

REVIEW

NORMAN CASTLES IN BRITAIN. By Derek Renn. Pp. xiii + 364, Pls. xlviii, Plans 76, Maps 6. John Baker, 1968. Price £6 6s.

Military architecture, especially when softened by a romantic haze of time, exercises a considerable fascination over the general public and, at the same time, attracts the labours of a large body of serious students. Many books have sought, with varying degrees of success, to bridge the gap between the two ranges of interest. Mr Renn, in a volume which is, one suspects, more than a trifle too expensive and meaty for the general reader to buy, has tried again.

The book falls, sharply, into two unequal sections. To begin with there are ten short introductory chapters but the main body of the book is taken up by a gazeteer of castles thought to have been built between 1066 and 1216. The gazeteer contains brief descriptions of the castles, gives references, and is generously illustrated by clear plans and half-tone plates.

In the introductory portion some chapters deal in a clear and elementary manner with basic terminology, etc. Other chapters attempt to outline the development of the Norman castle from before the conquest to the time of John. This outline suffers from excessive compression and certainly will not be universally accepted, but this is hardly surprising in a field where so much is still controversial.

The gazeteer is doubly useful. It provides a compact corpus of readily accessible information generally well annotated. The collection of plans to standardised scales in one volume is both interesting and instructive. However, the general reader will certainly find the format too ponderous for use as a touring companion.

The very breadth of Mr Renn's task in preparing this volume has led to a dependance on secondary sources and, in some cases, too uncritical an acceptance of interim statements and of old reports. This has resulted in one or two odd statements even about castles close to home but is most obvious when more distant castles are treated. It was among the Scottish material that this reviewer found most to disagree with. For example, the distribution map of mottes ignores several Scottish sites, notably two in Argyll which affect the general pattern. Elsewhere Mr Renn's attempt to draw a parallel between Castle Sween – a castle of enciente – and the keep at Canterbury just will not hold water. In the discussion on Sween (p. 39) there appears to be some confusion between the various lochs called Leven that exist in Scotland. In the gazeteer, the bibliography for the Bishop's Palace at Kirkwall omits the latest (1961) monograph by the late Dr Simpson on the subject. These errors along the margins of Norman Britain (and the Kirkwall Palace was hardly Norman) do detract from what would otherwise be a thoroughly useful book.

Closer to home, one small quibble. It was surprising to find a reference to 'Norman green-glazed pottery' in the entry for Rudgwick castle (p. 304).

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