

Rosemary Hill, *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain.*

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‘Strange as it may appear to some,’ wrote Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-52) in a letter published in *The Tablet* on 2 September 1848:

‘Rome has been, and ever will be, the corner and key-stone of pointed architecture [his italics]. Every Gothic church throughout the world was erected when the signet of the Fisherman was the talisman of Christendom, and the foundation of every vast abbey and mighty cathedral is based on the Rock of Peter.’

Pugin’s letter was written in defence of rood screens at a time when he was disillusioned by the coolness of Catholic bishops and clergy towards his aims. He was dismayed by the adoption of Italianate architecture, devotions and worship by Newman, Faber and many of the converts to Rome and their ill-disguised distaste for medievalism and the Gothic style. This dispute is well known but what is rarely emphasized is their point of unity. What made these factions one was a common loyalty to the Papacy; what divided them was the style and form in which their fidelity was expressed. Papal Catholicism was the foundation of Pugin’s perception of faith, held by him as strongly as the ultramontane convictions of the Italianizing party.

Pugin was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1835 at the age of twenty-three; he died seventeen years later in 1852 at the age of forty, exhausted, broken and mad. His early experience of religion was Presbyterian in a charismatic form under the influence of Edward Irving. He declared that he ‘had crowded a century’s work in forty’ and had transformed British architecture in nineteen by moving the revived Gothick style from a picturesque, ornamental, literary form into one informed by scholarship and the structural logic of Gothic. No architect had more influence on the Gothic Revival than him; scarcely a medieval or new Victorian church escaped the consequences. When the vicissitudes of Pugin’s life are considered the acceptance of two factors is necessary in order to understand him: his youth and his consent to receive Catholicism not merely as a vehicle of taste and architectural opportunity but as revealed truth. The two were inseparably associated and to divorce or reduce one at the expense of the other is to distort the fundamental motivation of his life, work and principles. Archbishop Ullathorne, writing to Ambrose Phillips de Lisle on 10

October 1852, said 'I wish very much to see something written about Pugin to show how completely his genius sprang from and was directed by religion'.

With the exception of Michael Trappes-Lomax's study of Pugin, published in 1931, Pugin's religion has been an embarrassment to his biographers. If you want to learn more of Pugin the Catholic, read Trappes-Lomax, if only because Pugin is given a voice; his words are quoted extensively and maintain the narrative drive. Benjamin Ferrey did not welcome Pugin's Catholicism and reflected the mid-Victorian prejudices of the year of its publication: 1861. Phoebe Stanton's short book on Pugin is valuable for being an architectural inquiry and for paying attention to his work in Ireland, in 1971 something of a revelation. Surprisingly, *Pugin* and her excellent articles are not included in the select bibliography, though there are unattributed references to her theories. While *God's Architect* is not an architectural study, Rosemary Hill has accomplished the fullest and most complete modern biography so far published; it will be hard to supersede and is likely to be regarded as the orthodox view of Pugin for the foreseeable future. I have never before read a book about an architect as substantial as this more quickly and with such pleasure; when finished I experienced a palpable sense of loss. Pugin's religion is, however, seen as part of a greater whole rather than the driving force of his life.

Pugin is, by now, a familiar Victorian architect due to *Pugin: a Gothic Passion*, the exhibition mounted by Clive Wainwright and Paul Atterbury in 1994 which caused a sea-change in the public appreciation of his work. It was a controversial exhibition that presented Pugin in terms of the applied arts at the expense of architecture and began a subtle process of secularising his life, work and influence on the development of the Gothic Revival. Despite a central display of church plate and other religious artefacts (some of which were not designed by him but were manufactured by Hardman in his style) the emphasis was more on his early years as a theatrical designer, his principles of design, his furniture and ceramics, his influence on the later Arts and Crafts Movement and his perceived, if erroneous, role as a precursor of the Modern Movement.

God's Architect is partly a fruit of this enterprise. It was then that Hill began research on a biography of Pugin and Wainwright's views had a strong influence on her in the early stages. The problem with Wainwright in relation to Pugin was that he was an atheist who had little sympathy with and no understanding of Pugin's religious views and their powerful motivation on his understanding of the Gothic style and social reform. In his lectures we had Pugin the sailor, the pirate, the womaniser, his supposed lack of interest in Catholic doctrine, his misreading of Catholic politics, his eccentric dress, his functional principles, his influence on the applied arts, his role as a proto- High Victorian. Pugin the Catholic was played down, Pugin the character emerged; a secularist, post-Christian understanding of Pugin was established.

Engaging though *God's Architect* is to read it is under-girded by a sequence of questionable angles that motivate Hill's thesis and fit Pugin's life into a pre-determined pattern. These I want to address. Early in the narrative it is suggested that Pugin was syphilitic and this affliction was the cause of progressive madness. In the epilogue she acknowledges that syphilis 'can never now be determined with certainty' yet she consistently maintains this inference to the point of fact as an explanation of his erratic behaviour, emotionalism and madness. Alternative medical opinion is disregarded, the evidence presented by the birth of Pugin's many healthy children

ignored. Pugin's early involvement with low life in the theatre is not only identified as a possible cause of the infection but as an explanation of his later planning. As a youth he worked with the Grieve family, the leading scenepainters of the day, at Covent Garden. This experience is pinpointed as having had a fundamental influence on many of his later architectural solutions rather than a study of medieval precedent and liturgical function.

We know from Pugin's writings, as well as his command of the grammar and vocabulary of Gothic design, that he had an unrivalled grasp of medieval architecture and detail. The theatrical interpretation is not only forced but untenable. It reaches over-confident lengths in her understanding of the plan of St Barnabas', Nottingham (1841-4), where the choir and sanctuary are described as a 'freestanding space within the larger volume' and described as 'the perfect Picturesque interior landscape, the three-arch effect he had learnt at Covent Garden from the Grieves, made solid, sacred, "real".' Hill includes no plans but one of St Barnabas' would demonstrate comparison with many medieval English cathedrals and collegiate churches. The same applies to the T-planned chapel at St Edmund's, Ware (1845-53). She believes that the stone screen, with its integral altars contained beneath the overhanging, vaulted loft, is derived from the Grieves' 'old three-arch device from Covent Garden, but made more dramatic, not merely theatrical'. It is, rather, a close copy of the fifteenth-century screen in the Liebfraukirche, Oberwesel, on the Rhine, which Pugin described as 'one of the most perfect, as well as the most beautiful screen in Germany'. Ware provided the only opportunity to use the precedent. Multiple altars were needed in a collegiate institution; the choir had to be enclosed; the screen provided a liturgical solution. Pugin himself deplored theatrical effects in church design.

There are also other debateable architectural assertions founded on a selective use of evidence. Of these the most significant is the maintenance of Wainwright's claim that Pugin anticipated the High Victorian style and his work would have developed on the lines of his immediate successors. Evidence for this is found in the occasional use of strong masonry, asymmetry in planning and offset arches, and the plan and structure of St Mary's, Rugby (1847). Consistently Pugin's churches were in the Decorated style with occasional works in Early English and Perpendicular. Off-set arches were a structural rather than stylistic solution and in the case of the unexecuted designs for St Peter Port, Guernsey (1845), which Hill describes as an exercise in imagining 'more complex space', this implementation can be seen in medieval English churches such as SS. Peter & Paul, Aylesford, for purely practical reasons. The realization of this plan occurs if separately expressed chancels and eastern chapels are designed using a common party wall, often with an arch or arches therein. It is a pragmatic engineering solution, not something 'quite original, mysterious and uneasy'. The reason why it was not built was because the Guernsey priest wanted a larger church; there is no evidence that he thought the design 'too peculiar, or too expensive'. Equally, strong masonry used in other buildings was related to cost rather than choice and in the cases where it was used economic factors explain the difference. In her desire to establish Pugin as a proto-High Victorian the evidence is pressed too far.

Hill depends heavily for her understanding of Pugin's varying attitudes to the Oxford Movement, the Church of England and the proleptic ecumenical implications on Margaret Pawley's book, *Faith and Family: the Life and Circle of Ambrose Phillips*

de Lisle (1993). Pawley's work is marred by an anachronistic understanding of nineteenth-century ecumenism, derived from experience of the ecumenical developments following the Second Vatican Council, 1962-5. These she had known through her husband, Canon Bernard Pawley, Archdeacon of Canterbury, an Anglican observer at the Council and a founder of the Anglican Centre in Rome, and she projects them onto the early-Victorian age. It is impossible to interpret the nineteenth-century ecumenical forays between Anglicans and Roman Catholics of Pugin's time in this way because they had no official backing and relations were confined to infrequent meetings, correspondence and occasional pamphlets.

Yet Hill's belief that Pugin was intent on belonging to an 'English Catholic Church' in the way that the Tractarians understood it is misleading, reflects her own moderate High Church position, and a shaky understanding of ecclesiology. Assisted by the research of Dr Daniel Rock, Lord Shrewsbury's learned domestic chaplain (whose acquaintance Pugin made in 1836, a year after his conversion), and drawing upon his detailed knowledge of English medieval liturgical furniture, Pugin sought the revival of an English liturgical rite and ceremonial and furnished his churches accordingly. This was the restoration of the Sarum Use which mysteriously Hill describes as 'that continuous, native Catholic tradition, a tradition in communion with but independent of Rome.' And she believes that for Pugin after his conversation Salisbury alone was 'now confirmed as the hub not just of his own world but of the true English Church, past and soon to come.'

The Use of Salisbury was a local medieval modification of the inessentials of the Roman Rite (of which many variants existed throughout the Western Church prior to the Counter-Reformation) used in Salisbury Cathedral, traditionally ascribed to St Osmund (d. 1099) but really much later. The Customary was not compiled until c1225 by Richard Poore, Bishop of Salisbury, to coincide, after receiving papal approval, with the building of the new cathedral. By the late Middle Ages the Sarum Use was followed, in whole or in part, in other English dioceses, and in 1457 was stated to be in use in nearly the whole of England. In addition there were also the uses of Bangor, Hereford and York. But to see it as a 'continuous, native Catholic tradition' represents a world of make-believe that ignores the conversion of England by St Augustine in 597 at the instigation of St Gregory the Great, and the Synod of Whitby in 664 when the young St Wilfrid, Bishop of York, secured the replacement of the existing Celtic usages by the Roman Rite, and Celtic by Benedictine monasticism. St Bede the Venerable saw this as the turning point of his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. Tutored by Rock, Pugin's liturgical ideals were essentially Gregorian, from the chant onwards. He included St Gregory and St Augustine with St George in the stained glass windows of his private chapel in the Grange, Ramsgate. Given his allegiance to the Papacy, it is impossible to squeeze him into an incipient High Church mould, however sympathetic he was to the aims of a significant minority in the national Church, with whose rhetoric he sympathized. Though Pugin enjoyed working for Tractarian clients, and (with Wiseman and a few others) had hopes enkindled by the Oxford Movement, he, and they, could no more have been Anglicans than Drummondites

What was Pugin's legacy beyond being the father of the nineteenth-century Gothic Revival in England? In an epilogue Hill maintains that 'he was largely forgotten by the end of the century' and when Herman Muthesius published *Das Englische Haus* in

1904-5, Pugin was 'all but invisible'. She identifies the limitations of Muthesius's understanding of the significance of Philip Webb, W. E. Nesfield and Norman Shaw as the fathers of modern domestic architecture by ignoring, or not recognizing, the fact that they were Pugin's immediate inheritors and that it was 'he, not they, who invented the English House that Muthesius so admired' and leaves it there. In domestic architecture echoes of Pugin's influence survive to this day, but what of the main body of his work and interest: church architecture?

After the abandonment of a design in the Early French Gothic style, in 1863 G. F. Bodley designed All Saints', Cambridge, in the fourteenth-century Decorated style verging on the Perpendicular preferred by Pugin, and brought the brief parenthesis of High Victorianism full circle. After visiting Germany in 1845 Pugin wrote to Bishop Sharpley that he believed 'that something even grander than most of the old things can be produced by simplicity combined with gigantic proportions', and that 'lofty arches & pillars, huge projecting buttresses grand severe lines are the true thing'. Hill sees this as an anticipation of High Victorianism but it is a prediction of the mature achievement of Bodley & Garner at St Augustine's, Pendlebury, (1874) and George Gilbert Scott Jnr at St Agnes', Kennington, (1877) rather than the restless northern Italian constructional polychromy and solid mass of Butterfield and Street and the powerful Early French structure of Burges; forget what J. T. Micklethwaite (another of Pugin's successors) described as the 'loud, coarse, vulgarity' of Teulon, Bassett Keeling and E.B. Lamb and the developments of E.W. Pugin and George Ashlin, both of whom certainly embraced what is known as 'High Victorianism'. Had he lived, Pugin's work could well have developed on Bodley's and Scott's lines; he was the father of the late Gothic Revival.

In 1886 J. Wickham Legg, the liturgiologist, wrote an essay, 'On some ancient liturgical customs', published in the *Transactions of the St Paul's Ecclesiological Society*, and said 'I am sure we must raise the cry *Back to Pugin*, to the principles Pugin advanced' in his campaign to apply authentic medievalism to Anglican worship and church architecture. These views also motivated Edmund Bishop, the leading English Roman Catholic liturgiologist, who, like most of his generation, was uncritically devoted to Pugin and pugnaciously English in his ecclesiastical preferences. Legg founded the St Paul's Ecclesiological Society to further his aims in 1879; Bishop and others the Guild of St Gregory and St Luke 'for ECCLESIOLOGY TODAY 40 · JULY 2008 108 the purpose of promoting the study of Christian antiquities and of propagating the principles of Christian art' in the same year. Pugin's Gothic romanticism and scientific liturgical research were, in company with Wickham Legg's goals, their watchword. Under the Guild's influence, Pugin's theories found a recrudescence in late-Victorian Catholic church architecture, principally in the work of J. F. Bentley (with the exception of Westminster Cathedral), Leonard Stokes, J. A. Hadfield, Thomas Garner and F. A. Walters (all of whom were members). The school of Bodley, most notably in the early work of J.N. Comper, brought Puginism to its ultimate fulfilment, reinforced by the church architecture of Temple Moore, the sole pupil of the younger Scott. These architects all revered Pugin and achieved his potential.

In a wider sphere, Paul Waterhouse recognized the roots of the late-Gothic Revival in Pugin in a serialized biography of him published in the *Architectural Review* under the editorship of Henry Wilson, illustrated by some of the leading architectural

draughtsmen of the day including F. L. Griggs. This prestigious monthly magazine was founded in 1897 and published all that was best in British architecture, regardless of style, and was in the vanguard of taste. From 1901 onwards newly-discovered drawings by Pugin and correspondence were published intermittently and these reflect continuing interest in his work and principles. At the turn of the century Pugin was far from invisible.

The strength of Hill's book lies in her depth of research, especially in the beginning, and the way that she sets Pugin's life and achievement into the panorama of early-Victorian England. For this I and others are grateful; she lays bare a forgotten world. In nearly 500 pages Hill presents an epic narrative of the times in which he lived and the influence he had upon contemporary architecture and taste. She relieves him of the reputation of being seen as the father of twentieth-century functionalism and repudiates Henry Russell Hitchcock's opinion that this development constitutes 'the core of Pugin's long-term significance as a theorist'. She believes that as a theorist 'he has no "long-term" significance at all' and that is true as far as Modernism is concerned. Her research into the lives and ancestry of Pugin's parents casts new light on his origins in France and the minor tributaries of the Lincolnshire gentry. Auguste Pugin's harmless pretensions to an aristocratic lineage are uncovered without censure and the facts of his French kinship extensively researched. Above all, Pugin's mother, Catherine Welby, is rescued from the derision to which she was subjected by Ferrey and later jovially disseminated by Trappes-Lomax. A difficult, intensely religious and over-bearing woman, unsympathetic to her husband's pupils, the Belle of Islington emerges as an intellectual in her own right and a positive influence on her son. The treatment of the Barry-Pugin controversy in the design of the New Palace of Westminster is judicious, and her skills of characterization exemplary. She deals with Pugin's volatile opinions well and writes perceptively of his marriages and relations with women.

But, above all, it is in the power of writing that Hill's book succeeds and will be found by many to be persuasive. *God's Architect* (a title that I dare say suggests the wit of a spirited dinner party rather than an accurate description of the subject; Pugin made no such claims) is an outstanding achievement, a landmark in architectural biography, and will find a place among the bestwritten biographies of the present time. But its literary merit is also a hazard because it subtly masks the biases from which it is written and is, I regret to say, more likely to misrepresent an understanding of Pugin's life and achievement than otherwise.

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