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978-1-108-05191-0 - A History of the Gothic Revival: An Attempt to Show how the Taste for Medieval Architecture which Lingered in England During the Two Last Centuries has Since been Encouraged and Developed

Charles Lock Eastlake

Excerpt

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HISTORY

OF

THE GOTHIC REVIVAL.

CHAPTER I.

THE RENEWAL, in this country, of a taste for Mediæval architecture, and the reapplication of those principles which regulate its design, represent one of the most interesting and remarkable phases in the history of art. Unlike the Italian Renaissance, which was intimately associated with, and in a great measure dependent on, the study of ancient literature, our modern English Revival fails to exhibit, even in its earliest development, many of those external causes to which we are accustomed to attribute a revolution in public taste.

To the various influences which raised this school of art from the crumbling ruins of the Roman empire to its glory in Western Europe, and then permitted it to lapse into degradation in the sixteenth century, history points with an unerring hand. But for the stranger influence which slowly though surely has rescued it from that degradation, which has enlisted such universal sympathy in its behalf, and which bids fair, in spite of ignorant and idle prejudice, to adapt it, after two hundred years of neglect and contumely, to the requirements of a mercantile people and a practical age—for this influence, indeed, if we search at all, we must search in more than one direction.

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At first it may seem strange that a style of design which is intimately associated with the romance of the world's history should now-a-days find favour in a country distinguished above all others for the plain business-like tenour of its daily life. But this presents a paradox more obvious in a moral than in an historical sense.

It is not because England has been stigmatised as a nation of shop-keepers that she is necessarily indifferent to the progress of architecture. The fairest palaces of Venice were raised at a time when her commercial prosperity stood at its zenith, but her art and her commerce had grown up together, and if the latter was genuine and healthy, the former was unsophisticated and pure. They had had a common origin in the welfare of the State. With the decay of the State they declined. Art in the thirteenth century was no mere hobby of the educated, nor a taste which depended on antiquarian research for its perfection. It belonged to the habits, to the necessities, one might almost say to the instincts, of civilised life. Men did not then theorise on the fitness of style, or the propriety of this or that mode of decoration. There was but one style at one time—adopted, no doubt, with more or less success, according to the ability of the designer, but adopted with perfect confidence and uniformity of purpose—untrammelled by the consideration of dates or mouldings, or any of the fussiness of archæology, and maintaining its integrity, not by the authority of private judgment, but by the free will and common acceptance of a people.

The difference of condition between ancient and modern art has a direct analogy with that which exists between ancient and modern poetry, and which has been ably illustrated by one of the greatest of our modern writers. 'In a rude state of society,' says Macaulay, 'men are children with a greater variety of ideas. It is, therefore, in such a state of society that we may expect to find the poetical temperament in its highest perfection. In an enlightened age there will be much intelligence, much science, much philosophy, abundance of just classification and subtle analysis, abundance of wit and eloquence, abundance of verses,

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Effect of Civilisation.

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and even of good ones; but little poetry. Men will judge and compare; but they will not create.'

If this reasoning be just in regard to the poetry of language, it is equally so with respect to the poetry of art. As a nation, we have grown too sophisticated to enjoy either intuitively. But there is another kind of admiration which we, in common with all modern Europe, may hope to feel for both, and which is derived from and dependent on the cultivation of the human intellect. The graceful action of a child at play is mainly due to its utter artlessness. It may skip and jump and roll upon the greensward in a manner which defies our artificial sense of decorum. Yet every movement associated with that age of innocence has a charm for us. It may be free and unconventional, but never clumsy. It may be quaint or even boisterous, but never vulgar. Such is the comeliness of nature, which by-and-by is handed over to the mercies of the dancing-master, who, with fiddle in hand and toes turned outwards, proceeds to teach our little ones deportment. From that moment ensues a dreary interval of primness and awkwardness. Who has not noticed the semi-prudish *gaucherie* of little ladies from the age of (say) twelve to sixteen? As a rule they stand, sit, walk, and converse with a painful air of restraint, in which all natural grace is lost in an overwhelming sense of propriety, nor is it until they ripen into womanhood that they acquire that easy confidence of manner which is at once characteristic of the most perfect breeding and the purest heart.

It is precisely such an interval as this—an interval between youthful grace and mature beauty—which must fall to the fate of every art during the progress of civilisation. But, instead of years, we need centuries of teaching to re-establish principles which were once independent of education, but which have lapsed away before the sophistry of theoretic science, or have been obliterated by the influence of a false economy. It has now come to be an universally accepted fact that the arts of design attain their greatest perfection under two conditions. We

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must either have theories of the most refined and cultivated order, or we must have no theories at all. In the present age, when theory is everything—when volume after volume issues from the press replete with the most subtle analysis of principles which are to guide us in our estimate of the beautiful, it is hopeless to expect that men will work by the light of nature alone, and forego the influence of precedent. If the ‘Dark Ages’ had continued dark in the ordinary sense of the epithet, what might we not have expected from the beauties of the Pointed style? Even if literature had kept pace with art, they might have gradually emerged together with the dawn of Western civilisation. But the change, though gradual, was too thorough for such a result, and when at length the dazzling light of the Renaissance burst in upon our monasteries and cathedrals, the spirit of their magnificence faded away before the unexpected meteor. The tree of knowledge had been tasted, and it was vain to expect sustenance from the tree of life. Thenceforth, the art whose seed had been sown in the earliest period of European history—which had developed with the prosperity of nations, and borne good fruit in abundance after its kind—was doomed to wither away, neglected, into a sapless trunk—to be hedged round, indeed, by careful antiquaries, and pointed at as a curiosity, but never, as it once seemed, likely to flourish again on English soil.

And here, if it were not time to drop the metaphor, one might extend its significance yet further. For there are two theories respecting the revival of Gothic architecture in this country. One is, that it appears among us as a new exotic plant, requiring different culture from its ancient prototype, which is supposed to have become utterly extinct. But there are those who love to think that the old parent stem never altogether lost its vitality, and that the Mediæval tendencies which crop up among us now in this latter half of the nineteenth century may be compared to the fresh green sprouts which owe their existence to the life still lingering in some venerable forest oak.

The supporters of this latter theory have a great deal to urge on

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Elizabethan Architecture.

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their side of the question. In the first place the Renaissance school, from which we are accustomed to date the extinction of Gothic art, although it appeared in Italy with Brunelleschi at its head during the early part of the fifteenth century, was scarcely recognised in England until a hundred years later, and long after that period, even when the works of Lomazzo and Philibert de l'Orme had been translated into English, and John Shute, an architect of Queen Elizabeth's time, had returned from Italy (whither he had been sent by his patron Dudley, Duke of Northumberland), no doubt full of conceits for, and admiration of, the new style, there was little to be seen of that style, save the incongruous details with which it became the fashion to decorate the palatial houses of the aristocracy. But though Italian stringcourses and keystones, quoins, and cornices, were introduced abundantly in the bay-windows and porticoes of the day, the main outline of the buildings to which those features belonged remained in accordance with the ancient type. This was especially the case in rural districts. The counties of Shropshire, Chester, and Stafford, bear evidence to this day, in many an old timber house which dates from the Elizabethan period, of the tenacity with which the old style held its own in regard to general arrangement, long after it had been grafted with the details of a foreign school. Even down to the reign of James I., the domestic architecture of England, as exemplified in the country houses of the nobility, was Gothic in spirit, and frequently contained more real elements of a Mediæval character than many which have been built in modern times by the light of archæological orthodoxy. Inigo Jones himself required a second visit to Italy before he could thoroughly abandon the use of the Pointed arch. But its days were now numbered, and when in 1633 the first stone was laid for a Roman portico to one of the finest cathedrals of the Middle Ages, the tide of national taste may be said to have completely turned, and Gothic architecture, as a practicable art, received what was then no doubt supposed to be its death-blow.

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By a strange and fortunate coincidence of events, however, it happened that at this very time, when architects of the period had learned to despise the buildings of their ancestors, a spirit of veneration for the past was springing up among a class of men who may be said to have founded our modern school of antiquaries. Sometimes, indeed, their researches were not those of a character from which much advantage was to be expected. James I. spent a great deal of his own and his architect's time in speculating on the origin of Stonehenge, and no doubt many ingenious theorists were content to follow the royal example. But luckily for posterity, the attention of others was drawn in a more serviceable direction. Up to this time no work of any importance had been published on the Architectural Antiquities of England. A period had arrived when it was thought necessary, if only on historical grounds, that some record of ecclesiastical establishments should be compiled. The promoters of the scheme were probably little influenced by the love of Gothic as a style. But an old building was necessarily a Gothic building, and thus it happened that, in spite of the prejudices of the age, and probably their own æsthetic predilections, the antiquarians of the day became the means of keeping alive some interest in a school of architecture which had ceased to be practically employed.

Early in the reign of Charles I., Mr. Roger Dodsworth, who appears to have belonged to a good family in Yorkshire, inspired by that love of archæology which distinguished many gentlemen of the time, began to collect materials for a history of his native county. In the course of his research, he necessarily acquired much interesting information concerning the origin and endowments of those religious houses of the North which had been established previous to the Reformation. While Dodsworth—a man somewhat advanced in years—was engaged in this pursuit, a younger antiquarian than himself, Mr. William Dugdale, of Blythe, was similarly occupied in compiling a history of Warwickshire. Sir Henry Spelman, who knew both, and appreciated the value of their labours, perceived that, by uniting the labours of these gentlemen, a

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The 'Monasticon Anglicanum.'

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valuable result might be obtained. He therefore did his best to bring them together, and we have reason to be thankful that he succeeded in doing so, for a literary partnership ensued, and the produce of their joint authorship was the 'Monasticon Anglicanum.'

Opinions are much divided concerning Dugdale's share in the earlier portions of this work. Mr. Gough, in his 'British Topography,' contends that the two first volumes were compiled entirely by Dodsworth. This opinion has since been refuted, with what success need not here be discussed. It suffices to state that Dodsworth, who was indubitably the original projector of the undertaking, died a year before the publication of the first volume, which occurred in 1655. This volume appeared without dedication, and, indeed, it would have been difficult to find, in those stormy times, and among the Puritan leaders of the Commonwealth, a patron who was sufficiently interested in the object of the work to lend his name to the title-page. Nor were the interests of literature likely to be better supported by the Royalists themselves, who had just been iniquitously deprived of one-tenth of their estates under the military despotism which then obtained in England. The book, in short, met with a miserable sale, so much so that it was not until seven years later, after the Restoration, that the second volume appeared—this time accompanied by a dedication to his gracious Majesty King Charles II., who no doubt was much edified by its perusal. The third volume came out in 1673—the memorable year of the Test Act—and, by an entry in Dugdale's diary, it seems that he received fifty pounds for it. In this concluding portion of his labour he had been assisted by Sir Thomas Herbert and Mr. Anthony à Wood.

In 1682 a new and improved edition of the first volume was published (*Editio secunda auctior et emendatior; cum alterâ ac elucidiori indice*), and of this edition many copies exist. It has a double title page, the first containing a sort of genealogical tree, on the branches of which are represented, in a kneeling attitude, little groups of figures emblematical

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of various religious and monastic orders. At the foot of the tree stand St. Benedict, St. Dunstan, St. Gregory, St. Augustine, and St. Cuthbert. The engraving opposite this is remarkable for two facts connected with it. Although the work to which it introduces the reader treats of none but Mediæval buildings, the design of this page is essentially Italian in character, and in fact represents a kind of Roman triumphal arch, so indifferent were its authors to the interests of Gothic art. But their sympathy with the fate of many an ecclesiastical institution which had perished under the rule of Henry VIII. is indicated by two vignettes which appear at the bottom of the plate. In one of these a king is seen kneeling before an altar and dedicating some grant '*Deo et ecclesiæ*' in behalf of an abbey which appears delineated in the distance. In the second compartment the abbey is in ruins, and 'bluff King Hal,' straddling in the foreground, and *apart from his Royal predecessors*, points with his stick to the dismantled walls, exclaiming '*Sic volo.*'

It is impossible to mistake the spirit which found vent in these symbols. The engravings which were published with the original editions of the 'Monasticon' were executed by Hollar and King, two artists, of whose names one would certainly not otherwise have reached posterity. Those by Hollar are the best, and are chiefly illustrative of the various costumes worn by ancient religious orders in England. King undertook the architectural views, which are for the most part of a rude and unsatisfactory description. They are frequently out of perspective, and are neither faithful in matters of detail nor drawn with any artistic spirit. They are, however, not uninteresting to the modern student, as they include many records of buildings, or portions of buildings, which have long since perished under the hand of time. Among Hollar's may be mentioned a view of Lincoln Cathedral, showing the spire previous to its destruction in 1547, and the views of Salisbury with its detached belfry (on the north side), since removed.

The descriptive text is written in Latin, after a fashion common with such works of that date. From an allusion in his diary in 1658,

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Illustrations of the 'Monasticon.'

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Dugdale seems to have feared that 'Mr. King' (probably a clerk in his employ) was about to publish a translation of the 'Monasticon.' That such a work was prepared to the extent of the first volume is evident from the fact that Dugdale himself alludes to its being 'erroneously Englished' in many places. The abridged translation, however, which was subsequently published, did not appear until 1692, six years after Sir William Dugdale's death, and being signed 'J. W.' was ascribed to Mr. James Wright, a barrister of the Middle Temple, who, in 1684, published the 'History and Antiquities of the County of Rutland.' Other abridgments and extracts from the original work followed, many of which were inaccurate.

The modern edition is well known. It was the result of the joint labours of three gentlemen eminently qualified for the task which they undertook:—The Rev. Bulkeley Bandinell, D.D., keeper of the Bodleian Library; Mr. John Caley, keeper of the Records of the Augmentation Office (who, at a later period, held a similar post at Westminster); and Mr. (afterwards Sir Henry) Ellis, keeper of the MSS. in the British Museum. It is needless to say that the amount of erudition thus brought to bear upon the subject materially increased the historical value of the work. Hundreds of Religious Houses of which Dugdale knew little or nothing were added to the list. Most of Hollar's prints were re-engraved. Those by King were rejected as worthless. But, in order to supply their place, the authors availed themselves of an artist's assistance, whose work, though it may appear indifferent when judged by a more recent standard of merit, is by no means deficient in artistic quality, and was no doubt among the best of his time. The engravings from Mr. John Coney's drawings will scarcely satisfy those who look for minute attention to the detail of Gothic ornament. But in breadth of effect, and in treatment of chiaroscuro, they will bear comparison with Piranesi. It is to be regretted that the initial letters and a few other characteristics of the early text were not reproduced. But taken as a whole, and considering

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the period at which it was brought out, the modern edition of the 'Monasticon' is a work which does credit to its authors and the spirit which induced its publication.

In examining the condition of what is commonly known as Pointed architecture during the seventeenth century, the student will be not a little puzzled who attempts to ascribe, with anything like chronological accuracy, its various characteristics to such a sequence of events as influenced it before, or have prevailed upon it since, that period. In the present day, when a few hours' journey enables us to pass from one end of England to another, and even into the heart of the Continent—when the increased facilities and cheapness of publication have rendered the public familiar with all sorts and conditions of ancient and modern art, it is difficult to estimate the importance which once attached to the merit and capabilities of individual example. Every builder's clerk who can now get away for a month's holiday may spend his time profitably among the churches of Normandy, or fill his portfolio with sketches in Rhineland. But, two hundred years ago a travelled architect was a great man, entitled to an amount of respect which quickly secured for him the highest patronage, and enabled him to form a school of which he became the acknowledged leader. The development of such a school, however, was often necessarily limited to that portion of the country where he found a field for the display of his talents. Meantime, many a rural practitioner was content to imitate the work of his forefathers; and thus, while the influence of the new Italian school was brought to bear upon public and important works, a large proportion of minor and domestic buildings still continued to be designed in that style which, though debased in character, may be fairly described as Mediæval.

It is well known that the earliest works of Inigo Jones himself were Gothic; and even after his return from Italy, where he had studied the works of Palladio, he could not entirely forsake the groove in which his youthful efforts had been exercised. The north and south sides of