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WILLIAM GREY: ‘MISSIONARY’ OF GOTHIC IN NEWFOUNDLAND

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One tends to view the Gothic Revivalist as a quaint antiquarian dashing frenetically about the English countryside with a sketchbook and a whip. The sketchbook is understandable—the revivalists were the most diligent recorders of ancient buildings. The whip? Well it is metaphorical. In recording the old, they judged the new and could be quite savage in their denunciation of buildings that failed to meet their standard. In so doing, they became famous for their dogmatism and pedantry. Even a staunch supporter like the historian E.A. Freeman (1823-1892) was compelled to concede: “The first phase of ecclesiology was simple antiquarianism [...] in its theory a mere technical acquaintance with the sacred buildings of a particular age, in its practice a careful reproduction of their features.”

What this characterization fails to recognize is that the revivalists were in fact quite modern in their outlook. Both the Oxford Architectural Society and the Cambridge Camden Society—principal promoters of the Gothic Revival—had developed fairly sophisticated building inventory forms. And among their members were those who came to see restoration as the rape of history; who were prepared to use iron as a building material; who were among the first to value the vernacular; who saw the relationship between architecture and society. And it was one of their members who brought these ideas to Newfoundland.

The Hon. and Rev. William Grey (1819-1872) was wholly in accord with them. Having absorbed the attitudes of Tractarianism (somewhat at odds with the
evangelical tendencies of his clergyman father), Grey became interested in architecture and a very active member of the Oxford Architectural Society. In 1842, the year he finished his BA at Magdalen, Grey presented that society with a portfolio of his drawings and gave what the society's secretary described as "several excellent papers." Taking up a clerical post in Wiltshire, he lived a very simple existence as a boarder on a farm.

Grey shared the architectural principles held by the Oxford Architectural Society and the Cambridge Camden Society (later renamed the Ecclesiological Society). The latter, which had been founded in 1839 by a group of Cambridge undergraduates, argued their position in the enormously influential periodical *The Ecclesiologist* as well as in several pamphlets. To the Ecclesiologists, Gothic was the most beautiful, most rational, most truthful, and most English style in the history of architecture. In church buildings such as St. Michael's, Long Stanton (fig. 1), they saw a host of aesthetic, social, and moral virtues, such as truthful expression of materials, truthful expression of interior spaces in exterior massing, and clear separation of nave and chancel. Such virtues, according to the ecclesiological doctrine, made Gothic the only appropriate style for the Church of England. It has been said that, by 1867, the Ecclesiological Society had succeeded in transforming the appearance of virtually every Anglo-Catholic Church building in the world. This architectural revolution was to be brought to the outports of Newfoundland largely through the efforts of William Grey.

In 1848 Grey, interested in mission work, accepted the invitation of Edward Feild, Bishop of Newfoundland, to join him on a journey to the diocese. Returning to England in June, he married Harriet White and came back to Newfoundland with her later that fall. While Grey's wish was to serve on the Labrador, the Bishop had others ideas. He asked Grey to take over the Theological College and to become the first and only Diocesan Architect, in which capacity Grey designed several Gothic churches. He also contributed a fascinating analysis of the state of Newfoundland church architecture to *The Ecclesiologist*. He served as principal of the College until 1851 when he sought, for health reasons, to move to Portugal Cove and parish work. Two years later, his health and that of his wife Harriet still poor, they returned to England. He only came to Newfoundland once after that, in 1857, to travel with Feild on the mission ship, *The Hawk*. On that visit he made a series of sketches that remain among the most valuable and beautiful records of mid-nineteenth-century Newfoundland, and they were published the following year as *Sketches of Newfoundland and Labrador*.

Grey had a dual architectural role in Newfoundland: as principal of the Theological College he was to educate the clergy to be their own architects; as Diocesan Architect he was to produce designs for model churches that would bring Gothic gospel to the congregations and make it the only acceptable style. The Church of England in Newfoundland at that time was essentially Evangelical with strong Puritan tendencies, tendencies made...
stronger when it came to spending of congregational moneys. Feild, as new bishop, had arrived just before the defection of John Henry Newman from High Church to the Roman Church and thus had concerns about being too closely linked with the Ecclesiologists. He was very alarmed to hear he had been made, without his consent, a patron of the Cambridge Camden Society. But he was insistent on liturgical and architectural reform.

On landing in St. John's, Feild immediately set about enquiring for architectural assistance—for his cathedral and other churches. In his first letters home he asked for designs from wooden Norwegian "stave" churches, for models. When the old church burned in the 1846 fire, he contemplated using an iron church as a temporary measure. But all had to be in the proper style and it is clear from his letter which described Newfoundland building that he, while no architect, felt he had a good sense of construction.

In St. John's, Feild would, initially, have had little assistance. The builder, James Purcell, had designed three other buildings for Bishop Spencer. The first was a proposal for the Church of England Cathedral: a design Feild dismissed as, among other things, "an abortion." Another was for a chapel-of-ease in Quidi Vidi (fig. 2), a small community just outside St. John's; a very neat, wood-frame structure in the shape of a Greek cross. It might have been taken for a gate-lodge were it not for the rather baroque cupola over the porch gable. Otherwise it was decorated with a number of pinnacled buttresses and crockets and, to a degree, bore out Grey's contention in The Ecclesiologist that the "Newfoundland architect [could not] produce all the varieties which battlements, parapets, [and] pinnacles [...] give to [...] English churches, without making his building either ludicrous, or dangerous, or both together." Purcell's other Anglican commission was equally diminutive: the Theological Lecture Room (fig. 3), which once stood next to St. Thomas's Church. In plan this was a three-bay, gabled wooden structure but, similar to the original Quidi Vidi proposal, supplied with buttresses at every junction. It had an elaborate Gothic entrance and windows in character on the sides. Over the door was a pinnacled crocket and, on the other gable, a castellated chimney. These and a scattering of cottages ornées were all that constituted architectural novelty in the St. John's of the 1840s.

When the opportunity came to work with Grey, Feild must have thought it heaven-sent. Grey in both manner and education was perfect for the post. A good scholar, fine designer, earnest craftsman, and modest person, he had the learning, open-mindedness, and skill with brush and pen to produce good plans. He was able and willing to work on the structures himself and these talents, combined with his gentleness, probably did much to win people to the Gothic cause. Not wishing to lose such a valuable asset, Feild overruled Grey's wishes to serve as a missionary on the Labrador, noting that he would be "eminently serviceable" in St. John's and that he could even, if needed, replace the Scotsman William Hay as Clerk of Works at Feild's Cathedral.

Grey's first work may have been the stone church of St. Saviour's in Hermitage (fig. 4), Fortune Bay. The construction of that church, which was begun around the year 1850, finished in 1854; it was consecrated in August of 1855 and demolished around 1900. According to Canon George Henry Bishop, who was rector there for thirty-seven years, the stone, stone masons, bricks, mortar, slate, and even every piece of timber were brought from England." Such a statement, if true, might account for the fact that Canon Bishop—writing before 1900—also reported "many signs of decay." As Feild had discovered while building his Cathedral in St. John's, the Newfoundland frost was capable of a remarkable degree of destruction totally outside the experience of British builders. Moreover, the workmanship of the building was apparently poor. "The masonry",

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**FIG. 4. ST. SAVIOUR'S CHURCH, HERMITAGE BY WILLIAM GREY. FROM D.W. PROWSE, A HISTORY OF NEWFOUNDLAND. ST. JOHN'S, 1895.**
wrote Rev. Bishop, "was never meant to last; the work was carelessly done; the plaster crumbles continuously, and the mortar in the massive walls has never set hard." By the time Bishop's article was written, the congregation had outgrown the church, and the prospect of enlarging a fundamentally unsound structure was "a problem to which we cannot find a solution." That being the case, its demolition was inevitable.

Unfortunately, the shoddy workmanship ultimately deprived Newfoundland of what should have been one of its most fascinating Gothic Revival buildings. St. Saviour's was clearly in the tradition of St. Michael's, Long Stanton, the thirteenth-century parish church often held up by the Ecclesiological Society as an exemplar for the colonies. Early English in style, St. Saviour's was a two-celled church with a south porch and western bellcote. The chancel was narrower than the nave, and had a lower roofline. Very solid stepped angle buttresses supported the corners of the nave, chancel, and porch. Stepped buttresses also divided the nave and chancel into bays. Single lancets lit the nave; shorter, twinned lancets, the chancel; a pair of tall lancets lit the west end, while the east wall was pierced by three graduated lancets. The interior had an ornamental rood screen of English oak, as well as an oak prayer desk, lectern, and pulpit. In its proportions, planning, and detailing, it was a thoroughly convincing example of rural Early English Gothic, and would have looked at home in scores of English villages. Imported into Newfoundland by workers who were ignorant of local conditions, the climate soon consumed it.

In his own parish, Portugal Cove, just nine miles north of St. John's, Grey built St. Peter's (figs. 5-6) to, as he put it in his funding prospectus, "exhibit to the inhabitants of..."
the Capital a perfect model of a Gothic Church. Grey had been appointed to Portugal Cove around Christmas in 1850, and one of his last acts before his return to England in 1853 was to raise funds for the building of a new church there. In 1854 Grey’s successor at Portugal Cove, George Johnson, reported to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (who had provided funding for this and many other Newfoundland churches) that “the event of the year” had been the erection of a new church. Arrangements, he reported, had been made by Grey, who had raised money among his English friends and secured a significant donation from the Bishop. The report was accompanied by a drawing of the church very similar to the drawing by Grey shown in figure 5. Depicted from the southeast, it shows a nave with aisles and a steeply pitched roof, a western tower with a sharply pointed spire, a chancel differentiated externally by the termination of the aisles, and a large and ambitiously tracery four-light east window with a triangular head (possibly similar to the one at Forteau discussed below, although apparently larger). These features are consistent with Grey’s 1857 drawing (fig. 6), published in Sketches of Newfoundland and Labrador, in which he gave the church an idyllic pastoral setting, both pictorially and verbally:

The descent to it from the Eastward is one of the most beautiful scenes in the neighbourhood. You wind down a long hill, having a river full of cascades on the right, and lofty heights on both sides, whose slopes are partly covered with forest, and partly broken into cliffs. About halfway down the descent, on a sudden turn you catch sight of the church standing on its own hill overlooking the river, which washes its base.

Grey also designed a rectory (fig. 7) for Portugal Cove in which he quite successfully executed his design ideas. Bishop Feild had
earlier commented on the fact that clapboarded buildings with their “succession of horizontal lines [were] [...] very strange and disagreeable to English eyes.”27 Grey’s solution was, as he explained in his article in The Ecclesiologist, to have the clapboard “nailed on, some horizontally, some obliquely, with the frame-work painted with red and the clapboard with yellow ochre.”28 His work on the parsonage was not restricted to design for he became fully involved in the building, making doors, a china cabinet, and a washstand, among other pieces.29

For the Labrador Grey designed two churches: St. Peter’s, Forteau, and St. James’s, Battle Harbour. Of the former, we have scant but useful records. The oldest comes from Grey himself, who sketched it while accompanying Feild on a visitation during the summer of 1857, and included it in Sketches of Newfoundland and Labrador63 (fig. 8). The exact date of its construction is unknown, but it was consecrated by Feild on August 9, 1857.31 Grey’s sketch, drawn from the northeast, shows a simple nave with a short western tower and spire, a chancel with a separate, lower roofline, and a vestry or sacristy on the north side of the chancel. The east end has a triangular-headed window with fairly ambitious tracery, in keeping with the theoretical discussion of wooden churches that William Scott had contributed to The Ecclesiologist.32 Grey also appears to have followed his own advice by mixing a lively variety of clapboard patterns: vertical under the gable, diagonal below that, followed by horizontal and vertical zones. The most curious feature is the series of diagonal struts, four per side, which extend to the ground from just below the mid-point of the north and south walls. Looking somewhat like a cross between flying buttresses and tent-pegs, they are presumably inspired by the former but perform part of the function of the latter; i.e. they secure the structure against the wind. All of these features are clearly visible in what is possibly the only extant photograph of the church (fig. 9), which is part of an album of photos made during the visitation of Feild’s successor as Bishop of Newfoundland, Llewellyn Jones (1840-1918), in 1902.33 Taken from the southwest, it shows that the north and south nave walls also used a combination of horizontal and diagonal clapboard (the same may be true of the chancel walls, although it is not clear from the photograph). Also visible is a south porch, which was the only entrance to the building. The windows are cusped trefoils. Although the church was
not yet fifty years old when the photograph was taken, it shows signs of wind damage in the nave and porch roofs and the west window, which fully justify Grey’s peculiar, earthbound “flying” buttresses.

Grey’s church at Forteau, St. Peter’s, represents the most elaborate attempt Newfoundland had yet seen to incorporate the principles of Ecclesiology with the colony’s unique climatic and constructional conditions in order to create “a national style of wooden Christian architecture,” as The Ecclesiologist had framed the problem.3 Gray's other Labrador church, St. James’s at Battle Harbour, is slightly less ambitious, but has the advantage of being still extant, albeit in a heavily restored form. In 1853 Feild reported not only that he had consecrated the church at Forteau, but also that construction had begun on a church in Battle Harbour, and that “means of finishing it” were at hand.26 According to Grey, it was consecrated on July 5, 1857.27 A drawing in the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA)28 shows a design for the church at Battle Harbour that varies slightly from what was built, with a single roofline, a chancel differentiated only by a narrowing of the width, and some slight vertical articulation on the sides of the church (fig. 10). Grey’s 1857 drawing (fig. 11) shows the church as built, with a lower chancel roofline and no vertical articulation. Whether the alterations were made by Grey or the builder is not known. The more distinctly articulated chancel would have been seen as an ecclesiological improvement, although the removal of all vertical emphasis (save the west tower) would have been criticized.

St. James’s was heavily restored in the early 1900s. Pre-restoration photographs show that, by the late twentieth century, the nave windows, which appear in Grey’s 1857 drawing to have been paired arches, had been replaced with simple rectangular ones. Another photograph in Bishop Llewellyn Jones’s album, taken from the northeast of the church in 1902 (fig. 12), shows the recent restoration to have been largely faithful to the original configuration. The exterior appears exactly as Grey had drawn it in 1857, although much more detail is visible. The nave windows were cusped like those at Forteau, while the east window consisted of three cusped lancets, graduated to parallel the line of the chancel gable and set within a frame painted in a dark colour. As can be seen by comparing photographs of 1902 and 2005 (figs. 12-13), the current restoration matches the original in most details and entirely in spirit.

The same can be said of the interior, which is also illustrated in Bishop Jones’s album (fig. 14). The photograph is badly faded and, having been taken before the days of sophisticated lens coatings, must have suffered from excessive lens flare. However, it can be seen that the essential arrangement is unchanged. A nave of open seats leads to a broad chancel arch, beneath a triangulated, open-frame roof that would have met hearty ecclesiological approval. The chancel is raised three steps above the nave, and appears to be separated by a simple altar rail. The only difference from the current arrangement (fig. 15) is that the pulpit has been moved from the south to the north side of the chancel arch.

In its clear spatial arrangements, honest use of materials, and simple but effective evocation of Gothic, St. James’s manages to be faithful both to ecclesiological principles and its remote outpost location. Set upon a hill high above the extraordinarily rugged coastline of Battle Island (fig. 16),
it vividly evokes the pioneer spirit of Feild's Labrador mission.

For Lower Burgeo, Grey designed a larger church with a more complex plan. Grey's drawing (fig. 17) shows what must be the earliest non-cathedral cruciform church in Newfoundland. The design includes a crossing tower with a broach spire and a south porch. The roofline of the transepts and chancel are lower than that of the nave, which would have been considered appropriate for a parish church. A photograph from c. 1960 suggests that the design was followed even if the crossing tower may have been lowered sometime after construction.

For St. John's, Grey provided a design for St. Mary's built in stone, on the southside of the harbour in 1859 and, with grim symmetry, demolished exactly one hundred years later (fig. 18). A formidable piece of masonry construction, St. Mary's was altogether more monumental and severe than St. Saviour's. The style is again Early English. To the nave were added a north porch and, further to the east off the north side, a tower. The tower, very disproportionately broad relative to its height and capped by a shallow, pyramidal spire, was possibly never carried to its originally intended height. The chancel was once again narrower and lower than the nave. No external buttresses interrupted the sheer wall surfaces, and the windows—all single lancets, except for the triple lancets of the west façade—formed conspicuously small apertures in otherwise massive walls. The result was, it must be admitted, a rather ominous looking building, with none of the idyllic charm of St. Saviour's.

Following his return to England, Grey settled for a time in Allington, Dorset, where, according to his acquaintance the Rev. T. Mozley, he served as curate while lodging with "an old farmer and his wife." His lifestyle was exceedingly modest for one of his social class, a fact that Grey's sister, visiting from an opulent estate in India, frequently pointed out. Grey rebuilt the church of St. Swithun's at Allington according to ecclesiological principles, resulting in a church that was, according to Mozley (himself no Ecclesiologist), "as dark, and dull, and cheerless as before." From Allington Grey returned to Exeter, where ill health forced him to retire. After lingering for a considerable time, he died of a throat ailment (probably cancer) that Mozley attributed to the scraping, dusting, and painting involved in his renovation of Exeter's St. Mary-Steps church.

If it is a monument we seek, we should not look only to the few survivals of Grey's works, but also to those he inspired. For the remainder of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, the ecclesiological principles pioneered by Grey proliferated throughout Newfoundland,
reflecting his direct and indirect influence. St. Stephen's, Greenspond (fig. 19), was designed by Julian Moreton, who had been at the Theological College in 1848 and doubtless learned architectural design from Grey. His work at Greenspond appears to be a compromise between strict ecclesiology and the demands of a conservative building committee. Ecclesiology of a purer sort can be seen in the work of the clergyman/architect J.J. Curling, whose church of St. Mary's, Birchy Cove (fig. 20, early 1880s, no longer extant), would have been inconceivable without the influence of Grey. Later churches such as St. Peter's in Catalina (1873), St. Paul's in Trinity (1892, fig. 21), and St. Luke's in Winterton (1901), show that Grey's architectural influence was still strongly felt decades after he left Newfoundland.

Although only one of his churches survives, and it in a somewhat altered state, Grey left his mark on the land. By educating the clergy to look at architecture with an informed Gothic eye, he fostered an interest in and commitment to good design that also produced some quite remarkable structures. His knowledge, developed as a studious antiquarian, his design skill, and his devotion to the mission of the church left an influence that lasted well into the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. Shane O'Dea would like to acknowledge Sylvia Cullum for introducing him to the Grey drawings; the librarians and archivists at the RIBA and the USPG; as well as the Secretary of the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society who were all very helpful in opening up and directing him through the marvellous maze of their collections.

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10. Feild to William Scott, July 1, 1844.

11. Feild to William Scott, August 6, 1846.


13. Feild to William Scott, May 20, 1845


16. Simms, Walter, 1989, « Canon George Henry Bishop », Newfoundland Churchman, May, vol. 35, no. 5, p. 7. This article, although under the heading of "Biography," is in fact a reprint of an article about St. Saviour's, written at an unknown date by Canon Bishop, who was rector there for thirty-seven years.

17. ibid.

18. ibid.


21. ibid.


23. Proposed New Church at Portugal Cove, Newfoundland, printed prospectus in RIBA Grey W [PB 195/3].


26. Grey, 1858, plate VI.

27. Feild to William Scott, August, 1844.


29. Leader : 140.

30. Grey, 1858, plate XII. Grey presents a striking portrait of Labrador in his preface: "Like its neighbour coast, the seaboard of Labrador presents its worst side outside. It is constantly beset by icebergs, and the islands and headlands which are opposed to the ocean are, at first sight, as bare as they can well be. But if you ascend the deep inlets, or thread your way between the innermost of the numberless islands which lie on the mainland, you find a warmer atmosphere, fine timber, luxuriant vegetation, abundance of wild fruits, and (what is less advantageous) thousands of mosquitoes."