

JOHN SOANE, JOHN PLAW, AND PRINCE EDWARD

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My keynote address primarily deals with what I call transferrals. By that I mean, firstly, the way artistic ideas are transferred from one architect to another, for the most part through the medium of the printed book. And, secondly, I mean how the transatlantic transferral of artistic ideas from Great Britain to Canadian soil could take place in the person of John Plaw (1746-1820). My first illustration introduces these two themes at the same time as it introduces the three principal protagonists: John Plaw, John Soane (1753-1837), and the early nineteenth-century arrival of the classical tradition on Prince Edward Island (fig. 1). I refer to the title page of the first edition of *Designs in Architecture*, the maiden publication by the young but soon to become internationally celebrated British architect Soane. The book came out in London in 1778, seven years after the impecunious Soane had enrolled as a student in the Royal Academy of Arts, London, during which short time he had risen to become its star pupil. Indeed the whole publication project was born in the heady aftermath of Soane having won the Academy's Gold Medal in 1776 and received its Royal Traveling Scholarship to Italy the next year. If Soane's list of contents as printed sounds impressive, it hardly compares to a manuscript proposal he made to his London publisher, Isaac Taylor, which specified the sort of pretentious publication synonymous with a major, well-established architect, rather than a beginner. Soane obviously over-rated his appeal to the public and Taylor knew it. Taylor whittled the intended number of copper plates down from 80 to 38, and the size from folio to quarto.

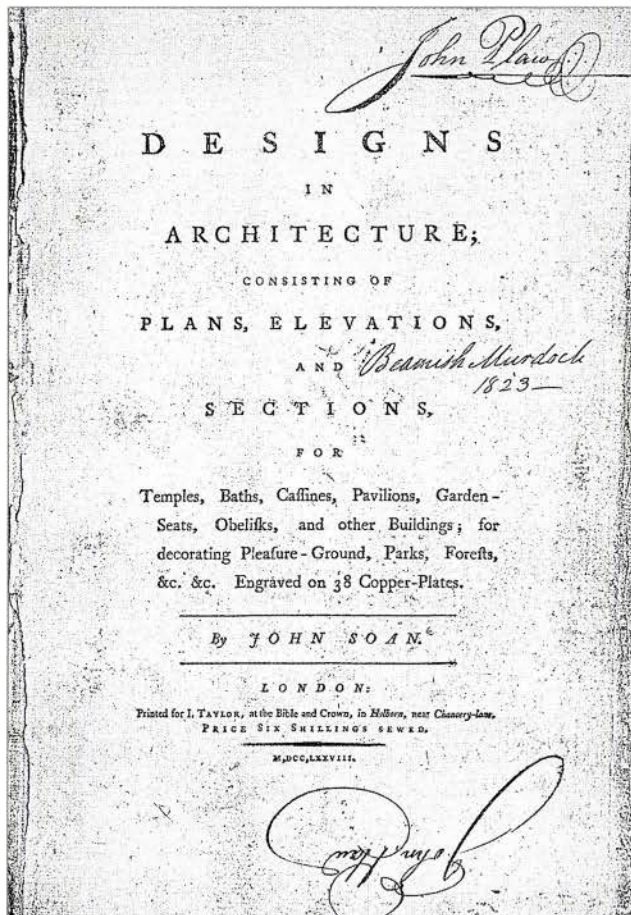


FIG. 1. JOHN SOANE, *DESIGNS IN ARCHITECTURE*, TITLE PAGE WITH SIGNATURES OF JOHN PLAW AND BEAVISH MURDOCH.

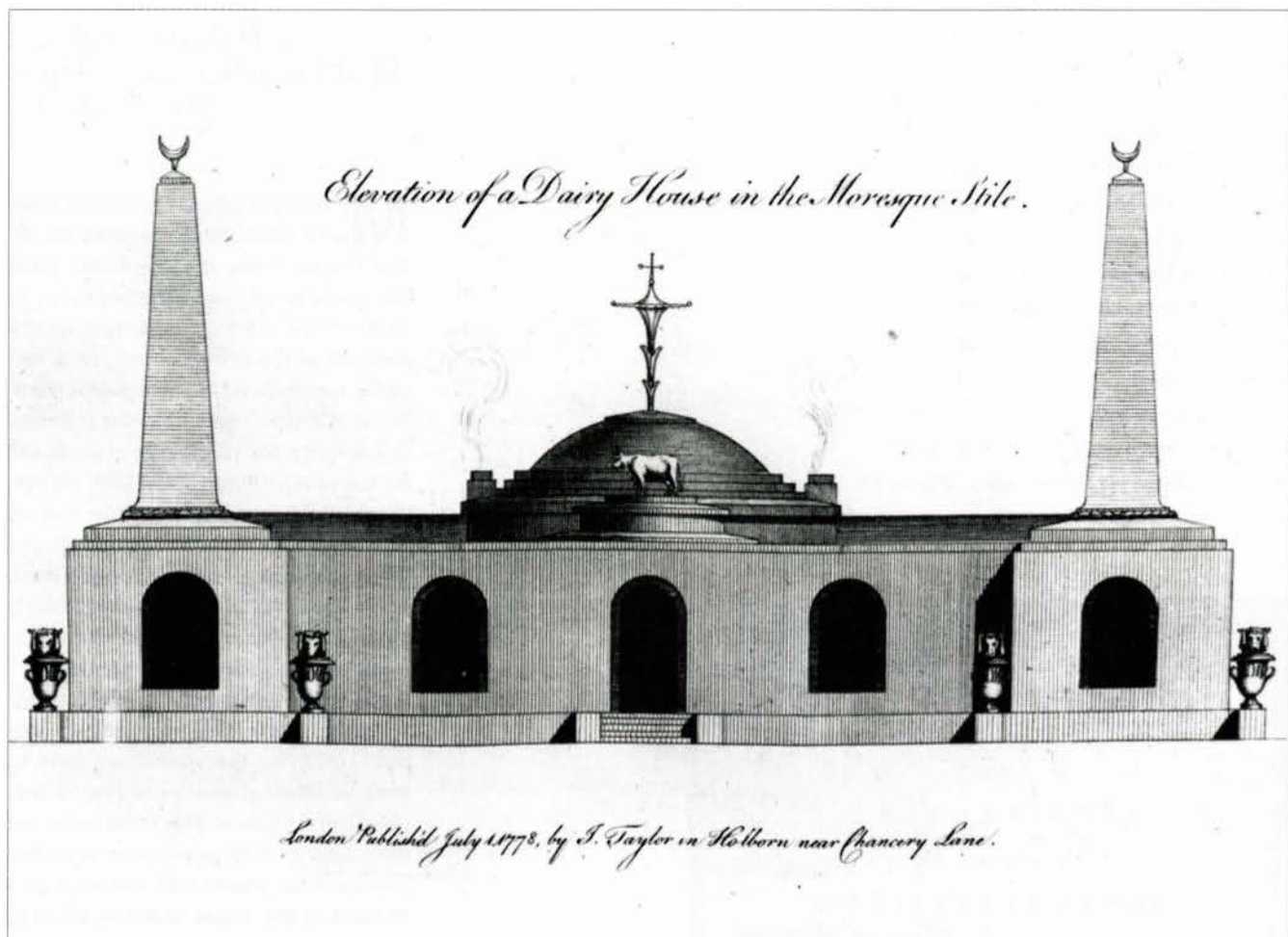


FIG. 2. JOHN SOANE, *DESIGNS IN ARCHITECTURE*, PLATE 23, MOORISH DAIRY DESIGN. | Pierre du Prey.

The eventual price of six shillings places the publication squarely within the category of pattern books, of which quite a few appeared under Taylor's Architectural Library imprint.

For reasons related to my theme of transferrals, that is in every respect an extraordinary copy of Soane's *Designs in Architecture*. At a fairly early date the copy entered the collection of John Plaw, a Putney-born bricklayer-turned-architect like Soane, who similarly hailed from the Thames valley. As was not atypical at the

period, Plaw practiced his flowing copper plate signature on the blank margins. More importantly, he consulted and drew inspiration from Soane's contents, as I will show shortly. You will furthermore notice the ownership signature of the prominent Nova Scotia lawyer and historian Beamish Murdoch, and the date 1823. From the fact that Plaw's wife Mary died in that same year in Charlottetown, I deduce that the book in question traveled with Plaw to Prince Edward Island in 1807 and that Murdoch acquired it from Plaw's estate. One thing is happily true: the book

remains in Canada at the Robart's Library of the University of Toronto. To my mind, at least, it has to be one of the most significant association copies in their entire Special Collections.

Apart from relative cheapness and frequent reprintings, derivativeness characterizes the majority of eighteenth-century pattern books. That kind of plagiarism appears quite frequently in Soane's *Designs in Architecture*. For instance, his amusing Moorish-style dairy, complete with a cow over the door and a row

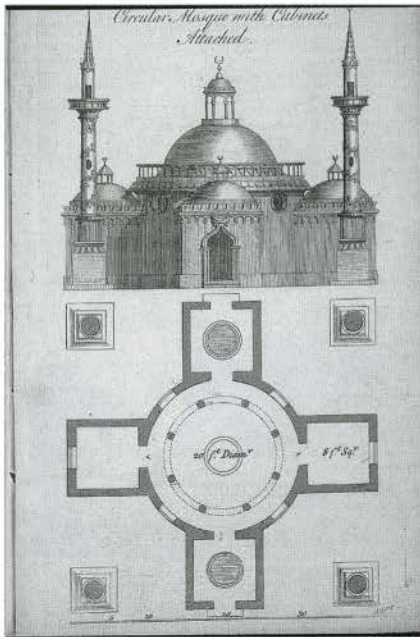


FIG. 3. WILLIAM WRIGHT, *GROTESQUE ARCHITECTURE*, PLATE 22, PSEUDO-MOSQUE DESIGN. | Pierre du Prey.

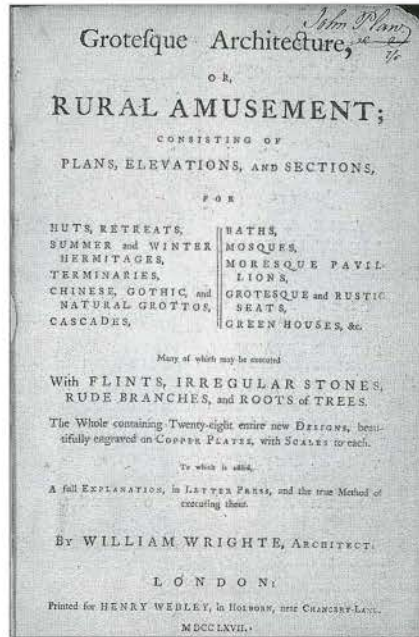


FIG. 4. WILLIAM WRIGHT, *GROTESQUE ARCHITECTURE*, TITLE PAGE, WITH SIGNATURE OF JOHN PLAW. | Pierre du Prey.

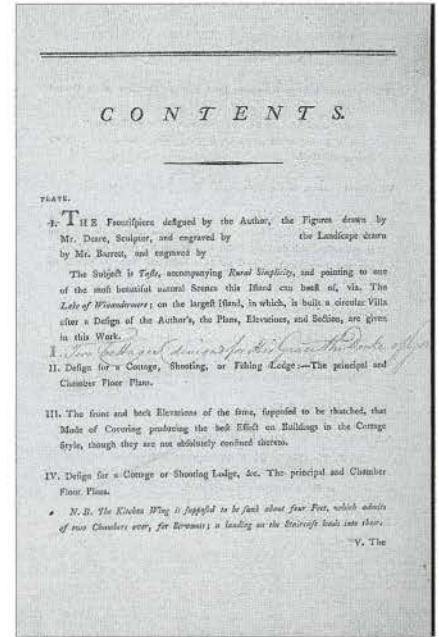


FIG. 5. JOHN PLAW, *RURAL ARCHITECTURE*, TABLE OF CONTENTS WITH ADDENDUM IN THE HAND OF PLAW. | Pierre du Prey.



FIG. 6. JOHN PLAW, *RURAL ARCHITECTURE*, PLATE 11, VILLA DESIGN. | Pierre du Prey.



FIG. 7. JOHN PLAW, *RURAL ARCHITECTURE*, FRONTISPIECE, 1802 EDITION. | Pierre du Prey.

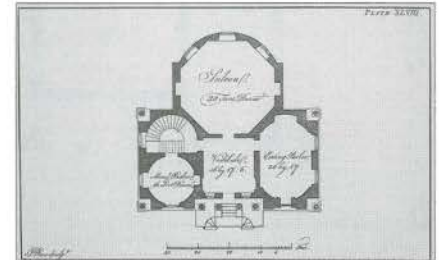


FIG. 8. JOHN PLAW, *RURAL ARCHITECTURE*, PLATE 48, CASINO DESIGN, 1802 EDITION. | Pierre du Prey.

of bovine-headed milk jugs along the front, no doubt borrowed something from a slightly earlier Mosque design in the book *Grottesque Architecture*, of 1767 by the otherwise unknown author William Wrighte (figs. 2-3). Wrighte obviously meant his garden structure as an entertaining Moresque *jeu d'esprit*, but Soane removed certain of the superfluities to produce something prophetic of his mature, stripped-down neoclassicism. The plate I illustrate comes from my own copy of Wrighte, which once belonged to none other than John Plaw.

In the case of this book, Plaw not only signed the title page, but also noted the price of seven shillings and six pence he paid (fig. 4). Similarly he stencilled the binding with his book stamp consisting of the words J. Plaw Archt on a shield crowned with a castle tower all set inside a laurel wreath. Be on the lookout for his *ex libris*. Other books bearing it may exist elsewhere. Certainly Plaw's last will and testament states he had a personal library with him in Charlottetown. Before the contents' eventual dispersal, they obviously included other people's pattern

books like those of Soane and Wrighte, not to mention copies of Plaw's own three publications.

In 1997, the same bookseller who had sold me the Wrighte offered me another volume with a Plaw provenance; a proof copy of his first book, *Rural Architecture* of 1785, with annotations in the hand of the author (fig. 5). That item is additionally unique because it illustrates so clearly the mechanics involved in producing such books and highlights Plaw's several innovative contributions to the genre. The first

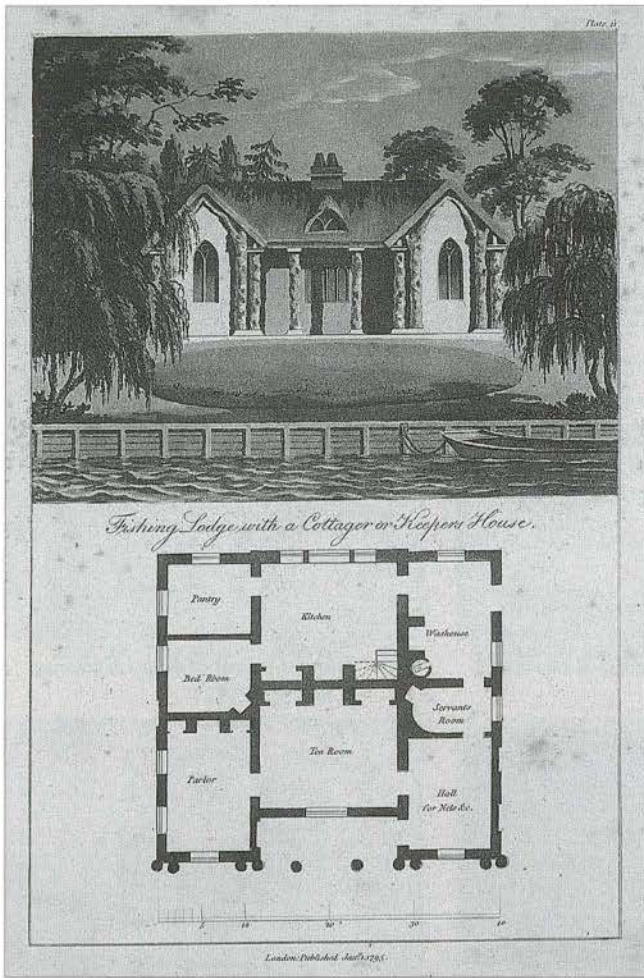


FIG. 9. JOHN PLAW, FERME ORNÉE, PLATE 11, FISHING LODGE DESIGN. | Pierre du Prey.

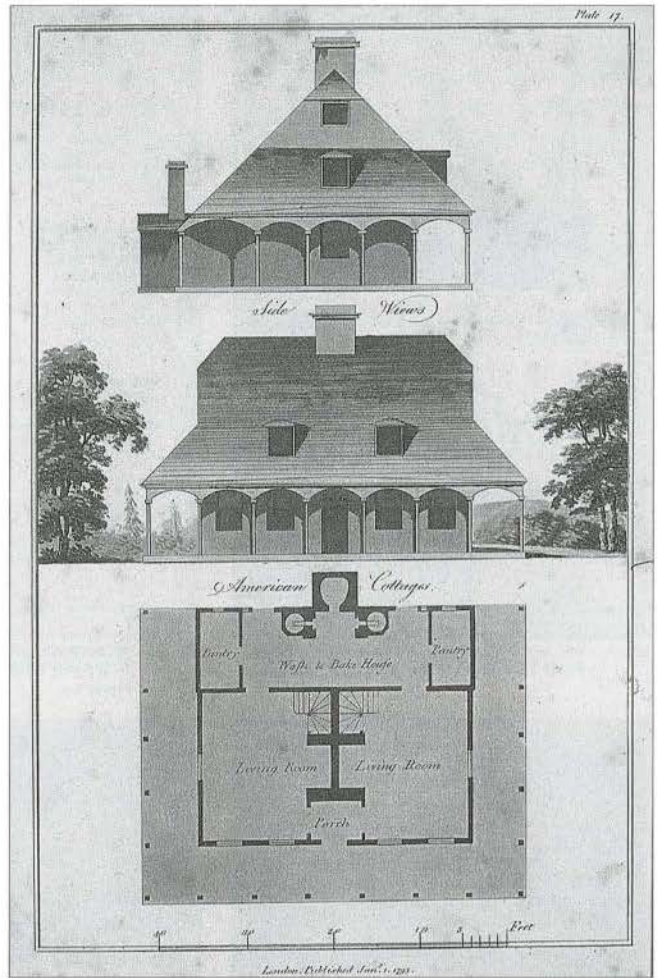


FIG. 10. JOHN PLAW, FERME ORNÉE, PLATE 17, AMERICAN COTTAGE DESIGN. | Pierre du Prey.

of these innovations concerns his entrepreneurial flair. He brought out the book under his own imprint, having advertised the publication in advance and successfully solicited pre-publication subscribers. (Although Soane's name did not appear on the subscribers' list, he nevertheless owned the copy still on the shelves in the Sir John Soane's Museum in London.) Secondly, architectural bibliographers acclaim *Rural Architecture* as a pioneer of the several dozen cottage or villa books that appeared in print over the next fifty years or so. All were small, inexpensive, derivative,

and frequently reprinted—in 1785 Plaw promised a sequel to his “part the first,” and it eventually appeared as I will mention momentarily. But the third and most prophetic characteristic of Plaw’s new hybrid publication is its focus on small-scale domestic buildings in the country suitable for construction by the author/architect. In the case of two tiny cottages for the Duke of Gordon, a handwritten interpolation to Plaw’s table of contents indicates these humble workers’ houses were already erected. Last but not least, experts hail Plaw’s mastery and innovative use of

the newly invented aquatint illustrative process. The aquatint technique allowed him the freedom personally to embellish his designs with a hitherto unattainable atmospheric quality and a tonal range indicative of different surfaces. For example, Plaw’s plate 11 shows a small villa as if it had recently withstood a typical English summer’s downpour (fig. 6). Glistening puddles fill potholes in the driveway, the façade seems freshly rain-streaked, the wet greenery has an almost tangible softness to it, and on the right hand side in the distance, under clearing

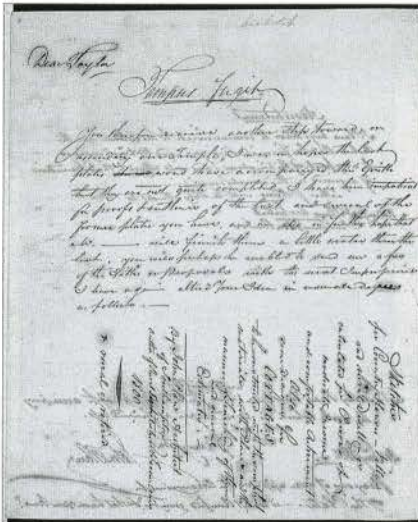


FIG. 11. JOHN PLAW, MANUSCRIPT LETTER AND PROSPECTUS OF JANUARY 30, 1800 TO JOSIAH TAYLOR, FOLIO 1 RECTO. | Pierre du Prey.

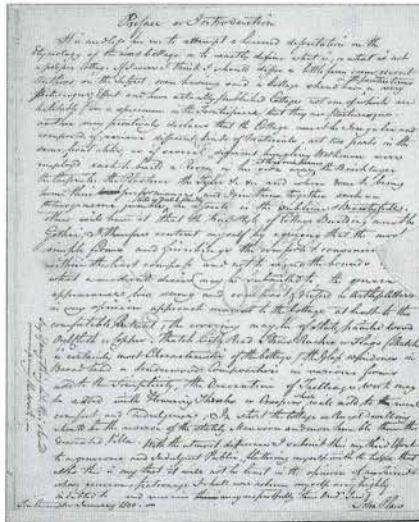


FIG. 12. JOHN PLAW, MANUSCRIPT LETTER AND PROSPECTUS OF JANUARY 30, 1800 TO JOSIAH TAYLOR, FOLIO 2 RECTO. | Pierre du Prey.

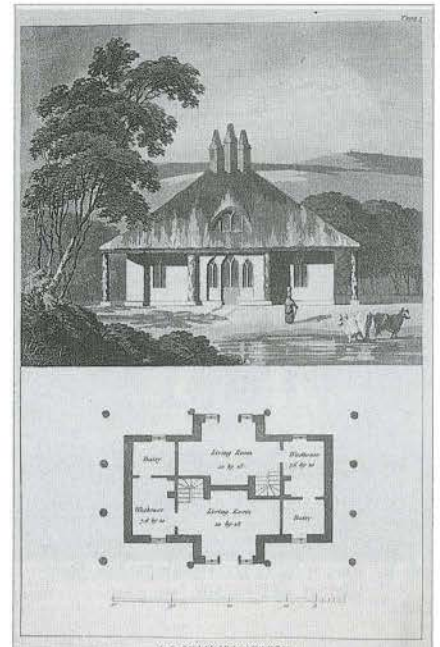


FIG. 13. JOHN PLAW, SLETTCHES IN ARCHITECTURE, PLATE 17, COTTAGE CUM DAIRY DESIGN. | Pierre du Prey.

skies, stands a village church and bridge. Soane's now familiar Moorish dairy lacks all that quite literally picturesque visual information (fig. 2).

When Plaw's promised second edition of *Rural Architecture* finally came out in 1790, its expanded contents included the aquatinted frontispiece he had intended from the start, according to his proof copy of the first edition (figs. 5 top, 7). A frontispiece is a rarity among cottage or villa books, especially one so richly allegorical. Plaw's list of contents describes how the painter John Deare's figures on the right overlook a delectably soft landscape of Lake Windermere in Westmoreland originally painted by George Barret. The personification of Taste on the left is pointing out to Rural Simplicity, an island in the middle ground with a temple-like house by Plaw, which serves as the climax of his book as it does of my keynote address.

The publishing house of Josiah Taylor, the son of Isaac, brought out the 1790 expanded version of *Rural Architecture*.

By that time the aquatints had doubled in number and they include something as rare in the annals of cottage and villa books as the frontispiece: the acknowledgement by one author of his indebtedness to another. Plaw's plate 48 depicts the ground plan of a design described in the table of contents as follows: "This idea originated from a hunting casino designed by Mr. Soane in a small book published by Mr. Taylor..." Here is a documented instance of artistic transferral if ever there was one (fig. 8). The borrowing from Soane's plate 33 in *Designs in Architecture* must have had the tacit blessing of Taylor and presumably also of Soane. Despite that, no evidence indicates that Soane and Plaw knew one another personally. They certainly showed work side by side at the annual Royal Academy spring exhibitions, which they both frequented. Soane might also have seen Plaw's designs at the less prestigious exhibitions of the Society of Artists, of which Plaw briefly became president. But, apart from the fact that they owned one another's printed works, nothing is known about

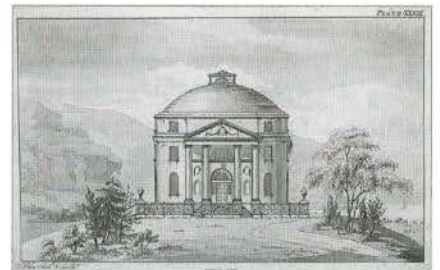


FIG. 14. JOHN PLAW, RURAL ARCHITECTURE, PLATE 28, ELEVATION OF BELLE ISLE, WINDERMERE. | Pierre du Prey.

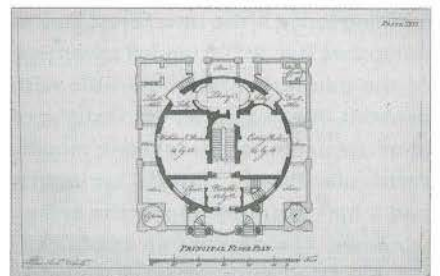


FIG. 15. JOHN PLAW, RURAL ARCHITECTURE, PLATE 26, PLAN OF BELLE ISLE, WINDERMERE. | Pierre du Prey.

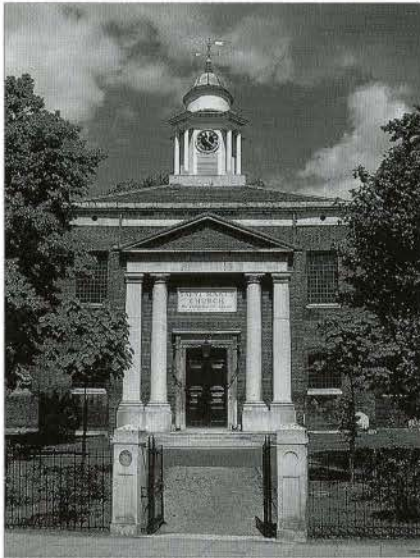


FIG. 16. JOHN PLAW, ST. MARY'S PADDINGTON CHURCH, LONDON, WEST FAÇADE. | Pierre du Prey.

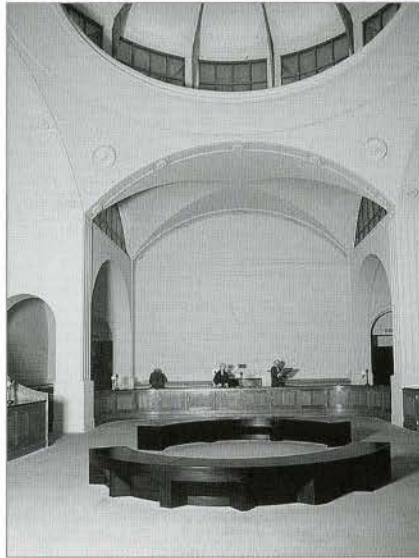


FIG. 17. JOHN SOANE, INTERIOR OF THE RECONSTRUCTED BANK STOCK OFFICE, BANK OF ENGLAND, LONDON. | Pierre du Prey.



FIG. 18. TOMBSTONE OF JOHN PLAW, CHARLOTTETOWN, PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND. | Pierre du Prey.

the relationship between these two artists of such similar backgrounds but such different ultimate fates.

By 1795, Plaw had obviously given up trying to establish himself in the competitive artistic milieu of the capital and went to work at Southampton in Hampshire. The move to the provinces coincided with the publication by Josiah Taylor of a second Plaw book. Consisting of 38 aquatint plates, its title coined the use of the French words *ferme ornée* to signify a specific, picturesque "cottagey" genre of architecture. Chalk up another first for Mr. Plaw! His plate 11 relates to a fishing lodge in the New Forest area of Hampshire (fig. 9). Taking full advantage of the painterly effects possible with aquatint, Plaw explored the textures of primitive bark-covered columns, mouldy vernacular thatch, classical symmetry, and a hint of Gothic too in the arched windows. The description specifically speaks of the shaggy effect of walls "executed with roots and trunks of trees"

supporting a rustic thatched roof over green gables.

Plaw's plate 17 in *ferme ornée* took pains to inform readers that the design had been carried out by Colonel John Montresor at Throwley near Faversham in Kent (fig. 10). Indeed it still survives under the name New York Cottage, so called after Montresor's place of residence at the time he retired from the British Army in 1779. Plaw titled his plate "American Cottages." Reading between the lines of his description, however, I take it that the design was Montresor's, based on houses the Colonel had observed in the colonies featuring steep roofs to evacuate snow and verandahs to create shade. Plaw knew Montresor (a subscriber to *Rural Architecture* in 1785) liked the cottage's look, and simply included it in his new book. It predicts uncannily Plaw's eventual involvement with the North American colonies, as does Plaw's design for the William and Anna Bingham house on Third Street,

Philadelphia, exhibited at the Society of Artists in 1790.

Of all the Plawian purchases I have been fortunate enough to make, none equals my acquisition of a manuscript letter signed and dated by him January 30, 1800, addressed to his publisher Taylor (figs. 11-12). It conveys precious insights into the writing and launching of Plaw's third and last architectural pattern book, *Sketches for Country Houses, Villas, and Rural Dwellings*. The letter has a general air of urgency, even finality about it. "Dear Taylor," it begins, "Tempus Fugit." The text includes an advertisement which begs leave to inform the public that Plaw will provide copies of his designs or carry them into execution in any part of the country for the usual fee or commission. The letter reads like that of many a would-be author. It bemoans the hold up with illustrations, wonders about approval of the final order of the plates, and sketches the title page layout. A post-script enquires what new books Taylor has

in press. Plaw was ever on the lookout for additions to his own library.

The last page of the letter contains Plaw's first, rather poorly written attempt at a preface or introduction (fig. 12). Another postscript inquires what Taylor thinks of the prose, as well it might. The last sentence of the manuscript, however, conveys more poignantly than the final printed version the impression that this is to be Plaw's farewell publication. He writes: "I submit this my third effort to a generous and indulgent public, flattering myself with the hope that altho this is my last it will not be least in the opinion of my friends."

Copies of the several editions—the final one of 1823 came out three years after the author's death—have bound into them a flyer listing Taylor's publications in which Plaw's earlier books appear side by side with Soane's book of 1793, *Sketches in Architecture... With Characteristic Scenery*. Note the similarity of Soane's title to Plaw's *Sketches for Country Houses*. That is perhaps another instance of the transferral of artistic inspiration from Soane to Plaw. Meanwhile Soane, in emulation of Plaw, employed "characteristic scenery" in aquatint to enhance the appeal of his designs. So the artistic exchange between the pair was very much of a two-way street.

In the tidier published form of his preface, Plaw argued against the prevalent trend among cottage and villa books toward picturesque asymmetry and the fashionable ramshackle-look. Above all, he felt that the architect ought to adapt a house to its situation or the surrounding scenery. Plate 7 from Plaw's *Sketches* shows what he meant to good advantage (fig. 13). The cottage design doubles as an ornamental dairy. A milkmaid with her jug on her head sways back toward

a well-insulated thatched structure with tree-trunk rustic columns in front of verandahs, "in the manner of an Indian Bungalow," according to Plaw. Cows graze in a watery pasture in the foreground and bleak hills rise behind. Who could resist such invitations to build? The answer is that many could and did resist. Competition among cottage book writers had grown stiff and clients tended to ignore Plaw, for whatever the reasons. He built so little in England after 1800 that, when he received an invitation in 1807 to emigrate to Prince Edward Island, he grabbed it and remained there the last thirteen years of his life.

In conclusion, let me briefly return to touch on highlights of Plaw's career as a practicing architect before he reached Canadian shores. The early commission that brought him the most renown, the unusual country house called Belle Isle on the island in Lake Windermere, was begun for the coffee merchant Thomas English in 1774. Plaw proudly exhibited it at the Royal Academy the next year, and included several aquatints of it as the culmination to the first edition of his *Rural Architecture* (figs. 14-15). See how artistically he conjures up in the background a picture of Lakeland scenery. To Plaw's great credit as a planner, it must also be said that transforming the round domed Roman Pantheon into a country house was a *tour de force*, which he managed with notable success. Look how skilfully he handled the tricky wedge-shaped leftover spaces; notice the flush toilet hidden behind a parapet underneath an urn. The planning has an effortless ease about it that inspired copies of Belle Isle House as far away as Lake Geneva and the rotunda library at the University of Virginia designed by Thomas Jefferson. But all did not go as smoothly with this building as it might seem. My proof copy of Plaw's book tells a different story.

Beside the printed description of Belle Isle, "designed and built by the author," he penned in the telling word "Alas!" with a big exclamation mark after it. Plaw obviously had some unspecified problems at Belle Isle with the client or craftsmen.

Sadly, Belle Isle burned down in a disastrous fire recently. That leaves one major Plaw building still standing, St. Mary's Church in Paddington (fig. 16). Its design and construction from 1788 to 1791 capped the architect's London years. It furthermore received international exposure when Christian Stieglitz reproduced an elevation and plan of it in his *Plans et dessins...* The exterior balances nicely the main or south façade against the principal liturgical façade on the west (off to the left of the photograph). Restored internally not many years ago by Raymond Erith, it is one of the prettiest, most intact neoclassical ecclesiastical buildings in the country. Plaw demonstrated anew his subtle understanding of interior spatial planning. He contrived to group four columns and attached galleries in such a way as to create a central space within a church that nevertheless had a distinct longitudinal east-west axis stretching from the entrance to the altar. He had obviously observed Wren and Hawksmoor's London churches attentively and learned lessons from them. Had Plaw worked decades later at the time of the funding for the so-called Million Churches in 1818, he might have established a flourishing ecclesiastical practice. Luck and economic hard times were once again against him.

And what of Soane, you ask? In the same year as Plaw began St. Mary's, Soane's friends in high places secured him the appointment of a lifetime: architect to the Bank of England. His Bank Stock Office (recently reconstructed) opened in 1792 and ongoing work for the thriving institution kept him gainfully employed

until his retirement in 1833 (fig. 17). The extensive opportunities at the Bank established him as one of the foremost figures in the profession, sought after for private and public commissions, a leading figure in international neoclassicism, who is still the darling of avant-garde architects. He gained the recognition that has eluded Plaw, not that Plaw lacked talent as a gifted artist and designer of ingenuity. Plaw, however, never received an academic training, never went abroad, and consequently never forged those connections with the ruling class so necessary to an architect in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Plaw had already missed the boat to fame and fortune by the time he caught the boat to Charlottetown in 1807.

I cannot delve into the last chapter of Plaw's activities on Prince Edward Island and later in Halifax, except to say that it must have been a frustrating time. The inscription on his simple headstone in Charlottetown's Elm Street Cemetery, where he lies buried beside his wife Mary, seems to spell out his disappointments (fig. 18): "Death like an overflowing stream, sweeps us away, our life's a dream; / An empty tale; a morning flower cut down and wither'd in an hour."

Judging from surviving drawings a more eloquent epitaph, had it survived, would have been Plaw's modest Court House on Queen Square. Until demolished, it stood on the site of the Confederation Centre.

In the apparent absence of any surviving buildings, what then is Plaw's Canadian legacy? He remains notable as the island's first architectural educator and one of the earliest in all Canada. He brought with him to his country of adoption precision drafting instruments and an extensive personal library—priceless resources with which

to teach an upcoming generation of builders, surveyors, and architects. And his Court House partly realized his dream of erecting a Roman forum in the heart of Charlottetown—his truly was *Architecture with a Mission*, to paraphrase the theme of this year's SSAC/SÉAC annual conference.

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