KING ARTHUR

Robert Dunning

King Arthur is the favourite of romantics and the bane of critical historians. There will never be absolute proof of his existence, for our main sources are more or less deliberate fictions, but there is enough to suggest for most a hidden truth and quite enough to inspire, from the Dark Ages to the present day.

Over the centuries the story of Arthur has been embellished and re-told, from medieval romances to Pre-Raphaelite painters to twentieth-century Hollywood. And yet the kernel of the story of a remarkable leader who inspired a devoted following has remained constant through the ages. But who was Arthur? Was he man or myth?

This handy, pocket-sized, hardback biography answers these questions and provides the ideal introduction in words and pictures to Arthur, his life and the places where his remarkable spirit can perhaps be felt even today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Dunning was for nearly forty years the official historian of the county of Somerset and is the author of numerous books about the county and its religious buildings. King Arthur caught his imagination as a child; as an historian his particular interest is in the use others have made of ancient sources for the king's existence and his life.
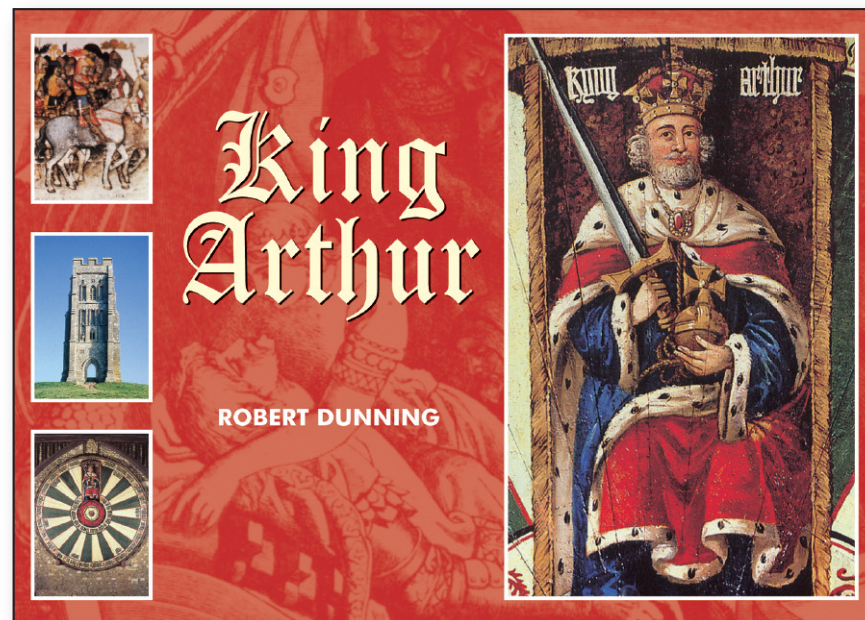
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Top left: *Merlin taking the child Arthur into his keeping. Aubrey Beardsley.*

Above: *The Round Table, Winchester.*

Left: *Bamburgh castle, Northumberland.*

One of the Nine Worthies

For generations, educated people agreed that there had been nine outstanding men in the world's history. Three came from the Classical World: Hector of Troy, Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar; three from Biblical times: Joshua, David and Judas Maccabaeus; and three from the Christian world: King Arthur, Charlemagne, Emperor of the Franks, and Godfrey de Bouillon, Ruler of Jerusalem after the First Crusade. Many of those famous nine have long been forgotten but King Arthur is a name recognised still by old and young around the world, for many a figure associated with chivalry and romance. But for many he is controversial, sometimes dismissed as pure fiction, sometimes the embodiment of some ancient truth. Real or not, the influence of his story was profound for much of the Middle Ages and in more modern times it has inspired words and pictures and music that are at the heart of our culture.

The famous printer William Caxton, when asked by King Edward IV to produce a book on King Arthur as part of the continuing revival of Arthurian interest that had been a mark of his reign, was at first uncertain about the idea, arguing that, in contrast to the other Worthies, Arthur was a fictional character, his story 'feigned and fables'. Yet eventually he was persuaded because, as he wrote, people regularly visited Arthur's tomb at Glastonbury, saw his seal at Westminster, the amazing earthworks at Caerleon, the Round Table at Winchester, Gawain's skull and Craddock's mantle at Dover Castle, and Lancelot's sword. Many people, too, had read the history of the king and his knights as told by Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chretien de Troyes and by many others in most European languages.

Example of a double-page spread.

Slaughter Bridge, Camelford, Cornwall.