TIMBER AND TIN: Church Design and Construction in the James Bay Mission, 1850-1890

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FIG. 1. ST THOMAS' CHURCH, MOOSE FACTORY, 1856-1864; 1884, EXTERIOR. | ALGOMA UNIVERSITY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, SHINGWAUK RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS CENTRE, JOHN EDMONDS FONDS, 2011-060-001.

Since the early French presence in North America, missions to Canada's indigenous peoples have been a key aspect of European expansion into the territory. The second half of the nineteenth century, in particular, was of note for the Church Missionary Society (CMS), the evangelical branch of the Church of England's missionary programme, which focussed its efforts on Canada's North and West, as part of their larger evangelistic enterprise across the British Empire. Although focussed primarily on preaching and conversion, the presence of missionaries was most effectively denoted through the construction and growth of churches and mission stations. Five of these stations were located on the shores of James Bay, with the specific focus of evangelizing the James Bay Cree.[1] The churches erected at these stations, in particular those at Moose Factory, which became the seat of the newly created Diocese of Moosonee in 1872, and at Fort George, demonstrate two key approaches to church design and construction, which, when examined in light of the CMS's policy on ecclesiastical infrastructure development, clarify the important limitations and conditions faced by these remote stations as regards their approach to architecture.

The five mission stations in this region were located at the Hudson Bay Company posts of Moose Factory in the south; Rupert House, Eastmain and Fort George on the eastern shore of the Bay; and Fort Albany on the western shore. Churches were erected at all of these stations, but very limited information about them can be found; only one, St. Thomas', Moose

Factory (1856-1864, 1884), survives in a complete and recognizable form. A lack of documentation as well as relatively few extant structures are central limitations in the examination of many CMS churches in the Canadian North; as such, assumptions must be made based on the surviving structures and the written material available. With those limitations in mind, the two churches that will be primarily examined in this paper highlight key approaches to construction and style, drawing conclusions which can most likely be applied to the other three, despite the limited information available that can be used for concrete analysis.

In order to effectively examine the architecture of the James Bay churches, it is necessary to briefly look at the central organization's policy on construction projects for mission stations. Contrary to standard Anglican practice in the second half of the nineteenth century as regards the erection of churches abroad, the CMS was actually opposed to the prevalent Gothic Revival style for churches in its stations. Instead, the organization advocated the use of vernacular forms, often modified, for worship space. This policy was specifically discussed at the 1860 Conference on Missions in Liverpool, a conference that set the tone for their evangelical mission strategy over the next thirty years.[2] The Gothic church, it was deemed, was "out of place"[3] in the global mission field.

The reasons behind such stance, so divergent from standard Anglican practice, were larger CMS policies regarding the ultimate outcomes of the evangelistic enterprise. At its heart was a policy known as "native agency," which aimed to promote Christianity not as an imported English cultural institution, but rather as a universal profession of faith that could operate within pre-Christian cultural paradigms. In particular, the native agency policy advocated the transmission of "Christianity in its essential truths severed from all the incidentals,"[4] in order to promote "the formation of a national and independent church, possessed of that freedom and elasticity which will enable it to adapt itself to the exigencies and circumstances of the new people amongst whom it has grown."[5] Most importantly for the CMS, the native agency policy was to be applied to two specific fields: the translation of Scripture and other religious texts into local languages, and the training and education of native clergy and lay leaders in the hope of building a local episcopal hierarchy manned primarily by non-Europeans.[6]

Within the broader application of this strategy, church architecture fell firmly into the category of "incidentals" because of its intimate connections to English culture, a fact recognized by the CMS.[7] As the *Church Missionary Intelligencer* reported in 1869: "Christianity clothed with a form so rigidly, and unalterably Anglican . . . can never thoroughly adapt itself to the requirements of a new country."[8] In theory, this approach dictated the use of local architectural forms in place of more familiar English and European ones in order to make the church as a representation of faith more relatable and more appropriate to both new and would-be converts. The actual application of this scheme, however, was consistently uneven. Taking the James Bay churches as primary examples, it is glaringly obvious that this policy was not followed. Nevertheless, the lack of adherence to corporate directives reflects a more complicated set of circumstances than perhaps realized by the Home Committee when constructing worship spaces in remote environments, rather than ignorance or lack of interest in larger goals central to the mandate of the Society.

Of all the churches on the James Bay coast from the original CMS's mission, St. Thomas' Church, Moose Factory, which became the diocesan seat in 1872, has the best documented history and survives in the most complete form, as has previously been noted (fig. 1). It was constructed between 1856 and 1864, with the chancel added in 1884, under the supervision of John Horden (1828-1893), the missionary at Moose Factory who became the diocese's first bishop, to replace an older church on the same site, established by a previous Methodist mission in the 1840s.[9] Incorporating a steeply-pitched roof, with lancet windows and an entrance tower, this structure is a basic example of timber Gothic construction—in line with contemporary trends for church building in North America for both settler and mission churches.[10] This design is not architecturally innovative, nor does it seek to incorporate indigenous design methodologies in any way. It has clearly been drawn directly from the English parish tradition exemplified in the early Gothic Revival, a trend adapted to timber construction throughout North America.[11] However, it should be noted that within most CMS stations, the vast majority of clergy were not architecturally trained, nor did they have access to the centres of architectural knowledge present in the university societies of Oxford and Cambridge, attributable to the high recruitment rate, especially in the North American field, of clergy and lay workers without a university degree. Horden, for example, had not completed any higher education studies whatsoever.[12] As a result, many designs for church projects were not original, but rather drawn from elsewhere; however, from Horden's written records, it is not entirely clear what exactly inspired the church's design.

The most likely source for this design, and others like it, are the pattern books.

Well circulated throughout nineteenth-century North America, pattern books formed a solid backbone in church design because they allowed communities, especially remote ones, to build Gothic-style churches, even when there was no one in the immediate area with such architectural expertise.[13] These books provided detailed images, and often also plans, for a range of structures that could be easily adapted, as necessary, to the local conditions. The most likely source for St. Thomas', based on visual evidence, is a pattern for a wooden church by American architect Richard Upjohn (1802-1878), published in 1852 in his book *Upjohn's Rural Architecture*[14] (fig. 2). Although there are some clear visual differences, the massing of forms, specifically in the use of the southern entrance tower, makes this pattern a plausible source for Horden's design. Whether this book was used specifically or if Horden saw a church like this elsewhere is entirely unknown, but the clear visual correlations between the two structures point to a link.

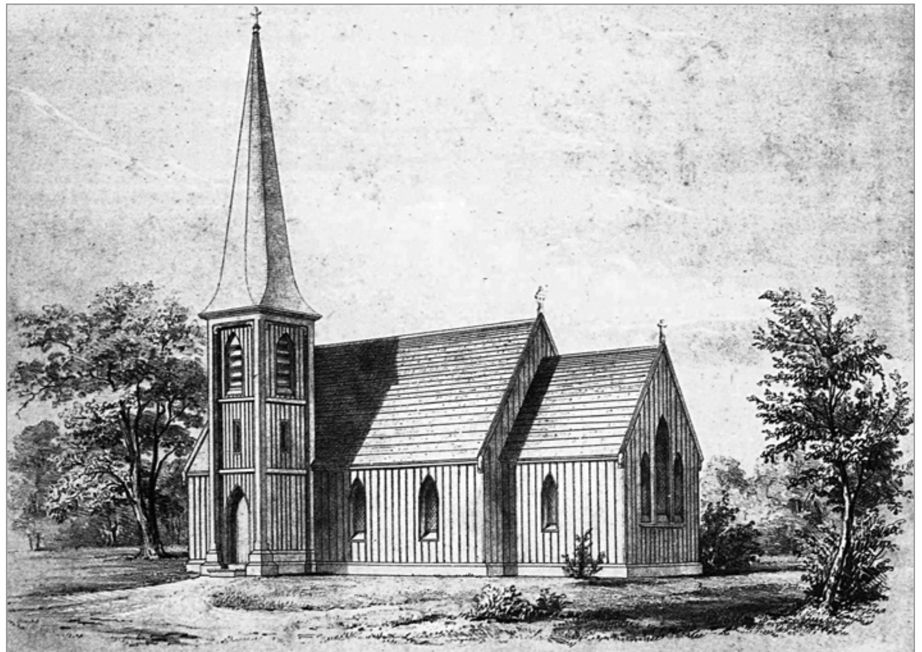

FIG. 2. RICHARD UPJOHN, "DESIGN FOR A WOODEN CHURCH," *UPJOHN'S RURAL ARCHITECTURE*, 1852. | IMAGE COURTESY OF DIVISION OF RARE AND MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS, CORNELL UNIVERSITY.

The differences between Upjohn's pattern and St. Thomas', however, highlight a very important aspect of the approach to architecture taken in this region and, indeed, by the CMS in general when employing Gothic design elements in their mission churches. In particular, the CMS, and its agents, were generally not concerned with the rigorous application of the Gothic principles as espoused by such Gothic thinkers as Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin and the Cambridge Camden Society, eschewing the so-called "ecclesiologically-correct" principles of design in favour of practicality.[15] There are several key deviations that must be underlined here in relation to St. Thomas', namely: the slightly lowered pitch of the roof away from the ubiquitous sixty-degree pitch seen in the ecclesiologically-correct Upjohn model; the substitution of weatherboard for board and batten, deemphasizing the verticality of the structure; and the somewhat ambiguous windows in the nave, tending toward a wider Georgian profile, especially when compared directly to the more recognizable lancets in the chancel. These changes most likely arose from the practical concerns faced by a remote mission with limited resources; for example, weatherboard, a fairly consistent feature in churches not only in the James Bay basin but in many of the CMS's North American missions, was cheaper, easier to erect, and significantly more durable in unfavourable weather conditions. A policy of economy, therefore, seems to have dictated the design process.

It is important to note that Horden never explicitly discussed his church, nor any other in his diocese, within the paradigm of the larger Gothic Revival. In fact, he never used the word "Gothic" to describe the building. What he did consistently emphasize, however, was the church's Englishness. For example, in an 1884 letter, he wrote: "it now appears like a fair English Church, while its [MS illegible] is as well crafted for worship both as regards to [right?] theory as any church I am acquainted with."[16] He even, at times, compared the structure to similar churches in England, admitting very directly the stylistic source of the church, and the English ecclesiastical tradition.[17] Furthermore, it was widely acknowledged throughout that period that "English" as a term applied to architecture essentially meant "Gothic," but without the nomenclature associating it with the High Church branch of the style.[18] That being said, whatever terminology he used, Horden was well aware that his church drew from an English tradition and consistently emphasized that fact, the major difference he acknowledged, most obviously, being its construction medium.

As demonstrated through St. Thomas', timber construction was actively employed

FIG. 3. FORT GEORGE MISSION CHURCH, EXTERIOR, DRAWING BY EDMUND PECK. | CHURCH MISSIONARY SOCIETY ARCHIVES, CADBURY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM, CMSA G1/C1/O1896.

in this region to adapt English forms to the North American context; it was the most common church building medium used in both James Bay and CMS stations in the Canadian Northwest. However, the most northeasterly station on the Bay broke away from that trend and toward a less commonly used method of construction. The church erected at Fort George (fig. 3) under the charge of missionary Edmund Peck, in the early 1880s, was in fact a prefabricated iron structure sent from England as a kit with instructions to be assembled by the local congregation. When examining this structure from the point of view of the CMS's policy on vernacular construction, there are some centrally obvious issues with this approach. However, in order to more fully examine the rationale behind the use of this building at the station, it is useful to briefly look at prefabricated ecclesiastical structures in general, both in regard to the Fort George church in particular and in relation to their use in the CMS's mission field as a whole.

It is not known how many prefabricated churches were sent across the globe throughout the second half of the nineteenth century. There are at least eight such recorded incidents specifically under the CMS's jurisdiction, as well as several under the auspices of different branches of the Church of England abroad. The most well known, and the best documented of these churches are the six structures sent to Australia in the 1850s, although these were not associated with CMS's missions as they were intended as settler churches.[19] Similar churches were sent to other regions of the British Empire, including one to Victoria, British Columbia, a church which, although much grander than that at Fort George, followed the same construction process. These churches were particularly popular in England, however, where they were often used as temporary churches for poor congregations.[20]

Of the eight churches known to be sent out by the CMS, three were exported to Western Africa and the Niger Delta to be erected at interior villages under the jurisdiction of Bishop Samuel Crowther.[21] The other five were sent to Horden's diocese, between 1876 and 1891, primarily for stations directly on the Hudson Bay coast, with the key exception being the Fort George structure. The primary reason that these churches were exported was to respond to a lack of material resources and manpower in this stations, which would have made it otherwise difficult to erect a suitable structure. Horden wrote of the church for the northern station of Little Whale River:

> I should be very glad if some good Christian friend would undertake to collect money for an Iron Church for Mr. Peck at L.W.R.; it is quite indispensible. No wood grow near there at all fit for buildings, and he cannot preach to or teach his people in the open air with the thermometer at 40 degrees below zero.[22]

Presumably, the church at Fort George was ordered for similar reasons, despite the fact that the timber for the interior fittings was harvested and processed on site. These iron structures were certainly more weatherproof than many of their timber counterparts, especially when compared to the poor quality timber available along much of the James Bay coast. Although there is no specific attestation to this for the Fort George church, examples elsewhere exhorting the warmth and the ability to withstand harsh weather conditions of these types

of buildings, especially in winter conditions, suggest this may have been a factor at play.[23]

In fact, very little is actually known about this structure; it is primarily enigmatic in its origins because Peck, the missionary in charge of the station, was based to the north in Little Whale River during its erection and wrote very little about it. Primarily described in very brief notes during a visit to the station in 1882, Peck's depictions were so limited that he never explicitly identified the fact that the church was a prefabricated kit.[24] His discussion centred primarily on the collection and processing of timber for the interior skeleton and sheathing, never mentioning the inclusion of any metal elements, presumably due to the fact that the majority of the building was completed while he was away. The only indication that the church was an iron kit comes from a précis of missionary activity in North America in the *Proceedings of the Church Missionary Society* for 1883, which reported that "another iron church, provided (like the one at Little Whale River) by the efforts of Mrs. Agnes Wright has been received by him [Peck], and put up at Fort George for the use of the Indians there."[25]

FIG. 4. ST. EDMUND'S CHURCH, LITTLE WHALE RIVER, 1879. | PRINCE OF WALES NORTHERN HERITAGE CENTRE, ARCHIBALD FLEMING FONDS, N-1979-050; 0298.

The construction process and material composition of that structure can be extrapolated both from the very brief descriptions provided by Peck during visits to Fort George and from the analogous erection of another iron church in his charge, at the northern station of Little Whale River on Hudson Bay, in 1879 (fig. 4). The kit itself contained only the exterior iron shell and fittings, including windows and doors. The skeleton and interior sheathing of both structures were made of wood, which was standard practice in these buildings (fig. 5).[26] Although interior fittings appeared to have been sent from England in the case of the church for Little Whale River, at Fort George, only the external shell was imported.[27] In his 1882 annual letter to the CMS Home Committee, Peck discussed at length the harvesting and processing of timber at Fort George specifically for the church, as well as the initial erection of its interior skeleton.[28] Clearly, the material resources at Fort George were not so limited that no labour could be done onsite; presumably, the use of local timber for the interior was primarily a cost-saving measure to avoid importing from England a material that was fairly readily available at the station.

The import of a church directly from England was certainly a direct infusion of English culture into the James Bay ecclesiastical environment. The surviving images of this structure from the early twentieth

FIG. 5. FORT GEORGE MISSION CHURCH, INTERIOR, DRAWING BY EDMUND PECK. | CHURCH MISSIONARY SOCIETY ARCHIVES, CADBURY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM, CMSA G1/C1/O1896.

century show that it clearly conformed to Gothic design principles, incorporating double lancet windows on the long nave, a steeply-pitched roof and frontal tower. The original building also had an architecturally separate chancel, another factor that emphasized the overarching Gothic theme through its stylistic details and massing of forms.[29] From a stylistic point of view, this structure, like its contemporary in Moose Factory, was very overtly in contravention of the CMS's policy.

However, the use of prefabricated structures naturally dictated the use of European forms. Due to the fact that these buildings were industrially manufactured and could be ordered from catalogues, there was little room in the process for cultural nuance.[30] Buyers in England, who comprised the majority of these building manufacturer's customers, primarily wanted buildings that reflected the prevalent ecclesiastical trends of the day, specifically the neo-Gothic style, and the choices available for order directly reflected that clientele's tastes. For the CMS, the advantage of these structures was that they were easy to erect and highly utilitarian. The fact that their stylistic adherence was not in line with corporate policy was of secondary importance, especially given the presence of other Gothic-style churches within this local mission.

It is likely that the other churches constructed in the other three stations along the coast followed the stylistic pattern laid out by the churches at both Moose Factory and Fort George, although none survive to confirm this assumption. They most likely were of timber construction as the import of iron structures generally was noted in CMS's records, as it was in the case of the Fort George church and the other four imported to Horden's diocese. That being said, there is very little documentary evidence that can be used to discuss their stylistic adherence and construction process, specifically in the case of Rupert House and Eastmain, as neither had resident missionaries for significant periods of time during the late nineteenth century and considering that their churches were extensively modified and reconstructed in the early twentieth century.

Fort Albany, however, was under the direct jurisdiction of Thomas Vincent, a Métis man who became archdeacon of the diocese in 1883 and was a fairly prolific church builder in the outstations around the fort.[31] With limited access to English architectural trends, whether or not he would choose to erect a church in a clear Gothic style is less clear. The church at Fort Albany under his supervision was described as "one of the prettiest little churches in James Bay."[32] It was partially destroyed by floodwaters in 1880, resulting in a major rebuilding project; the reports of the flood, however, confirm that the church was originally constructed with a steeple, a fairly standard Gothic feature, and it can be assumed that the rest of the structure conformed to a European mould. Vincent, in any case, consistently built in a European style; several churches constructed under his supervision in northwestern Ontario were consistently described as "English," which, as at St. Thomas', remains a good indicator of a broad adherence to the Gothic stylistic umbrella.[33]

When looking at the James Bay mission, it is clear that the use of English forms for non-English congregations, despite

corporate policy, was the norm in the region; it was, however, also the norm in the vast majority of the CMS's missions across the British Empire, where Gothic churches were consistently being erected. That being said, it must be noted that the CMS did not police architecture within its missions; missionaries, like Horden and Peck, were effectively operating independently and were able to address the particular concerns of their area, as well as build in a style they were comfortable pursuing, given the resources at their disposal. It appears that the Society saw vernacular construction and design practice as desirable in church construction projects, but certainly not the most important aspect of evangelism. Their lack of reaction to the use of the Gothic style can be seen in the pages of their two major periodicals, the *Church Missionary Intelligencer* and *Church Missionary Gleaner*, which regularly discussed Gothic construction projects throughout the global mission field and portrayed them in a positive light.[34] The James Bay churches were not as out of place within the global context as corporate policy might suggest. Nevertheless, they appear to indicate a stance on the idea of native agency not entirely in line with CMS's goals.

FIG. 6. SKIN-TENT FRAME, BAFFIN ISLAND, SIMILAR TO THE SKIN-TENT CHURCH. ILLUSTRATION FROM THE *CHURCH MISSIONARY GLEANER*, JANUARY 1900. | IMAGE COURTESY OF CHURCH MISSIONARY SOCIETY ARCHIVES, CADBURY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM.

The stance on "native agency" by the two missionaries involved in the erection of the above example, John Horden and Edmund Peck, provides a key backdrop to the discussion of these structures and outlines the ambiguous place of architecture within this strategy. Horden's commitment to the policy was both incomplete and highly typical of missionaries in the field. He avidly promoted the use of the Cree language among his staff, made sure that the Cree lifestyle was not overly interrupted by their adherence to the Christian liturgical year, specifically through the promotion of flexible day schooling options for their children, and was invested in the training and ordination of both Cree and Métis men to expand the church using local manpower.[35] Yet at the same time, Horden displayed tendencies toward what church historian Brian Stanley has called "soft racism,"[36] that is the making of a casual connection between exposure to Christianity and the level of civilization in a given racial group. For example, as his mission progressed, Horden had questions about the ability of the Cree and Métis members of his congregation to carry the weight of the Christian establishment without English assistance, because of their limited exposure to the faith as a cultural group, and he consistently took a paternalistic stance on their welfare, a widespread view among Anglicans abroad.[37] As for Peck, he was highly committed to the native agency principles, particularly in the growth of a native pastorate; his later missions to Baffin Island in the 1890s and early 1900s attest to such commitment.[38] Although not evident at his missions under Horden, his approach actually translated into a vernacular approach to architectural practice on a limited scale. An interesting development coming out of the Baffin Island mission, centred on Blacklead Island in Cumberland Sound, was the use of Inuit construction methods to erect clearly defined worship spaces, although these were explicitly recognized as being temporary. The most well known of these structures was the so-called "tabernacle in the wilderness," a sealskin tent built on a whalebone frame that evolved directly from Inuit construction methods (fig. 6).[39] Nevertheless, the consolidation

of the Baffin mission was marked, like at Fort George, with the erection of a European-type building, albeit a very rudimentary one, imported from Scotland on a whaling ship.[40]

Evidently, commitment to native agency and the erection of churches using vernacular design principles did not directly correlate. That being said, churches employing vernacular design elements and construction methods, although not widespread, did exist in the mission field. The two main areas where these types of churches were erected were in Pakistan and on New Zealand's North Island. While these two fields were startlingly different in many respects, they both could rely on a factor that allowed a vernacular style to be easily utilized by missionaries: an established tradition of permanent construction and local expertise involved in their erection. In Pakistan, the tradition employed and adapted into Christian ecclesiastical design was drawn from Mughal-era mosque construction and was generally put in place by local, and not necessarily Christian, architects with a specific understanding of local design and construction techniques.[41] In New Zealand, conversely, the domestic *whare*, or meeting house, forms were adapted and modified by local congregations to build spaces for Christian worship throughout the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s in large-scale projects driven primarily by local Maori congregations.[42] While the structures erected under these schemes presented very specific problems in regard to liturgy and their ability to be identified as churches, and were often criticized on the basis of their non-Christian design elements, they exemplified the growth of vernacular expressions of Christian worship at least within limited segments of the CMS's mission field.[43]

Obviously, on the James Bay coast, the options presented abroad to CMS's missionaries working amongst cultures with clearly identifiable permanent architectural traditions were not available given the primarily mobile lifestyle of the James Bay Cree. The western idea of architectural permanence, especially within the context of Christian missions, was a deeply ingrained in the British psyche in North America, and one that did not correlate to using semi-permanent or moveable forms.[44] Certainly, missionaries in the region performed services, and even sacraments, in the bush or in Cree camps, as demonstrated by the published account of Horden's successor, Bishop Jervois Newnham, performing a baptism on his way to Fort Albany "by the light of the candle in the open air."[45] Peck used Inuit tent structures for worship in the early years of the Baffin mission, as mentioned above, but he also used snow structures, demonstrating a clear willingness to adapt to architectural conditions outside of European norms.[46] Nevertheless, the church as a permanent structure was, for the CMS, a centrally important element of the growth of Christianity in a given region as a key indicator of the consolidation of the mission.[47] For Horden, a man with no architectural training and with no access to someone with professional expertise, designing a culturally-sensitive yet permanent church from two disparate approaches to human space was outside of what was reasonable in such circumstances. This idea of permanence is highlighted when looking at Peck's mission in Blacklead and the eventual erection of a permanent structure to replace the vernacular tent-church with a western-style building. To further stress this point, the importance of permanence was also emphasized through scriptural interpretation. Central to this idea was the Old Testament transition of the Israelites from a nomadic people in the desert to a settled agricultural civilization in Canaan, a transition that could be achieved due to their faith in, and obedience to God.[48] As a result, the idea of architectural permanence for mission worship spaces was seen to transcend culture, in this case standard English settlements patterns, and become a key aspect of the acceptance of God and the growth of Christian communities as exemplified through scriptural examples

It should be noted that not all regions with a tradition of permanent construction in which the CMS operated pursued a vernacular approach to ecclesiastical design. In particular, the mission stations in British Columbia tended toward Gothic-style design to the detriment of the powerful long house building techniques employed by the local Tsimshian, Tlingit, and Haida communities where the missionaries worked.[49] Yet, as a rule, these missions operated under a different ideological framework, one which actively suppressed native culture, as most infamously demonstrated by the constructed settlement at Metlakatla under William Duncan, where European architectural forms were explicitly employed in order to separate his converts from their pre-Christian past and "the miasma of heathen life."[50] The express rejection of vernacular forms, in this particular region, was directly associated with a rejection of the value of any aspects of indigenous culture. This is opposed to the significant practical concerns and the overarching, but not intentionally destructive, racial attitudes and cultural assumptions of Horden and his contemporaries in the James Bay region.

The difficultly in adapting Cree building techniques to thoughtful permanent worship spaces by individuals with little experience in nuanced architectural planning led directly to the use of the two strategies outlined in the Moose Factory and Fort George churches: pattern books

and prefabrication. Both of these strategies allowed missionaries with limited knowledge and resources to erect permanent, functional structures in their missions with relatively little effort, especially in regard to design. However, they naturally dictated how the structure would proceed stylistically as both of these resources were directed primarily at home and settler audiences. These solutions were intended to be accessible to a much larger audience than the small mission field in northeastern Ontario and, as such, consistently presented structures based on European, generally Gothic, principles. The strategy was utilitarian, to the detriment of commitment to policy and to "arraying the truths of Christianity in the vernacular of the people,"[51] as expressed through material form. Nevertheless, it allowed the mission stations in the region to erect useable churches without significant time being allotted to the planning process.

Commitment to policies on paper did not necessarily work on the ground, especially when that policy did not directly affect immediate evangelism. While speaking the Cree language had direct consequences on how evangelism was conducted, church construction, viewed from a utilitarian perspective, did not, as long as some sort of building was present and available for worship services. The churches of the James Bay mission approached faith-based architectural planning in an area where incompatible ideas of architecture collided by taking the easy route, not the culturally nuanced one, an approach taken very frequently through CMS's missions abroad. This was certainly unfortunate in light of the Society's mandate, especially given how, in some regions, vernacular forms had been actively and successfully integrated into ecclesiastical design. The James Bay churches were consciously foreign, but they were also not seen as being the most important area to implement a policy of native agency, but rather a utilitarian necessity for which there was a straightforward English solution.

NOTES

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