

### **The Civils — The Story of the Institution of Civil Engineers**

Garth Watson

Thomas Telford, London 1988  
(ISBN 0-7277-03927)

This long-awaited history of the world's senior engineering institution (the author's predecessor as Secretary was gathering material for it 30 years ago!) makes a welcome contribution to the annals of civil engineering. The general arrangement of the book bears some similarity to that of Appleyard's opulently-produced history of the IEE (1937) and Parsons' history of the IMechE (1947), but is enhanced by more thematic chapters. It ranges from the foundation of the Institution in 1818 through to the creation of the Chilver Committee.

The book abounds with factual material which will interest both general and specialist reader. Its author Garth Watson, the Institution's Secretary for nearly 12 years, has produced a solid, authoritative and readable work. It is however, perhaps understandably, a 'safe' book and anyone expecting the whole story may be just a little disappointed. It would have been intriguing to have had more insight into the Secretary's influence on policy and decision-making since the post became full-time in 1839, set against the background of the declining tenure of the presidential office to its present one year term.

Regarding the Institution's early history, it is gratifying to see Henry Robinson Palmer firmly dubbed as founder and the important roles of Bryan Donkin, James Jones and others clearly identified and at last receiving much-deserved recognition. The correction of the misleading statement in Volume 1 of Transactions that the first meeting of the Institution was held at the Kings Head Tavern, Cheapside is also welcome. As Watson states, the early meetings were held in the Kendal (or Kendall's) Coffee House in Fleet Street. It is interesting to note that the Institution first established its headquarters in

Great George Street (next to President James Walker's house) in 1839. The premises contained a spacious meeting room, model room and library. Walker offered to advance any sum necessary to complete the alterations that were required!

It is often thought that George Stephenson became Founder President of the IMechE after being refused membership of 'The Civils'. Watson reminds us that this was not the case. No membership proposal from Stephenson ever reached the Institution and the fact that he did not join 'had more to do with his character and temperament than with any matter of (membership) procedure'. Obtaining membership of the Institution then as now could not be taken as a foregone conclusion as Marc Brunel discovered. In 1826, his proposal that Le Chevalier Schlick Architect to the City of Denmark be admitted to membership 'without formality' was turned down. At a later date the Institution was exercised as to how to deal with Indian MICE (Members of the Indian Chamber of Engineers)!

The book is wide-ranging in its coverage. Following a useful prologue on the origins of Civil engineering, the first five chapters chronicle the progress of the Institution from its formation in 1818 to the close of Garth Watson's stewardship in 1978. This narrative is then reinforced and cross-fertilised with theme chapters on membership, the learned society, education and training, founders and fore-fathers, the headquarters, at home and abroad, and benevolence and scholarship. The volume concludes with chronological lists of Presidents, Treasurers and Secretaries. The membership section would have benefitted from a graph or table of membership growth with explanatory notes, and perhaps an illustration of an early application form signed by Telford, surely a passport to entry! However, the inclusion of part of the Roll for 1843 with the signatures of Prince Albert and William John Macquort Rankine is a thought-provoking contemporary touch. Although the library gets numerous mentions, as one of the Institution's greatest assets it could have stood a chapter in its own right.

Structural engineering gets an occasional mention and is best exemplified in the illustrations which are well chosen and of good quality. The dust wrapper exhibits the famous 'conference of engineers at the Menai Tubular Bridge' in full colour. Other illustrations include, The Crystal Palace, Vignoles' Dnieper Suspension Bridge, Clifton Bridge, Pantaleymon Suspension Bridge erected at St Petersburg; Brunel's Thames Tunnel; Cleopatra's Needle erection (from Sir Benjamin Baker's paper); and Rennie's Waterloo Bridge Centering. The 'learned society' section concludes with the advent of New Civil Engineer magazine shocking some older members but 'becoming accepted if not always admired'!

This book is a landmark in the literature of civil engineering history.

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## **Structural Engineering Review**

VOLUME 2 NUMBER 3 SEPTEMBER 1990