

The New Criterion

Books

November 2008

The houses Pugin built

by [Roger Sandall](#)

On *God's Architect: Pugin & the Building of Romantic Britain* by Rosemary Hill.

Rosemary Hill

God's Architect: Pugin & the Building of Romantic Britain.

Allen Lane, 624 pages, £30

Greek versus Gothic—porticoes and columns versus pinnacles and spires—it was a struggle that could have gone either way, with the new British Houses of Parliament (1835–1847) built to resemble the Parthenon. But after Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin entered the lists the issue was never in doubt. He had matchless energy; he turned an idle taste for medieval decor into an architecture of serious religious conviction; and between about 1830 until the 1880s the advocates of “pointed” architecture increasingly had their way. As Rosemary Hill says in her superb biography of Pugin, *God's Architect*, the growing influence he exercised in these years substantially changed the face of Britain.

It needed changing—politically as well as architecturally. On the one hand was the tide of social discontent leading to the Reform Bill of 1832. On the other was the steady disfigurement of town and landscape produced by a headstrong and heedless industrialism. Of the two, Pugin was always more sensitive to the second. This was because he was the son of a French émigré who published *Examples of Gothic Architecture*, an illustrated series for which the young Pugin regularly accompanied his parents, visiting, studying, and drawing English cathedrals from the age of six.

Sir Kenneth Clark in *The Gothic Revival* felt disinclined to dwell on Pugin's childhood: “At this period of their lives, it seems, men of talent are all much alike—the same solitary school-time, the same violence of temper, the same omens of a brilliant future.” We know what he means. But Rosemary Hill properly gives Pugin's childhood more space. Only by understanding the profound impression left on him during his early visits to Lincoln Cathedral and York Minster, which planted “ideas and impressions that would last all his life,” can we understand both the passion of his vocation and its limitations. His enthusiasm for medieval buildings was combined with a hearty contempt for neoclassical Renaissance styles—including the architecture of St. Peter's itself. Largely self-educated, he was never apprenticed to an architect, never studied architecture formally, and when in his teens he quit working for his father, he enthusiastically joined the theater at Covent Garden.

Stage-struck between the ages of sixteen and twenty, Pugin became a valued scene-painter and designer, his greatest triumph coming (in Clark's words) when “his correct and gorgeous scenery made a success of the opera *Kenilworth*”—an adaptation that made much of Kenilworth Castle. Rosemary Hill tells us that this was a time when “spectacle was taking over from acting.” At Covent

Garden, Pugin befriended the workmen at the theater, many of them sailors who “knew the ropes” both on deck and in the flies, bought himself a boat, and began the lifelong habit of wearing self-designed clothing on the lines of a seaman’s rig. “God bless my soul,” said his father to a friend one day, “this morning I met my boy Auguste in the disguise of a common sailor, carrying on his shoulder a tub of water which he had took from the pompe of St. Dunstan.” He had little money; at Covent Garden he sometimes slept in the boxes, and not always alone.

One might emphasize the connection between the theatrical and aesthetic ideals of the Gothic Revival, as the author of *God’s Architect* does, writing that “the art of illusion” was common to both. (She at one point describes Pugin at the age of twenty-one as “a stage designer and draughtsman with ambitions to be an architect.”) Or one might contrastingly emphasize an important difference—namely, that when Pugin turned from the theater to serious religious building, it was in moral revulsion against the “lies” and “shams” of that same art of illusion. The second is more important. Sham ruins serving much the same function as stage décor had been built in the English countryside since 1746. Nature was required to be picturesque, and there was nothing more picturesque than ruins. Sham ruins were known as “follies,” and they were combined with slightly more serious medieval pastiches such as modern castles well into the nineteenth century. From all of this Pugin turned contemptuously away, resolved, as he wrote in various places, to restore true Christian architecture as it once had been.

That would be difficult. What Pugin himself had in mind, and what his aristocratic patrons expected (some of whom had castles they wanted rebuilt), were often very different things. As much a work of history as of biography, *God’s Architect* takes us through the Tractarians and the Oxford Movement, the Camden Society and Young England, the group Hill calls the Romantic Catholics represented by Kenelm Digby, the growing dissatisfaction within the Church of England, and the growing number of those who would recant and join the Catholic Church—John Henry Newman among them. According to Hill, when Pugin at the age of twenty-one launched his architectural crusade his sole idea of Catholicism was “the faith of England in the Middle Ages.” He knew nothing about the modern Catholic Church: “The only Catholic he knew personally was Edward Willson, who was steeped in the same English antiquarian tradition and who had taught him to call the architecture of the Middle Ages ‘Catholic.’”

Willson led him to Henry Spelman and William Dugdale, and convinced him that the Reformation was a defining disaster in English history that wrecked the social and physical fabric of the Church and had been a “terrible blow” to the arts that “adorn and soften life.” Having little formal education, little sense of chronology, and not realizing that the Renaissance and “pagan” neoclassicism came first, the English Reformation assumed in Pugin’s mind a false importance in the history of architecture overall. In Hill’s words, he believed that “everything had gone wrong at the Reformation and had been getting worse ever since.” One had to go back there and start again. In a letter to a friend in 1834, as he moved toward embracing Catholicism, Pugin wrote (the style and spelling are his own):

I can assure you after a most close & impartial investigation I feel perfectly convinced the roman Catholic church is the only true one—and the only one in which the grand & sublime style of church architecture can ever be restored—A very good chapel is now building in the north & when compleat I certainly think I shall recant.

In 1835 he did so, laconically remarking in his diary, “Finished alterations at Chapel received into Holy Catholic Church.”

Architects are always at the mercy of patrons. A man might aspire to build cathedrals (and with St. Chad’s, Birmingham, 1838–1841, Pugin created the first cathedral in England since Christopher Wren’s St. Paul’s), but will the patron agree? Pugin was lucky to have the sixteenth earl of

Shrewsbury in his corner, a wealthy Catholic and a loyal supporter through the thick and thin of the architect's declining health. The earl had inherited property valued at £347,511, and his initial requirement was that the Shrewsbury country seat of Alton Towers in Staffordshire be improved. His predecessor, the fifteenth earl, had filled the gardens with Indian temples, Chinese pagodas, and a model of Stonehenge. The sixteenth earl wanted none of that. Instead what he wanted were scenes from *Ivanhoe*, and Pugin worked at transforming Alton Towers for many years. More significantly, Shrewsbury funded what Hill describes as "one of the most admired and visited of all Victorian buildings."

This was the church of St. Giles in the little Staffordshire town of Cheadle. *God's Architect* has some fine illustrations, and these show why the church aroused such admiration. No detail of ornament or fixture had been overlooked. Cardinal Newman described St. Giles as "the most splendid building I ever saw ... enough to convert a person. The chapel is on entering a blaze of light. I could not help saying to myself 'Porta Coeli.'" That is exactly how Pugin intended it to be seen and experienced. A full-blown work of high Romantic art, "for Pugin it marked the point, perhaps the first, certainly the last, where his religious and aesthetic ideals were seen to be equally fulfilled," Rosemary Hill writes. "It convinced architects and Catholics alike and it remains his best known and most loved building." From the stunning image of the interior reproduced as color plate 14, one can see what she means, and also why Newman was so impressed.

Among the visitors who came for the church's consecration in 1846 was Charles Barry, the architect appointed to design the new Houses of Parliament. Pugin's second most celebrated patron (if also his least remunerative), Barry was finishing his great work beside the Thames; it was only much later that the extent of Pugin's contribution was known. This matter was muddied by a bitter dispute that broke out between the two families, but the truth is roughly as follows: Without Pugin's mastery of medieval detail the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben itself would not look the way they do; without Barry's overall direction and control they would not exist at all. Clark writes:

The silly question, "Who was the architect of the Houses of Parliament?" is well forgotten; but it is worth remembering that every inch of the great building's surface, inside and out, was designed by one man: every panel, every wall-paper, every chair sprang from Pugin's brain, and his last days were spent in designing ink-pots and umbrella-stands.

What about the man himself? What was he like? Neither smooth nor discreet, dressed eccentrically, sometimes dishevelled and dirty, he was voluble and loud and when frustrated swore like a seaman. All this was combined with immense good humor. We're told that in the room where he worked—with nothing more than a rule and a rough pencil—there was "a continual rattle of marvellous stories and shouts of laughter." He had tales to tell of the sea, of trips to Flanders to buy religious antiquities, and of being wrecked on the Scottish coast ("there is nothing worth living for but Christian architecture and a boat," he once said). No one, writes Clark, could escape "his medieval vehemence and whole-heartedness." The ecclesiastical world fired his imagination, and he loved its language:

The stoups are filled to the brim; the rood is raised on high; the lamps of the sanctuary burn bright; the albs hang in the oaken ambries and the cope chests are filled with orphreyed baudekins; and pix, and pax, and chrismatory are there, and thurible and cross.

In Salisbury, where early in his professional life he built himself a house, a solicitor and authority on church music named John Lambert found Pugin's enthusiasm and warmth irresistible, and welcomed him into his Catholic circle. Cardinal Newman, however, though at first an admirer of Pugin and his work on St. Giles, was finally unable to bear the man himself. He described Pugin as

an “immense talker” who was “rough tongue-free unselfgoverned.” This reaction was perhaps natural in a man of exceeding refinement who once laid it down that “a gentleman is seldom prominent in conversation.”

Though more than rough and unstoppable vehemence was involved. Newman finally decided he was dealing with a “bigot,” a harsh opinion his encounter with Pugin in Rome did nothing to soften. In 1847, recovering slowly from a serious bout of insanity (he would die within five years of the terminal consequences of a disorder contracted in his rackets days in the theater), Pugin had taken himself off to Europe with almost no luggage, one shirt, his sailing clothes, and looking both unclean and eccentric. His faith in Gothic was unshaken: he was now determined to confront the Renaissance and speak his mind. Rome he found “disgusting and depressing,” he loathed the “paganism” of both the Renaissance and the Baroque, and he told two prelates “in immediate attendance on the Pope” that he “expected St. Peter’s to be rebuilt in the Gothic style.” What he may have told the Pope himself Hill does not say.

Should we be much worried about all this? I don’t think so. Pugin was a great religious artist; his rough ill-educated prejudices were inseparable from his gifts; and Rosemary Hill makes all of this reasonably clear. Of her book it is difficult to speak too highly. It should be on every serious reader’s list.

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 27 November 2008, on page 65

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