Scholarly interest in the Bayeux Tapestry has heightened to a remarkable degree in recent years with an increased outpouring of books and articles on the subject. Gale Owen-Crocker has contributed to this perhaps more than anyone else and her publications have made her an outstanding authority on the subject. And the fact that all but three of the seventeen articles published in this collection date from the past ten years shows the degree to which her fascination with the tapestry is alive and active today. Since her own specialty has been the history of textiles and dress one might expect that these articles would deal mainly with the kinds of materials used in the tapestry, the system of stitching, and the like. But this is not so. Although she does indeed treat these questions she also approaches the tapestry from a number of other perspectives.

After an eight page introduction to the whole collection the author groups the first three articles under the heading of »Textile«.

I. »Behind the Bayeux Tapestry«, 2009. In this article she describes the first examination of the back of the tapestry in 1982–1983 which was accomplished by looking under earlier linings which had previously covered it, and the light which this shed on various aspects of its production – questions of color, type of stitching used, and later repairs.

II. »The Bayeux Tapestry: invisible seams and visible boundaries«, 2002. This is an examination of the nine separate sections of the tapestry suggesting that separate workshops had worked on them simultaneously, complemented by other evidence pointing to the likelihood that a single master designer had planned and overseen the production of the whole.

III. »Fur, feathers, skin, fibre, wood: representational techniques in the Bayeux Tapestry«, (here published for the first time). A study of the type of embroidery used by the workers – stem stich and laid-and-couched work – and the number of different colors used, and their function in the telling of the narrative.

In the second section of her collection, articles IV and V, Owen-Crocker turns to the question of the sources from which the designer may have drawn for his presentation of the story.

IV. »Reading the Bayeux Tapestry through Canterbury eyes«, 2006. In this article she re-examines scenes presumed to have been borrowed from illuminated manuscripts at Canterbury at this time, St. Augustine’s abbey and Christ Church, in order to find out why the designer had made the choice which he did.
instance the presentation of William ordering the construction of ships for the invasion of England was taken from a scene in the Old English illustrated »Hexateuch« (BL MS Cotton Claudius B iv) showing Lot counseling his sons-in-law to flee from Sodom which faced destruction. Owen-Crocker believes that this use of the citizens of the wicked city of Sodom as models for Duke William could be the designer’s surreptitious expression of disapproval of the Norman commander.

V. »Stylistic variation and Roman influence in the Bayeux Tapestry«, 2009. A study of people, buildings, and activities in several tapestry scenes depicting not battles but peaceful activities such as shipbuilding, castle construction, cooking and banquets. Significant differences in the portrayal of people led her to the conclusion that these may have been late additions to fill otherwise empty spaces in the tapestry. From this she deduces that a second person may have participated in the designing. And she maintains that the designer(s) borrowed even more heavily from scenes in Trajan’s column in Rome than first proposed by Otto Karl Werckmeister in 1976.

In the third section of the collection the author turns to the subject of narrative devices used in the tapestry; the different methods used by the designer(s) to tell the story being presented.

VI. »The embroidered word: text in the Bayeux Tapestry«, 2006. The first of three articles in this category is a study of the inscriptions (tituli) which accompany most of the scenes in the narrative. This leads her to an analysis of the words used – noun, verbs, adjectives, etc. – hints as to Old English or French origin, and to paleographic questions such the types of letters used – Roman and Uncial –, spacing and punctuation. In addition to this she looks into the function and position of the tituli in relation to what is being portrayed visually, and accompanies this with an eight page table comparing all the inscriptions from the perspective of parts of speech and giving the punctuation symbols alongside them.

VII. »Telling a tale: narrative techniques in the Bayeux Tapestry and the Old English epic Beowulf«, 1998. Here Owen-Crocker points to resemblances she finds in the narrative structure of the Bayeux Tapestry and the Old English poem Beowulf, favoring the view that in its present form the latter dates from the eleventh century, hence is close in time to the tapestry. These include a binary structure of main themes, the use of digressions from the main narrative, occasional reversals in time, and repetition of motifs. For this she concentrates on scenes of coronation and feasting in the tapestry.

VIII. »Brothers, rivals and the geometry of the Bayeux Tapestry«, 2005. It would be difficult to view a tapestry of such great length, 225 feet, without wondering whether the commissioner and designer had not made it to fit into a specific room of those dimensions, but most earlier scholars assumed it was intended to be hung and displayed somewhere in Bayeux cathedral. Owen Crocker’s study persuaded her that it was destined for a square room, sides of equal dimensions, in which contrasting scenes involving Odo of Bayeux (William’s half-brother) and Harold of England would be located at central points in walls facing each other, and that proof of this could be found in the corners where the tapestry would have turned 90 degrees in the new direction.
IX. »Squawk talk: commentary by birds in the Bayeux Tapestry?«, 2005. In this first article she identifies and describes the variety of birds portrayed in the borders and points to some which express feelings, sentiments, about the human events taking place above and below them.

X. »The Bayeux Tapestry: the voice from the border«, 2007. Study of the borders of the tapestry has raised many questions in the minds of modern observers. What are the main figures presented, from which sources did the designer(s) take them, what functions did they have in relation to the main narrative, what was the relationship between the upper and lower borders, etc.? Did the imagery of the borders change over the course of the entire hanging? Gale Owen-Crocker addresses these and other related questions in this second of two articles on borders in this collection.

XI. »The Bayeux Tapestry: culottes, tunics and garters, and the making of the hanging«, 1994. From the subject of the borders our author turns next, in two articles, to an examination of the clothes worn by the people in the tapestry, and in this first one she concentrates on the dress of both the English and Norman warriors, noting the tunics of the first and culottes (short trousers) of the second. Differences in detail lead her to the conclusion that the different sections of the tapestry – nine in all – may have been embroidered simultaneously in separate workshops prior to being brought together and sown into a whole. And that some of the embroiderers may have been men.

XII. »Dress and authority in the Bayeux Tapestry«, 2007. In this article Owen-Crocker focuses on the ways in which the tapestry designer(s) singled out the characters in the narrative who held power, King Edward, Harold, William, through the clothes they wore – long cloaks, and sometimes garters, and ornaments.

XIII. »Embroidered wood: animal-headed posts in the Bayeux Tapestry«, 2008. The last three articles deal with other recurrent elements used in the picturing of people, animals, buildings, and events in the tapestry. This one is a study of wooden heads, human and animal, attached to end posts of ships and pieces of furniture from the first half of the tapestry alone (there are none in the second half). Owen-Crocker finds that these heads are carved to express emotions, such as by sticking out their tongues, in reaction to the events then taking place.

XIV. »The Interpretation of gesture in the Bayeux Tapestry«, 2007. Given the severe limitations of space, the tapestry inscriptions were few in number with only a few words at a time, thus the designer(s) relied heavily on the use of human gestures by the characters in the story to convey to the onlookers what was happening as well as the emotions and feelings being expressed. In this article the author examines the ways in which people used the pointed finger, and the hand held open, etc. to express surprise, hope, grief, religious feelings, supplications etc. She accompanies her analysis with a five page table classifying the dozens of examples she found according to the type of gesture, the persons gesturing, their objectives; and their relationship in some cases to the inscriptions.

XV. »Hawks and horse-trappings: the insignia of rank«, 1991. The concluding article is a study of the
horse trappings pictured in the tapestry – stirrups, bits, bridles, reins, saddles – and the presence of hawks carried by riders showing an interest in falconry.

Owen-Crocker’s articles exemplify the changes which have taken place in Bayeux Tapestry studies in the past few years. The central questions remain the same as they were when Frank Stenton published his basic book in 1957: when was the tapestry made, where, how, by whom, why? But these articles show a deeper probing into the evidence, an approach narrowed down to the most minute examination of detail. The renewed appraisal of the stitch work as revealed by the opening of the back of the tapestry; the dissection of the words in the inscriptions, the analysis of gestures and of the various elements in the borders, etc. To me one of the most impressive traits of Owen-Crocker’s work is the wide range of her research. In addition to looking at this tapestry as a specialist in textiles and dress, she has approached it as an art historian looking for sources of borrowings, as a literary historian seeking a deeper understanding of narrative structure, as one explaining horses, birds, and gestures. This has led to findings of central importance for the understanding of this incredible work of art. Scholars interested in further research on the Bayeux Tapestry are fortunate to have these articles now brought together into a single volume.