In his new book Nigel Saul blends his personal interest in architecture with the history of one baronial family of moderate significance in the late middle ages through the study of their monumental brasses. Saul lays out his rationale in the first chapter, noting that although brasses have been studied in depth before, they have only been studied for their own uses. He argues that we need to place the study of these brasses within a wider context, because brasses and all funerary monuments were part of a society’s material culture and, as such, should be interpreted (pp. 5-6). Such monuments served as a focal point for commemoration of the dead through inscriptions placed on the brasses; served as a focal point for annual ceremonies and helped in the bereavement process for the living; and provided a visual symbol, to all who saw them, of the legitimization and the station of the person there buried.

Saul moves from his introduction to a discussion of the Cobham family down to the seventeenth century. From 1313 they were among the leading landowning families in the south-east of England. From relatively humble origins, the Cobhams rose to prominence in the thirteenth century through an eclectic mix of wise land transactions, good marriages, government service, and luck. In 1313 the Cobhams were summoned to Parliament as barons for the first time. Saul traces the family’s land acquisitions in Kent as well as in Wiltshire and Somerset, along with the growth of cadet branches of the family.

The third chapter begins with a discussion of the parish church at Cobham, the seat of the main line of the family. Here, Saul works to demonstrate the Cobhams’ interest in the church fabric. Sir John Cobham was helpful in restoring some of that fabric in the 1320s (pp. 41-42). Nonetheless, the church did not lay in the possession of the Cobhams, but rather under the control of the Prior of Bermondsey until 1362 when John, third lord Cobham, founded the Cobham Chantry or Cobham College (p. 42). Cobham’s chantry was as large as it was ambitious. Saul describes it as a “monastery in miniature” (p. 43). It is possible that Cobham took King Edward III’s building of the College of St. George in Windsor as his inspiration. Whatever the case, Cobham’s initial foundation provided for a staff of five chaplains before rising to seven in 1389, following the acquisition of more collegiate lands, and eventually to eleven (p. 44). Though, on first sight, these numbers sound impressive, Saul cautions the reader that “Cobham’s initial endowment was modest. For a man of baronial standing his estates were by no means large” (p. 44). Yet Cobham College, though not overly wealthy, was “hardly an encumbered one” (p. 46). Saul then provides a description of the College (now dismantled) from sixteenth-century sources (pp. 46-54). Although the grand College envisioned by its founder remained unfinished at his death (and was probably overly optimistic in its conception), the College functioned well until the dissolution, when it was sold back to the Cobham family rather than to the Crown (pp. 59-60).

Chapter 4 is a discussion of brass monuments in general and Saul places these in the cultural milieu of late medieval England. He traces their first use by bishops in the thirteenth century and demonstrates that by the 1280s and 1290s engravers began to extend their brass monument craft to the laity (p. 66). Saul also discusses the production of the brasses themselves in a section on the brass workshops of the period. He argues that prior to the Black Death regional brass workshops were the norm.
in England, where brasses were produced in wide variety. After the mid-fourteenth century, however, brass-work shifted mainly because of the effects of the Plague on the artisans and also because of the increasing authority of London-made brasses (pp. 67-68). Medieval brasses were almost mass produced, and as such they tended to be stylized representations of the deceased rather than an actual portrait. This was perhaps even more the case after the Black Death as many brasses were imported from Flanders (pp. 68-69). Following this discussion, Saul takes up the question of why the Cobham’s preferred brasses to relief monuments. He concludes that the Cobhams preferred brasses because they fit well into the college and were unobstructive, where a number of tomb-chests would have cluttered up the chancel and caused no end of logistical difficulty (pp. 73-74).

Chapter 5 is a discussion of the brasses at Cobham itself. Saul pays careful attention to each brass, discussing each one in great detail, including the size of the tombs, the inscriptions, and the representations of the occupants. One of the central questions dealt with in this chapter involves the arrangement of the tombs within the chancel of the church at Cobham, namely whether it is original or Victorian. Through a careful reading of the wills of the deceased (i.e., those wills that specifically state where they are to be buried in the chancel) and antiquarian accounts, Saul argues that although some re-arrangement has taken place, the “self-consciousness of the Cobham layout is very much a product of the middle ages” (p. 80).

Chapter 6 is a discussion of the Cobhams of Sterborough, a collateral branch of the Cobham family founded by Reginald, Lord Cobham, who died in 1361 (p. 123). Saul takes the reader through the family history of this cadet branch of the family down to the mid-fifteenth century and establishes the church at Lingfield as their family mausoleum.

Chapter 7 is a discussion of the brasses at Lingfield. Here too, Saul discusses each monument in detail. At Lingfield, however, there are several notable differences in both the style and plan of the Cobham mausoleum. Unlike at Cobham where John, third Lord Cobham, had laid out the design of his mausoleum and his successors had followed the plan, Lingfield is a more eclectic mix of brasses and tomb-chests without much regard to placement within the church (p. 147). The earliest monument at Lingfield is that of Reginald, First Lord Cobham of Sterborough, and this is a tomb-chest, not a brass (p. 149). He was influenced in his choice of tomb not by his family, but rather by the Berkeleys who were related to the Cobhams of Sterborough through marriage (pp. 150-151). Saul then takes the reader through a discussion of the armorial devices on the tomb to demonstrate political contacts from all over the country and to further demonstrate the interconnected nature of late-medieval English politics (pp. 153-158). The chapter then turns to a discussion of the tomb-chest of Reginald, Lord Cobham, who died in 1446 (pp. 176-180), and concludes with a detailed discussion of the Cobham brasses found at Lingfield (pp. 181-191). At the end of the chapter Saul sums up the differences between the two cadet branches of the same family. Although they interacted with each other in politics and in family affairs, the Cobhams of Cobham and Cobhams of Sterborough projected their immortality in completely different ways and the two sets of monuments reveal completely different priorities. At Lingfield the emphasis is on status and rank, best evidenced by the imposing (and costly) tomb-chests, whereas at Cobham the emphasis is on dynasty and lineage (pp. 189-191). The eighth chapter is a discussion of tombs and brasses associated with the Cobhams in other churches and parts of the country (pp. 192-225), while the ninth chapter is a summing up and conclusion of the work (pp. 227-249).

Taken as a whole, Saul has produced a fine, intriguing, and very readable work. Its thesis is as clear as it is convincing. If the book has any failings it would perhaps be in its scope. The limitation of the discussion to only one family is perhaps too narrow. One useful path of investigation might have been to place these brasses within the context of other lords, barons, and gentry folk in the local area. In addition, a broader comparison between Lord Cobham’s building efforts of the family mausoleum and other baronial mausoleums would be helpful to place the Cobham family experience within a broader cultural milieu. But such quibbles do not detract from the overall impact of the work. Use of monuments, be they brass, marble, or alabaster, are an important source for historians of medieval society and culture as well as historians of medieval politics. As K. B. McFarlane pointed out long ago, monuments “throw a lot of light” on who these men and women were and, thus, deserve careful study, as Professor Saul demonstrates to us.[1]

Note
