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BOOK REVIEW AND NOTE

Late-Georgian Churches: Anglican Architecture, Patronage, and Churchgoing in England, 1790–1840. By **Christopher Webster**. London: John Hudson Publishing, 2022. 320 pp. £80.00. ISBN 978-1739-8229-1-0.

This is a beautifully and lavishly illustrated volume which demonstrates the vitality and innovation in Anglican church building between 1790 and 1840. Although the imperative to build new churches was recognized by the 1818 Church Building Act, historians have downplayed new commissions before that date. Furthermore, the churches which were built before 1840 were heavily criticized by the Ecclesiologists who, from the 1840s, advocated for "Gothic" architecture. Christopher Webster overturns much of this conventional view, describing and analyzing in fascinating detail the "stunning outburst" of new-built, or re-built, churches from 1790 (amounting to almost 1,500), of a quality almost unparalleled in Europe, and showing how the move to "Gothic" predated the Ecclesiological "revolution" of the 1840s.

Webster notes that the most interesting and innovative churches were often in the expanding industrial urban centers, during a time when the population of England doubled to over 13.5 million, and where there was a desperate need to accommodate congregations in areas of population growth. This is an important observation given that an older historiography (Alan Gilbert, Owen Chadwick, Peter Virgin, and others) emphasized the ways in which industrialization and urbanization in this period tended to overwhelm the established Church, and that it was found most wanting in these new industrial and urban centers. While Webster does not cite more modern publications which have explored the ways in which the established Church did rally to some of the challenges of urbanization and industrialization, telling the story through the architectural and related evidence not only sheds fascinating light on the Church of England in this period but chimes with the more positive views of some recent historians.

Webster's methodology is to present these churches on their own terms ("seeing things as the Late Georgians would"), free from the prejudice of the Ecclesiologists (which even led the architects who designed these churches to apologize later for their efforts). He emphasizes the ways in which church building fully embraced the technological and material discoveries of the age: for example, St Michael in the Hamlet, Liverpool, built during 1814-1815, used cast iron for much of its structure and decoration. Webster argues that it was often ecclesiastical commissions rather than industrial ones that exploited new materials. His analysis demonstrates that the period saw a gradual shift from classical to Gothic so that few by 1830 would have contended for a classical design. He makes a good case that it was during the late Georgian period that the real Gothic revival was instigated, although this was not necessarily the "correct" Gothic of the Victorians since architects rarely tried to reproduce medieval styles (since these were Roman Catholic) and instead went for something which was "sufficiently" medieval, indicating the Church of England's historic tradition and its difference both from the pre-Reformation Church and nonconformist classical places of

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worship. Webster concludes that the move from the classical rectangular solution favored in 1820 to the Gothic of 1845 was less profound and more seamless than has been hitherto understood and it was thanks to the battles fought by the late Georgians that the Victorian Gothic revival was able to flourish so quickly.

Webster emphasizes the legal, administrative, and financial challenges of building a new Anglican church in an ecclesiastical legal system where creating a new worshipping community entailed moving resources from an existing one, and where it was easier to build Roman Catholic and nonconformist churches. Given this, it is remarkable that so many outstanding Anglican churches were built. A key issue was to find a style of architecture which best enabled congregations to see and hear, and this resulted in experimentation in a range of shapes and styles, such as the innovative circular classical church of All Saints', Newcastle, as well as octagons and parallelograms. Experiments included introducing a ring of columns within a conventional rectangular structure, as well as trying out "Gothic" forms.

An interesting theme of this book is the issue of how classically trained architects approached the Gothic style (which was increasingly favored by clergy and others), and which saw architects submitting designs in different styles. Webster discusses the problem of not having an identifiable set of principles, or an architectural language, to delineate or describe the Gothic, and that a conventional office-based classical training was possibly a disadvantage. Here the breakthrough were publications by John Britton examining buildings from the Middle Ages and Thomas Rickman's *Attempts to Discriminate the Styles of Gothic Architecture* (1817) which provided the taxonomy still used today of Norman, Early English, Decorated, and Perpendicular.

Webster uses case studies of West Yorkshire, Liverpool, south-east Lancashire, and London, to explore the progress of the Gothic revival before 1830, as well as the prominent role of the clergy in championing both the Gothic style and the need for free seats for the poor. He shows that by 1830 new classical churches in the capital were very rare, which is significant since this was the home of the Wren/Hawksmoor churches which had once set the benchmark for ecclesiastical classicism. The spate of clerically inspired church-building in the industrializing and urbanizing north is powerful evidence of the energy of the Church of England in areas where traditional historiography has found it failing. Special emphasis is placed on clergy who sponsored church-building in the urban north-west such as Hammond Roberson, vicar of Liversedge; T.D. Whitaker, vicar of Whalley and later Blackburn; JW. Whittaker, vicar of Blackburn; Roger Carus Wilson, vicar of Preston; and James Slade, vicar of Bolton.

This is a formidably researched book which shows how architectural history can give a particular and perhaps unique insight into the broader social and religious history of the age. The publisher should be congratulated on the high-quality production standards, and the photographs by Geoff Brandwood (who died just before the book was published) are outstanding and evocative.

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