



Fig. 1. St. Patrick's Church, exterior.

St. Patrick's Church, Montréal: Sorting Out the Beginnings

By Donna McGee

St. Patrick's church on Dorchester Street in Montréal (built September 1843 - March 1847) (Fig. 1), is considered an architectural landmark because it represents a step forward in the understanding of Gothic building principles—this according to many recent books on architectural history in Canada. But there are gaps in our knowledge; for example, the authorship of the plans is still a matter of contention. For instance, while most authors agree that the architects were probably Pierre-Louis Morin (b. Nonancourt, France: 1811-1886) and Father Felix Martin (b. Auray, France: 1804-1886),¹ what Mathilde Brosseau has written in *Gothic Revival in Canadian Architecture*, has sparked controversy in addition to that of older accounts. She notes that in the Sulpician archives in Montréal, there is a copy of a letter from Joseph-Vincent Quiblier, the Superior of the Sulpicians, to Augustus Welby Pugin, asking for plans for the projected church. This is dated May 28th, 1842. There is no record of a response from Pugin.² Some architectural historians feel that Pugin designed the plans, or that the possibility exists that he designed the plans. This essay is an attempt to establish the sequences of events surrounding the building of this church, and to show conclusively that the plans followed were not those by Pugin.

The congregation had originally requested a new church in January of 1833.³ Some nine years later, by the time Quiblier wrote to Pugin, the committee members of the Fabrique of Notre-Dame, who were in charge of churchbuilding for the city, had changed their minds on the site of the future church. Pierre-Louis Morin had been hired to survey the Bleury Street lot, which the Fabrique wanted to sell, and the de Rocheblave estate, which they wanted to buy. Morin's ground-plan is dated the 27th of June, 1842.

Pugin could not have provided designs for St. Patrick's church. The usual time it took for mail to reach overseas destinations was about three

months, judging from other correspondence and newspaper reports. Quiblier's letter would have reached Pugin by the end of August, 1842. A response from Pugin, if sent immediately, would have arrived here by November. Pugin had sent plans overseas, so this type of request was not uncommon. Quiblier states in his letter that he would be in London in October of the same year and would be able to pay Pugin a deposit for the plans on that occasion. Whether they did indeed meet and what transpired is unknown. What we are left with, however, is that the only Pugin church that even remotely resembles the shape of St. Patrick's is St. Chad's Cathedral in Birmingham, designed in 1839. It has, as does St. Patrick's, the high aisles under the same roof and a polygonal chancel at the same height as the nave. On the interior, St. Chad's has a gallery at the west end for the choir, even though Pugin was usually opposed to galleries (he called this one a "loft for choristers"). St. Patrick's presently has two galleries, the lower of which was installed in 1894 for the choir. The upper gallery is an organ loft, and since the organ was installed in 1852 before the interior decoration was begun, the organ loft was likely included in the original plans.

But by 1842, Pugin's archaeological studies on Gothic churches of Britain led him to dismiss his earlier work as full of errors. A proper Pugin church of this period would have had south porches, smaller, square-ended chancels with a separate roof, lower aisles, and steeply pitched roofs. The interior nave frequently had an open timber roof as opposed to rib vaulting which in the nineteenth century was usually lathe and plaster in imitation of stone or brick used earlier. Furthermore, Pugin demanded that construction be truthful to the materials used. (A typical Pugin church of 1842, is St. May's in Brewood, which has all the features mentioned.)

Pugin's zeal was such that he would never have allowed Quiblier

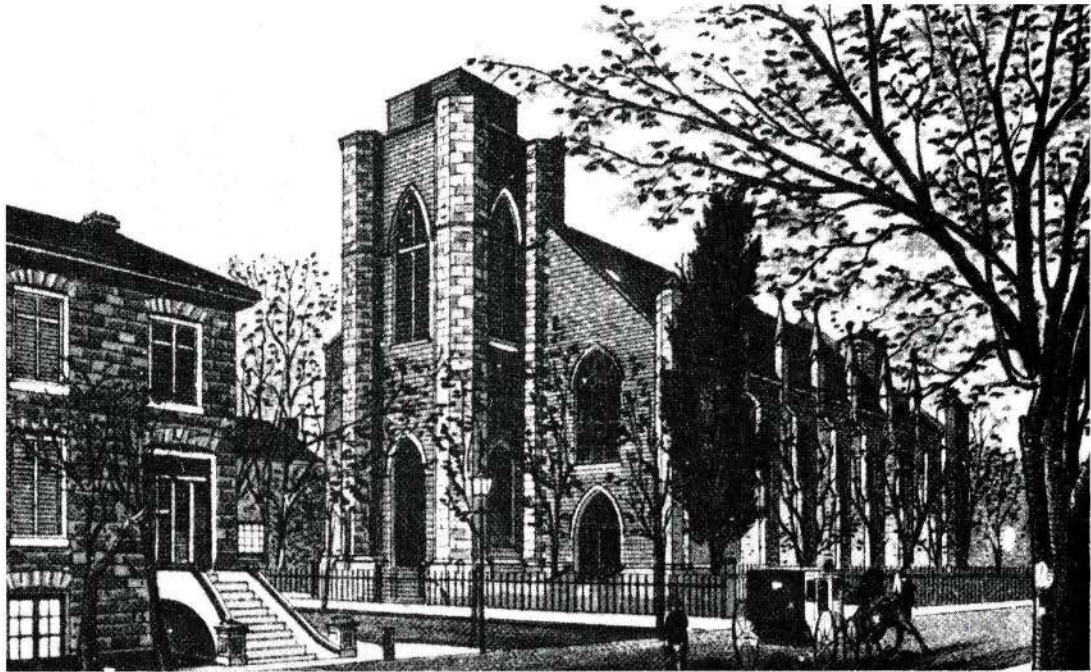


Fig. 3. St. Mary's Church, Kingston, exterior from Louis Flynn's *Built on a Rock* page 225.



Fig. 2. St. Patrick's Church, interior.

a copy of the plans for St. Chad's no matter how suitable Quibler might have thought them to have been. St. Patrick's, then, has many un-Puginesque features, such as the box-like plan under a single roof, the polygonal apse, and in the interior, the imitation vaulting, the wooden columns painted to resemble marble, and especially, the entablature/cornice at the top of the capitals (Fig. 2). We may eventually discover the outcome of Quibler's action, but only at such time as Pugin's descendants allow scholars access to his correspondence.

Luc Noppen and Georges-Emile Giguere both state that Father Martin designed the facade and Morin drew up the plans for the body of the church.⁴ There are a number of reasons to support this thesis. (Documents may exist in the Jesuit archives to support this assertion.) First, the facade has a central projecting bell tower, the only feature it has in common with St. Francois-Xavier church in Kahnawake, which was built in 1845 by Father Martin. Although St. Francois-Xavier was built after St. Patrick's, according to Noppen (p.56), it is possible that the plans for St. Francois-Xavier were designed shortly after Father Martin's arrival in Canada on May 31st, 1842. What speaks for the fact that Father Martin was not the major architect but designed the facade only is that he was more of a historian and teacher than an architect.⁵

Still unclear is when Morin was hired as architect and on whose recommendation. We do have records of his being paid for the plans of the church, but we have no documents showing the elevation or the facade. The church was built to conform to the Recollet Plan, according to Noppen's designations (p. 28) with a single storey elevation, box-like plan, high rounded apse, high pitched gable roof, and spire over the liturgical west end. This type of plan is very common in Quebec and Morin is known to have sketched many buildings during his travels in Canada and Quebec for some six years he had been here. Furthermore, according to Morin's friend, Napoleon Legendre, Morin considered his adopted country as his home with, it is implied, complete respect for local traditions. (See Morin's obituary in *Le Journal de Quebec*, 16 Sept., 1886, p. 2.) The Irish congregation had been housed in a Recollet church to this point, so the choice of this type of plan for the new church is understandable.

Finally—an oblique point—in a letter addressed to Bishop Gaulin of Kingston dated April 8, 1843, Bishop Bourget (of Montreal) stated that the plans for the proposed cathedral in Kingston drawn up by Morin, "will soon be ready to send".⁶ On the occasion of Morin's appointment to Surveyor of the province of Lower Canada, *La Minerve*, a Montréal newspaper, reported on the 17th of August, 1843, that the Cathedral of Kingston, currently being built, was designed by Morin. The importance in this is that the facade was redesigned by Joseph Connolly in 1885, possibly indicating that gothic-style facades were not Morin's forte.

That he designed the plans for the cathedral has yet to be conclusively proven. Yet an argument for his authorship on stylistic grounds is the presence of octagonal buttresses flanking the projecting tower on the



Fig. 4. St. Mary's Church, interior.

original facade, a somewhat more elaborate variation on the octagonal buttresses flanking the projecting bell tower on St. Patrick's (Fig. 3). Furthermore, inside St. Mary's we can see once again the unusual use of an entablature/cornice in a gothic-style church (Fig. 4). In addition, there is the similarity of the plan of the church to that of St. Patrick's. St. Mary's Cathedral has a more detailed finish—hammer-dressed stone instead of ashlar, and the buttresses end in finials; but when one considers that St. Mary's is a cathedral, and that Kingston was the capital of Canada at the time, the differences in the finish are explained.

In the Sulpician archives is an estimate of the cost of a detailed selection of materials for the church. The last paragraph of this document is: "avec Quinze mille deux cents six Louis de la Province, Nous soussignés sommes d'avis qu'on pourra bâtir, d'après les Plans de P.L. Morin, architecte, l'Eglise St. Patrice. Montréal, 21 Mars 1843."⁷ It seems that these plans were accepted by the 8th of April, 1843, because there is a receipt signed by P.L. Morin for the plans, estimate of costs, and model for the projected St. Patrick's church.

Although Morin's name shows up as architect and surveyor, and occasionally as author and teacher, very little is known of his life. There is a letter in the Sulpician archives, from Morin to the new superiors of the Sulpicians asking for the balance owed him for his work on the church. Reading between the lines, it seems that Quiblier consistently underpaid Morin. Morin humbly asked the honorable gentlemen if they could find any other architect in the area who would have been able to build a church of those dimensions with such thrift. In the course of his eloquent request, he mentions that he was given not only the Blondel books on architecture (no first name), but a book on gothic cathedrals of France during the time he was working on the plans for the large College of Christian Brothers, prior to his engagement for the St. Patrick's plans. If we can determine what book on gothic cathedrals in France he had, it would be interesting to see how it may have influenced the details of the architecture.

St. Patrick's church was built according to the plans of Pierre-Louis Morin. The specific role played by Father Martin remains unclear. The introduction of the projecting bell tower is easier to associate with him, as opposed to Quiblier, for example, who many believe had the tower built inside the church so that when the walls reached the level of the roof, it became evident that the church needed a tower. This seems to be an apocryphal account.

It may be revealed, however, that the as yet anonymous book Morin had on gothic cathedrals of France influenced the projecting bell tower, and that Father Martin did not draw the plans for St. Francois-Xavier in Kahnawake until 1844, or after St. Patrick's was begun. Perhaps both men carried with them memories of the projecting central portals of many churches in Europe and France. At any rate, church facades in Quebec began to be renovated in an updated style. Examples are the projecting bell towers which appear on the churches of St. Francois Sales in Nouville (1854), Notre-Dame de Bonsecours in Montréal (1885-86), and, of course, the previously mentioned St. Francois-Xavier in Kahnawake amongst others.

The entablature/cornice also prompts speculation as to the reason for its existence. The story behind this might not be merely stylistic, but political as well. Although it would seem logical to assume that the Sulpicians (i.e., Quiblier) hired Morin since the records indicate he was working for them as early as June, 1842, it was Bishop Bourget who informed Bishop Gaulin of Kingston that Morin's plans for the cathedral were almost ready. This implies that Bourget also hired him. Morin may have had to dance between the two men, because there was a mutual suspi-

cion between them. In terms of religious politics, the Sulpicians came from France and were Gallican in their orientation. In brief, this means that they recognized the French Church as their spiritual authority. The Gothic architecture of France became the symbolic expression of their beliefs. Bishop Bourget, on the other hand, was born here and had been the secretary and later coadjutor to his predecessor, Bishop Lartigue, who himself was a supporter of the ultramontane tenets that were so popular in Europe.⁸ The ultramontanes regarded Rome as the centre of the Catholic Church, and also called for a return to ceremony, with more colourful robes and more frequent gatherings, to replace the sedate approach that had been adopted since the Restoration, and that which Sulpicians had taken. Here, too, the architectural style was symbolic of the preferences of the ultramontanes. In the 1850s, Bishop Bourget would argue for either Italian Renaissance or Baroque styles of architecture, but in the 40s, when the gothic revival was at the height of popularity, it seems he had no objection to it. The relatively few examples of Italian Gothic, however, have such "classical" features as an entablature above the arcade, similar to the one found in St. Patrick's. Could this have been a concession to the bishop?

Further investigation of seemingly innocuous details such as the entablature/cornice may reveal complex explanations. The puzzle of this well known yet inadequately recorded church has not been completely resolved. □

NOTES

1. Some of the more recent authors include: Mathilde Brosseau, *Gothic Revival in Canadian Architecture*, Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1980; Alan Gowans, *Building Canada: An Architectural History of Canadian Life*, Toronto: OUP, 1966; Jean-Claude Marsan, *Montréal en Evolution*, Montréal: Fides, 1974; and Luc Noppen, *Les églises du Québec: (1600-1850)*, Montréal: Fides, 1977. There is also an entry on Felix Martin by Georges-Émile Giguère in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. XI: 1881-1890, Toronto: U of T Press, 1982.
2. Two sources examined were the Sulpician archives or the archives of the Fabrique de Notre-Dame. Malcolm Thurlby of York University wrote to Rory O'Donnell, a Pugin scholar in England, on my behalf, and he replied that he had no access to Pugin letters of 1842 as they are mainly in the hands of Pugin's descendants. He adds, however, that Pugin usually did not keep his correspondence, but destroyed it as he wrote back in acknowledgment. We might one day find Pugin's reply. O'Donnell added that his diary for 1842 did not record anything about Quiblier. This is not yet a dead end.
3. Sulpician archives (Les Archives du vieux Séminaire), Section 27, Voûte 2, Armoire 7, Tiroir 97, files 187 and 188. Most other documents to which I refer are from these archives or the archives of the Fabrique de Notre-Dame.
4. Noppen, p. 56; and Giguère, p. 588.
5. See Jean-Claude Marsan's estimate of Martin's work as an architect in *Montreal in Evolution*, p. 200.
6. This is recorded in the Rapport de l'archiviste de la Province de Québec pour 1948-49 (Secrétariat de la Province: Redempti Paradis), p. 419-20 which can be found in the Archives de la Chancellerie at the archevêché de Montréal.
7. It is signed by Louis Comte the notary, Louis Comte, ma, Con., and P.L. Morin.
8. Philippe Sylvain, "Bourget, Ignace" in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. XI, p. 94.