Book Reviews

Fawcett, Richard, *The Architecture of the Scottish Mediaeval Church 1100-1560*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, published with the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art (2011), 456 pp., 400 pls. £50. ISBN 978-0-300-17049-8

As the author explains in his *Preface*, medieval church architecture in Scotland has not received anything like the attention it has received in other countries, notably in England. This is partly down to the poor survival rate; just 37 cathedral, monastic and collegiate churches remain wholly or partly in use and there were only ever 1136 parishes. Add to this the complexities of post-Reformation alterations (which are not without their own interest, of course) and the paucity of documentary evidence and the task of creating an overview becomes daunting. For those of us who have previously relied on the three volumes of MacGibbon and Ross (1896-7) and the growing number of *Buildings of Scotland* books, this single, weighty (2.5 kilos) volume brings a very welcome modern overview.

Richard Fawcett has become the public voice of Scottish medieval church architecture at many conferences. Although he fully acknowledges the contributions made recently by other scholars, in his typically self-deprecating way he omits to mention his own substantial contribution. The excellent bibliography lists thirty-seven of his own publications, the majority articles, but including many guidebooks for his former employer, Historic Scotland, and four books. He is therefore just the person to write this overview and the Yale University Press has once again given us a finely produced, well illustrated book. For Sassenachs, a map of Scotland and a chronology of its kings and principal events would have made it even better.

The book is organised in eight chronological chapters spanning 1100-1560, with a short *Introduction* covering the 500 years up to 1100 and a longer *Conclusion* on *The Impact of the Reformation*, a curtain raiser to another Fawcett article. There is also *A Note on building stones*. Almost half the text, chapters 5 to 8, covers the years 1300-1560, reflecting both the surviving material and the author's particular interest in the late medieval period. As he admits, the date divisions can be arbitrary and the eleven-page chapter 5 covering 1300-1370 is only really there to emphasise the point made by its title, *A Recession in Building Activity*. The main building described is not in fact a church, but the grand refectory at Dunfermline Abbey, a rare excursion into the 'secular' field, despite the author's clearly expressed view that 'any attempt to discuss Scottish ecclesiastical and secular buildings together and on equal terms before the 15th century must inevitably result in unbalanced treatment'. However, as he also claims that many of the foreign architectural sources must arise from patrons visiting buildings in other countries, some coverage of their 'secular' buildings is surely necessary. Indeed, the revived use of stone barrel vaults, with or without applied ribs, in churches in the later 14th century is only explained by their use in contemporary tower houses. Of course, the generally poor survival rate has no doubt contributed to the author's decision, but medieval architectural history has to take into account what is known to have been built as well as what happens to have survived.

This is very much an architectural account with some lengthy detailed descriptions of features that can get in the way of understanding the broader sweep. Chapters are divided into typological sections based on building function and monastic order and although each chapter begins with a very helpful historical summary, only chapter 5 has a concluding paragraph that draws together the main points covered. I would like to have seen a little more coverage of architectural sculpture – especially when the text tells me that Linton's figurative tympanum is 'a unique survival in Scotland' or the painting on the tomb recess at Inchholm Priory is 'a rare survivor of the painted decoration that must once have been common'. Only two tombs are illustrated and no furnishings, despite a number of mentions and the stated possibility that elements in their design might have been relevant to the understanding of the architecture. We must continue to rely on MacGibbon and Ross, which is referenced very frequently in the copious footnotes.

Scotland is not just more of England, yet identifying its own Scottish-ness in medieval churches and the ideas that formed that character can be elusive. Much of the book is about trying to discern where ideas have come from, what induced a patron or mason to take those particular forms and whether any distinctly Scottish architecture emerges (especially in the 15th and 16th centuries). There are two well known recurrent sources: Ireland for the west of Scotland and the Islands, and England, particularly for the Borders and Lowlands. The *Introduction* was presumably written before Tomas O'Carragáin's overview of the pre-1100 period in Ireland was published (also by Yale), so

references there to Irish parallels are more limited than might be expected. The links persisted, with an Irish mason even signing a capital at Iona Cathedral in the mid-15th century.

In the period 1160-1220 (chapter 2), 'lowland Scotland and northern England were essentially one architectural province', which the author attributes to the architectural homogeneity of the reformed Orders and their influence on more public buildings like York Minster. Frustratingly little is known about the Tironensians, a reformed order of Benedictines founded at Tiron, half way between Chartres and Le Mans, who may have been just as influential as the Cistercians in Scotland. The plan and remaining pier forms of their main abbey at Kelso, founded in 1128 by the anglophile King David I (also earl of Huntingdon), may have a superficial appearance to Ely and other East Anglian churches, but the three arms of its unique western transept are of equal height and all three open into the west tower, unlike the English examples. Perhaps more importantly, the architectural vocabulary being used is much more local, which raises the distinct possibility that there is a missing link (Dunfermline is postulated) and that Scotland developed its own version of early Gothic, just as it developed a distinctive late Gothic style.

Throughout the book, parallels are drawn with buildings beyond Scotland which can be superficially convincing, but are not always supported by some historical link. The Kelso Abbey elevation may look like St John's, Chester, but there is nothing else to link them (or to link the Lowlands with north-west England). I doubt that Devorguilla's ownership of land at Driffield helped to persuade the mid-13th-century masons at Sweetheart Abbey to use the moulding profiles of Bridlington Priory in their nave arcade. More probable is that Bishop Elphinstone liked the foliate bosses he saw on his frequent late 15th-century visits to Bruges enough to instruct someone in his entourage 'competent to record and transit such information' and so incorporate such details into King's College Chapel, Aberdeen.

How patrons and master masons picked their architecture and who had the upper hand when determining characterful details remains a constant conundrum in studying medieval architectural history. In this book, Richard Fawcett has worked hard to establish possible sources and to identify trends that contribute to ecclesiastical buildings of the Middle Ages in Scotland. He is most confident when dealing with the later period, when the use of details like tracery from the Low Countries is undoubtedly proven. More difficult, perhaps impossible given the losses of buildings and documents, is to explain why Scottish patrons and masons borrowed these particular details and what they were trying to express by using them in their buildings. Details of the late 14th-century east end of Melrose Abbey may have a number of exact parallels in Yorkshire and East Anglia, but surely it is the Lady Chapel of York Minster that is the principle inspiration and the (Scottish?) mason has worked out his own variations. The aim of the patron (the abbot?) could have been sycophancy – Scotland was in the province of York until 1472 – or emulation, even betterment, of the latest big architectural statement in the north. Unless something has been written down somewhere, we shall never know for sure.

Richard Fawcett remains hesitant in determining a truly Scottish style; he even dismisses that rare (but for many people, very Scottish) feature, the crown steeple, as an indigenous creation. He could only have been more assertive in claiming more Scottish originality by hypothesising on the form of lost buildings, not a new technique in architectural history of course, but not one that an evidence-based scholar like Richard Fawcett would naturally pursue. We must hope, then, that further studies of individual buildings over the next generation or two will enable him to speculate in the future. Meanwhile, this is the book to have if you need to know about the development of medieval church architecture in Scotland.

RICHARD HALSEY

Grainger, Hilary J., *The Architecture of Sir Ernest George*, Reading: Spire Books (2011), 480pp., 332pls. £65. ISBN 978-1-904965-31-2

About forty years ago I bought a small etching by Ernest George (1839-1922), showing a picturesque group of medieval timber houses in a German city. Whenever I have looked at it since, I have puzzled over the man who drew and etched it. Why should his name be so familiar, yet his work so little-known? Like any reasonably equipped architectural historian of the 19th and 20th centuries, I knew him as the designer of W. S. Gilbert's lusciously iconic

house in Harrington Gardens, as a celebrity country house architect (whilst knowing hardly anything of the houses themselves), and as the only formal teacher Lutyens ever had. Nothing else.

At least part of the reason why Sir Ernest George's name and reputation have survived is because so many of the architectural stars of the next generation passed through his office and regarded him with such deep respect and affection. Not the least impressive aspect of Professor Grainger's comprehensive study of his life and career is the appendix describing the organisation of the practice and the astonishing roll-call of George's pupils and assistants: Herbert Baker, Guy Dawber, Edwin Lutyens and Weir Schultz among very many other talented figures. His office was easily as influential as those of Norman Shaw or, a generation earlier, G. E. Street.

On the other hand, his architecture has been neglected for much of the last century – the democratic century coloured by Modernism and collectivism – at least partly because of the very nature of his practice and client base. Ernest George has been remembered as one of the most prestigious country house architects of the late Victorian and Edwardian ages, and therefore someone who serviced the vanities of a minority culture as it amused itself on the very lip of a volcano. He perfectly caught the taste of that leisured, wealthy class which began slowly to melt away after the First World War, and which only managed to live in his houses the life for which they had been conceived for perhaps thirty or forty years.

This is a significant and valuable book because Sir Ernest George was undoubtedly an influential architect and, in the context of his time, an important one. He was not, however, a great one. In her admirably thorough study, Hilary Grainger reveals his weaknesses as well as his strengths. She explains the symbiotic relationship between his career as an architect and his passionate, but semi-private, commitment to picturesque topographical etching and painting in watercolour. As she admits, George is weak when dealing with the monumental. His architectural perspectives are often so persuasive, atmospheric and charming that the finished buildings can seem flat by comparison.

Indeed, charm is often the dominant characteristic of his work, and is probably the reason why so many of his smaller buildings – the village halls at Moreton-in-the-Marsh and Buscot, the garden pavilion at Batsford Park, even the startlingly tough early church and school at Rousdon – are so satisfying. But when it comes to designing buildings on an heroic scale, charm is not a robust enough quality to sustain them. Country houses like Batsford Park and Poles certainly have charm, but it has a good deal to do with what they evoke; their kinship with the great houses of the first Elizabethan age. Shorn of its mild asymmetries, Batsford would come perilously close to being repetitious and bland, and some of his later great houses have the look of being designed to become the institutions or hotels they now are.

When he cannot be picturesque – at which he excels – George is too often merely dull. This is particularly true of his classical buildings. It would take a good deal more than a display of heroic, Shavian chimneystacks to redeem the thinly-detailed elevations of the Royal Academy of Music – so much less interesting than other contemporary public buildings. Imagine what Edwin Rickards would have made of the same opportunity! Perhaps the best of them is Crathorne Hall, though even there the relationship between the bay windows and the portico on the garden front is equivocal without being interesting, and the awkward junction between the central bays and the flanking towers on the otherwise thrilling entrance façade is something his most celebrated pupil would easily have a avoided. He even manages to give his re-invention of the Oxford Wing at Welbeck Abbey a slightly institutional air, not quite redeemed by the consistently superb craftsmanship.

One rarely feels that Ernest George's designs are guided by principles much higher than a feeling for the picturesque and an instinct for decent proportion and massing. Although his houses are clearly of one build, they sometimes suggest in their materials and articulation that they might have mysteriously evolved over time. In this essentially Romantic attitude he is the heir to Devey, and his work can seem more fanciful than substantial; ultimately less satisfying than architecture which has some more abstract or universal basis. On a large scale, his detailing can become routine and conventional in a way that Webb and Lutyens never were, and even the famously relaxed Norman Shaw rarely allowed himself to be.

Yet there are also considerable triumphs. Probably because of his skill as a draughtsman, George has complete mastery of the artful balance of solid and void, of calm emptiness and busy pattern-making, that is such an important ingredient of the late Victorian design language. Its finest ecclesiastical exponent is Bodley, but George

is an easy rival in the domestic sphere – witness the weirdly eventful and irresistible entrance front of Buchan Hill, for example. Moreover, few urban ensembles anywhere can match the panache and ravishing excess of his splendid houses in Harrington Gardens and Collingham Gardens in London.

The Architecture of Sir Ernest George is an impressive study, lavishly presented and scrupulously researched, in which the author strikes a neat balance between the tone of a scholarly thesis and a sumptuous monograph in the tradition of fine architectural biographies established by Andrew Saint's magisterial, and recently re-issued, *Norman Shaw*. Perhaps treating each of the major projects in turn to its own few pages sets up a slightly plodding rhythm – surely unnecessary in a book which includes a rich chronological catalogue of works – and there would have been value in drawing out some of the larger connecting themes, as the author does effectively in the section dealing with terracotta (which, incidentally, is surely modelled rather than carved).

Professor Grainger has certainly served her subject and his otherwise elusive architectural partners (Thomas Vaughan, Harold Peto and Alfred Yeates) extremely well, and has at last enabled me to place my little etching of a German town in context. Her book fills a significant gap, and will be an important work of reference for years to come, but as I read it I grew to like and admire Sir Ernest rather more, and his buildings a little less.

PHIL THOMAS