

**THOMAS FULLER: ARCHITECT FOR A NATION**  
 by Dorothy Mindenhall, 2015,  
 Victoria, British Columbia, Lakehill Books

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Thomas Fuller [1823-1898] is celebrated in Canada as the architect of the old Centre Block of Parliament in Ottawa (1859-1866, burnt 1916); and, some years later (1881-1896), as an effective and prolific chief architect in the service of the federal Department of Public Works. Presumably the “nation” the title refers to is Canada (before and after Confederation), even though a major point the author makes is that Fuller worked extensively elsewhere, too. Given that that author is a friend and former student of mine, I hope readers will not be upset to find me reviewing her book, for her project, although indebted to earlier writing on Fuller, presents much that is fresh in the form of biographical data, reference to previously unknown commissions, and new perspectives—geographical, professional, technical, and typological. Not that the basic factual outline was not known, but Mindenhall, an architectural historian born and largely trained in England, with interests in regional and cultural history, gives the facts context and relief they have not had before. She gives us a new Fuller, an international figure of professional range and accomplishment, a creative experimenter virtually throughout his career.

I find her new material on Fuller’s early life and career in southwest England and Wales, with a productive interval in Antigua, British West Indies, perhaps the most illuminating. Often with relatively little to go on—practically no family papers survive—except secondary studies of contextual questions and coverage in period newspapers and journals (of which she makes excellent use), Mindenhall



FIG. 1. FORMER BROCKVILLE POST OFFICE, COURTHOUSE AVENUE, BROCKVILLE, ONTARIO, 1882–1886. | GEORGE ELAND, C. 1950, FROM THE ARCHIVES OF THE BROCKVILLE MUSEUM.



FIG. 2. NEWARK WORKS, LOWER BRISTOL ROAD, BATH, MACHINE SHOP FOR STOTHERT AND PITT, IRONFOUNDERS. | PHOTOGRAPH OF 1880 COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF BATH AT WORK.

winkles out a good deal about Fuller that is new. She presents him as a product of nineteenth-century industrial Bath, a city relatively little known even to locals, who tend to emphasize the eighteenth-century spa resort, which had fallen on hard times by then. Fuller's was a family heritage of manufacture and invention—they grew wealthy in carriage-making and in the twentieth century re-invented the family firm as specialists in car and truck bodies—that makes sense of our Fuller's lifelong interest in new materials and structural systems (e.g., the Fink Truss to roof over the wide spans of Canadian armouries and drill sheds in the 1890s). Furthermore, the architect's father, a Bath city councilor and one-term mayor, was a social and economic progressive, which may have disposed the son to gravitate to building-types connected with reform causes, such as schools, hospitals, prisons, municipal buildings, and Ecclesiological neo-Gothic churches and chapels. His whole career, perennially given to public

service by way of constructing large and medium-sized building-complexes to accommodate and represent Victorian notions of the Public Good, might be seen as an extension of his family roots in the Reform Age.

We have recognized for a long time that Fuller was good, but I am not sure that until now we have known just *how* good. That at twenty-two he was commissioned to rebuild an Anglican cathedral in Antigua to replace one badly damaged by earthquake—a cathedral that has weathered several quakes since and still stands (recently restored)—is a clue: Fuller had already served a serious pupillage, won a prize in drawing from the Royal Society of Arts, attended the Royal Academy Schools, participated in a prominent Gothic Revival publishing project, and been elected an associate of the Institute (later, Royal Institute) of British Architects. He was clearly a prodigy to whom, Mindenhall shows, the close

ties between the eastern Caribbean and the Bath-Bristol area stood in good stead. And that was only the start. When, a decade later, in 1857, he came to Canada West, he had already engaged—alone or with partners—in, besides the cathedral, a range of building commissions (many secured competitively) in London, the Southwest, and Wales that included a sizeable prison in Plymouth, a charitable hospital, several schools, churches, and chapels (chiefly Wesleyan), a town hall of striking form, and the largest factory in Bath, built for the firm of Stothert & Pitt. Indeed, a preservation battle in 2006 over the disused factory is what brought Bath's highly successful native son back to civic memory after nearly a century of oblivion. In addition, Mindenhall volunteers the intriguing suggestion that his contact with Stothert & Pitt ("Crane-makers to the World"), whose clients included the Grand Trunk Railway in Canada, may have been one of several forces that impelled him to try his luck in Canada West when business was slack at home.

Toronto when he arrived was indeed what Eric Arthur later called "no mean city" after a quarter-century of rapid growth, a promising place for the ambitious Fuller to set up shop, and his practice (first solo, then with partners) represented the state of the architectural art in the late 1850s. His steep, ritually correct, village-type church of Saint Stephen-in-the-Fields, built on an agricultural estate on the edge of the city, was the most advanced yet seen in the province, and he quickly made a name for himself in church design, especially Anglican. Mindenhall views it as almost a foregone conclusion that Fuller and his partner, civil engineer Chilion Jones (aided by a talented Fuller relative, who came to Ottawa via Brazil), had their design for the centre block of Parliament in the freshly minted capital of Ottawa premiated in the competition held two

years later. In my view, the author stresses too much Canada's "colonial" character—a word that appears and reappears—for, although a British possession to be sure, the Canadian province since 1841 had been on the road to becoming a quasi-nation, a new sort of hybrid creature firmly imperial yet for practical purposes self-governing. That is just why the complex on "Parliament Hill" was built so impressive and innovative in style and services that overseas and American visitors, from Trollope and Lady Dufferin to Henry-Russell Hitchcock (in nearly our own time), could barely credit their eyes when they saw it on the bluff above the Ottawa River. (Its unlikeliness had been a positive advantage to little Ottawa in the scrum to choose a seat of government.) The story of the Parliament Hill project, including its fitful, fraught, and graft-laden construction, is already well known, thanks especially to Carolyn A. Young's book *The Glory of Ottawa* (1995, McGill-Queen's University Press); but, again, Mindenhall helps us see it with new eyes.

The magnificent, *dernier cri* character of the Ottawa buildings goes far to explaining why Fuller emerged in the late 1860s from a dizzying series of competitions, re-competitions, and politicking of all sorts as the main designer of a vast new capitol for the Empire State of New York at Albany, envisioned as a towered showpiece of the French Second Empire style. Yet, with its lower storeys already well advanced, politics and anti-British sentiment bedevilled the project and led eventually to Fuller's dismissal from Capitol Hill in 1876. But the episode's celebrity—Fuller's part was taken by such luminaries of the American Institute of Architects as Richard Upjohn and Richard Morris Hunt—later served to recommend him to the Canadian government and, today, may win Mindenhall readers and shelf-space in libraries in the United States.

Clearly, then, when Fuller wrote Ottawa in late 1881 to express interest in the then-vacant post of chief architect to the Department of Public Works, Prime Minister Sir John A. Macdonald and his works minister, Sir Hector Langevin, realized they were being offered the services of a very distinguished and experienced architect, and at a fragile time in Canada's national development when a strong and sturdy school of federal building design was much needed. Although nearly sixty when he took over, Thomas Fuller remained chief architect for nearly fifteen years, arguably the strongest designer ever to hold that position. He had a rigid work ethic and with a small staff faced a punishing workload of providing new buildings and seemingly endless repairs to existing ones, including his own Centre Block of Parliament. His brief called for the building in dozens of towns of combined post offices and customs houses (the most numerous type built in that era); federal prisons and hospitals; territorial administration buildings in the West and Northwest; several large buildings in Ottawa to house the growing civil service, including one named for Langevin, and, in the 1890s, several armouries and drill halls (memorably, one in Toronto that did not survive the post-war rampage on Victorianism)—one hundred and fifty buildings in all. Mindenhall does a creditable job of grouping and digesting these, identifying their salient characteristics with verbal economy I can only admire. She finishes by sketching the design legacy Fuller left his successors—including his own son, Thomas W.—and the continuing contributions to Ottawa and Canada the Fuller family has made through its construction businesses, of which the recent restoration of the octagonal Parliamentary Library is perhaps best known. Writing in a graceful and sometimes amusing style, Dorothy Mindenhall has given us a book that will appeal to

readers and libraries across Canada and in other countries and areas the architect worked, and perhaps also in those elsewhere in the Commonwealth and former British Empire that may see their own experience mirrored in the work of a gifted and cosmopolitan Victorian architect closely connected to Canada.