INDICES OF IDENTITY: A Canadian Architectural Practice in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century

"Canada is a colony, not a country; it is not yet identified with the dearest affections and associations, remembrances and hopes of its inhabitants; it is to them an adopted not a real mother. Their love, their pride, are not for poor Canada, but for high and happy England; but a few more generations must change all this."²

by Angela Carr
So wrote Anna Jameson in 1837. More than half a century later, little had changed—another commentator ventured that it was "not unreasonable to believe that the period will be reached when her sons [sic] will think of Canada as Canada and not as a mere dependency." Only in the past thirty years have academics been in a position to articulate the country's political and cultural emancipation as a nation. In the meantime, the issue of Eurocentrism in Canadian academic curricula has focused critical concerns about how one forges cultural identity. As a result, it is all the more incumbent upon scholars to examine precisely how past belief systems have informed and are still implicated in the myths of our national consciousness.  

Carl Berger's pioneering study *The Sense of Power*, published in 1970, chronicled the rise of the British imperial vision after 1860 under Disraeli's Conservatives and the ensuing view of Canada as the "keystone" of empire. A.B. McKillop has since credited Berger's work with shifting our understanding of imperialism in Canada from a destructive retrenchment to a defensive intellectual stance protective of the country's nationhood. Here, historian and historiographer, no less than historical subject, share in the re-presentation of the past. More recently, R.G. Moyles and Doug Owram have documented nine British stereotypes of Canada, all of which were entirely at odds with contemporary Canadian interpretations of self and nation. Historical narrative appears, therefore, as an arena in which past and present interact as ideologically invested constructs within and beyond their respective historical moments.

Berger, in his exploration of imperialism as a post-Confederation defensive strategy around which the Canadian Dominion was built, quoted a 1904 Empire Club of Canada address by nationalist poet Wilfred Campbell to the effect that the country's only choice lay between "two different imperialisms, that of Britain and that of the Imperial Commonwealth to the south." To stay within the British sphere was a matter of self-defence, because "to enter that of the American means sheer annihilation of all our personality as a people." According to Berger, American republicanism and continentalism were seen as serious threats to British North America well into the early decades of the 20th century.

McKillop has argued that, because of the country's colonial origins, Canadian intellectual historians must ask how ideas, whatever their source, have been handled in the Canadian context, not which ideas are "indigenous" or "derivative." By analogy, our understanding of architectural theory and built form in the historical period is not so much a study of "innovation" as an exploration of "appropriation" and "acculturation." How colonial cultures interpret borrowed ideas is fundamental to our understanding how the society defined itself.

Toronto architect Edmund Burke's career illustrates some of the doctrines of imperialism as they relate to the practice of architecture in Canada in the 19th century. Burke offered some insights into what he understood of his own cultural identity in an 1892 speech to the city's Architectural Sketch Club on the subject of residential construction techniques. His personality tended toward conciliation and gentility, yet his discussion mischievously deprecated the "tendency to 'knock things together'" superinduced by the craze for cheapness and inordinate haste, after the example set by our restless cousins to the South who use the almighty nail and trust it implicitly. The statement bears an uncanny resemblance to contemporary Canadian imperialist rhetoric, which labelled the American system unstable and chaotic—the "power of mobocracy." If it were not for the fact that Burke was soon to emerge as one of the foremost proponents of American commercial architecture in Canada, one might take his comments at face value. But the context suggests that the spirit of 1812 may have prejudiced the merits of the balloon frame.

It is worth noting that Burke also dismissed the British mortice-and-tenon system in his discussion of construction techniques because it was too labour-intensive for the high wages of the Canadian market. Instead, he advocated wrought iron straps and bolts to hold the framing together (a refinement lost on today's residential builders). The restricted labour pool determined the choice of construction techniques, said Burke, just as a lack of household help precluded "careless and diffuse" room arrangements common in Britain. Extremes of climate demanded a compact building footprint for effective heating, and snow necessitated steep roofs (figure 1). Burke positioned the Canadian house plan as a kind of "golden mean" between Britain and the United States, using regional labour variances and climate to construct his ideal.
Even Burke’s seemingly practical references to climate take on a broader significance in the context of contemporary rhetorical linkages with national character. Imperial advocate George Parkin wrote that the country belonged to “the sturdy races of the North ... fighting their way under conditions ... more severe than those to which they have been accustomed in their old homes.”18 Roland Barthes has suggested that myths, because of their tendency to “act economically,” lend the appearance of innocent naturalness to something entirely constructed.19 Indeed, Canadians until quite recently have accepted that a harsh climate linked quite naturally to a series of archetypes emphasizing rusticity and toughness as intrinsic to the national character. Lawren Harris’ proclamation of a new race of “true” Canadians imbued with the [ample, replenishing] North is a widely accepted identity-myth, notwithstanding reservations by some contemporary scholars that it was little more than “mystic racism.”20

Burke was a generation older than Lawren Harris, but he shared the same social circle. A devout Baptist, Burke was retained by Lawren’s uncle Elmore Harris in 1889 and again in 1892 to design successive buildings for the Walmer Road Baptist Church in Toronto. Six years later, a commission for Elmore’s Toronto Bible Training School also came Burke’s way, and in 1902 his firm built a house for Lawren Harris’ mother, Mrs. T.M. Harris, at 123 St. George Street in Toronto. Burke’s views, while quite distinct from Lawren’s Theosophic mysticism and Elmore’s pre-millennialism, embodied the popular rhetoric of the day. He envisioned a country dedicated to imperial unity, but free from sectarian or class distinctions—a result to be achieved through determined opposition to dual languages and separate schools. Burke’s condemnation of American residential construction techniques21 may have been rooted in his rejection of slipshod methods. But the speech of 1892, like his politics, seems tinged with an imperial jingoism which proposes a myth of self-sufficiency and resistance for a Canadian profession under siege.

In many ways Burke is representative of an entire generation of Canadian architects. He is distinguished both for his role in founding the Ontario Association of Architects in 1889, which placed the practice of architecture on a professional footing, and for the unprecedented step of introducing Chicago-style curtain-wall construction into Canada, in 1894-95.22 His training with his uncle Henry Langley, begun in 1865, scarcely prepared him for the challenges of his later career. He once confided that little thought had been given to education in his day—students read Daly and Rickman, and “[looked] out the window while the boss was out.”23 In fact, his boss Henry Langley was one of the most highly respected practitioners of his day, known for his more than seventy churches, mostly in the Gothic revival style.24

Langley’s knowledge of British precedents and training methods derived from a seven-year apprenticeship with Scottish emigre William Hay. Hay came to Canada in 1847 as clerk of works on Gilbert Scott’s St. John the Baptist Anglican Cathedral in St. John’s, Newfoundland, then settled for a time in Toronto. Hay was well-informed about contemporary British architectural theory, and upon his return to Scotland in 1862 he left a stock of British-based precedents as a foundation for Langley’s productive and successful career.25
While Hay experimented in the 1850s with the British version of the Second Empire mansard, Langley turned to this form (in its American interpretation) only in the late 1860s. Langley described his 1866-70 scheme for Government House in Toronto (figure 2) as being in the “modern French style of architecture” adopted “largely in American cities” and “rapidly getting into favour in England.” This apologia reveals Langley’s perception of fashion hierarchies, and the justifications needed to gain public acceptance. Two years later he designed the federal government’s Eighth Post Office in Toronto, based on a preliminary proposal by American government architect Alfred B. Mullett and solicited, according to architectural historian Janet Wright, as part of a concerted effort to update the government’s public image. The trend was continued in the Langley firm’s designs for an adjoining office building known as “Imperial Chambers” and for the Bank of British North America one block away (figure 3, page 11).

Apparently, American models were promoted by Canadian governments immediately after Confederation but before the appearance of the influential periodical American Architect & Building News in 1876, the year of the American centennial. Campbell’s speech four decades later about the choice of imperialisms took aim at a cultural shift that began as soon as the new Dominion was created. As Kelly Crossman has chronicled, the Ontario government offered a final bow to British tradition when it requested entrants in its notorious 1880 competition for the legislative buildings in Queen’s Park to submit only Gothic designs. But the architectural character of the winning entries was judged inferior because of an unrealistically low budget. American assessor Richard Waite inveigled the commission for himself with a scheme The Globe described as “Nero” Greek (figure 4)—actually Richardsonian Romanesque. American Architect & Building News labelled Waite’s conduct “reprehensible,” while the provincial government blithely defended a huge increase in budget.

In the Langley office American ideas were assimilated quickly. Two important commissions from Senator William McMaster, at the urging of his American wife, Susan Moulton, launched Burke’s career. The Jarvis Street Baptist Church of 1874-75 was arranged on an amphitheatre plan drawn from American evangelical sources. And McMaster Hall of 1880, a private Baptist college established on Bloor Street near the University of Toronto, synthesized ideas from similar institutions in the northern United States. Langley’s firm also explored American neo-grec and, along with E.J. Lennox, introduced Richardson’s popular aesthetic in a series of city churches (figure 5). The intense gravitational pull of the United States was resisted only in residential commissions, where public taste and/or municipal bylaws apparently dictated a preference for Queen Anne revival.
By 1890, Burke was design partner for the Langley firm, supervising a large draughting room similar to though somewhat smaller than the large draughting factories common among major architectural practices south of the border. Former Langley students J.C.B. Horwood and Murray Alexander White, later Burke's partners, went to the United States—to New York and Chicago, respectively—to gain additional experience. Horwood's communications with Burke during that period were instrumental in encouraging another historic change. In 1894, having set up practice on his own, Burke proclaimed himself dissatisfied with what he called "an unreasoning adherence to [methods] unworthy of this scientific and progressive age." Notwithstanding his remarks on the American balloon frame, he decided to tackle the sparse aesthetic of the "Chicago men," as he called them. That year he designed the Robert Simpson retail store in Toronto with a rolled-steel interior frame enclosed by a series of continuous brick piers carried on I-beams at the level of the mezzanine. While not a fully sustained curtain wall, the concepts of the Chicago school were clearly evident. The store was destroyed by arson three months later, but was rebuilt on a freestanding iron frame, fireproofed to the latest standards. Such prompt adaptation was far from universal. Crossman has detailed how government and business leaders continued to bypass Canadian architects throughout the 1880s, until their American counterparts had made Richardsonian Romanesque the ascendent idiom. Protests surfaced about the hiring of Americans by Canadian companies such as Western Life Insurance and Canada Life, as well as the Toronto Mail, known for its editorial defence of the Conservatives' National Policy on trade protectionism. The profession gloated over every structural collapse for which American-based firms could be held responsible. And, for their part, American periodicals stereotyped "staid old Canada" for its fear of tall buildings and elevators, saying that Canadians would "as soon attempt to walk upon the waters, as Peter did of old, as to trust their precious lives in one of those 'bird-cages.'"

This debate raged into the first decade of the 20th century, when the New York firm of Carrère & Hastings secured several important commissions in Toronto. But the tide gradually turned after 1910, when the Maxwell brothers won the commission for Montréal's Dominion Express building. A contemporaneous decision by the Hudson's Bay Company in London, England, to choose Burke, Horwood & White of Toronto in preference to Burnham & Company of Chicago for their flagship stores in western Canada was another triumph, but the victory lost some of its edge when the firm was told to develop a motif similar to one Burnham had already successfully colonized in London's Selfridge's store. Likewise, the Georgian mode already established in the United States by McKim, Mead & White of New York was the basis for a series of YMCA buildings that Burke's firm designed in the Toronto area in the same years. While American competitors were criticized, imperial architects were often welcomed. The Royal Architectural Institute of Canada publicly pressured the Anglican bishop of Toronto to employ a Canadian or British architect in finishing St. Alban’s Cathedral instead of the renowned American neo-Gothicist Ralph Adams Cram. Then, in 1912, Borden's Conservative government, having just won an election on its opposition to reciprocity with the United States and its support for imperial ties,
called upon landscape architect Edward White of London, England, to prepare a ground plan for a piece of land on Wellington Street in Ottawa, newly expropriated for the Supreme Court and yet another group of departmental buildings (figure 8). Later disrupted by the outbreak of war, the competition, like so many of that period, was open only to British subjects practising within the empire, and White's preliminary layout even alluded to the Baroque domes of Wren's Greenwich Hospital as part of the concept.44

On the subject of imperial architecture, a column reprinted from the conservative British journal The Builder in the November 1912 issue of Construction magazine proposed that "an empire can nurse no finer ideal than the cohesion of its dominions in cities erected in one style of architecture recognized throughout the world as the expression of its own imperial ideals."45 A month later, a rebuttal demanded to know

Will we, then, by planting in India, in Australia, in Canada and elsewhere, the architectural style suitable to the practical and natural needs of our mother country, England, bring about ideal conditions? It means the loss of a nation's individuality.46

Even those who supported the imperial link as a strategy to discourage the country's annexation by the United States saw it as perpetuating a state of mind that hobbled any sense of independent action.47

THE CONCEPTUAL COMPROMISES IMPLICIT IN THE DOCTRINES of imperialism are manifest in Burke's claim to favour imperial unity, while at the same time counting himself a Liberal, and supporting the Conservatives' National Policy on protectionist tariffs. Our abiding national obsession with a supposed lack of identity finds its roots in a borrowed chauvinism born of imperial ideology and in the meagre appropriation and acculturation of alien ideas. But Burke managed to deploy the rhetoric of one in opposition to the other—reinterpreting all the borrowed precedents according to a made-in-Canada standard—to promote a dynamic that aspired to liberate Canadian architecture from the taint of 'provincialism.'
invariably conform to the commercial, legal, financial, social, and ethical standards which will be imposed upon her by the sheer, admitted weight of the United States." See John Robert Columbo, ed., Columbo's Canadian Quotations (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1978), 311.


16 ibid., 48-51.


18 Berger, 131.


23 "Annual Banquet," Construction 2 (January 1909): 43. The actual reference is to "Paley" and "Ryckman," an indication that the reporter knew little of what Burke was discussing.


28 Carr, 104-06.


32 Carr, 100-106, 34-38.

33 ibid., 52-74.

34 ibid., 13.

35 ibid., 126-33.


38 Carr, 114-25.

39 ibid., 108-14; Crossman, 9-27.


41 Carr, 133-35.

42 ibid., 135-39, 91-95.


44 The federal Department of Public Works had already completed one governmental building on Sussex Drive—now occupied by Revenue Canada—after the failure of the 1906-07 competition awarded to the Maxwells of Montreal; see "New Departmental Building at Ottawa," Contract Record 24 (27 April 1910): 170; Crossman, 32-35. What's scheme was controversial, but indicates the strength of the British tie, particularly for a Conservative government. See Robert Laird Borden Papers, MG 26, H7[c]. vol. 219, pp. 123014-123076; Ontario, Department of Public Works, RG 11M, Acc. 834033/38, D3946 F4, NMC 12178, item 116, NAC; "Influence Exerted," Construction 5 (October 1912): 56; "Proposed New Departmental Buildings, Ottawa," Contract Record 27 (5 February 1913): 61; and "Plans Showing Scheme for New Departmental and Court Buildings for the Dominion of Canada in Ottawa, Ontario," Construction 6 (September 1913): 331.


46 "Imperialism and Architecture," Construction 5 (December 1912): 44.

47 Moyles and Oram, 32-35.

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