Book review

Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers in Great Britain and Ireland, 3 volumes

Volume 1: 1500–1830. Skempton AW, Chrimes MM, Cox RC *et al.*, Thomas Telford, London, UK, Volume 1, 2002, ISBN 978-0-7277-2939-2, £153.39 hardback, 897 pp.

Volume 2: 1830–1890. Bailey MR, Chrimes MM, Cox RC *et al.*, Thomas Telford, London, UK, Volume 2, 2008, ISBN 978-0-7277-3504-1, £164.00 clothbound, 907 pp.

Volume 3: 1890–1920. Chrimes MM, Cox RC, Cross-Rudkin PSM *et al.*, Thomas Telford, London, UK, Volume 3, 2014, ISBN 978-0-7277-5834-7, £206.00 clothbound, 743 pp.

This mammoth three-volume reference work was nearly 20 years in the making, and the quality, comprehensiveness and importance of its content reflect this effort and the expertise and enthusiasm of the many authors who contributed some 2700 entries.

Little needs to be said about the main content of the volumes – they are what you would wish for – save for the observation that anyone who consults the work will be amazed at the huge number of engineers that they were unaware of. Each entry contains both personal and professional biographical details, key sources of the biographical material, their main publications and their important engineering works. Small portraits of the engineers are included when available. The length of entries varies, of course – Robert Stephenson gets nearly seven pages while Alfred Brittain (1840–1913) gets a mere 16 lines. Perhaps one of the key benefits of the biography format is, of course, to quickly sort out which member of a family of engineers did what – the Stephensons, Cubitts and Mylnes, to name but three, and also to resolve non-familial disambiguation.

It is worth noting here what the reader gets in addition to the biographical entries, and there is a great deal.

Volume 1 opens with an excellent, succinct 18-page essay entitled 'The practice of civil engineering 1500–1830'. This was written by Professor Sir Alec Skempton – Skem to those who knew him – who was the driving force behind the whole initiative and who sadly passed away in the year before the first volume was published. I know of no better introduction to the subject and it is a great tribute to Skem and his lifetime of passion and effort concerning civil engineering history that inspired so many of us. This is

followed by six pages containing facsimiles of the signatures of 46 eminent civil engineers and contractors from this period – of little use, maybe, but incredibly interesting and even moving to be presented with a tiny, intimate link to these great men and, by the way, 'men' it generally is. Only one woman is mentioned – Alice Tredwell – who took over managing the construction of the Bhore Ghat line on the Great Indian Peninsula Railway after her husband Solomon, one of a large family of railway contractors, died of cholera just 15 days after arriving in India in around 1860.

We then get under way with Charles Abercrombie (1750–1817), 'an eminent Scottish road surveyor and engineer'. Following the last entry (Thomas Young, no less) there is an eight-page appendix on 'Wages, costs, salaries and inflation', then a six-page 'Chronological table' of key engineering works during the period covered by the volume, and finally a 60-page index of place names mentioned in the biographies. A paper discussing the compilation of volume 1 on the biography was published in 2000 (Cross-Rudkin, 2000)

Volume 2 begins with an eight-page general essay entitled 'The practice of civil engineering 1830–1890' and includes at the end a 14-page index of people and a 25-page index of places mentioned in the biographies. Volume 3 opens with a 14-page introduction and ends with a 17-page index of people and a 39-page index of places.

Readers can see lengthier reviews of the first two volumes by Mike M. Chrimes, former librarian at the Institution of Civil Engineers, and core member of the editorial panel for the Biography (Chrimes, 2004a, 2004b).

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REFERENCES

- Chrimes MM (2004a) British civil engineering biography, part 1: 1500 to 1790. *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers – Civil Engineering* **157**(2): 91–96, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1680/cien.2004.157.2.91>.
- Chrimes MM (2004b) British civil engineering biography, part 2: 1790 to 1830. *Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers – Civil Engineering* **157**(3): 140–144, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1680/cien.2004.157.3.140>.
- Cross-Rudkin P (2000) Professional lives: compiling the Biographical Dictionary of Civil Engineers. *Construction History* **16**: 77–86.