A First-rate Gothic Man

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Brian Andrews
CREATING A GOTHIC PARADISE: PUGIN AT THE ANTIPODES
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IN 1848, four years before his lapse into insanity and early death, the British architect Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812–52) wrote of his third, and final, wife: ‘I have got a first-rate Gothic woman at last, who perfectly understands and delights in spires, chancels, screens, stained glass, brass vestments etc.’ In addition to this ‘acquisition’, Pugin’s passion for Gothic had led him to design numerous buildings and furnishings in the style, including churches and a substantial part of the British Houses of Parliament. Pugin also published extensively on Gothic design, ranging over furniture, metalwork, ornament, costume and architecture. Most importantly, in 1835 he converted to Roman Catholicism, the faith of those who built the Gothic structures he so admired.

That Pugin pursued Gothic with such unwavering zeal is not surprising: his first essay in the genre, in 1827, was Gothic-style furniture designed for Windsor Castle. What is surprising, however, is that the precocious Pugin was only fifteen. Having commenced his design career in Regency Gothic, Pugin became the most influential architect of the nineteenth-century Gothic revival. His knowledge developed through firsthand study of historical monuments, objects and documents, and his style evolved into a highly sophisticated one, demonstrating original and creative use of Gothic design and decorative principles. Pugin’s development as an ecclesiastical architect also coincided with a wave of Roman Catholic church building in Britain. We are fortunate in Australia, too, that churches to designs by Pugin and, later, his followers were also erected in several parts of the country.

Pugin’s first involvement with design work in Australia was an organ case for St Mary’s Cathedral Sydney — installed in 1841 but destroyed along with the church in a fire of 1856. Pugin’s involvement with Australia flourished when his friend and colleague, Robert Willson (1794–1866), first Catholic Bishop of Hobart, arrived in that city in 1844. Willson had played a role in the construction of a Pugin church in Britain. He came armed with plans, models and ecclesiastical paraphernalia, all to Pugin’s designs. As Brian Andrews writes in Creating a Gothic Paradise: Pugin at the Antipodes: ‘Here was an opportunity for Pugin to create a Gothic paradise in a pristine land in concert with another soul whose views exactly corresponded with his own.’

In Hobart, Willson laboured hard against enormous (mostly financial) obstacles and not entirely in vain. He attempted to build St Joseph’s to a Pugin design. Two churches to Pugin’s designs were constructed in Tasmania during the 1850s from designs Willson had brought with him from Britain, and others followed. Willson also acquired for Tasmanian churches large amounts of ecclesiastical metalwork by John Hardman & Co. of Birmingham and numerous sets of vestments, all following Pugin’s designs. From the 1840s several Pugin churches were also erected in New South Wales under the direction of another Pugin enthusiast, Archbishop John Polding (1794–1877). Pugin’s death in 1852 did little to halt the enthusiasm for Gothic, and his influence persisted in Australia. The biggest Gothic-revival church of them all, St Patrick’s, Melbourne, was designed by one of his most talented followers, William Wardell. Work on it began in 1854.

The involvement of major nineteenth-century British architects and designers in Australian projects was rare, but work of two of the most significant, Pugin and William Morris, is well represented here — Morris, through his interior design work for South Australians, and Pugin for his Tasmanian and New South Wales churches. (Ironically, given their influence, neither visited Australia.) Creating a Gothic Paradise — published to accompany the fascinating Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery touring exhibition of the same name — thoroughly documents Pugin’s remarkable Australian legacy. Andrews is admirably equipped for the task, having worked and published on Pugin and Gothic revival ecclesiastical work for many years. In 1994 he wrote the Australian chapter ‘Pugin in Australia’ for the Victoria and Albert Museum’s Pugin: A Gothic Passion.

Creating a Gothic Paradise takes the form of a series of essays and exhaustive and extensively illustrated catalogue entries. An introduction to the subject by Pugin scholar Rosemary Hill is followed by several essays by Andrews covering all aspects of Pugin’s Australian work. For Puginists, it is a pity that there is no appendix listing the location of extant Pugin buildings and objects in Australia. This information is not always easy to extract from the text. Another not insignificant point is that it is not always clear from the image captions who was the architect of a particular church. These reservations notwithstanding, Creating a Gothic Paradise is a most valuable and attractive contribution to nineteenth-century design history in Australia.