

**Rodney M. Thomson, Emily Dolmans, Emily A. Winkler (ed.),
Discovering William of Malmesbury, Woodbridge (The
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Based on the proceedings of a conference held at the University of Oxford in 2015, this volume devoted to the life and the massive historical output of William of Malmesbury (c. 1090–c. 1142) is a remarkable tribute to an extraordinary historian and to the dedicated scholarship that over the last forty years has produced editions and English translations of all of his historical works. The volume's 17 essays provide an extremely interesting and important assessment of William as a man, a historian, and a monk. That they have been written by scholars based in eight countries is testimony to the scale of interest he arouses. They include a personal memoir by Rodney Thomson and commentaries by him and Michael Winterbottom on the scholarship devoted to William of Malmesbury since the times of Sir Richard Southern and Sir Roger Mynors and on their own understanding of Malmesbury as a historian and a writer of Latin. This review must therefore begin by paying a fulsome tribute to their magnificent efforts over their professional life-times which have so deeply enriched our knowledge.

All of the essays illuminate in different ways the extraordinary energy, knowledge and intellect of the book's polymathic subject. While the majority are devoted to William of Malmesbury the historian, there are also contributions on chronology and medicine by Anne Lawrence-Mathers and Joanna Phillips. Samu Niskanen's essay on William as a librarian brings us close to him at work within his monastery and adds an important additional strand to our understanding of the man. Overall the essays in the volume integrate well with the theme that for William the aim of historical writing was to instruct, a conventionality shared with many other medieval writers of history, but one that he treated in a personal and original way. History, he believed, should not only instruct, but also inform and entertain, with these themes being interwoven with his religious beliefs and a devotion to the English nation. With the ethical aspects of the historian's responsibilities in mind, Sigbjørn Sønnesyn further broadens out his already substantial contribution to this subject by examining William's treatment of friendship, especially as expressed in his relatively late work, the »Commentary on the Lamentations of Jeremiah«.

Reading the articles as an ensemble and re-visiting some of William of Malmesbury's writings while doing so has made me reflect on just how engaged with the secular world he was. For all that he believed that the laity should listen to priests and monks, he was notably sympathetic to the complexities of the exercise of power in the turbulent world outside his monastery. His engagement is above all evident in John Gillingham's remarkable essay that convincingly demonstrates that most modern historians have completely misunderstood William's portrayal of William Rufus and Henry I, and, on this basis, William Rufus as both a man and a king. Even if his personal admiration had to be tempered by awareness of



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the king's limitations, William's rejection of the strands that are central to Eadmer's damning verdict on Rufus is not just a demonstration of Malmesbury's independence of mind but of an awareness of the qualities that the secular world required and valued.

Ryan Kemp's and Alheydis Plassmann's essays also show just how profound was Malmesbury's determination to understand and explore the ethical complexities of rule and power. All three of them surely confirm that Malmesbury was fundamentally a more worldly man than his great contemporary Orderic Vitalis (who features less in this volume than he ought to do). In different ways too the essays by Kati Ihnat on the Jews, Daniel Gerrard on civic virtue, and Emily Winkler on the Britons confront issues that were extremely immediate for William in ways that are notably sensitive. Emily A. Winkler's article in particular offers an excellent critique of John Gillingham's earlier publications on the subject by pointing out just how British William's perspectives were; his treatment was not a product of imperialism, but rather a commentary on a falling-away from past times. In all three of the articles, the problems of the present are given an historical context.

Among the other essays that concentrate primarily on Malmesbury as a historian, his thoroughness and critical faculties are predictably emphasised, but in ways that are often new and different. This is very much the case in Anne E. Bailey's article on the critical use of sources undertaken to compile the »Gesta Pontificum« and Emily Joan Ward's and Michael Winterbottom's, with it being shown how, among other things, Malmesbury was prepared to amend and improve the writings of the likes of Bede and Alcuin when he thought it was required. When it comes to Malmesbury's research, Stanislav Mereminskiy uses the example of Durham to suggest that networks of information exchange rather than visits informed William's apparent knowledge of many of the places he mentions. A final theme to mention is that of the international dimensions of Malmesbury's work, with Alheydis Plassmann's comparison of his writings with those of Otto of Freising and William Kynan-Wilson's on his treatment of Rome reiterating and expanding on arguments already developed by Rodney Thomson and Michael Winterbottom in earlier publications and in this book.

In their introductory chapter, Emily Dolmans and Emily Winkler rightly say that to achieve a comprehensive treatment of William of Malmesbury's writings was impossible for the conference and the volume. There were certainly times when I was left feeling the concentration on the »Gesta Regum« and the »Gesta Pontificum« excessive.

There are certainly ways in which the book's mission to guide future research could have been improved. A basic time-line of William's writings would have helped. And so too would a Bibliography. A cursory glance into the depths of the scholarship devoted to William that appear in the book's foot-notes shows how much the latter would have helped the most experienced of specialists, let alone newcomers. The statement in this excellent introductory chapter that William was »among the most learned historians of twelfth-century Europe« (p. 1) does invite a comparative study to prove or disprove, while recognising the levels of subjectivity that such an analysis would involve. This remains the case even though many of the essays do locate William's writings within the wider European world and the shared culture of Christendom, to both of which he manifestly believed he belonged.



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Dolmans and Winkler also reflect illuminatingly on William's personal growth, without, however, following up on the comments on his changing relationship with the wider political world and the Bible as evidenced by the »Commentary on Lamentations« with the information that after the »Lamentations« he turned to the »Historia Novella«, a work dedicated to that »unworldly« (the irony is intentional) man Robert, earl of Gloucester. For all that Malmesbury might have proclaimed himself ready to leave history behind and devote himself to the monastic life, on his terms the sins of youth might be thought to have returned. Or rather, the moral responsibilities of the historian to instruct and guide the wider world had never left him and returned in full force with the civil war that was ongoing when he died.

Even more than with the absence of a time-line, I was pushed by this to reflect again that an even broader coverage of William's life and writings, albeit one that acknowledged where more work was needed, was ideally required. This comment notwithstanding, this is a truly excellent book. It is not only a tribute to the achievements of Rodney Thomson and Michael Winterbottom as well as to those of William of Malmesbury; it is a contribution to the study of twelfth-century historical writing in England and Europe on which other publications can build.



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