Book review

Some Writers on Concrete: the Literature of Reinforced Concrete, 1897–1935

Edwin A.R. Trout. Whittles Publishing, Caithness, UK, 2012, ISBN: 978-184995-050-3, £60, 320 pp.

This is a book for those with an interest in the recorded attainments of over 170 individuals covering the period 1902–1935 within the civil engineering sector. It is like a who's who of high achievers and contains some surprises. The period in question is split into four parts covering 1902–1911, 1912–1918, 1919–1928 and 1929–1935 and ranges from novelty and adoption through understanding, exploitation and finally consolidation and codification.

The gallery of individuals is mainly from the UK and the USA, and is quite humbling. In some cases, from modest beginnings, many of those mentioned achieved great outcomes owing to their capability, tenacity and enthusiasm. They form the hard core on which many current practices are still based. The gravitas of some entries is palpable and the photographic impressions quite telling.

The book has an extended 22-page introduction; this covers visual and textural aspects mentioned later.

The first section contains 73 personalised entries, from a few lines to several pages each, dealing with novelty and adoption. Some individuals stand out like giants, for instance, Charles Fleming Marsh, William Newton Dunn, Walter Noble Twelvetrees and Sir Henry Tanner, for whom reinforced concrete was the centre of their lives. Such dedication and productivity are daunting.

The second section covers understanding and acceptance, with names such as Oscar Faber and Ernest Ransome rising from the pages, alongside materials, design, testing and techniques, which all play their part.

The third section deals with exploitation and expansion, covering concrete housing, flood protection, atomic explosions, sea-going ships and concrete production, to mention a few.

Finally, the fourth section covers consolidation and codification. If you think this was the end of innovation and imagination, you are wrong. At this stage, the then Building Research Station and the Road Research Laboratory came into their own, with notables such as Sir William Henry Glanville and Sir Frederick Lea making their mark.

There are five detailed and useful appendices, including a substantial bibliography.

The author has brought together concisely and cogently a collection of contributors to concrete that need to be recognised and remembered. It is clear, however, that this field of endeavour was dominated by men. Perhaps events since 1935 have changed that – time will tell.

For students of the subject and those with an interest in reinforced concrete or simply concrete itself, this is a must-have book and at £60 in hardback it is a snip.

Peter Hewlett