

[Book Review by Fred Shade, October 2006]

THE ROSSLYN HOAX? Viewing Rosslyn Chapel from a new perspective.

Robert L.D. Cooper, Lewis, England, 2006 ISBN 0 85318 255 8

Having met Bro. Bob Cooper in Melbourne, having had the privilege of him staying with us for a few days, and having heard him speak at the Victorian Lodge of Research, I had a pretty good idea as to the quality of his research and the standard of presentation that this new work would offer. I am not disappointed.

I am not going to present an analysis of the work as I need to read it again in order to appreciate all that it has to offer. However, I would like to offer a few reflections on Bob Cooper's latest opus.

The book extends to 216 pages, has nine chapters, an extensive bibliography and 11 appendices, plus an index. But it was his Introduction that grabbed my attention first. Here he discusses the two approaches to the study and writing of history – the academic approach and the popular approach. He then describes (and demolishes) the credibility of the popular approach to the writing of history by showing how the methodology they use is most questionable. He shows how these writers of popular history may use a 'negative' to prove a 'positive', support their theories by quoting from other writers of popular history, how they may write with self-imposed, or deliberate, ignorance, how writers can ignore uncomfortable facts, and how they make selective use of sources, even misquote sources (and who has the time to double-check what they have quoted!). Now, these issues would be already known to the reader of this newsletter, but Cooper is writing for the general reader as well as the masons who are interested in this subject.

One of the most damning statements he makes is that NONE of the writers of popular history in regard to Rosslyn Chapel has bothered to check the documents that are held at the Museum and Library in Edinburgh! (In fact, he said that these authors would not even come to his talks as they know that his material will compromise their case. I would describe this as an example of selective ignorance.) And Cooper does us a wonderful service by reproducing the most important of these documents held in Edinburgh as appendices to his book, so that we can all have the benefit of reading them for ourselves and not rely on commentaries made by others. There are also 54 plates, many in colour, of carvings in the Rosslyn Chapel, the members of the St Clair family and other places of interest.

As with his paper to Quatuor Coronati on the Knights Templar and the battle of Bannockburn, Cooper demolishes several of my cherished beliefs about Rosslyn as well as the antiquity of symbolism in modern Freemasonry. I describe reading Cooper's book as being a bit like taking a cold shower; but we know that it is a healthy thing to do from time to time!

Bro. Cooper has made a most significant contribution to Masonic research, and not only in warning us of the perils of believing what we read in popular history. He has produced a work that will be of benefit to all Masonic researchers because of the high standards of research he has placed upon himself, showing us how it should be done, and also in presenting aspects of (Scottish) Masonic history to the general public, a history of which we should be proud.

The Bibliography, which the author has confined to the many references he has studied for this work, is in two sections. The second list includes those works of the Alternative, Popular or Mythological school of history and are to be treated accordingly. He also lists a few works of fiction to indicate this genre of material that continues the myth of the link between Knights Templar and Freemasonry. I have to admit to be a closet reader of such material. To sum up, this work is essential reading for the Rosslyn Chapel student.

Fred Shade

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