

THE CANADIAN CHURCHES OF STEPHEN C. EARLE¹

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Trinity Church in Digby, Nova Scotia (figs. 1, 6-8), was the first of three churches (or arguably four, as will be seen) in what is now Atlantic Canada to be built from one set of drawings made by the American architect Stephen C. Earle. As well as being a notable Canadian work by a notable American architect, Trinity is a useful case study. The style of Earle's design provides an interesting insight into the cultural meaning of Gothic in nineteenth-century Atlantic Canada, and into the circumstances in which the style was introduced and promoted. The popularity and subsequent proliferation of the design is an instructive (if idiosyncratic) reminder of the diverse ways in which architectural ideas and forms were disseminated in nineteenth-century Canada.

Stephen C. Earle was born in 1839 in Leicester, Massachusetts.² He apprenticed in the office of architect Calvert Vaux in New York, before taking time out to fight in the American Civil War. After the war, he returned briefly to Vaux's office before relocating to Worcester, Massachusetts, finding work as an architectural draughtsman in the office of Elbridge Boyden. His historicist instincts were honed by a tour of Europe in 1865, and he set up his own practice in Worcester the following year.

Born and raised a Quaker, Earle's first major commission was close to home—the Quaker Meeting House in Brooklyn, New York, finished in 1868.³ This boxy, brick oblong structure reveals a hint of medievalist taste in its pilaster strips and arched corbel tables—possibly the legacy of a European tour Earle had undertaken in the summer of 1865.⁴ These details,



FIG. 1. TRINITY CHURCH, DIGBY. | PETER COFFMAN.

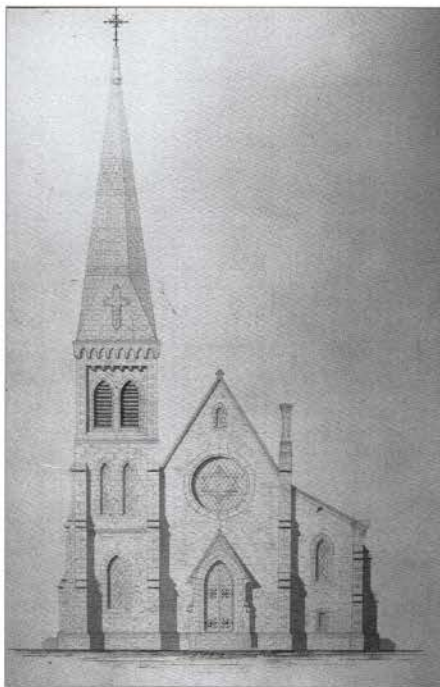


FIG. 2. STEPHEN C. EARLE, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, NORTH ADAMS. | AMERICAN ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY.

associated with Early Romanesque, may also have struck a suitably “primitive” note appropriate to the simple, unadorned liturgy of the Quakers.

Around the same time that the Brooklyn Meeting House was built, Earle began a long and fruitful relationship with the Episcopal Church. This relationship would soon result in Earle’s conversion to Episcopalianism—or perhaps it was his conversion that fostered the relationship, it is difficult to say from this distance in time. Either way, Earle brought the enthusiasm and vigour of the convert to his Episcopal designs. His first effort, St. John’s in North Adams, Massachusetts, shows that he was completely at home in the Gothic style (fig. 2). The corner tower, broach spire, and six-pointed star rose window are features that would find clear echoes in his Canadian oeuvre. While Earle continued to establish himself as an accomplished church architect, his grandest ecclesiastical design was never



FIG. 3. THE ORIGINAL TRINITY CHURCH, DIGBY. | THE NOVA SCOTIA MUSEUM.

built. Earle lost the competition for New York’s Cathedral of St. John the Divine to Ralph Adams Cram, but his entry demonstrates both his rising national stature and his flexible use of historical Gothic.⁵ Its twin-towered façade, copious and prominent flying buttresses, and broad, polygonal crossing tower combined into an eclectic yet coherent whole.

All of Earle’s Gothic designs demonstrate fluency with architectural principles that had been formed in England over the preceding few decades. At the foundation of those principles were Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin and John Ruskin, who developed separate but related theories arguing that Gothic was morally and ethically superior to other styles of architecture, and that it could be used as a path to a more virtuous, harmonious society.⁶ Parallel to this was the Oxford (or “Tractarian”) Movement, whose numerous “Tracts for the Times” advocated a return to more ritualistic, medieval-based liturgy for the Church of England.⁷ The Tractarians spawned a renewed, Anglo-Catholic liturgical practice still

known as the High Church, while all of the above were immensely influential on the group known as the Cambridge Camden Society (later renamed the Ecclesiological Society).⁸ That Society, founded in 1839, was the self-appointed architectural authority for the Anglican communion worldwide; it vigorously pursued its approved form of Gothic as the only acceptable style for the Church of England. All of these ideas converged to inform a great deal of architecture produced in the colonies, including Canada, and provided the intellectual backdrop to events in Digby, Nova Scotia, in the 1870s.

On Easter weekend in 1876, the Anglicans of Digby met to choose a rector.⁹ The interim rector, John Ambrose, was up for induction as their permanent vicar. The process was far from a formality, as Ambrose’s predecessor, Harry Leigh Yewens, also had considerable support. The difference between the two candidates was not one of performance, or even popularity, but ideology. According to the Vestry Minutes, a parishioner by the name of Mr. DeBahuchas called for



FIG. 4. STEPHEN C. EARLE, WEST FAÇADE, TRINITY CHURCH. | TRINITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES.

a vote, and put the issue into sharp focus by stating that he “had no objection to Mr. Ambrose but as the parish was vacant there should be a choice between Rev. Mr. Ambrose and Rev. Mr. Yewens, between a high churchman and a low churchman.”¹⁰

Underlying this seemingly straightforward suggestion was a significant struggle within the Anglican Church, not just in Nova Scotia but also worldwide. On one side of the argument was the Low Church—severely Protestant, evangelical, and famous for sermons that could go on for hours. Opposed to this was the High Church—ritualistic, essentially medieval in its liturgical practices, and as far as its detractors were concerned, Roman Catholic in all but name.¹¹ To the Low Church party, the High Church liturgy was a thinly disguised attempt to restore Popery. The High Church party, of course, saw things differently. To them, the use of medieval liturgy was an affirmation

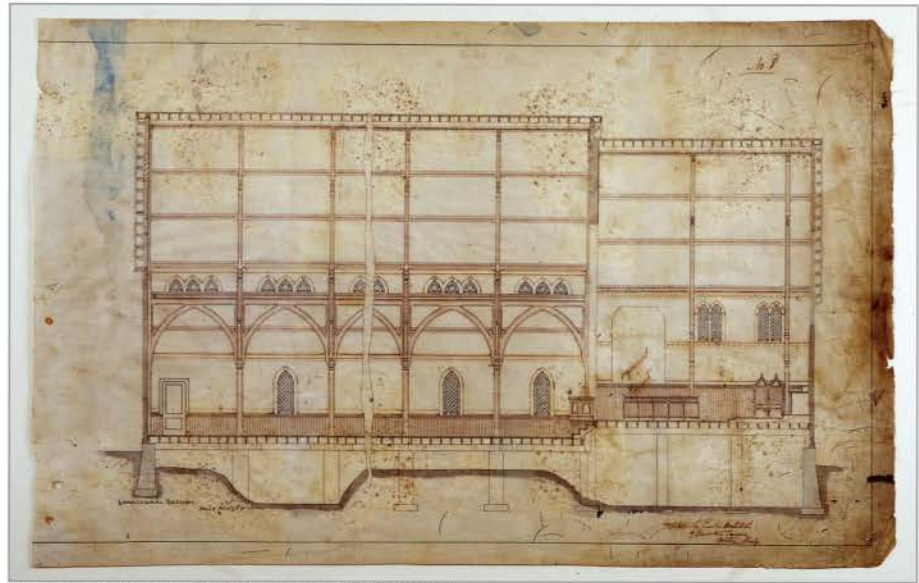


FIG. 5. STEPHEN C. EARLE, CROSS-SECTION, TRINITY CHURCH. | TRINITY HISTORICAL SOCIETY ARCHIVES.

of the ancient authority of the English Church; an authority derived from the belief that its bishops and vicars were the only true successors to the apostles. As Hibbert Binney, the first Tractarian Bishop of Nova Scotia, put it in his *Charge to the Clergy* of 1866:

We believe that our present ministers can trace back their authority, as derived by succession, through an unbroken line, from those who received their commission from Christ; whereas these other [Protestant] bodies cannot pretend to claim any such authority for their ministers.¹²

Thus, at the heart of the High Church is a very concrete vision of the English nation, its Church, and its place at the centre of history.

The parish of Digby duly held its vote, and the result was a victory of Ambrose over Yewens, by a count of forty-four to thirty-eight. While perhaps not a ringing endorsement, this was nonetheless a clear-cut victory for the High Church. Almost immediately, Ambrose set out

to build a new church. Earlier that year, he had complained that the existing building was “uncomfortable, leaky, and had several other highly objectionable [sic] qualities—and the time had arrived when a new church should be built.”¹³ Given the High Church belief in Gothic as the only suitable style for the English nation and Established Church, the building’s Classical style (fig. 3) was presumably among those “objectable qualities.” In its blend of Gibbsonian massing and Meeting House details, the building represented the Low-Church liturgy and architecture which had just lost the “election” at Digby. Ambrose was understandably determined to cement his victory and advance his agenda with a new church building.

By July of that year, a plan had been made to obtain a design from “an excellent architect at Charlottetown P.E.I.,” the renowned William Critchlow Harris.¹⁴ By that September, Harris had submitted a design that could be completed for seven thousand dollars if built of wood, or eleven thousand dollars if made of



FIG. 6. TRINITY CHURCH, DIGBY. | PETER COFFMAN.



FIG. 9. CHRIST CHURCH, WINDSOR. | PETER COFFMAN.



FIG. 7. TRINITY CHURCH, DIGBY. | PETER COFFMAN.



FIG. 8. TRINITY CHURCH, DIGBY, INTERIOR. | PETER COFFMAN.

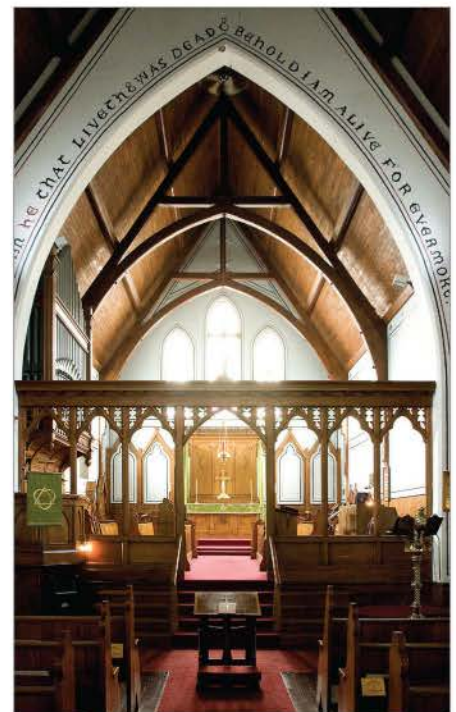


FIG. 10. CHRIST CHURCH, WINDSOR, INTERIOR. | PETER COFFMAN.

stone. The vestry, somewhat optimistically, voted to build in stone. This decision was reversed by a more realistic (and unanimous) vote the following February. By Easter 1877, no progress had been made, and it was reported that: "Mr. Ambrose read a letter from Rev. A. Gray... and also one from Mr. Earle,

Architect, with plans of a church which could be built for \$4000 exclusive of inside finish."¹⁵

In the absence of any more detailed evidence than that summarized above, it may be supposed that cost was the reason why Harris, a (nearly) local architect of

considerable fame, was rejected in favour of an American competitor. The Reverend A. Gray, mentioned above, donated one hundred and forty dollars to cover Earle's stated design fee (which the architect had discounted by ten dollars), so Earle evidently had at least one influential champion in Digby. Whether Earle's plan was

in any way, practically or aesthetically, superior to Harris' cannot be known, as the latter's design has disappeared without a trace.

Earle's design (figs. 4-5) was Gothic, with the broach spire, corner tower, six-pointed star window, and overall massing closely modeled on his earlier church at North Adams (although the tower has moved to a different corner, at the junction of nave and chancel). The conversion of the style from the masonry of North Adams to the carpentry of Nova Scotia is complete and convincing. A mixture of vertical and diagonal wooden siding reflects the current Ecclesiological theory regarding the translation of Gothic into wood,¹⁶ the shingle detailing in the tower and spire dovetails perfectly with available Nova Scotian craftsmanship, while the hint of half-timber detailing in the tower reflect the currently popular Shingle style in the United States. On the interior (fig. 5), the open-work arcade, clerestory, raised chancel floor and separate chancel roofline also reflect meticulous knowledge on Earle's part (and likely his patron's) of Ecclesiology.

The Gothic style would have been a novelty to the people of Digby in 1877, whose experience of Anglican church architecture would have been limited to the new building's Classical predecessor. In the aftermath of the highly contentious clerical vote of the year before, this style was full of meaning—and its presence here is a perfect example of history being written by the winners. Gothic, and only Gothic, was the accepted style of the High Church. Its ancient roots were thought to mirror the ancient pedigree and authority of the English Church. The Gothic Revival, according to its most prolific and successful English practitioner, Sir George Gilbert Scott, was "the revival of our own national architecture,"¹⁷ and

it had brought church architecture "back to our true national type."¹⁸ So identified did Gothic become with this vision of Englishness that, by the late nineteenth century, it was widely considered the architecture of the nation, of its Established Church, and of the Empire.¹⁹

The fidelity of the building to Earle's design—and to the principles of Ecclesiological Gothic that he so clearly understood—can be seen in figures 6 to 8. The key ecclesiological principles—truth to materials, separate chancel, clear articulation of spaces, steeply pitched roofs, precise Gothic detailing—have been seamlessly translated into the traditions of Nova Scotian carpentry. The church was consecrated on October 15, 1880, by its Bishop, Hibbert Binney. Binney was the first Tractarian Bishop of Nova Scotia, and this church, along with the election of Ambrose, represented a very notable victory for him in what had often been a resistant and intransigent diocese with deeply rooted Low-Church traditions. As the day of consecration approached, the building was described in some detail in the Anglican periodical *The Church Guardian*:

The style is that known as Early English Pointed... The roofs, equilateral as the style requires, are all open timbered, the timbers being of southern pine, and the wainscoting of black ash, all well oiled, so that the beautiful natural grain of the materials show to best advantage.²⁰

At the consecration service, Bishop Binney praised the church as: "a beautiful Church—which, eschewing all shams and imitations—showed itself to be what it really is, a wooden building."²¹

This praise for the church's truthful use of materials could have come from the mouth of Pugin, or Ruskin, or the

Ecclesiological Society—and indicates Binney's familiarity with all three. They all shared a common vision of what the English Nation, its history, and its Established Church looked like when expressed architecturally. And this vision, notwithstanding the resistance it met when Binney first introduced it to Nova Scotia, would flourish through the widespread proliferation of Earle's design.

It is generally assumed that styles and forms are transmitted from place to place in a purposeful and meaningful way; and it is generally agreed that patrons such as Charles Inglis and John Ambrose, or publications such as James Gibbs' *Book of Architecture* or Pugin's *Contrasts*, facilitate the movement of architectural ideas and the ideologies that accompany them.²² There is ample evidence to support this view, but the precise mechanisms by which architectural forms and ideas traveled are not always explored in detail. The subsequent uses of Earle's design for Digby provides a well-documented and useful (albeit perhaps unusual) example of how architectural forms moved from place to place in nineteenth-century Canada.

In September of 1879, the Anglican ladies of Windsor, Nova Scotia, met to form a committee whose goal was to raise funds to build a new church.²³ Fundraising was difficult, but ultimately successful, and the first service in the new building was held in March of 1884. Doubtless of some help to the fundraising campaign was the fact that no architect's fee would be required—Stephen C. Earle's design for Trinity Church in Digby would be used at no cost. It has been reported that Earle agreed to allow his drawings to be used for free at Windsor on the condition that they not be altered in any way.²⁴ No primary documents exist to confirm this, but the building's fidelity



FIG. 11. ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH, HANTSPORT. | PETER COFFMAN.

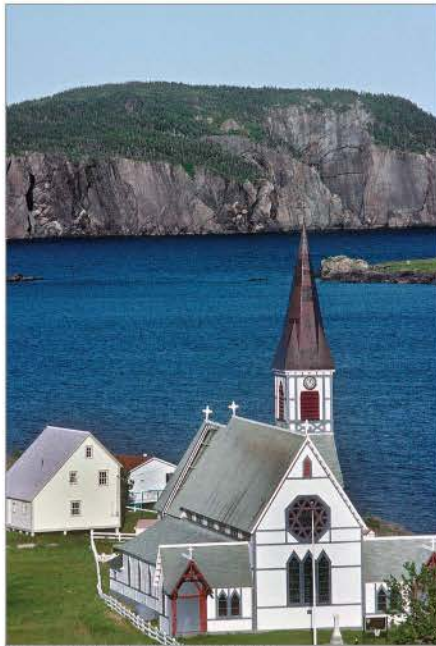


FIG. 13. ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, TRINITY. | PETER COFFMAN.

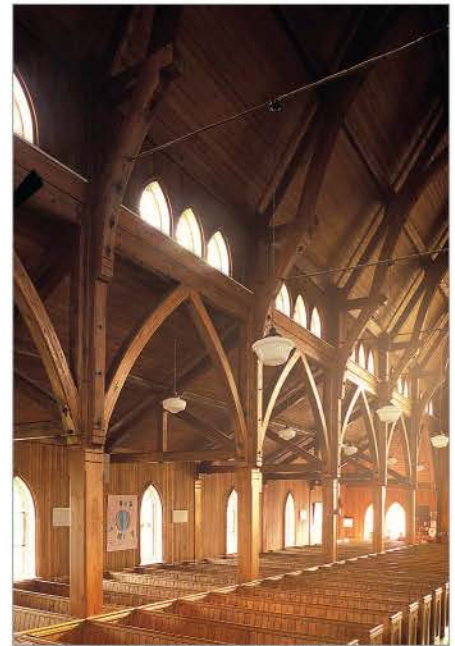


FIG. 15. ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, TRINITY, interior interior. | PETER COFFMAN.



FIG. 12. ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH, HANTSPORT. | PETER COFFMAN.



FIG. 14. ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, TRINITY. | PETER COFFMAN.

to Earle's plan is clear, notwithstanding the extraordinarily unsympathetic later replacement of the clapboard and shingle with vinyl siding (fig. 9). Fortunately, the interior (fig. 10) is much better preserved, and clearly exhibits the truthful use of material, the fine craftsmanship and lucid geometry that had been considered so praiseworthy at Digby.

The builder at Windsor was a Mr. W. Taylor, who was singled out by the Rector for particular praise at the consecration service.²⁵ Work at Windsor began just as the church at Digby was consecrated—a fortuitous (or perhaps planned) circumstance that would have made the loan and transfer of the drawings a simple matter. The fact that the

Digby drawings were so coveted may be taken as an indication of just how admired the church must have been—and as an indication that the influence of the High Church party of Ambrose and Binney was waxing. That this design was coveted is beyond doubt—indeed at Windsor, it was only halfway through its journey across Atlantic Canada.

The town of Hantsport, Nova Scotia, lies just a few miles north and slightly west of Windsor. The cornerstone of the Anglican church of St. Andrew (figs. 11-12) was laid in October of 1888, and consecration took place in October of 1894.²⁶ According to one writer, a meeting of May 4, 1888, “adopted the plan for the church drawn by Mr. Robert Burns.”²⁷ That may be the case, but if so, it is not difficult to determine from where Robert Burns drew his inspiration. While reduced in scale and complexity, the similarities between St. Andrew’s and the recently completed churches at Digby and Windsor are unmistakable. Indeed, there is not a major feature at Hantsport that is not in Earle’s drawings, and the “signature” features, such as the broach spire and six-pointed star window, are duplicated quite precisely. So, while not officially recognized as an Earle building, it is reasonable to add Hantsport to the list of Canadian churches that issued from Earle’s Digby drawings.

The builder at Hantsport was Joseph Taylor, of Lower Falmouth.²⁸ It is reasonable to speculate that he may have been related to the W. Taylor who had finished building the church at Windsor four years earlier. In fact, the *Biographical Dictionary of Architects of Nova Scotia* identifies Joseph Taylor as the builder of both Windsor and Hantsport.²⁹ Either way, it seems unquestionable that the builder of this church had direct access to Earle’s drawings. That those drawings were still on hand, in Ambrose’s possession, becomes clear from their next and final peregrination.

As early as 1883, a committee met in Trinity, Newfoundland, to discuss the state of St. Paul’s Anglican Church.³⁰ The building was reported to be dilapidated and in need of extensive repair. It was also an essentially Classical building in the Gibbsian tradition (pointed windows

notwithstanding) that must have seemed out of date. The committee decided to proceed with the building of a new church, although nothing happened for four years. The congregation met to debate the issue in 1888, and after what the vestry minutes describe as “a considerable amount of discussion,” the decision was made to build according to a design obtained, for fifty dollars, from the Reverend John Ambrose of Digby, Nova Scotia (which makes the net cost to Ambrose for the design a mere ninety dollars).³¹ So, like a modern-day Newfoundlander crossing the country in search of work, Earle’s drawings left Ambrose, Digby, Windsor, and Hantsport behind, and made one final trip, to Newfoundland.

The hardships, delays, and challenges of the building of St. Paul’s in Trinity (figs. 13-15) are alternately agonizing and amusing, and have been adequately summarized elsewhere.³² The building was finally consecrated in 1894, and still ranks as one of the most impressive wooden churches in Newfoundland. No evidence exists that Earle benefitted in the slightest from this fourth use of his Digby drawings, or that he even knew about it.

The trajectory of Stephen Earle’s design for Trinity Church in Digby provides an informative window into the transmission of the Gothic Revival throughout what is now Atlantic Canada, as well as to the ideas and practices associated with the style at the time. Although the initial resistance to these ideas had been, at times, as fierce as a Maritime gale, the continuing demand for Earle’s drawings trace the progress that Tractarianism and Gothic made toward mainstream acceptance in Anglican Canada. By the time St. Paul’s in Trinity was consecrated, the nearly twenty-year-old drawings had lost much of their contentiousness, but none of their allure.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank the many people who helped with various aspects of this research, in particular Lorraine Slopek, Diocesan Archivist of Nova Scotia and PEI, Claire Campbell and Shirley Tillotson of Dalhousie University, William Naftel of Halifax, Canon Robert Tuck of Charlottetown, the Reverend David Cury of Windsor, the Reverend William Burt of Digby, and Malcolm Thurlby, editor of the present volume. I would also like to thank the American Antiquarian Society, Nova Scotia Museum, and Trinity Historical Society (in particular James Miller) for illustrations. This research was made possible by the Killam Foundation.
2. For biographical information on Earle, see Dahl, Curtis, 1987, *Stephen C. Earle, Architect: Shaping Worcester’s Image*, Worcester, Massachusetts, Worcester Heritage Preservation Society.
3. For an illustration, see Dahl : 28.
4. Dahl : 8.
5. For an illustration, see Dahl : 37.
6. Pugin’s key texts are *Contrasts: Or, A Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries and Similar Buildings of the Present Day. Shewing the Present Decay of Taste. Accompanied by Appropriate Text* (1836), and *The True Principles of Pointed Or Christian Architecture: Set Forth in Two Lectures Delivered at St. Marie’s, Oscott* (1841). Ruskin’s key works on Gothic are *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853).
7. Useful summaries of Tractarianism are found in the more recent surveys of the Gothic Revival, particularly Brooks, Chris, 1999, *The Gothic Revival*, London, Phaidon Press; and Lewis, Michael, 2002, *The Gothic Revival*, London and New York, Thames and Hudson.
8. Useful summaries of Ecclesiology are also found in Brooks and Lewis. Important primary documents are reproduced in Webster, Christopher (ed.), 2003, *Temples... Worthy of His Presence: the Early Publications of the Cambridge Camden Society*, London, Spire Books.
9. The account of the choice of rector is drawn from the *Vestry Minutes 1862-92*, Diocesan Archives, MG3 Series, vol. 13, no. 5.
10. *Vestry Minutes*, Easter 1876, p. 132.
11. For a broad discussion of the history of the Anglican Church in Canada, see Hayes, Alan

- L., 2004, *Anglicans in Canada: Controversies and Identity in Historical Perspective*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press. On how the High/Low Church conflict unfolded in Atlantic Canada, see Tuck, Robert, 2002, "The Impact of Tractarianism on the Maritimes," paper delivered June 30, 1983, at The Atlantic Theological Conference, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, in marking the 150th anniversary of the Oxford Movement (1833) [rev. September 2002], available at *Project Canterbury*, [<http://anglicanhistory.org/>], accessed December, 2012. On the introduction of High-Church liturgy and architecture to Nova Scotia and the resistance met, see Coffman, Peter, 2012, "The Introduction of Ecclesiology to Nova Scotia," in Alex Bremner (ed.), *Ecclesiology Abroad: the Empire and Beyond*, London, The Victorian Society, 2012, p. 79-93.
12. Binney, Hibbert, 1866, *A Charge Delivered to the Clergy at the Visitation Held in the Cathedral Church of St. Luke, at Halifax, on the 3rd Day of July, 1866*, by Hibbert, Lord Bishop of Nova Scotia, Published by special request of the clergy, Halifax, N.S. Printed by Jas. Bowes & Sons, Hollis St., p. 32.
 13. *Vestry Minutes*, January 29, 1876, p. 126.
 14. On W.C. Harris, see Tuck, Robert, 1978, *Gothic Dreams: The Life and Times of a Canadian Architect, William Critchlow Harris 1854-1913*, Toronto, Dundurn Press, 1978; also Tuck, Robert, 1995, *Gothic Dreams: The Architecture of William Critchlow Harris*, Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum, Charlottetown.
 15. *Vestry Minutes*, April 2, 1877, p. 46.
 16. See Scott, William, 1848, "On Wooden Churches," *The Ecclesiologist*, vol. 9, p. 14-27; also Grey, William, 1853, "Ecclesiology in Newfoundland," *The Ecclesiologist*, vol. 14, p. 156-161.
 17. Scott, George Gilbert, 1857, *Remarks on Secular and Domestic Architecture*, London, J. Murray, p. 10.
 18. *Id.* : 12.
 19. On the perceived "Englishness" of Gothic, see also Frew, J.M., 1982, "Gothic is English: John Carter and the Revival of Gothic as England's National Style," *Art Bulletin*, vol. 64, p. 315-319.
 20. *The Church Guardian*, January 29, 1880.
 21. *The Church Guardian*, October 28, 1880.
 22. On the role of pattern books in spreading the Gothic Revival in Canada, see Magrill, Barry, 2012, *A Commerce of Taste: Church Architecture in Canada, 1867-1914*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's.
 23. *The Church Guardian*, April 15, 1880.
 24. See *The Parish of Christ Church, Windsor, Nova Scotia, with a History of the Parish of Windsor 1771-1804*, no author cited, 1982.
 25. *The Church Guardian*, March 26, 1884.
 26. *The Church Guardian*, November 7, 1888, and November 7, 1894.
 27. Arnold, George F., 1990, *St. Andrew's Story, Hantsport, N.S. 1890-1990*, Hantsport, Lancelot Press, 1990, p. 10.
 28. *Id.* : 9; also L.W.M., "St. Andrew's Church, Hantsport, N.S. Observing our 65th Anniversary This Month," *The Diocesan Times*, vol. 10, no. 11, 1955, p. 26-27.
 29. Rosinski, Maud, 1994, *Architects of Nova Scotia – A Biographical Dictionary, 1605-1950*, Halifax, Province of Nova Scotia.
 30. Trinity Historical Society Archives: St. Paul's Church Series 1: Minutes of Vestry, March 21, 1888; see also Coffman, Peter, 2008, *Newfoundland Gothic*, Quebec, Éditions MultiMondes.
 31. Trinity Historical Society Archives, *id.*
 32. Coffman (2008) : 175-183.