

The Glory of Ottawa: Canada's First Parliament Buildings

Carolyn A. Young, *The Glory of Ottawa: Canada's First Parliament Buildings* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995). 216 p., illus, refs, index. ISBN 0773512276, \$34.95 cloth. Review by Jacqueline Hucker.

On the vaulted ceiling of the small vestibule in front of the entrance to the Library of Parliament in Ottawa are two uncarved bosses. They were about to be carved in January 1877 when the order came to dismantle the scaffolding and clear the area so that parquet flooring could be installed in time for the opening session of the Supreme Court, then housed in temporary quarters nearby. The floor was laid but the scaffolding was never re-erected; the uncarved bosses remain as a charming reminder that buildings themselves can be archives, containing numerous small clues to the history of their construction.

Carolyn Young is a good detective and has picked up on many of the clues the Parliament Buildings have to offer. She is also a meticulous researcher. Having apparently navigated the National Archives with ease, she has thoughtfully appended to her slim volume thirty pages of material relating to the architectural competition and subsequent construction of the Parliament and Departmental Buildings, thereby making valuable information accessible to future researchers.

Young's book is in two parts: the first delves into the 1859 architectural competition for the design and plans for the group of government buildings which were to be erected on Barrack Hill in Ottawa; the second documents the actual construction of the buildings. Her purpose, Young states, is to answer how a young and distant colony of Great Britain succeeded in producing a first-class group of major public buildings in the most fashionable style of the day, structures that have long enjoyed an international reputation. The competition attracted 20 entrants who provided 32 designs comprising 298 drawings. Most of these drawings have unfortunately been lost, but Young includes in her book several illustrations of those that have survived.

The architects who won the competition to design the Centre Block and attached library were Thomas Fuller and Chilion Jones, while Thomas Stent and Augustus Laver were

awarded the commission for the two adjacent Departmental Buildings. (As is well known, Fuller and Jones' Centre Block burned down in 1916, to be replaced by the present building designed by Pearson and Marchand). Young's research has not produced any startlingly new information, with the exception of her conclusion that Fuller and Jones had plagiarized the work of an English architect. But more on this later; in essence, it was all a matter of timing: good, young British architects (Thomas Stent at age 37 was the oldest of the four), three of whom had arrived from Great Britain within the previous three years, won this great public commission at exactly the time when architecture and engineering were entering a confident stage of progression.

This is not to suggest that Young's efforts have been fruitless. On the contrary, by discussing the international influences on Canadian architecture in the 1850s—particularly by explaining the roles of John Ruskin and William Butterfield and eloquently expanding upon the period's romantic interest in combining eclectic historicism with structural rationalism to create picturesque compositions—she has done an excellent job of placing the buildings in the contemporary scene and underscoring their great value.

In the process, Young reveals the inconsistencies in the judging process, which together with petty corruption and inexperience contributed to the protracted exercise of transforming the designs into buildings. Along the way, the author documents the roles played by the Legislative Assembly's librarian Alpheus Todd and by the Department of Public Works. Todd provided the architects with the library's distinctive circular plan, an example of which had just been published in Edward Edwards' *Memoirs of Libraries*, and from which was derived the recently erected Reading Room of the British Museum in London. The Department of Public Works played a key role by adjusting the scale of the buildings and by altering features of the designs to produce the harmonious final composition on Parliament Hill.

Young raises interesting questions concerning contemporary British work that clearly influenced the winning designs, focusing on four: Dean and Woodward's Oxford Museum of Natural Sciences; Alfred Waterhouse's proposal

for the Manchester Assize Courts; George Gilbert Scott's designs for the Town Hall in Hamburg; and the same architect's scheme for the Foreign Office in London. All of these would have been available to the architects from contemporary publications. In tracking down the influences, Young discovered that Fuller and Jones plagiarized sections of the submission that accompanied Waterhouse's entry for the Assize Courts in order to strengthen their argument for the choice of the Gothic Revival style. She goes further, charging them with using this very design for their unsuccessful entry for the Departmental Buildings. (Could Young have begun her research with a notion to reveal a Canadian version of the British "Battle of the Styles" which was then raging over the choice of style for the government offices, but found nothing and turned instead to the interesting matter of influences on the Canadian buildings?)

As the author herself reminds the reader, however, in the 1850s all these architects, Canadian and British alike, were developing new building types, and in the process were transforming the Gothic Revival into its dynamic final stage. All were initially obliged to call on a limited number of stock features and all were probably guilty of borrowing compositional devices from one another. In a matter of four short years, for example, the detached chapterhouse/monastery kitchen motif moved from the Oxford Museum to University College, Toronto, and then to Parliament Hill in Ottawa. What is interesting about this particular motif is that its use reveals how dependent the architects were on historical models during this early stage of "Civic" Gothic.

It may well be that Fuller and Jones did not produce original work in the modern understanding of that phrase; however, a few presentation drawings are insufficient evidence on which to base such a charge. Which brings me back to the uncarved bosses in front of the library entrance. In concentrating almost exclusively on contemporary presentation drawings, the author has essentially overlooked the buildings' interior designs. In the case of the interior of the Centre Block, she would have found a most important and obvious source of influence: the Palace of Westminster, in London.

Although by 1859 Charles Barry's Romantic Gothic style for the new Houses of Parliament in London had long since fallen out of fashion, the building itself had only just been completed, and contained many novel features. The documents related to the construction of the Parliament Hill complex suggest that all those associated with the Ottawa buildings were conscious of the newly completed Palace of Westminster, and were concerned not only to evoke the British Houses of Parliament but to improve upon them. In settling on the choice of

variegated Nepean sandstone, for example, the Clerk of the Works remarked that it was far superior to the exterior stone used in the British building. Certainly, plans for both legislative chambers were modelled on the Westminster examples, whose designs were widely published in the 1850s, as were such components as the chambers' novel overhead lighting, which Fuller and Jones adapted for the Ottawa building. One suspects that a close comparison of the two structures would reveal many more connections.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Fuller and Jones did not design either the Library's iron dome or its wonderful interior finish. Fuller and Jones had been aware that iron in some capacity would be required to span the 87-foot diameter Reading Room and support the heavy lantern, but they had left the project before a solution had been found. After much deliberation, the Department of Public Works decided to order a prefabricated wrought-iron dome from the Fairbairn Engineering Company of Manchester, England. The dome arrived partially assembled in November 1870. In the case of the library's interior finish, Fuller and Jones had followed Alpheus Todd's advice and specified that the book stacks that line the Reading Room walls and all the doors be constructed in iron as a precaution against fire. Accordingly, in 1874, a young architect named Frederick Alexander, recently arrived from London, England, and ensconced in the Department of Public Works, was asked to provide drawings and specifications. By this time, however, Thomas Seaton Scott had been appointed the department's first Chief Architect, and he ordered the specifications for all but the main entrance door be changed to oak. He also directed Alexander to produce a new set of designs for the wooden stacks.

Scott oversaw the repainting of the dome ceiling and later secured permission to scrap Fuller and Jones' plan for a "fire-proof" concrete floor in favour of parquet—the same floor which would later be extended to the vestibule and interfere with the carving of the bosses. Taken together, the changes suggest that, in completing the library, Scott imposed the aesthetic taste of the 1870s, with its lighter palette and greater emphasis on comfort, over the functionalism of the 1850s. Ironically, the iron door installed at the main entrance subsequently saved the library from the fire that destroyed Fuller and Jones' Centre Block.

All of which is to say that there is still a lot to be learned about Canada's most important 19th century buildings. Too often we rely upon out-of-date scholarship. One of the great pleasures of Young's book is that she is aware of this problem and revisits the subject with fresh eyes. She has added to our knowledge, and in the process has produced an interesting and very useful book.