ST. ANNE'S ANGLICAN CHURCH AND ITS PATRON

There is one city church which is not afraid of innovation [...] When the present St. Anne's was built in Byzantine style instead of the conventional Gothic, there was surprise and to this day its unusual lines [...] stand out for their suggestion of the Moslem world (The Globe, December 15, 1923).

By the time St. Anne's Anglican Church was completed in 1925, it was certainly the oddest Anglican church in Toronto, and arguably in the country (fig. 1). Designed in 1907 by Ford Howland, St. Anne's is Byzantine in style, with interior murals and sculptures by such artists as J.E.H. MacDonald, Frederick Varley, Frank Carmichael, Frances Loring, and Florence Wyle. It remains a singular monument to a wilful, visionary, and singularly determined patron, the Rev. Lawrence Skey.

At the time St. Anne's was built, Gothic had for several decades been the accepted and expected style for Anglican churches. That had come about largely through the zeal of the Cambridge Camden Society, which held an iron grip on matters of Anglican architectural propriety in the middle and later nineteenth century. Since the 1850s, their model church had been William Butterfield's All Saints, in London (fig. 2). Later christened "The Ecclesiological Society," the Camdenians aired their views, praised "good" church architects, admonished "bad" ones, and generally bullied the architectural community into submission in the pages of their journal, The Ecclesiologist. The influence of the Society was enormous, and their judgements had a profound effect on the careers of many Victorian architects.

Ecclesiological Gothic arrived in British North America via the east coast. Christchurch Cathedral in Fredericton (begun
Gothic was complete. No other style, it seemed, was as beautiful, as practical, as adaptable, as rational—in short, as English.

Seven years after the completion of All Saints, London, in 1867, Lawrence Edward Skey was born to a good Anglican family in Toronto. In 1902, Lawrence Skey—by then the Rev. Lawrence Skey—became Rector of St. Anne's Anglican Church, whose congregation worshipped in a respectable Gothic Revival church in Toronto's west end that had been designed by Kivas Tulloch (fig. 5). That church, built in 1862, had been enlarged by the addition of a south aisle in 1879, a north aisle in 1881, and by the addition of transepts and a new chancel in 1888. Skey soon realized that his flock had yet again outgrown its space, and a special meeting of the congregation was called on April 17, 1906, to discuss the building of a new church. By 1907, Skey was ready to act.

It is not known whether, by 1907, the Anglican authorities in Toronto already knew that Lawrence Skey was born to be a square peg in a round hole. If not, then they would know by 1908, when Skey held the first service in his newly built (but not yet decorated) church (fig. 6). The unsuspecting Toronto Anglicans of 1908, familiar with the traditions of Anglican architecture, must have thought that a dreadful mistake had occurred. The architect, Ford Howland, produced a Byzantine design that would have looked quite at home in Athens, but was completely anomalous in Anglican Canada.

Whose idea was it to build a Byzantine Anglican church in Toronto? In the opinion of Catherine Mastin, whose M.A. thesis is the most ambitious piece of scholarship on St. Anne's, the credit (or blame) for the choice of Byzantine is due to the patron, Lawrence Skey. Like many Anglicans of his day, Skey was very
concerned with church union. Exceedingly resistant to the idea of papal supremacy, he had written off the Roman Catholics, and had, by his own admission, no sympathy at all for the Anglo-Catholics. Skey’s hope was for union with the Protestant denominations and, according to Mastin, his choice of Byzantine was a deliberate attempt to evoke an early era of church history not blighted by inter-denominational schisms and bickering.

If that was his motivation, however, it is not clear why Byzantine would have seemed the right choice. An early Christian Basilica, being the style spread by Constantine himself when there was only one Christian Church, would have done just as well. Romanesque, a style which flourished centuries before the Reformation, was already well established in Toronto, both in sacred and secular contexts. Indeed Gothic, which also pre-dates the Reformation, would offer a distinctly English idiom within which to work, and enjoyed the wholehearted approval of the Anglican establishment as well as a solid grounding in Anglican theology. Moreover, anyone familiar enough with church history and architecture to have been concerned with that question in the first place would surely have known that, in choosing Byzantine, he was erecting a potent reminder not of church unity, but of the great and ancient schism in church history between Rome and Constantinople.

More recently, Marilyn MacKay has suggested that Skey’s architect, Ford Howland, was the driving choice behind the selection of Byzantine. Howland, she argues, is far more likely than his patron to have been up to date with current architectural trends, and by the time he began designing St. Anne’s, the Byzantine Revival was a significant, though not widespread, trend. James Cubitt had recommended Byzantine for Protestant worship in his

Church Designs for Congregations in 1870. Whether either Howland or Skey owned a copy of that book is unfortunately not known. John Oldrid Scott and Beresford Pite had each designed one Byzantine Anglican church in London. The best-known example of the Byzantine Revival, however, was the Roman Catholic Cathedral in Westminster—hardly a model likely to have been emulated by an anti-Catholic low-churchman like Skey. A letter in the Anglican archive in Toronto, written in 1960 by one P. Douglas Knowles, muddles things further. According to Knowles, who identified himself as a friend and neighbour of Ford Howland’s from 1907-1910, the architect had intended St. Anne’s to be a miniature version of the Roman Catholic Cathedral at Manila, Philippines. If that is true, then one can only suppose that Howland had kept it a secret from his patron—like Westminster Cathedral, this is hardly a model that would have impressed Skey. And therein lies the
main problem with attributing too much credit to Howland: whatever his wishes and inspirations, nothing was going to happen unless Lawrence Skey agreed that it was a good idea. And, as we shall see, Skey was no pushover.

A simpler explanation may suffice. Skey was a Low Church Anglican, deeply committed to both halves of that label. Gothic had been revived in large part to facilitate the Anglo-Catholic liturgy; thus, it was the style of the High Church, and would have been undesirable to Skey. Byzantine, on the other hand, was emphatically not High Church in appearance, as well as being spatially well suited to Low Church, sermon-centred services. Nor could it be confused with non-Anglican spaces built by Protestant denominations like the Baptists and Methodists, whose amphitheatrical plans (for example, Walmer Road Baptist Church, 1888-1992, fig. 7) were by that time a frequent feature of the Canadian architectural landscape. In Byzantine, Skey had a style that was practical, unique, beautiful, and free of ideological baggage that would play into the hands of the feuding Protestants of early twentieth-century Toronto.

Those considerations may have justified the choice of Byzantine in Skey's mind, but the choice remained an extremely unconventional one for Canadian Anglicans. In order to execute a highly original and expensive project within a highly conservative institution, it helps to have a dynamic, charismatic, slightly bull-headed instigator pushing it along. By all accounts, that describes Lawrence Skey quite accurately (fig. 8). A newspaper profile of 1917 characterized him as follows:

Slight of build, but well-knit, fresh of face, hair slightly gray, mind alert and exceptionally well-informed, quick and enthusiastic in speech, strong in his opinions, shrewd, warm-hearted, and wholly devoted to his work—there you have an impressionistic picture of Reverend Lawrence Skey, M.A.

His popularity among his parishioners seems to have been unbounded. Skey served as an army chaplain in the First World War, and his flock welcomed him back from the front with an elaborate celebration on December 5, 1918. The musical program leaves no doubt about the feelings of the
the instant, wholehearted agreement of his flock. One doesn’t generally win that kind of following by being an indecisive ditherer, so it comes as no surprise that Skey was not. Another newspaper clipping in the Anglican archive, unfortunately undated, tells of an occasion when Skey learned that a man in his church neighbourhood was in the habit of beating his wife. Skey paid the man a visit, and, finding him obstinate in the face of reasonable persuasion, determined to settle the matter once and for all: “Take off your coat,” cried Mr. Skey, removing his own. Dumbly, the husband obeyed, and the fighting parson started at him. It was a fair fight, with no one to interfere. It lasted several minutes, but in the end the minister had “licked” his man. Mr. Skey came out of the fight with a black eye, but that worried him nothing at all. 30

Whether that anecdote is true is less important than the fact that it was circulated. Moreover, Skey’s feisty streak did not extend only to the weak and the drunk. In 1923, he held a special service to celebrate the completion of the decoration of St. Anne’s. To mark the occasion, he invited one Rev. Pidgeon (a Methodist) and one Rev. MacNeill (a Baptist) to share his pulpit. Skey’s bishop (Sweeney), in turn, marked the occasion by informing Skey that under no circumstances was he to share his pulpit with such company. Skey being Skey, he followed his convictions and ignored his boss. “I was glad,” he reflected later, “that I stood by my principles in the matter.” He then added a thought that could serve as his epitaph: “One must learn to defy opposition.” 31

Such lack of regard for the approval of others—even of one’s own superiors—was doubtless a useful trait for anyone planning to build a Byzantine Anglican church in Toronto in 1907. After the opening service of 1908, the Canadian Churchman summarized the resistance to Skey’s new church:

When this church was in the course of erection many and various were the remarks made upon it, and many of them were far from flattering. Mosque, cyclorama and synagogue were among the most common
and frequent epithets used, and, judged from the exterior view, having a dome as the main feature, it has of necessity a certain outward resemblance to the synagogue of the Jew, and no one is blamed for not altogether liking the external appearance.32

The writer does, however, make an attempt to defend Skey's church:

The objections that have been made that it is contrary to church architecture are, of course, only made by the ignorant, for there is no rule or law that Gothic is the only type for Anglican churches. St. George's Cathedral, Kingston, is of the same [Greek or Byzantine] type, and though, like St. Anne's, many do not admire it from without, there are few who would not admit that when you enter in you find one of the most beautiful churches in our country.33

Several architectural and historical facts are muddled in that account: St. Anne's is Byzantine, not Greek; and Byzantine had, for 1300 years, been a Christian style only recently used in synagogues. The St. George's Cathedral referred to is not Byzantine (fig. 9), and has, in Wren's St. Paul's Cathedral, London (begun 1675), as mainstream a lineage as one can wish for in the Anglican Church.34 The claim that there was "no rule or law" that Anglican churches had to be Gothic, while technically true, displays remarkable ignorance the Ecclesiological Society and the very long shadow they had cast on Anglican church building. But perhaps more revealing than the art historical mistakes is the assumption that identifying an architectural precedent somehow made St. Anne's acceptable. The need to find authority in historical precedent is a distinctly ecclesiological way of thinking, and one probably not shared by Skey. Despite the efforts of the Canadian Churchman, St. Anne's remains, as the Toronto Star proclaimed in 1924, "Skey's Byzantine Defiance."35

That predilection for independent thought makes it easier to understand Skey's other, more famous, unconventional decision regarding St. Anne's. For the first fifteen years of its life, the interior of St. Anne's remained undecorated. When, in 1923, the necessary funds to carry out the decoration became available, Skey hired neither an established liturgical artist, nor an authority on Byzantine icons, nor even a good Anglican—but a landscape painter whom he had met at the Arts and Letters Club, named J.E.H. MacDonald.

J.E.H. MacDonald is famed as a founding member of the Group of Seven. On the face of it, a more unlikely candidate for the most ambitious programme of Anglican liturgical art in Canadian history would be difficult to find. MacDonald had never undertaken a large decoration job, and, as he himself admitted, his selection was "an act of faith on Mr. Skey's part."36 Yet, the more deeply one probes, the more appropriate the choice seems. Although resistance to the work of the Group of Seven was not as universal as they would later have had the world believe, the battle was not yet won in 1923.37 However, some of the qualities that their critics most disliked might actually have helped them when it came to decorating a Byzantine interior. The boldly graphic sense of design and lack of academic painterly qualities gives the Group's work a broad kinship to Byzantine work. Moreover, the visual and symbolic languages of the Group of Seven and of Christian art are arguably
not as far apart as might be assumed. The tree, for example, plays a central role in both: in Christian iconography, the tree participates in the Fall in the Garden of Eden, then reappears in association with redemption through the Tree of Jesse (see, for example, the stained glass of St-Denis and Chartres); the tree also resonates in Canadian painting, presenting an image of the human soul in a variety of states. Tom Thomson’s *The West Wind* is arguably the most famous tree in Canada and, to many, the quintessential Group of Seven image (notwithstanding the fact that it was, technically, not painted by a Group member). Thomson’s tree is vibrant, wild, and teeming with life; by comparison, Carl Schaeffer, painting in the middle of the Great depression, featured a dead tree in *Summer Harvest* (1935). In the immediate aftermath of World War II, Charles Comfort painted a poignantly uprooted tree in *Early June, Albion Country* (1949). When Skey and MacDonald began discussion of the programme at St. Anne’s, they would have found at least some common ground in their respective lexicons. Finally, the project of St. Anne’s must be seen in the context of the MacDonald’s experience as a commercial designer. Neither he nor other members of the Group of Seven were strangers to commissioned work.

MacDonald’s original plan for St. Anne’s had been to design the whole program himself and execute it with the help of some of his students at the Ontario College of Art. Unfortunately for him (if not for posterity), by the time he was ready to begin, his students had left for the summer break. He did what anyone would do in such circumstances: he called on his friends—including friends named Frederick Varley, Frank Carmichael, Frances Loring, and Florence Wyle. The participation of these artists—a who’s who of Canadian art in the 1920s—accounts for whatever fame the building now enjoys.

As seen in MacDonald’s cross-sectional sketch (fig. 10), the major areas for decoration were the dome (now re-done in a manner that does not show great sensitivity to MacDonald’s vision—see fig. 11), the base of the dome, the pendentives (fig. 11), and the chancel ceiling (figs. 12 and 13). Loring and Wyle provided low-relief sculptures of the four evangelists’.
symbols (fig. 14), while between them are portraits of prophets, painted by Varley. Dominating the central space are the huge pendentive paintings: the Nativity, by Varley (fig. 15); the Crucifixion, by MacDonald (fig. 16); with the Resurrection by H.S. Palmer and the Ascension by H.S. Stansfield on the other two pendentives.

The artists' acceptance of the highly diagrammatic and flat Byzantine style is striking, as is the architectural solidity of the paintings. If architecture is the art of composition in mass, void, and light, these paintings unequivocally and unashamedly affirm that they are part of the mass. The same sensibility continues into the most elaborately decorated part of the church, the chancel (fig. 12). As well as a wealth of non-figural decoration, the chancel includes paintings by Frank Carmichael, Arthur Martin, Neil Mackechnie, J.E.H. MacDonald, and MacDonald's son Thoreau.

The decoration of St. Anne's represents a remarkable collective effort, rendered perhaps even more remarkable by the fact that individual egos were, apparently, subordinated to the group project. Or, to use a distinctly Canadian metaphor, MacDonald and Skey assembled a group of first-team all-stars of Canadian art, got them to play as a team, and scored a stunning and unequivocal team victory. It is a unique, and uniquely Canadian, success.

Works of striking originality often stand out more dramatically in relief, and the comparison between St. Anne's and St. Paul's, mentioned above (fig. 4), is instructive. Architecturally, St. Paul's defines itself entirely by reference to the English, Anglican, Gothic past. At St. Anne's, Skey proceeds as if the traditions of the Anglican Church didn't even exist. The two churches are of the same denomination, in the same city, and were built within five years of each other. Yet they could hardly be more different. They stand not side-by-side, but back-to-back, their gazes fixed in opposite directions.

NOTES
1. For for their time, patience, assistance and expertise, the author would like to thank Robin Sewell and Rev. Peter Orme at St. Anne's Church, Mary Anne Nicholls and Marian Rhodes at the Diocese of Toronto Archives, Prof. Anna Hudson and Prof. Malcolm Thurlby of York University, and Prof. Pierre du Prey of Queen's University.


4. For example, even the enormously successful Sir George Gilbert Scott showed a concern bordering on paranoia about how the Society reviewed his work. The paranoia was not altogether justified: see Stamp, Gavin, 2000, « George Gilbert Scott and the Cambridge Camden Society », in Webster and Elliott, op.cit., 173-189.

6. The church was discussed in The Ecclesiologist prior to its completion, and is reproduced in Simmins, Geoffrey, 1992, Documents in Canadian Architecture, Peterborough, Broadview Press, p. 33-42.


11. Trinity College joined the University of Toronto in 1903, and subsequently moved to a new Gothic building on Hoskin Avenue. The original college was demolished in 1955. See Dendy, William, 1993, Lost Toronto, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, p. 158-163.

12. There is abundant literature on the French origins of Gothic. For a relatively recent discussion, see Wilson, Christopher, 1990, The Gothic Cathedral, London, Thames and Hudson.


16. The evidence of the fabric suggests that St. Paul's was intended to be more like its monumental models than it currently is. The timber ceiling of the nave cuts awkwardly across the windows of the (liturgical) west wall; a stone vault would not have been done so, and presumably that was the original intention.

17. On "Old" St. Anne's, see Robertson, J. Ross, 1904, Landmarks of Toronto, vol. 4, Toronto, Robertson, J.R., 1912, St. Anne's Church, Toronto: Fiftieth Anniversary and Jubilee 1862-1912, Toronto, Carlton Press.

18. Vestry Meeting Minutes, April 17, 1906, Diocese of Toronto Archive 88-1, Box 11.

19. Except that even Athens has a Gothic Anglican Church—St. Paul's Church, on Philellinon Street.


21. Significant Toronto buildings in the Romanesque (or Richardsonian Romanesque) style include University College (Cumberland and Storm, 1856-1859), the Church of St. Andrew (William Storm, 1874-1875), and the "Old" City Hall (E.J. Lennox, 1889-1899).

22. The final schism occurred in 1954.


26. "The present church was designed by W. Ford Howland, who was a friend of mine, and a neighbour, when I was manager of the Bank of British North America at Bloor Street and Lansdowne Avenue, 1907-1910. My recollection is that the present church is, to a large extent, a small copy of the Roman Catholic Cathedral at Manila, Philippines." (P. Douglas Knowles to the Rev. Warren N. Turner, Rector, St. Jude's, October 1960, Diocese of Toronto Archive 88-1, Box 11.)

27. Skelton, James, n.d., « Rev. L. Skey Would Reach Mothers », clipping from unidentified newspaper, Diocese of Toronto Archive 88-1, Box 11. As the article concerns recruitment of soldiers for WWII, it can presumably be dated between the start of the war in 1914 and Skey's departure for the front in 1917.

28. « Souvenir of St. Anne's Congregational 'Welcome' to the Rector Rev. Capt. Lawrence E. Skey on the occasion of his return from the Front Thursday, December 5th, 1918 at 8:00 p.m., Musical Program », Diocese of Toronto Archive 88-1, Box 11. Song #2 (n.p.), A Lot of Salons with One Chorus.

29. Ibid., Song #4, A Short Solo and a Very Long Chorus.

30. « Rev. L. Skey Beat Wife Beater Well », n.p., clipping from unidentified newspaper, attributed to "J.D." Diocese of Toronto Archive 88-1, Box 11. The story is clearly written in retrospect, and may have appeared in connection with Skey's retirement in 1933.

31. « Play Golf After Sermon Canon Skey Advises Men », n.p., newspaper clipping possibly dating from Skey's retirement (1933), Diocese of Toronto Archive 88-1, Box 11.

32. « St. Anne's Opening Services », Canadian Churchman, October 15, 1908, p. 669.

33. Ibid.

34. On St. George's, see Mckendry, Jennifer, 1995, With Our Past Before Us, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, p. 59-68.


38. All three paintings are in the collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario.


40. Greenway.