

INTRODUCTION

I cannot, in all honesty, claim to be a believer in reincarnation. I am neither for nor against the concept, though I find the entire notion of having lived on this Earth in other forms fascinating. I *want* to believe in it; but having no clear proof that I have, in previous lifetimes, been a cow, a wolf, a cockroach, or a king, I prefer to tell myself, “I do not know.”

And yet I cannot explain why, since my earliest recollections, I’ve found myself inexorably drawn to old stone structures—to stone houses, old bridges and monuments, colonial-era walls, and, most of all, to castles.

Of course, the irony of these early childhood memories is that I was born and raised in Flushing, Queens—a place not immediately associated with ancient armies and soaring ramparts. I simply knew that whenever I was in the presence of any historic site, I felt a powerful, secret connection to that structure. Something welling within my subconscious would stop me in my place: “Yes,” my inner voice would tell me, “this is correct; this is where I belong.”

On school field trips to the famous Cloisters, in Fort Tryon Park, Manhattan, I would quietly slip away from my teacher and classmates and walk reverently toward the huge central tower, with its expansive perimeter walls. I would make my way to the west-facing stoneworks and gaze out at the Hudson River below, then across to the rising cliffs of the Palisades, in New Jersey. I’d let myself drift away, pretend I was one of my childhood heroes, the legendary Spanish knight Rodrigo Diaz de Bivar—known to history as “El Cid Campeador,” the Lord Champion. I could see the legions of elite Moorish troops, cloaked in black, against the setting sun, marching ominously toward the walled castle-city of Valencia. I could hear the steady, sardonic drumbeat—the thumping, pounding rhythm—that powered the enemy’s undaunted approach to my courageous soldiers.

Admittedly, my imagination was shaped by the Hollywood epic *El Cid*, starring Charlton Heston and Sophia Loren. In fact, most of our modern impressions of castles are shaped by Hollywood images of great stone fortresses that feature damp, dark chambers and cold, brooding ramparts (which are based on the Norman castles or “keeps” of the eleventh and twelfth centuries), or “Cinderella” castles with fairytale towers and soaring spires (which take their inspiration from Neuschwanstein Castle in Bavaria, a nineteenth-century palace commissioned by Ludwig II). In



reality, however, there are many different types of castles, from the basic “motte and bailey” (mound and palisade) of the earliest Norman castles, which were built strictly for defense, to majestic structures built to house entire households and retinues. There are even castles in Asia such as the majestic Edo Castle in Tokyo, a fifteenth-century, seven-story pagoda that was the residence and military fortress of the shogun. One thing that all castles seem to have in common, though, is that they were intended as showpieces: enormous, often intimidating landmarks that told the local peasantry (or prospective invaders), in effect, “We’re in charge . . . and you’re not.”

It was not until the invasion of England by William the Conqueror in the eleventh century that what we think of as the stereotypic castle really took hold as a building type. In the beginning, just after William’s resounding victory at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, Norman castles were simply strongholds or stockades made of wood, which could be erected quickly from the raw materials found in surrounding forests. After William’s decisive victories in England’s north, however, he and his nobles began to erect more substantial and permanent structures out of stone. Again, they served two purposes: to establish superiority and control over the peasantry, and to stave off potential attacks from invading armies.

The first Norman castles shared several common features: a tall central tower or keep, which provided a high vantage point from which soldiers could rain down arrows, boulders, or boiling oil onto enemies below. These towers were built on earthen mottes, which would further raise the height of the keep and force enemies to scramble up a steeply angled slope to attempt an assault. They were generally surrounded by a ditch, which provided the earth for the motte. The battlements on top of the tower were composed of alternating merlons (raised square projections) and crenels (squared depressions), producing a type of up-and-down, zig-zag pattern known as crenellation, which gave the Norman castle its signature profile.

As castles became more elaborate and the nobles’ power (and households) grew, courtyards, or “baileys” were added outside the ditch, and buildings and stables were erected within these to provide living and working space for all the people necessary to sustain castle life: blacksmiths, tanners, swordsmiths, armorers, cobblers, coopers (barrel-makers), troops, servants, and so forth. If there were multiple baileys, invading troops would be forced to advance through the castle’s outer baileys and through its increasingly smaller inner ones. Narrow vertical spaces—called “loopholes”—in the interior walls and towers allowed for a deadly crossfire of arrows from defending forces, and hot tar and boiling oil could cascade down from above as the enemy tried to pass through a series of gates called “portcullises,” constructed of heavy wood or iron, which could be raised (to let friends in) or lowered (to keep enemies out). They could be raised to let an enemy in, then lowered behind them as archers fired from the walls and loopholes at the trapped soldiers below. In the event that invaders took control of the outer and inner baileys, there was always the central keep to retreat to as a last line of defense.

Knowing these things as I prepared to take the photographs for this book, I had to ask myself, “Exactly what *is* a castle? For the purposes of this book, what makes a castle a castle?” I had to form my own criteria for judging whether a building qualified as a castle, yet at the same time

get across to my readers that there are, in fact, many types of castles, not all of them following the familiar Norman design. I decided upon three main physical features that I felt all the featured castles should share: a prominent central tower, the use of merlons and crenels to give the impression of battlements, and a thick wooden or iron main gate or door. I did not include baileys because the earliest Norman castles (like Sky Top at Mohonk Mountain House) were in fact just simple towers. Indeed, unlike my Spanish friends Juan Manuel “Fin” Montero and Alfonso Moral “Lugh” Cervantes, both of whom were spoiled by childhoods exposed to the enormous medieval fortresses of Alcazar and Alhambra, I have a quiet appreciation for the smaller castles and castle-towers, which are structural gems in themselves. Indeed, my favorite castle in the world is Eilean Donan in the Scottish Highlands.

Sadly, one of the castles featured in this book is in serious danger: the weathered and austere Bannerman Castle on Pollopel Island in the Hudson River, between Beacon and Cornwall-on-Hudson. Despite valiant efforts over the years to maintain the structural integrity of this well-known phantom of the Hudson Valley, Bannerman continues to fall (literally) into disrepair: on December 26, 2009, a little over a month after I had submitted my final manuscript to the publisher, a thirty-foot-long section of the castle’s southeast wall collapsed, leaving a gaping hole in the perimeter.

Having visited the island itself as well as photographing the castle from the shore, I had long suspected, and even predicted to my friends, that such a collapse was imminent. I was truly saddened to learn that my prediction had come true, for it is my belief that we need to preserve our precious historic structures. I cannot envision the Metro North commute from Poughkeepsie to New York City without the anticipation of seeing Bannerman Castle between Beacon and Cornwall-on-Hudson; nor Tarrytown, New York, without Lyndhurst or Castle on the Hudson; nor the town of Hudson without Frederic Edwin Church’s Olana. The recent collapse of Bannerman Castle’s south face was as much due to the community’s lack of will and desire to preserve it as it was due to lack of funds to maintain it.

Too often, we only appreciate something when it’s gone. For my part, I think a New York without the awe and majesty of Singer Castle in the Thousand Islands Region or the imposing strength of Castle Gould on Long Island or the mysterious ruins of Bannerman Castle in the Hudson Valley would be a diminished state. Even if I cannot visit every castle or castle-like structure in the state, it is enough to know that they are out there, among us, enriching our lives and the lives of our children. Sometimes they are hidden, off the beaten track or behind the gates of some large estate, but more often they are hiding in plain sight, like the New York State Capitol in Albany or the New York State Military Museum in Saratoga. It is my hope that this book will help us open our eyes to see these castles and to preserve them for generations to come.