REVIEW


This is a well organized, comprehensive guide to the castles and fortified houses of Edinburgh and the Lothians, packed with pictures and history. Graham S. Coe has produced a work of enormous appeal and, from a North American perspective, the pictures of these magnificent structures alone are enough to draw one over to Scotland. The guide is divided into five circular tours, each with a detailed map indicating castle location, major roads, towns and villages. The routes appear to be well thought-out for the self-guided sightseer.

The author has provided a picture of every castle, fortified house or ruin in the region. As well as detailed driving instructions, each building has a description of its construction including fine points on the actual structure such as when it was first built, how many floors, the types of towers or stairwells or whether a coat of arms can still be found etched in the stone. Architectural particulars, building plans and layouts have also been incorporated into the guide. Changes that have occurred over the course of the building’s history accompany each description, and can sometimes run to some length as several of the castles date back as far as the twelfth century and have changed hands frequently. Details can include such things as whether the castle was destroyed in the past due to a siege, who owned it at the time, and who was responsible for its destruction, why it was destroyed, and particulars about its later renovations. These brief historical notes provide insight into the building’s past, its historic significance and offer the reader a glimpse into Scotland’s storied past of kings and queens, battles, plots, pillaging and hangings. The very existence of these fortified buildings, as well as their sheer number, forces one to consider the precarious nature of life in Scotland’s past, even for the well-connected and wealthy.
For the uninitiated castle tourist or in order to provide the student of castle lore greater ease of use or understanding of the subject, I would recommend a few minor additions. To begin with, a more comprehensive index would be helpful, so that one might look up a castle by name, rather than having to first determine on which tour it can be found. A glossary of architectural terms would be most helpful, as few would have the least idea as to the meaning of terms like: corbels, harled, bartizan, garderobes, or ‘conoidal corbelling within the re-entrant angle!’ An explanation of these terms along with a clear compass orientation of each picture would allow the reader to follow the descriptions with more ease. Finally, I would strongly suggest the addition of a page detailing the various castle styles as they changed over the centuries with an explanation of why the changes came about, and how to recognize the various changes in style whether it was Roman, Medieval, Gothic or Georgian.

Information about the current ownership of each castle is provided as well as contact information for those which allow visitors. There is a page about the author in which he describes the extent of his research, as well as appendices with information on the area, the Scottish Castles Association and a summary of the Land Reform Act with details about public access. This is a superb guide that will whet your appetite for a tour of Scotland. It might also draw the reader into a deeper look into the country’s captivating history. It is an excellent resource, not just for the tourist, but for the arm-chair traveller and the local resident interested in their own rich material history.

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