

CELEBRATION

> PIERRE DE LA
RUFFINIÈRE DU PREY

Three recent publications by authors associated in the past with the SSAC/SÉAC call for a celebration. Rather than produce formal book reviews, I have chosen this more informal, celebratory way of welcoming the writers back to the fold, so to speak, especially because their subject matter is non-Canadian and would not normally figure in these pages—unless you agree with Prime Minister Mackenzie King that the Vimy Ridge Memorial in France is “Canada’s altar on European soil.”

The first book to arrive, *Pride in Modesty: Modernist Architecture and the Vernacular Tradition in Italy* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2010), is by Michelangelo Sabatino, whose article on Eric Arthur appeared in this *Journal* in 2001, at the time Sabatino was completing his doctoral studies at the University of Toronto. (He currently teaches at the University of Houston’s Hines College of Architecture in Texas.) Sabatino’s subtitle draws attention to a much-neglected aspect of Italian architecture and culture, namely: the vernacular tradition during the first half of the twentieth century and beyond. The final chapter and the epilogue trace the continuing impact of that tradition after World War II in Europe and North America.

Sabatino champions ardently the vernacular (fresh, brimming with primitive vitality) as opposed to the classical (played-out, derivative). In part this permits his text to sidestep the stripped-down classicism practised by some architects during the Mussolini era and tainted by its reprehensible politics.



FIG. 1. MASONIC LODGE, 650 FISGARD STREET, VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA, 1878-1908. | PIERRE DU PREY, 2012.

Strangely, as Sabatino rightly points out, this fascist material has exerted a morbid fascination on quite a few scholars. But the story he tells they have largely overlooked. He weaves a compelling tapestry from a well-researched web of events, polemics, combative protagonists, and eloquent pundits. At times the strands wildly crisscross the intellectual spectrum. By putting Futurists, Fascists, Nationalists, and Mediterranean Regionalists on the same footing, however, Sabatino makes sense of them all. Commendably he looks into related developments in painting, book art, and furniture design. With particular reference to domestic architecture he brings into discussion such topics of burning interest at the time as the regional styles of architecture on the isle of Capri, or in the Italian Alps, and the *casa colonica* of the central part of the country. I found especially eye-opening his discussion of the many exhibitions devoted at the period to the traditional arts of the rural population. A whole literature surrounded them: catalogues, a spate of books, periodical articles, and reviews in the popular press. In this regard I note the omission of the seminal 1931 Florence exhibition *Mostra del giardino italiano*. It included architectural as well as horticultural material of considerable historical interest and was partly masterminded by one of Sabatino's frequent protagonists, the dynamic but right-wing art critic Ugo Ojetti. His emphasis on the value of "high art" counteracted the pronouncements of his left-leaning art historian rival Lionello Venturi, the originator of the phrase "pride in modesty" that forms the first part of Sabatino's book title. But fundamentally, Ojetti and Venturi's differences seem to me a question of degree rather than kind. Regardless of politics, both men partook of the Italian passion for architecture—whether rustic or classic—which is the overarching theme that comes across so beautifully in this book.

The next book in order of receipt was James Stevens Curl's handsomely produced and lavishly illustrated *Freemasonry and the Enlightenment: Architecture, Symbols, and Influences* (London, Historical Publications, 2011). Curl, who now lives in Northern Ireland and publishes frequently, was the keynote speaker at the 2001 SSAC/SÉAC annual meeting held in Halifax. For a topic as vast, complex, and I am tempted to say, as arcane as his, Curl chose a thematic structure, starting with a discussion of the origins of Freemasonry with its rituals, aims, and secrets. Inevitably, the thematic organization incurs the risk of repetition or backtracking, which some judicious editorial pruning might have avoided. But generally the reader moves smoothly from one fascinating topic to the next. Certain chapters, like the seventh devoted predominantly to France, stand out in my mind as required reading for anyone wishing to understand the architectural creativity of the waning years of the *Ancien Régime*. England, Scotland, and Ireland too loom large in Curl's discussions, as was to be expected; far less anticipated is English literature's contribution to the equation—the so-called Graveyard Poets, analogous in their impact on the arts to Sabatino's twentieth-century literati. What struck me as particularly well discussed pertained to the garden architecture of Enlightenment Germany and Poland. (The colour plates in that section are outstanding.) Considering the secrecy surrounding membership in Freemasonic lodges, the degree to which practising architects became adherents—with a few well-documented exceptions like John Soane—may always remain a mystery. In short, the reader is left asking questions such as: does Curl intend one day to turn his attention to the embarrassment of Masonic riches in North America? By way of incentive to him I illustrate here the lodge in Victoria, British Columbia,

featuring over its doorway the six-pointed Seal of Solomon, or hexalpha, flanked by the twin columns named Jachin and Boaz that stood before Solomon's Temple of Jerusalem in biblical times.

One omission worth noting concerns of all things an Italian example. Curl seems unaware of the existence of a proto-Masonic fresco program decorating the interior of Andrea Palladio's Villa Cornaro at Piombino Dese. The decorations, which include a depiction of the Temple of Solomon—the fundamental source of Masonic lore—date from considerably later than the villa's construction in the 1550s. Andrea Cornaro, a descendant of the original client, commissioned the paintings from Mattia Bortoloni who completed them in 1717, the very year of the founding of the Grand Lodge at London. All this has been pointed out by Douglas Lewis in "Freemasonic Imagery in a Venetian Fresco Cycle of 1716," an essay tucked away in an obscure volume appropriately titled *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult in Early Modern Europe*, edited by Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (London and Toronto, Associated University Presses, 1988). Lewis muses, as do I, that Francesco Cornaro, Venetian Ambassador at the court of Queen Anne from 1705-1709 and cousin of Andrea, might have acted as the conduit for this remarkably early transference of Masonic ideas.

The third book to cross my desk gave me the greatest cause for celebration because its authors, Jacqueline Hucker and Julian Smith, had written separate articles on the Vimy Ridge Memorial in an issue of the SSAC/SÉAC *Journal* I had edited in 2008. Their *Vimy: Canada's Memorial to a Generation* (Ottawa, Sanderling, 2012) unites them anew in a slim, skillfully designed, and beautifully illustrated soft-cover publication. Considering its

attractiveness, it is priced very reasonably. Every Canadian library and household can therefore afford a copy and should have one. Ten chapters interspersed with dazzling colour plates and archival photos in black and white stress the pivotal World War I victory and its immediate aftermath, chronicle the design competition that led to Walter Allward's selection as the Vimy memorial's architect/sculptor, and discuss the long-drawn-out construction of the physical monument, its subsequent deterioration and near-miraculous restoration in time for the 2007 re-dedication ceremony. Jacqueline Hucker (a former student of mine) was the architectural historian attached to the monument's conservation team, co-led by architect Julian Smith who directs the Willowbank School of Restoration Arts, located in Queenston, Ontario.

In chapter five, Hucker and Smith unravel the prolonged story of the illusive search for the right stone in which to build and sculpt the monument at Vimy. Gripping period images of the quarry on the Dalmatian coast of modern-day Croatia, the transportation of the stone, its arrival on the site, and the painstaking process of the carvers at work accompany the text. Surely this must be among the best-documented building campaigns during the last century. What still remains mysterious—not unlike the relationship between architects and Freemasons as unveiled by Curl—is the genesis of Allward's design and the sources of his inspiration, topics well covered by Lane Borstad's article in the Vimy issue of the *Journal*, but still awaiting further detailed examination. The same holds true for Allward's connections with the architects attached to the War Graves Commission in London, notably the celebrated Edwin Lutyens. In my editor's postscript to the issue of the *Journal* devoted to Vimy, I mention that Lutyens admired Vimy and ask

whether he may have known Allward. The answer to this and other questions may someday emerge from the archives, much as the earth at Vimy Ridge occasionally disgorges missing remains and unexploded ordnance. Architecture, sculpture, and the very landscape itself—what Mackenzie King's diary of 1922 called "two square miles of... consecrated hallowed ground"—enter into a solemn chorus. Hucker and Smith's book poignantly captures that haunting song.