Blood, Faith and Iron is the culmination of Paul Belford’s academic research and substantial experience in the heritage sphere. It is not just a post-PhD monograph, but a wide-ranging, coherent and intriguing exploration of a Catholic gentry family’s role within early modern English industrialism. It follows a thematic structure with an in-built chronological framework, first introducing the varying ‘lines of enquire’ or sources used, then exploring each method within lightly delineated conceptual chapters. The overarching aim is to ‘overturn some traditional narratives about the process of industrialisation’ through a re-examination of the focal point of many of these narratives, namely the industrial landscape of the Ironbridge Gorge. Although it is difficult for a non-expert to review the technical aspects of metalworking discussed within the book, what feels truly unique to this research is the integration of religion and socio-politics into a narrative of industrial archaeology that is often dominated by practical and economic considerations. Belford certainly achieves his aim; he provides a comprehensive yet nuanced perspective of early modern industry that makes use of an admirably interdisciplinary approach.

Introducing the work, Belford defines his mission statement: to explore how exceptional the Brooke family was, the scope and nature of their impact, and the role of Catholicism in shaping this impact. He outlines his focus on archaeological expressions of an often-unseen cultural phenomenon, the Catholic industrialist, before providing a comprehensive overview of academic approaches to industrialisation as a counterpoint to this omission. The emphasis often placed on economic and biographical themes, on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and on documentation is highlighted, something I also identify in country house studies. He also emphasises the role of Ironbridge in the development of industrial archaeology and demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the influence of heritage management over the nature of the landscape. The second chapter then defines how to move forward, giving background to each disparate strand of research upon which the work is based. This encompasses introductions to historical archaeology, landscape, buildings and architecture, industrial archaeology, archaeometallurgy and material studies, and historical thought. A valuable point is made about the division between these schools based on their individual origins, such as the difference between ‘middle-class, humanities-based’, theory-led historical archaeology and the more working-class, empirical and research-focused industrial archaeology. This work goes some way to bridging these gaps.

The next section, titled ‘Before the Revolution’, explores the temporal depth of the Ironbridge Gorge, including a survey of its topography and geology, the literal bedrock behind the industry, and the toponymy of the region, as well as illustrative maps to further define the study region. Belford considers the nature of the pre-Dissolution estate, owned by the Cluniac monastery of Much Wenlock, as key to how the identity of the manor and its gentry was formed; he argues that ‘consideration of the administrative, physical and symbolic development...is necessary to
understand the effects of the agency of the Brooke family upon it’ (Belford 2018:34), employing an impressive understanding of economic, social and symbolic transitions in the medieval period and using a range of material sources. There is consideration of the extent of industrialisation before the Dissolution in the area, focusing on mills, mines, and ironworks, an approach that reveals the vibrancy of the area with different industries taking place. The use of the Valour Ecclesiasticus, in particular, demonstrates how the production of goods was part of monastic income for Much Wenlock, much more so than in other monastic estates, yet also shows how other activities including agriculture and pilgrimage were more financially impactful, suggesting ‘fragmented entrepreneurial innovation’ (Belford 2018:49). It ends by detailing the 1544 purchase of the Madeley estate by Robert Brooke, a useful beginning to the study.

The following chapters are thematic in approach, starting with ‘Society and Religion’, which approaches societal and religious themes as they interweave with the biography of the Brooke family. He explores the meaning and significance of gentry as a term, elucidating the importance of ancestral ties, primogeniture and property ownership in defining their social class. There is then a comprehensive review of the family, highlighting key individuals who influenced the trajectory of the dynasty. This section would be improved with the inclusion of a family tree, as it is sometimes difficult to follow, yet is incredibly wide-ranging in its use of contemporary documents, secondary biography, and monumental inscriptions on family tombs. There is also important consideration of the women of the family, noting how they are not referenced within many of these sources, and those that do often consign them to roles related to family or to faith; Bedford notes their role in maintaining estates during periods of widowhood, but finds little other information about them, something to perhaps be followed in another paper.

There is then an interesting section on performance, defining the omnipresence of theatrical actions not just on the stage but in the interactions of everyday life, and its role in expressing and maintaining socio-political networks. Belford explores the political and courtly roles of the Brooke family, and how this inevitably affected their activities within their physical space. This is tied into their religious identities, experiences, and connections as a Catholic dynasty, the backbone of much of the following work. Belford sees Catholic belief as a constant and highly significant marker of identity throughout the early modern period, held despite the fluctuations in royal religion of the late sixteenth-century and the polarisation caused by the political circumstances around Queen Henrietta Maria in the early seventeenth-century. He explores how the family navigated these changes; he suggests that they had a private, internal faith immediately after Dissolution, which shifted to a more political stance because of Basil Brooke’s connections to the Jesuits from the 1620s. This provides valuable background to exploring how their Catholicism could be expressed through something visible to an archaeologist.

Belford then explores how this religious identity affected and structured the landscape. Key to this section is in the interplay between the development of the Renaissance garden and Catholic identity, referencing concepts developed in art history, garden archaeology, and archaeological studies of designed landscapes from other periods. Belford gives a useful overview of the key features and examples of both, viewing the Renaissance as a coherent design language and Catholic expression as an implied symbology. It is inevitably limited in exploring these ideas at Madeley Court (the Brooke family’s manor house) due to the lack of evidence; the gardens were remodelled throughout the seventeenth-century, whilst the exploitation of minerals throughout the estate has resulted in pit mounds across the landscape that reduce the potential for meaningful geophysical survey. However, Belford does note potential compartmentation of space within the garden and the construction of an orangery or ambulatory, following the expectations of a Renaissance but not overtly Catholic design. The absence of other features is compensated for by detailed discussion of a seventeenth-century sundial, the first study to contextualise it as part of Basil Brooke’s exploration and intellectualism. There is also an almost phenomenological appreciation of the wider estate; as well as the social and economic influence of divisions and settlements, Belford considers the symbolism of viewpoints across the estate and routeways through it, suggesting that a Catholic theological meaning could have been embedded within the landscape by those with sufficient religious teaching to access it.

A similar approach is also applied in ‘Expressions in Architecture’ which compares
both Catholic and early modern ideologies to Madeley’s architecture. This considers Catholicism not just through religious buildings but through secular space, a fairly new approach that has previously focused on Thomas Tresham’s overtly symbolic buildings and on visual statements like the IHS monogram. Belford notes how the integration of private worship and public life in this period meant that all spaces could be religious, whether in the materials used within the space or through mental re-conceptualisation. He integrates a survey of Madeley Court and surrounding buildings and references to previous architectural studies, enabling a portfolio of various design changes throughout the Brooke family’s ownership of the house. This includes exploring the retention of the monastic chapel by Robert Brooke, potentially as a symbol of resistance to the Reformation; he also suggests a similar motivation behind the continuation of a courtyard layout, but rightfully notes that this was an established style of post-Reformation building also seen in Protestant-owned houses. As seen in the previous chapter on landscape, Belford concludes that the architecture represents a ‘conventional sequence of post-dissolution improvement’ (Belford 2018:124) with no overt Catholic meaning. This suggests instead that Catholicism was expressed in other aspects of the Brooke family’s activities.

The next three chapters consider industrialisation, considering the development of industrial processes as a ‘less restricted canvas’ (Belford 2018:129) to express Catholic identity. The whole chaîne opératoire of the production of coal and iron is defined, valuable for a better understanding of the information presented, especially to those with less experience of industrial archaeology. Belford reviews evidence for ironworking in the sixteenth-century, showing that Brooke’s initial priority was the maintenance of the coal industry. The discussion moves to ‘innovation and resistance’, outlining the development by Basil Brooke in the early seventeenth-century of an integrated steelworks undertaking cementation steelmaking, the first of its kind in the country. It is this section that is truly innovative, a comprehensive study of how Brooke developed his mechanisms of supply and manufacture, using evidence from archaeological excavations of the steelworks. He demonstrates the difficulties Brooke faced as both a Catholic and an industrialist at this time, due to economic issues, increasing investment in ironworking by other social classes, and the socio-political exclusion that Catholics often faced. He aptly demonstrates how exceptional Basil Brooke was in bringing post-humanist intellectualism to industry, and how his industrial activities reflected Catholic theological principles of Man’s ordained control over the natural world. It is this last point, that the ironworks were an extension of Brooke’s spiritual and scientific exploration of landscape, that feels instrumental to understanding both the dynasty and the Ironbridge Gorge of this period.

In conclusion, this book is successful in integrating historical, architectural, biographical, landscape, and archaeological approaches to create a nuanced yet persuasive narrative. This is well-expressed in the analogy to a masque made in the concluding chapters, which suggests that the backdrop of both an industrial landscape and country house can be brought to life by studying the actors, or people, living within it. The conclusion thus emphasises the role of the Brookes in forming the Ironbridge Gorge that we see today. It shows the importance of Catholic families in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-centuries not just as oppressed martyrs but as economic, social, and political figures with prolonged influence over society. It is a masterful work and a valuable addition to historical and industrial archaeology.

-Cait Scott