The World on a Shield: The Encyclopaedic Vision of Randle Holme

by Andrew Gray

In 1688 Randle Holme III of Chester started to publish The Academy of Armory.¹ This was to be a library of heraldry on an epic scale, which Holme undoubtedly saw as the culmination of his life’s work. This paper attempts its reappraisal and urges its reinstatement in the canon of heraldic literature.

It is a work which in my view has been misunderstood, even misrepresented, in its intention and achievement, and in consequence has until recently been largely disregarded. Sir Anthony Wagner, in his Heralds of England, called it ‘a fantastic encyclopaedia masquerading as a book of heraldry’.² More recently, the British Library published on disc a selection from Holme’s original manuscript drafts, focussing on his comprehensive listing of the artefacts of seventeenth-century life.³ The editors explained that ‘appreciating the fascination and importance of Randle Holme’s text is made very difficult by its extensive overlay of heraldic material. To make its social historical content more accessible […] we have […] excised the heraldic material’.⁴ But who was Randle Holme? His grandfather, the first Randle Holme, had been appointed in 1601 as deputy to William Segar, Norroy King of Arms from 1597 to 1604, to monitor use of arms, arrange heraldic funerals, and collect fees in Cheshire and its neighbours, roles in which he was confirmed by Segar’s successor, Richard St George, in 1606.⁵ This is documented in Earwaker’s comprehensive 1891 biography of the family, and much of the narrative material in this paper originates in that source.⁶ The Holmes were painters and antiquaries and were active...

Fig. 1: Memorial panels by the Randle Holmes. Left: Tarvin, Cheshire, 1605 (Randle Holme I). Right: Gresford, Flintshire, 1688 (Randle Holme III).

in Chester’s civic affairs. For four generations a Randle Holme was to fill such roles, spanning the whole seventeenth century. Today their most visible legacy is the beautifully crafted armorial memorial panels (Fig. 1) to be found in many churches around the region.

Randle Holme II and Randle Holme III each had the misfortune to succeed his father during the Commonwealth, in 1654/55 and 1659 respectively; after the Restoration, William Dugdale, the new Norroy King of Arms (1660–77), prosecuted the latter for working without license. Holme may well have been appointed deputy by one of the Commonwealth Norroys, William Ryley or George Owen, whose acts as such were now declared void. Dugdale’s pursuit included forays into the north to destroy Holme’s monuments, but fortunately several of them still survive. Holme eventually recovered his position, but as deputy to Garter King of Arms Edward Walker, whose deputy his grandfather would once have been as Norroy.

The Academy of Armory
Holme began compiling his book in 1649, but only half of the planned work was published in 1688, because Holme had run out of funds. In the Table of Contents of the 1688 edition, Holme writes after the summary of Book 3, Chapter 13:

Thus far have I with much Cost and Pains, caused to be Printed for the publick benefit; what remains (and is ready for the Press) is as followeth in the succeeding Contents, which if encouraged by Liberal and free Contributors may appear in the World, else will sleep in the Bed of its Conception, and never see the Glorious Light of the Sun.

We had to wait until 1905 for the Roxburghe Club to publish the rest from the drafts which Holme left in his extensive manuscript collection and which are now in the British Library.

The 1688 volume, however, gives us a table of contents for the whole work, which reveals that Books 1 and 4 are the main heraldry sections, and in fact they present one of the most thorough early-modern textbooks on the subject. The most obvious near-contemporary comparison is with A Display of Heraldrie by John Guillim (1610). A detailed comparison is beyond the scope of this essay, but Guillim’s organization is similar, albeit less logical and much less elaborate. Holme’s Book 1 deals with the essentials: tinctures, ordinaries, and subordinaries, complex fields and charges, while Book 4 presents elements of heraldic design in increasing complexity, including marshalling and accessories, followed by ceremonial, and finally three

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10 Ryley was Lancaster Herald (1641–67), but served as Norroy (1646–58), and Clarenceux (1658–60): see Godfrey, The College of Arms, p. 89. Owen was York Herald (1633–63), but served as Norroy (1658–60): see ibid., p. 88. Acts of the Commonwealth Kings of Arms were voided by Royal Warrant 6 September 1660, I. 25 f. 82v, cited in Wagner, Heralds of England, p. 263.
11 St Mary’s Church, Chester, monumental inscription to Randle Holme II. See The Heraldry Society, Image Library of Hatchments.
12 Holme, Academy, I, p. 1.
13 Ibid., Contents, after the summary of Book 3, Chapter 13.
chapters on heraldic funerals (Fig. 2), a speciality of the Holme family. Meanwhile Books 2 and 3 constitute the 'encyclopaedia'. Of these, Book 2 catalogues creatures, from immortal beings and heavenly bodies, through elements, vegetable, and animal worlds, culminating in humankind. Book 3 is largely artefacts, including regalia, national characters, and tools of craft, trade, and occupation. Once again, the scheme may be founded on Guillim's, but extends much farther and deeper.

But throughout, we should note the phrase in the Contents — ‘and who beareth such things in their Coats Armor’ — for, in successive chapters, Holme puts each item in the context of heraldic usage wherever he can. Book 2, Chapters 11–13, for instance, are both a bird-spotter’s guide (Fig. 3) and an ordinary of how birds have been — or might be — used in heraldic design.

The detail of some chapters is striking; everything a surgeon, shipbuilder, or a soldier needs to know, to give three examples. For the surgeon, medical and anatomical knowledge is catalogued in Book 2, while his instruments are dealt with in Book 3 (Fig. 4). Similar examples can be taken from the artefacts and tools of the ironmongers or of the locksmiths. Everywhere there are illustrations of heraldic usage; and Holme’s search for sources ranges widely, with many examples from continental Europe. The military chapters seem to follow on from the topic of recreation without a break in Book 3, Chapter 16, in the sequence: gaming, hunting, fireworks,

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16 Holme, Academy, II, Book 4, Chapter 12.
17 Ibid., I, Contents, heading to Book 3.
19 Ibid., Book 2, Chapter 17; Book 3, Chapters 11 and 12; Holme, Academy, II, Book 3, Chapter 15; Book 3, Chapters 16–19.
20 On one not untypical page Holme cites as illustration the arms of: Van Eschelpach of Bavaria, Van Warpke of West Phalia, die Horne, die Hackell, Hevgell of Brunswick, die Hevgell of Brunswick, the Duke of Wirtenberg, and the Count de Pisieux de Sillery: ibid., Book 3, Chapter 16, p. 90.
Fig. 3: Randle Holme, *Academy of Armory* (1701), Book 2, Chapter 11, f. 226.
war. Holme then digresses into a long essay on the design of fortifications. Unfortunately, the first three chapters of Book 4 have never been found, but it is clear from their surviving plates (Figs 5–6) that they were to deal in some depth with the principles of the design of arms and the complexities of marshalling.21 But this book does contain an early list of baronets (1611–49), and armorials of the Order of the Garter, the Round Table, and medieval monasteries.22 In a final chapter, Holme may be taking revenge on his nemesis, the recently deceased Dugdale, by warning that ‘destroying of tombes and sepulchres’ is no ‘lesse a sin than sacrilege or Church robbing’.23

The value of this fascinating and instructive book has been made difficult to appreciate through its being divided into two publications separated by two centuries, both publications being now rare. The Heraldry Society believes these two parts would benefit from being reunited in a complete and indexed digital edition, a task which, thanks to the kind assistance of the Roxburghe Club and the Institute of Heraldic and Genealogical Studies, it is now able to undertake as part of its Heraldry Archive programme.24 Far from being ‘a fantastic encyclopaedia

21 Ibid., Book 4; three plates follow p. 302 in the Roxburghe Club edition.
22 Holme’s list of Knights of the Garter is interesting for its correspondence in the medieval period with the Dean’s Tables at Windsor. These date from the reign of Charles I but may be copied from an earlier register, now lost, and differ in some details from the list now generally accepted. See The Heraldry Society, Armorials of the Order of the Garter, Heraldry Archive Series DVD (London: The Heraldry Society, 2015). Holme’s list of monastic arms seems similar to that in Joseph Edmondson, Complete Body of Heraldry, ‘Arms of Abbies, Monasteries, and Religious Houses’ (London: Printed for the Author, 1780). The primary source for both is likely to be William Dugdale, Monasticon Anglicanum (London: Printed by Richard Hoddginsonne, 1655–73).
23 Holme, Academy, II, Book 4, Chapter 13, p. 522.
Fig. 5: Randle Holme, *Academy of Armory* (1701), Book 4, Chapter 2 (lost), following p. 302, 'complex heraldic designs'.
Fig. 6: Randle Holme, Academy of Armory (1701), Book 4, Chapter 3 (lost), following p. 302, 'marshalling.'
masquerading as a book of heraldry, the Academy of Armory is exactly what Randle Holme intended, a comprehensive textbook for the heraldic scholar and source book for the designer of armorial bearings. By placing the whole of contemporary knowledge at our disposal, he could hope to enlarge significantly the repertoire of ideas for heraldic designs to put the whole world on a shield.