

Discovering William of Malmesbury

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Both in the number and quality of his writings, William of Malmesbury (c.1090-1142) has been widely recognised as one of the foremost contributors to the pronounced historiographical turn seen throughout the Anglo-Norman realm from the first decades of the 12th century onwards. Perhaps more than any other of the numerous writers, known and unknown, who searched for the past with renewed vigour in this period, William of Malmesbury has captured the attention of modern historians. This is due a combination of factors; most notably the broad scope of his writings, including the *Deeds of the English Kings* (completed c.1125, with subsequent revisions thereafter, and stretching over 800 pages in its Oxford Medieval Texts edition), *Deeds of the English Bishops* (a gazetteer of English church history first completed around the same time), the *Recent History* (*Historia novella*) finished c.1142, numerous lives of Anglo-Saxon saints, and a number of theological reflections.

William has been praised by modern commentators for the importance of the historical information preserved in his works and the quality of his Latin prose, but is perhaps best known for his exacting historical methods, and above all his aptitude for comparing, contrasting and evaluating his sources, for which Gransden deemed William to have earned 'an important place in the development of historical method' in England.⁽¹⁾ Current scholarship on William's life and works is dominated by the work of Rodney M. Thomson, who, working in collaboration with Michael Winterbottom, has prepared editions and translations of William's works, and who has also published numerous studies which explore the composition, character and contents of these works. Some of the most important of Thomson's studies were collected by Boydell into a single volume, published in 1987.⁽²⁾

This new volume of 17 essays, edited by Dolmans, Winkler and Thomson, provides a wide-ranging re-examination of William's works and aspects of his life. The editors' preface asserts that the initial impetus for the project was provided by the completion of Thomson and Winterbottom's project to edit all of William's works with the publication of his treatise on the *Miracles of the Virgin*.⁽³⁾ The greater part of the essays featured in this volume derive from the 2015 Oxford conference 'William of Malmesbury and his Legacy', organised by Ilya Afanasyev, and two of the co-editors of the present volume; Emily Dolmans and Emily A. Winkler. The completed volume also features contributions not delivered at the conference.

From the outset, it is clear that this book does not aim to collect the entire range of current knowledge surrounding William's life and works, in the form of a companion volume. Instead, the studies featured here showcase some examples of recent research by a mix of well-established and emerging scholars from across Europe, North America and Australia, in the hope of inspiring further engagement and research. This is made clear in the editor's preface (p. vii) and is evident through a first glance at the contents. The choice of topics includes some very specific inquiries, such as Philips' study of William as 'Medical historian of the Crusades', mid-scope studies of themes in William's works such as those on civic virtue (Gerrard), Jewish history (Ihnat), Roman identity (Kynan-Wilson) and friendship (Sønnesyn), as well as essays which address much broader themes, such as Bailey's chapter on the genres of history and hagiography, Lawrence-Mathers' on William's knowledge of computistical techniques and debate, and Thomson's reflection on William's conceptualisation of the purposes of history. The majority of chapters reflect studies of themes in William's works (with a clear focus on the historical writings) supplemented by a smaller number of studies focusing on William 'the man' (that is, studies of his activities and how they help us better to understand the wider character of his works).

Winkler and Dolmans' introduction briefly outlines the main facts of William's life and the intellectual basis of the volume. Emerging from this is a clear attempt to emphasise a certain fluidity in reading William's life and works. They note the 'complexity of his thoughts and experience' (p. 3), characterise William as an author who 'struggled to reconcile his own beliefs and the world he read about' (pp. 4-5), and assert the futility of attempting 'to have understood him fully' (p. 10). Effort is made to account for the broad range of approaches featured in the present volume by continually emphasising 'connections' between William's various areas of activity and themes featured within his writings. This may lead to the conclusion that the volume is rather ill-defined, in the sense that its constituent chapters lack unifying themes, but in fact, it appears that the authors have in fact aspired to produce an open-ended dialogue, and what they describe as a 'handlist of approaches to William and his works: an introduction to the man and his writing, and an opportunity to find the kinds of connections between themes and ideas for which William spent a lifetime searching' (p. 2).

Any reader interested in the theory and practice of historical writing during the Middle Ages will find much to recommend in this volume. Bailey's conceptual exploration of the ground shared by history and hagiography in William's *Gesta pontificum* (chapter two) offers an important case study of a theme meriting further exploration. Thomson's examination of the themes that governed William's historical writings (chapter 14) provides an interesting dialogue with Bailey. Similarly, Lawrence-Mathers' examination of William as computist (chapter eight) offers important new knowledge on William's wider skills and interests, and their relationship with his historical writings. In a related chapter, Mereminskiy explores William's knowledge of the church at Durham, which at first seems a rather narrow topic for inclusion (chapter nine) but in fact sheds important light on what Rollason has recently termed the 12th-century networks of interconnected 'historical workshops' and historiographical exchange.⁽⁴⁾ It seems that no study of 12th-century historiography seems complete without a chapter on the influence of Bede, provided here by Ward (chapter 15), who explores the extent to which William acknowledged, followed and then built upon Bede's historiographical model in a logical and exacting manner throughout.

Niskanen's study of William's experiences as librarian (chapter ten) is one of the most important contributions to this book. Building on Thomson's work, Niskanen reviews the surviving manuscripts

containing William's handwriting, and assesses the nature of his contributions, and the topics featured within them. This allows him to examine the range of William's interests as a reader and teacher, and feeds into wider current debates on the nature of the librarian's role within the medieval monastery.⁽⁵⁾ Winterbottom's study of William's Latin style and vocabulary (chapter 17) is closely related to the topics covered by Niskanen. Winterbottom's chapter reveals much about William the man, showing his own personal flourishes, skills in invention and imagination. As such, it is testament to the depth of knowledge amassed by Winterbottom through his numerous editing projects, and readers should be grateful for access to such insights.

The remaining chapters of the volume are largely given over to the discussion of themes and topics treated in William's works. Here, too, distinct themes emerge across these studies. Gerrard (chapter three) builds on Sønnesyn's recent work on William's ethical frameworks and motivations, through a study of how William judged the conduct of certain civic communities at key points in English history, and is thought-provoking on the issue of wider 12th-century English national identity and communities. Similarly, Gillingham examines how William judged the relative successes and failures of Kings William Rufus and Henry I, and by association also kingship in general (chapter four). Related to this is Kemp's chapter on the role of bishops and saints as mediators of royal action in a broad range of William's works (chapter six) and Plassman's comparison (chapter 12) of the ways in which William and Otto of Freising evaluated the conduct of Germanic rulers. All four chapters make genuinely new contributions to an established body of scholarship on William's capacity to explore the past as a form of moral instruction.

Ihnat's study of the depiction of Jewish communities in William's tracts on the miracles of the Virgin (chapter five) is another notably new topic for debate in William of Malmesbury studies, and offers a compelling argument that William depicted the Jews as 'foil to Christians performing the proper forms of veneration' (p. 62) rather than as reflections of historical reality. Kynan-Wilson (chapter seven) explores William's conceptualisation of Roman identity and its presence (or not) in medieval England, shedding important light on his own ambitions as an individual reader but also as a member of an Anglo-Norman society which would, he hoped, emulate the cultural and intellectual achievements of ancient Rome. Related to this, Winkler (chapter 16) explores William's characterisation of the ancient Britons, arguing that William 'honoured the Britons of England's past' (p. 190) and helped to restore their place within English historiography. Philip's study of William as 'medical historian of the crusades' in the *Gesta regum* (chapter 11) is interesting on several levels. It uncovers a new line of enquiry on William as a writer of the crusades and his interest in medical matters simultaneously; both are important topics for discussion, but it would be helpful have been given more explanation on the connection of these two interesting themes, and how they are explored in William's other works. The final chapter on themes in William's work is Sønnesyn's typically insightful examination of William's relationship with his authors, and the process of meditative reading within contemporary Benedictine life.

The volume concludes, perhaps unusually, with Thomson's 'Epilogue', which functions as the author's own personal reflections on his life of reading and writing on William's life and works, and his various collaborations with Michael Winterbottom. As such, it offers remarkable insight into Thomson's own research agendas, closing with the assertion that he aims to 'pass the torch on' (p. 224). The importance of Thomson and Winterbottom's contributions to William of Malmesbury studies ensure that future generations will no doubt be fascinated to read it.

Some concluding reflections: there can be no doubt that the editors of this volume and its contributors deserve significant praise for assembling a collection of thought-provoking chapters, which not only help us to understand better the life and writings of William of Malmesbury, but which should also find relevance within the wider field of Anglo-Norman studies, the study and writing of history during the Middle Ages, and numerous additional topics besides. It is also noted and welcomed, that without exception, the chapters featured are of uniform manageable length: an aspiration shared, but rarely obtained by those who have ever edited similar collections. The book itself provides yet another high-quality publication by the Boydell Press (although one might question the editors' choice of cover illustration from the Yates-Thomson *Vita Cuthberti*

, which might lead the uninitiated reader to the erroneous belief that there exists an author portrait of William himself, or to a connection between William and that particular manuscript, of which there is none confirmed).

In their introductory commentary, the editors are careful not to present this volume as a ‘companion to William of Malmesbury’. That said, one cannot help but question why this wasn’t the original plan, to produce what would surely have been an important and (noting the authors featured in this particular volume) enduring contribution to the corpus of scholarship on William’s life and works; texts which remain central to the discovery of the Anglo-Norman world, and which are studied on multiple university degree programmes as part of courses on the development of historiographical method. The editors (p. 10) admit to having not yet fully discovered William and it is acknowledged that ‘the true extent of William’s legacy is still beyond our grasp’ (p. vii). However, they also acknowledge the now unrivalled access to William’s works through comprehensive modern editions (pp. vii and 1) and the result is a somewhat mixed message of what we can and cannot know.

In addition, there are some confusing omissions, although again these are perhaps explained by the status of the volume as ‘not a companion’. Studies of William’s theological and exegetical knowledge, the place of the *Historia novella* in his final corpus of historical writings, and a palaeographical guide to William’s handwriting might have made worthy contributions. These topics were not featured at the 2015 conference, but the editors claim to have commissioned chapters for this volume (p. vii) and might have thought about expanding their scope further. Notably, the volume features no timeline of William’s life, no list of his main works and chronology of their composition, and no bibliography of the most influential previous studies: admittedly, any bibliography is the earliest part of a book to prove outdated, but even the revised bibliography in Thomson’s 2003 *William of Malmesbury* requires updating. Such materials would have proven invaluable additions for readers new to the study of William’s life and works.

The organisational structure of the book might also have been improved. As noted above, there are several related strands within the studies, namely those related to William’s historiographical method; William as reader and teacher; and the moralising purposes of his writings. The reading of the constituent chapters suggests that there is in fact much more thematic unity in this book than is currently visible in its current arrangement, and this places onus on the reader to make their own connections between these materials.

There is no doubt that this volume must be recognised as an outstanding collection of perspectives on areas of William’s life and works. It is not the final say on William, and the editors are right to make clear that this is not what it intends to be. But is this an opportunity missed? Students new to William are still reliant on the introductory commentaries by Gransden (1974), Thomson (1987, and updated 2003) and in introductory commentaries featured in editions of his works. Given the individuals involved in the development of this volume, this is a small shame, but it nevertheless points to the huge potential for the composition of such a companion volume by future scholars, to whom Thomson now triumphantly passes the torch.

Notes

1. Antonia Gransden, *Historical Writing in England*, 2 vols. (London, 1974-82), I, p. 167. [Back to \(1\)](#)
 2. R. M. Thomson, *William of Malmesbury* (Woodbridge, 2003). [Back to \(2\)](#)
 3. William of Malmesbury, *The Miracles of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, ed. and translated by R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (Woodbridge, 2015). [Back to \(3\)](#)
 4. D. W. Rollason, ‘Symeon of Durham’s *Historia de regibus Anglorum et Dacorum* as a product of twelfth-century historical workshops’, in *The Long Twelfth-Century View of the Anglo-Saxon Past*, ed. D.A. Woodman and M. Brett (Farnham, 2015), pp. 95-112. [Back to \(4\)](#)
 5. See for example, *Music, Liturgy and the Shaping of History: Medieval Cantors and their Craft*, ed. K. Buygis, A Kraebel and M. Fassler (Woodbridge, 2017). [Back to \(5\)](#)
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