

## Heraldry, Scholarship, and *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry*

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*The Oxford Guide to Heraldry.* Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson. London: Oxford University Press, 1990. ISBN 0-19-285224-8. \$15.95 paperback.

Several years ago at a dinner party I was informed that the five most dreadful words in the English language were "The port rests with you." I had to be told that they implied someone was guilty of hogging the decanter and if he did not immediately pass the port, he would be forever branded a boozer and a boor. So I passed the port. However, it seems to me even now that as dreadful as "The port rests with you" is, there are worse phrases. Any Southerner, for instance, should immediately recognize the horror of "But who *are* his people?" If you doubt this, think for a moment of some poor Southern belle trying to convince her mother (Gorgon and local Junior League Treasurer) that marrying a carpet-bagging Yankee confidence man is a Good Thing. Lady Bracknell is a piker by comparison with that particular outraged matriarch.

Yet this question, "But who are his people?" however daunting, is a perennial one. It has occurred not only in the Old (or for that matter the New Rich) South; it has been around in Europe for centuries. In Europe there was always the possibility of giving a visual response — "But who are his people" could frequently be answered by determining if the carpet-bagger had a coat of arms. If he did, he might still be a cad, but in much of Europe and the British Isles, he was still a gentleman of coat armor and as such would be far less susceptible to the glares of outraged Gorgons guarding their daughters. After all, "gentleman" used to be a social rank as much as anything else.

In our own country, heraldry remains an ubiquitous, if misunderstood, presence. We Americans are fascinated by it. The number of mail order firms willing to supply you with

"your" family coat of arms grows apace, and the number of homes displaying mass-produced armorial plaques for their owners' surnames is even a bit daunting. Unfortunately, the relationship between a coat of arms for "Johnson" and the particular Johnson who displays it is usually pretty tenuous — it is rather like assuming that every Johnson is a talcum powder heir just because he and "Johnson and Johnson" share the same last name.

The American ignorance of what heraldry is and how it works can be readily remedied by *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry*, which has recently been reissued as a paperback. The text, written by two of Her Britannic Majesty's Officers of Arms (that is, the Heralds), is authoritative and fascinating. It discusses the theories of the origin of coat armor and traces the development of the shield (the most important part of any coat of arms), the crest (the device on the top of the helmet rather than the whole coat), supporters (figures that hold up the shield), and blazon (the description of a coat of arms in its own Norman French argot). The granting and recording of English coats of arms in the College of Arms, London, is also treated, including an account of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Visitations, which surveyed the gentry of England to record (for a fee) their arms. The book is both informative and useful — it is even great fun. It discusses all the major aspects of heraldry, including the inheritance of coats of arms and the differences between English and Continental heraldry, with verve and understanding. There is a particularly fascinating account of heraldry in the New World, which includes an attempt by the British Crown to set up an hereditary nobility of Landgraves and Cassiques in America, something that really could have been flaunted at your local D.A.R. chapter.

More importantly, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* takes a genuinely critical and scholarly approach. In the past, heralds were sometimes better at invention than accuracy; Thomas Woodcock and John Martin Robinson do not fall into that trap. In recent years the heralds' College of Arms has not only been more accessible to scholars, it has even produced them. Sir Anthony Wagner, formerly Garter King of Arms, has produced many works on genealogy and the history of the heralds which

are of immense use to historians and antiquarians. John P. B. Brooke-Little, Norroy and Ulster King of Arms, founded the Heraldry Society to encourage heraldic studies and is himself an author and editor of *Boutell's Heraldry* and Fox-Davies' *Complete Guide to Heraldry*, still the most useful guides to describing coats of arms correctly. Other works also demonstrate a marked renewal of interest in heraldry from a scholarly perspective. *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* is clearly in this camp. Instead of the mythical snobbisms beloved of some earlier writers, what we get here is careful and well-presented historical argument. This book is sound not only from the standpoint of the authors' heraldic expertise, it is good scholarship as well.

It is also magnificently illustrated. One of the great advantages of having this work written by heralds is that they can make use of the archives of the College of Arms not only for the sake of evidence, but also for the sake of art. Many of the records in the College of Arms are beautifully illuminated and illustrated, and *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* is full of beautiful plates, from medieval Rolls of Arms to double-spouted whales. Both in color and in black and white, the illustrations are worth the price of the book.

Anyone interested in heraldry will find this book fascinating, and anyone even slightly interested in history will want to read it. Heraldry is more than a social climber's dream; it is history made visible. It is also the iconography of honor, and as such still exerts a powerful symbolism appeal on both sides of the Atlantic. 🐉