway viaducts, as I have a particular need just now for bridges to monitor and analyse. Several unfamiliar ones turned up that might well be useful, although obviously even a simple list of such structures would be beyond the reach of any book.

I had a look for bridges that were particularly important to me and have found no gaps yet.

There are some indications of a rather nationalistic view, such as the description of pointed arches first appearing in Durham. There are much older pointed bridges in the near east, and they may well predate the use of the form to enable rectangular vaults. However, after all, it is an encyclopaedia of British bridges and is surely a popular rather than academic, book.

To this bridge engineer, the book has already turned up many delights and it promises many more as I find the various ways into the list. To own it would be a delight to anyone with an interest in bridges.

Four hundred forty-four pages of A4 format and uncountable number of photographs. A weighty, valuable and enjoyable tome.

Bill Harvey