

National Style in the Architecture of Parliament: Whose Nation, Whose Style?

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Abstract

In this article, I address the notion of “National Style” in the architecture of Canada’s Parliament buildings in Ottawa. Writing in 1968, Alan Gowans named High Victorian Gothic as the national architectural style of Canada, citing Parliament among his prime examples. His work appeared in a volume titled *The Shield of Achilles*, which considered the role that Victorian-era themes and values played in shaping Canada. The volume was published shortly after Canada’s Centennial celebrations and captured some of the nationalist sentiment that characterized mid-20th-century Canada. Architectural historians today have largely dismissed the idea that Victorian Gothic is Canada’s National Style in the way that Gowans suggested (see particularly Thomas 1997, 2004, and 2011). But the argument still carries weight in some circles; and as Canada approaches its Sesquicentennial, the issue warrants re-examination. Does this style speak to a particular identity, and if so, whose? How have these buildings been interpreted over the years? What messages do they encode? To what extent do these messages diverge from the urban setting in which the buildings are located? These questions tie in to discourses around what it means to be Canadian, highlighting the conflicts between an identity rooted in Northern European (generally British) ethnicity and numerous other identities that popular interpretations of the Gothic style have excluded.

Keywords: Parliament, Architecture, National Identity, Canada

Résumé

Cet article examine la notion architecturale de «Style National» des édifices du Parlement du Canada à Ottawa. Écrit en 1968, l’essai d’Alan Gowans qualifie le style architectural national du Canada comme étant «Gothique Victorien», citant le Parlement en tant qu’exemple principal. Parue dans un volume intitulé «The Shield of Achilles», cette étude examine le rôle qu’a joué les thèmes et les valeurs de l’époque victorienne dans l’histoire du Canada. Le volume a été publié peu après les célébrations du centenaire du Canada et reflète certains sentiments nationalistes qui caractérisent le milieu du 20^{ième} siècle au Canada. Aujourd’hui, les historiens de l’architecture ont en grande partie rejeté l’idée que le style Gothique Victorien est le style national du Canada selon la suggestion de Gowans (voir particulièrement Thomas, 1997, 2004 et 2011). Mais l’argument porte encore du poids dans certains milieux; et puisque le Canada s’approche de son 150^{ième} anniversaire, la question mérite un d’être réexaminée. Est-ce que ce style reflète une identité particulière, et dans l’affirmative, laquelle? Comment a-t-on interprété ces bâtiments au fil des ans? Quels en sont les messages (codes)? Dans quelle mesure ces messages diffèrent du milieu urbain dans lequel sont situés les bâtiments? Ces questions s’intègrent dans des discours sur le sens d’être Canadien, mettant en évidence les conflits entre une identité ancrée dans l’ethnicité Nord Européenne (généralement Anglaise) et les nombreuses autres identités que l’interprétation populaire du style gothique a exclu.

Mots-clés: le Parlement, architecture Victorienne et Gothique, identité nationale, Canada

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Introduction

A group of friends and I have just left a dollar store on Bank St. in downtown Ottawa where I've purchased a new pair of not-quite-designer shades. It is very bright in the hot sun and I need them. The sidewalks are crowded—tourists, office workers, canvassers with clipboards, homeless with outstretched coffee cups, and many people like us who have come downtown just because we live here and want to spend an afternoon walking in the city. Attire today, I note, varies from grey business suits to pink tank tops to niqabs. We walk slowly, our stomachs still full from the Vietnamese lunch earlier in the day. Pho is my Turkish friend's favourite dish when we eat out because it's inexpensive and filling. After a further half hour of walking in the heat, my friend from Chad suggests we get some cold drinks, pointing toward a chain café. I mention the café's Art Deco exterior as we enter; it's the old Ottawa Hydro Electric Company Building from the 1930s, at the corner of Bank and Albert. Another in our group comments on the glassy office blocks we've passed on our walk. The buildings should be taller, he says; Ottawa would look better with some super-tall skyscrapers. We order ice teas, chat inside awhile, cool off, continue on our way. We pass an older brick building that's boarded up, the boards scrawled with graffiti. We catch a strong whiff of fermenting garbage as we pass an alley between buildings, followed by the scent of doughnuts on the next block, of shawarma on the next, of cannabis on the next.

That the above paragraph has little to do with the content to follow is a central point of this article. The Ottawa of discount stores, modern office blocks, gritty downtown streets, global identities, and socio-cultural challenges is at odds with the particularist images of nation and government that Canada's Parliament buildings present to the world. Ottawa's realities continually contest and subvert nationalist rhetoric and hegemony—and they always have, even though the dichotomies are more pronounced today than 150 years ago. But in a different way, the national capital, too, attempts to destabilize the effects of what Anthony D. King describes as hegemonic globalization; King suggests that “modern urbanism represents a distinctive form of cultural hegemony and that the particular task of the national capital is somehow to subvert this, to keep hold of the idea of ‘national identity’ and to ‘knock the nation into shape’” (King 1993: 253).¹ But what “identity” and what “shape” do the Parliament buildings suggest?

In this article, I will examine a specific imagining of Canadian national identity that is encoded in Parliament's architecture and demonstrate that sympathy for this imagining has endured from the days of the Loyalists through to the present. This imagining may not resonate with a great many Canadians, and perhaps never did; it certainly does not match the world described in my opening paragraph. Despite this, the messages and associations are there, and they continue to play a role in constructions of Canadianness. My analysis will begin with a discussion of “National Style” in Ottawa's (and Canada's) architecture, a problematic concept that has surfaced many times in the past century and was given notable support by architectural historian Alan Gowans (Gowans 1958, 1968, 1991) as well as notable refutation by architectural historian Christopher Thomas (Thomas 1997). Thomas's views on the topic changed over time (Thomas 2004, 2011), as I will show, and to a certain extent they may now even mesh with those of Gowans in unexpected ways. I will then expand on their ideas by considering general questions around National Style in the European and North American contexts—what does a National Style supposedly represent?—and address architectural associations that have, over many years, influenced not only interpretations of the Parliament buildings, but also identity construction in Canada. I will argue that the divergence between messages encoded in Parliament, on one hand, and in the world of everyday Ottawa, on the other, illustrates some of the major conflicts that arise in discussions of Canadian national identity: rural versus urban, “ancient” versus modern, civilized versus unruly or “barbaric”, monarchical versus revolutionary, particular versus universal, Christian versus secular (and non-Christian), Northern European versus cosmopolitan.

I stress that my focus is more on associations and less on the stylistic and typological nuances of the architecture. *Associationism* is the link between broad architectural styles and particular meanings and functions. “At the simplest level,” writes architectural historian James Kornwolf in reference to late-18th-century Romantic associationism, “this means that Egyptian pylons became associated with prisons and cemeteries; Greek or Roman temples or basilicas, with statehouses and banks; Gothic cathedrals, colleges, or castles, with churches, universities, and country houses” (Kornwolf 2002: 1246; see also Hersey 1972 for an in-depth discussion of associationism). Such associations may be more the stuff of mythology than of historical “facts”, since different individuals and groups may have quite different associations, and these in turn may be quite different from anything that the architects or their contemporaries had in mind. But associations and mythologies are what

one needs to consider in tackling the question, “How have people in various periods responded to this style?” A response to a building such as Parliament may tell us little about the actual history of the building, but it can tell us much about the person or people having the response.

Canadian National Style? A look back at Centennial discourses²

For a 1968 collection titled *The Shield of Achilles* (edited by W. L. Morton), Gowans contributed an essay arguing that Canada’s national architectural style is High Victorian Gothic (Gowans 1968), a revival style inspired by Mediaeval Gothic buildings but incorporating new and stylistically eclectic features. *The Shield of Achilles* appeared shortly after the Canadian Centennial in 1967; its purpose was to examine aspects of Canada in the Victorian Era and to demonstrate the lasting influences of that era on the country’s direction and identity.³ The structures that Gowans cites as prime examples of the “Canadian National Style” (as he titled his essay) are the Parliament complex in Ottawa (1866, Centre Block rebuilt after 1916 fire), and a building that he regards as a probable model for Parliament, University College in Toronto (1859, rebuilt after 1890 fire); but he maintains that the Gothic style distinguished many significant Canadian buildings in the 19th century (Gowans 1968: 209). Taking this one step further in his final paragraph, Gowans writes, “For recognized consciously or not, High Victorian was a truly National Style for Canada, and the feeling for it remains deep and instinctive, in the indefinable but very real way such feelings do” (Gowans 1968: 218).

Gowans’s 1968 essay was not his first expression of this point, nor would it be his last. He identified the style as particularly Canadian in his 1958 book on Canadian architecture (Gowans 1958: 145; Thomas 1997: 8). More than 30 years later, in his 1991 volume on North American architecture, Gowans presented a more subdued but important articulation of his argument, writing that Gothic Revival had become “the *de facto* official style of Canada into the 1870s, and as such it was the natural choice of style for government buildings” (Gowans 1991: 139). He contrasted its frequent, non-controversial use in Canada during those years with its more “subversive” and “anti-establishment” use in the United States, where Classical Revival designs—characterized by Greek- and Roman-inspired domes, colonnades, symmetry, and, often, white coloration—dominated governmental and other architecture (Gowans 1991: 139).

The Gothic Revival style emerged in the late 18th century⁴ and marked a return to design elements of Mediaeval Gothic buildings, particularly in ecclesiastical structures, exhibiting such features as verticality (in towers, turrets, and pinnacles), intricate ornamentation, arched windows, and asymmetry (Brooks 1999; Glancey 2006: 397-398; Gowans 1991: 136-138). The style was not a strict copy of the past; designers also wanted to inject new ideas, technologies and colour variations, and to incorporate elements of other architectural styles, as advocated by 19th-century British architect Augustus Pugin and by his contemporary, art critic John Ruskin (Pugin 1836, Ruskin 1849, each discussed in Young 1995). Pugin and Charles Barry collaborated on the design of Britain’s new Houses of Parliament—the Gothic Revival Palace of Westminster (completed 1852)—a building that Pugin himself described as having “Gothic details on a Classic body” (Glancey 2006: 400). It replaced the original Palace that had been destroyed by fire; Glancey notes that the question over whether the new Palace should be Gothic or Greek (he contends that it is both) “sparked the most furious architectural argument of the 19th century” (Glancey 2006: 400). The outcome would have relevance in Ottawa not long after.

Like the Palace of Westminster, the Canadian Parliament buildings are examples of the civil or secular Gothic Revival style. The original Centre Block was designed by Thomas Fuller and Chilion Jones, the East and West Blocks by Thomas Stent and Augustus Laver. Civil Gothic structures departed more freely than churches from Mediaeval models, and Ottawa’s legislative buildings depart even further than London’s in a number of ways; they were considered modern, progressive and innovative in their time (Young 1995, 3ff; Kalman 2000, 371-375).⁵ But Georg Germann maintains that even when applied to secular structures, Gothic Revival remained an *ecclesiastical* style (Germann 1972: 185), and this is one of the points that, according to Gowans, led to different interpretations of the style in the United States and Canada. He argues that Gothic Revival architecture was in Britain “an antirevolutionary metaphor of continuity and stability”; and the style created images “calling to mind what its proponents considered a more moral—usually meaning Christian—social order” (Gowans 1991: 139). This symbolism, Gowans suggests, is what made the style “anti-establishment” in the revolutionary, secular United States. Regarding the choice of style for the Parliament buildings, which set the tone for many others, Gowans wrote in 1968, “there was never any real argument—for all intents and purposes it was taken for granted that Gothic had become Britain’s National Style, [and] Gothic would be

Canada's also" (Gowans 1968: 214).

Gowans has not been the only scholar to link Canadian national identity with Gothic and other Mediaeval-inspired revival architecture. Architectural historian Harold Kalman, for example, has deemed Gowans's observation "valid", stating that "although other forms of expression for public buildings were used as well [...] Canadians have shown an inherent attraction to a historically elusive 'northern' architecture of steep roofs and vertical proportions" (Kalman 2000: 376). Further, Kalman, in 1968, and Abraham Rogatnick, in 1967, each wrote works on the French-influenced Scottish Baronial château style that is characteristic of Canada's numerous railway hotels, arguing that the château style captured something of Canadian national identity (Rogatnick 1967, Kalman 1968). Although not Gothic Revival, these hotels share picturesque aspects of High Victorian Gothic, such as the steep roofs, vertical proportions, ornamentation, and at least the suggestion of antiquity; and the style was chosen for the federal government's Confederation Building (1928-1931) just west of Parliament's West Block on Wellington Street (Thomas 1997: 12-13).

Canadian qualities presumably encoded in these Gothic Revival, Baronial, and other eclectic, Mediaeval-inspired buildings include the connection to a "time-honoured" cultural, legal and ecclesiastical tradition, a connection to Britain and the British government (particularly in distinction to the United States), a connection also to "ancient" French and Scottish identities, and a connection to the "north" (all of which I will address further).

The counterargument ... with caveats

In a 1997 article, Christopher Thomas challenges claims that either the High Victorian Gothic or château styles were representative of anything intrinsically Canadian. But he challenges some of his own arguments in two further articles appearing in 2004 and 2011, in light of increasingly detailed information relating to the buildings' history, changing approaches to architectural scholarship, and more nuanced critical analyses of national identity and hegemony—noting, importantly, the Anglo-Canadian nationalist positioning of most architectural historians writing on this issue (Thomas 2011: 177). I'll summarize his 1997 article first, and then consider where his more recent views depart.

One of Thomas's main objections to the linking of Gothic Revival with Canadian identity is that the nationalist interpretations came well after Parliament and other Gothic Revival buildings were constructed; they were most widely propagated, he maintains, in the years 1945 to 1980, a period of nationalist fervor (Thomas 1997: 6). The nationalist interpretations, he further argues, sidestep "inconvenient historical facts", do not consider other architectural movements, and ignore earlier periods (Thomas 1997: 13-14).

Numerous details support Thomas's assertions. He notes, for example, the architectural nationalists' disregard of the pre-Confederation "building-arts of Quebec and the Anglo-American Georgian of Ontario and the Maritime Provinces" (Thomas 1997: 13), as well as the fact that the Parliament buildings were designed more than eight years before Confederation for the British Province of Canada, the 1841-1867 union of Upper and Lower Canada (Thomas 1997: 6, 14-15). Moreover, a number of government buildings around Parliament do not fit the "National Style" mould of Gothic Revival—for example, the neo-Romanesque Langevin Block, 1883-89, also designed by Fuller (Thomas 1997: 15).⁶ Regarding the railway hotels, Thomas offers ample evidence (citing also Rhodri Windsor Liscombe's 1993 article on the topic)⁷, demonstrating that the château style, more or less evocative of France, was quite popular and generic outside Canada and was initially intended to attract wealthy tourists to Quebec, appealing to Anglo-American tastes (Thomas 1997: 16-17). While conceding that the High Victorian Gothic and château styles do have a place in Canada and have been received as Canadian, Thomas concludes thus: "It seems, then, that, in architecture at least, a Canadian national identity was initially constructed not from domestic impulse, but to fulfill British and American politico-economic desire, and that Canadians, formed as a nation in that imperialist matrix, went on to wear the garments assigned us by others to represent ourselves to ourselves" (Thomas 1997: 22).

And so it would seem that in 1997, Thomas set to rest any notion that High Victorian Gothic is "truly a National Style for Canada". But his article leaves one asking, was it really *all* external? Was there no population base *within* Canada that might have had a hand in "assigning" the "garment" of Gothic Revival? Thomas addresses these and other issues in his 2004 and 2011 articles. While maintaining that the Parliament buildings were designed in pre-Confederation Canada, he demonstrates that they were intended for a United Province that many, particularly in what was to become Ontario (and most particularly in Toronto), saw as a growing,

modern nation state, with a transcontinental “Manifest Destiny” comparable to that already underway in the United States—only with a British, Imperial, and better-mannered orientation (Thomas 2004: 20; Thomas 2011: 185). He argues that the architects Fuller and Jones played a formative role in the choices made with respect to Parliament (Thomas 2011: 178), and that they understood what would appeal to those who wanted a coast-to-coast *British* nation in North America:

“In short, to design a building in the revived Gothic in Canada in the late 1850s connoted Britishness in general; and few were more aware than Thomas Fuller of Gothic’s ability to signal relations of class, ethnicity, and nationality and to exploit that ability at a historical moment charged with tension for Canada’s future” (Thomas 2004: 22).

The Parliament buildings, then, may well have suggested Britishness, Thomas concludes: not “Canadianness” in the modern sense of this term, perhaps, but at that point, Canadianness in much of Anglo Canada *was* Britishness. This is not really so different from Gowans’s stance; it is mostly the tone that diverges. Where Gowans, in 1968, proclaims the High Victorian Gothic style as “truly Canadian” in a triumphant voice (muted in later works)⁸ Thomas acknowledges that it may in fact have been so for the Anglo-Canadian (especially Toronto) elite in the 19th century who were instrumental in Confederation, even if such a Britanno-centric vision of Canada seems out of step today (a point to which I will return).

Architectural history is a product of its era no less than other disciplines. We see in these interpretive shifts the change in discourse from Canada as a proudly Victorian and British nation, to Canada as a pawn of empires (British and American), to Canada as a postmodern and introspective nation of the 21st century that acknowledges its exclusionary past—but where the old associations, I argue, persist even so, in such enduring symbols as Parliament. The following sections will consider in more detail just what those associations are and trace their sources.

Origins of “National Style”

That a nation might have a particular stylistic stamp associated with its particular culture—a style exemplified in the nation’s “authentic” art, music, literature, or whatever medium—is a notion linked to the rise of the nation state in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Writing in the 1780s, German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder argued that the common people of a nation (in German, the *Volk*) are the fundamental source of that nation; they are deeply rooted in its particular geographic setting, speak a particular language, and produce particular forms of creative expression (Kramer 2011: 52, 58; Herder 1803 [1784]: 298). Herder maintained that “a poet is the creator of the nation around him” (quoted in Wilson 2013: 113), and urged poets to look to the songs and tales of the common people for inspiration (Koepke 2009: 222). He further argued that the poetry of the ancients, like other art forms and even science, sprang from the people’s *religion*, which he saw as the wellspring of civilization (Herder 1803 [1784]: 455-456). Regarding architecture, Herder equated “Gothic” with the abstraction of a united German state (Wilson 2013: 113), a historically erroneous equation that became prevalent in the 19th century (Koepke 2009: 222).

Uniting disparate but related principalities into larger entities such as one Germany or one Italy lay behind much of the nationalist thinking that followed from Herder. Rhetoric appealing to *Volk* and Nation escalated after the French Revolution, most markedly when Napoleon began expanding the French Empire into other parts of Europe (Schulze: 49-50). Today’s Germany was, at that point, a patchwork of dozens of more or less independent states; nationalists viewed this political disunity as a threat to the future of the German people, who collectively faced the imposition of French imperialism and, many feared, of cultural dilution or even annihilation. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, following from Herder’s arguments, urged Germans to unite and embrace their shared language and tradition; he championed the view that ethnic identity is the real source of nationhood, not a faceless state (see Fichte’s 1807-1808 *Lectures to the German Nation*, an excerpt from which appears in Schulze 1991: 111ff). Fichte considered the Germans to be “uncorrupted by Roman and Latin influences”; an ethnic German nation, furthermore, would provide an example of what humanity could achieve (Nipperdey 2014: 265-266).

Following 1815 (and the Battle of Waterloo), animosity toward the French began to ebb somewhat, but the dream of a united Germany did not. Cultural attributes that went hand in hand with this imagined state

included the very things that Herder had identified earlier, e.g. language, stories and legends, and a looking back toward the Mediaeval period as a way of looking forward. Nipperdey describes two types of states emerging in the climate of the early nineteenth century:

“Firstly, there was the nation-state, the product of subject and common will, of a contract, and consequently firmly rooted in law (nationality is synonymous with citizenship) [...] On the other hand, the cultural nation (*Kulturnation*) and *Volksnation*, objectively present through language and a shared heritage, and thus taking precedence over the individual, had fluid, open frontiers, *Volk* being a more open concept than state [...] [P]eoples who have no state or who are divided between states are those who seek to define themselves, first and foremost, according to language, culture, and history, according to the *Volksnation*. This was the case with the Germans” (Nipperdey 2014: 265).

Nipperdey goes on to say that German nationalists considered religion, the church, and piety as “the specifically German expression of the true universal power of Europe” (Nipperdey 267), and they embraced the concept of a German artistic style which many felt was best expressed in the Gothic style (Nipperdey 267, also 484).⁹

One may argue that for much of Canada’s anglophone population at the time, both the 1841 Province of Canada and the Canada of Confederation in 1867 were more like the *Volksnation* model that Nipperdey describes than like the model exemplified by France. Raymond Breton writes, “In its early phase, and to a certain extent still today [1988], the nationalism of English-speaking Canadians was ethnic” (Breton 2007: 107). Breton cites also Douglas Cole, who compares anglophone nationalism in Canada to German, pan-Slav, and Italian nationalism (Cole 1980: 1-2, Breton 2007: 107)—even though this anglophone population did not actually have a long connection to the land. Loyalty to Britain was key among Canada’s earliest anglophone migrants from the United States (Jasanoff 2012: 362)—that was their main point, after all—and British immigration to Canada reinforced this. The creation of the Province of Canada, which eliminated Lower Canada (today’s Quebec) as a separate political entity, made francophones a minority in the larger united province; the French language was discouraged and even for a time forbidden, the intent being to create one anglophone nation that would partake in the superior culture of Britain (Breton 2007: 107-108; see also Durham 1839 for a primary source, particularly Parts 4 and 5). Anglo-Canadians typically identified with the very cultural attributes that would characterize the mid-20th-century nationalism that Thomas (1997) describes. And these cultural attributes, again, bear similarities to those of the German model: tradition, shared language, shared heritage, and moral (versus “unruly” and “revolutionary”) behaviour. The United States was the expansionist other, like Napoleon’s France, against which one must be on guard for the sake of preserving cultural and political integrity; and the push for Canadian Confederation was in some ways like the push for German unification. By combining forces, disparate political entities with shared interests (or at least the shared interests of their dominant elite) could hold together and keep the expansionist neighbour at bay and create another expansionist, hegemonic entity.

In the 19th century, among the symbols that represented Britain, particularly in its colonies, was High Victorian Gothic architecture (Porter 2011: 72-73); Thomas refers to Gothic in Victorian Canada as “Tory symbolic ground” (Thomas 2004: 21). But the Progressive Eclectic Gothic style of Parliament also reconciled two quite different Victorian values, historicism and progress (Young 1995: 7). The style represented a traditionalist approach to progress rooted in history and linked with British ethnic nationalism—looking backward to look forward. In Canada, this duality had added significance. Thomas argues that Parliament features a distinctive fusional typology. Its architecture has a bicameral symmetry like the United States Capitol with equal space allotted to the elected and appointed chambers, decidedly not British yet Parliament is “Britannic, neo-Mediaeval, and Ruskinian in detail” (Thomas 2011: 187). The components of a modern North American responsible government are there, but the Gothic Revival trappings, in this context, suggest “Britain in North America.”

Gothic Architecture and Nordicity

The Gothic style has also conjured associations with the north, northern nations, and such landscapes as “dark forests.” Thomas is rightly critical of mid-20th-century expressions of this northern association, stating that it has a “sinister” pedigree: the link has often been extended to northern “races”, while classicism has been associated with Mediterranean peoples (Thomas 1997: 8). Here he cites former Governor General Vincent Massey, who identified Parliament’s architecture as “essentially Canadian, not only because it is different from the legislative

buildings in the United States ... but because it fits perfectly into its northern setting” (Massey 1967: 8; Thomas 1997: 8). Thomas quotes, as well, poet Wilfred Campbell, who saw “our Celtic, Saxon and Norman forefathers” in the Parliament buildings, “our common ancestry, and our common Christianity” (Campbell 1907, quoted in Thomas 1997: 9; Thomas further credits Villiers-Westfall 1975: 55)—once again invoking ethnicity, tradition, and religion. Campbell brings francophones into the northern fold by framing them as “Normans”, precisely what members of the Canada First Movement had done following Confederation in the late 1860s and 1870s. Canada First, whose members included Robert Grant Haliburton and William Foster, saw Canada as a nation of strong, northern European races whose survival in harsh climates made them superior to the weaker races of southern regions—including the United States, which, they claimed, had been watered down by non-Northern immigrants and by a warm climate (Berger 1966: 4-8).¹⁰

When conflated with this sort of nationalism, burdened with ethnocentric and potentially racist associations, Victorian Gothic is indeed a deeply problematic marker of “Canadian” identity. The extent to which Parliament’s design was intended to inspire specifically northern (or racist) associations is difficult to determine; although associative feelings are real enough, they often are, as Gowans said (in a different context), “deep and instinctive”, and therefore not easily proven. We can say, however, that there were people in Canada who espoused racist viewpoints, and any architecture representing a state apparatus that supported these views (not just Gothic) is at least implicated by association—if the “garment” fits, as it were, then so be it. Westfall maintains that imperialists of Canada First, who “drew heavily upon Gothic aesthetics,” viewed Canada as the “savage wilderness” that would shape British North America into a new, strong, heroic nation (Westfall 1989: 139).

Themes of nordicity, antiquity, woodlands, order, religion, and ethnic identity (often in distinction to a revolutionary, neoclassical “other”) accumulated over many decades in both Europe and beyond, and culminated in public architecture that could trigger any and all of these associations. In the case of Canada’s Parliament, monarchy, too, is encoded in the artwork and symbols, for example in the large statue of Queen Victoria in the Parliamentary Library which shows her holding a scepter with a cross.

Gothic Architecture and Gender

A last point I will consider is the association of Gothic Revival architecture with male gender. In her synopsis of Progressive Eclecticism, Young states that the style was “known for muscularity, masculinity, and even ugliness” (Young: 7). Vijay Mishra asserts that the category of [Gothic] Sublime “has always emphasized a male subject” (Mishra 1994: 9); and Dan Coleman writes of a related association emerging in Britain in the 19th century, that between Christianity and “manliness” (Coleman 2006: 134). Advocates of *muscular Christianity*—a derisive term coined by T. C. Sanders in 1857—saw Christ as a figure of manly strength, not of meek submission, and championed strong bodies and characters as necessary to the “fight for justice and social improvement” (Coleman 2006: 134). Coleman regards muscular Christianity as an important theme in Canadian discourse, arguing that it “enabled the Canadian imperialists to weave together the primal vigour and Christian activism of British manliness with a nationalist vision of Canada” (Coleman 2006: 138). The cover of Coleman’s 2006 book *White Civility* shows a poster by Francis Robert Halliday titled “National Progress,” created for the 1921 Canadian National Exhibition. The poster depicts a shirtless, muscular man (who looks somewhat like the Incredible Hulk) clasping a sledgehammer in his right hand and a bundle of golden wheat under his right arm, while holding high in his left hand a bough of red maple leaves.

These gendering threads merge with descriptions of Parliament in Bruce Hutchison’s 1942 work, *The Unknown Country: Canada and Her People*. Written during World War II, the book was intended to introduce Canada to Americans. Hutchison devotes each chapter to a different area of the country, like a loosely organized travel narrative; and each chapter is preceded by a rhapsodic musing.

Hutchison talks at some length about the Parliament buildings, and particularly the Peace Tower. In the following passage, we see the fusion of ethnic nationhood, a gendered northern landscape, and Gothic architecture:

“The height of our mountains is there and the hardness of our plains and, in many a fretted carving, the richness of our forest growth. More than that. The character of Canada is held in the Tower for all to see. Here is the solid sense of the English, the lean face of the Scotsman, the whimsy of the Irish in wild sculpture, the laughter of the French in the delicate tracery

of stone [...] He [the Canadian] comes closer and finds the Tower growing in size until, as he approaches, it leaves him on the ground, no larger than an ant [...] The Tower is firm and untroubled and secure, as all men would be. It is undefiled, as no man is, and beyond avarice and lust and self-seeking” (Hutchison 1942: 77-78).

In another passage, addressing landscape, Hutchison speaks of “the clean, manly smell of Canada, in pine forest and settlers’ clearing fires, and alkali lakes and autumn stubble and new sawdust and old stone” (Hutchison 1942: 5). Although the book’s title suggests a feminine identity for Canada, it is clear in these and other passages that the author sees Canada’s *landscape* as male.

In contrast to the masculinized natural setting—home of the “real” Canada—urban settings are almost un-Canadian for Hutchison, and he occasionally uses feminine imagery in his descriptions of them. Consider this passage from his chapter on Montreal:

The lady with the diamonds and poodle never strays far enough from the spacious sweep of Sherbrooke Street to see anything unpleasant, but be fair to her. She is a patron of the arts. She maintains great institutions of learning and a costly system of churches and charities. She possesses perhaps the only real manners, in the old-world sense, to be found in any sizable quantity in Canada. Beside her, Toronto or Vancouver, equally prosperous, look like the wives of men who have just made a fortune in oil (Hutchison 1942: 65).

He speaks of Montreal as a “grand dame ... losing her figure” and “far gone in the dropsical American disease of size ... its urgent skyscrapers, like weeds in a garden ... crushing out the last relics of a great and noble history” (Hutchison 1942: 64). For Hutchison, Montreal is the opulent and somewhat lazy beneficiary of the poor, hard-working (rural) Canadian’s labours.

William New sees in Hutchison’s Canada similarities with landscape writers such as Douglas LePan (1914-1998) and with the paintings of the Group of Seven; in each case, Canadian identity and power implicitly rest in central Canada on the edge of the Laurentian wilderness, which these artists depicted as the characteristic Canadian landscape (New 1997: 144). One can’t help taking this comparison further—the dark and rather phallic tree stump in A. Y. Jackson’s painting *North Shore, Lake Superior* (1926) shares something in spirit with Hutchison’s rapturous descriptions of the Peace Tower.

The Unknown Country was well regarded in its day and won the Governor General’s award for creative non-fiction in 1942 (just ten years before Vincent Massey would be appointed Governor General).¹¹ The gendering we see here—a hard, masculine landscape, embodied in the Gothic architecture of Parliament (notably the Peace Tower), juxtaposed with a feminine Americanized urban landscape—taps into a narrative that had been around for decades. Hutchison’s descriptions bring to mind Eva Mackey’s analysis of gendering in the Canada First Movement and the Group of Seven (citing Berger 1966)¹², as well as in the work of Northrop Frye (Mackey 2000). Canada First, Mackey writes, constructed the United States “as the degenerate, decaying, female south” (Mackey 2000: 126). Hutchison’s view of urban modernity relates to this discourse: the authentic Canada, in these passages, is rural, strong, and hard working; urban Canada, though prosperous, is matronly, diseased, and physically decrepit. But the gendered wilderness that Mackey examines—a feminized, threatening world of “unseizable virginity,” as characterized by Northrop Frye and Rupert Brooks (Frye 1971, Mackey 2000: 128)—is transformed in Hutchison to male. Instead of being impenetrable, the landscape is, in the embodiment of the Peace Tower, firm, secure, undefiled (rather different from unseizable), beyond avarice or lust. This was a book to introduce Canada to Americans, and on the international stage, a nation does not want to appear as weak and victimized. Mackey writes, “a nation, in order to be a proper nation, must have the male-gendered characteristic of virility, and not the stereotypical female characteristics of dependency and subservience” (Mackey 2000: 126-127).¹³

Hutchison’s portrayals of francophone Montrealers and Indigenous peoples, by contrast, are decidedly unflattering. Indigenous place names may be “hard” and “manly,” or “noble” (Hutchison 1942: 209)—e.g., Shickshocks, Rimouski, Okanagan—but not the people who bestowed these names. In the last two paragraphs of the book, Hutchison writes of an Indigenous man in British Columbia who performed a ritual release of feathers; following the release, “We were welcome now to fish and hunt all over the lands of his tribe [...] We

left him there, standing among his fallen totem poles, a tired old man in gold-rimmed spectacles” (Hutchison 1942: 373). Fallen totem poles, like the loss of virility, present a stark contrast to the firm and secure Peace Tower. Something in this reminds the reader of a line in Lucien Brault’s book on Parliament Hill: “When the Indians wandered over this cliff, it was covered with wretched cedars hardly growing for want of soil” (Brault 1972: 3).

Back to the Beginning

What has all this to do with the 21st-century Ottawa that my friends and I (all of us immigrants, as it happens) experienced on a summer afternoon? Not a whole lot, it may seem. But as stated at the outset, that’s the point. The government buildings that are the centerpiece of this city come with centuries of associative baggage, and in some ways the messages they have embodied, either in their original context or in later interpretations, are the antithesis of those embodied in today’s diverse city. Ottawa is urban, it is busy, it is complex, it has abundant modernist architecture, it has many hot summer days just as it has cold winter ones, and it has residents for whom most of the old messages and associations do not resonate. What is more, there has always been some tension between the federal government and the city. If we do indeed think of anglophone Canada, originally, as an ethnic *Volksnation*, it is ironic that the actual *Volk* of the nation’s capital were not held in high esteem—neither the Indigenous Algonquin Anishinaabeg of the Ottawa Valley nor the lumberjacks who were among the first European settlers. Governor General Edmund Head, in an 1857 memorandum, said that “the present population may be called 8,000-10,000 not of the best description” (quoted in McCreery 2014: 1); and mid-19th-century Ottawa (or Bytown, as it was known until 1855) has been portrayed as a “brawling lumber town” (McCreery 2014: 1). Further to this point, Thomas references Edmund Meredith (John A. Macdonald’s Under Secretary of State), who deemed the city “rough, wild, and unfinished” but who greatly admired the East Block of Parliament where he worked (Thomas 2011: 180; citing Gwyn 1984: 35-36 and 90). Though the specifics have changed dramatically over time, the dichotomy between Ottawa the “glorious capital” and Ottawa the living, breathing community has persisted, with much of the former encoded in Parliament.

One might also ask why we should even care about associative meanings in Parliament’s architecture. To answer this, we need only consider the omnipresence of these buildings in Canadian life, and the role that the themes detailed in this article continue to play in subtle ways. The buildings have frequently, for example, appeared on currency; at present, a different tower or roof of Parliament is featured on every Canadian polymer banknote, in the holographic security foil. Travel books about Ottawa discuss the buildings in detail (often ignoring the modernist downtown altogether); photographers highlight them in their work; and millions of tourists come to Ottawa specifically to see them (perhaps partaking in such summer-night events as the suggestively named “Northern Lights at Parliament”).

The Parliament buildings also appear prominently on the cover and throughout the pages of the current Canadian citizenship guide, *Discover Canada* (Government of Canada 2012), intended for permanent residents who are preparing for the citizenship exam.¹⁴ Pictures on pages 1 and 5 of the guide highlight Canada’s nordicity as well: an inuksuk, a moose, a canoe, a kayaker in the sea beside an iceberg, and hikers crossing a suspension bridge over a shield-rock canyon. The guide’s geographic pictures depict many more rural scenes than urban ones; and people often are shown participating in physical activities in northern landscapes. The guide, further, invokes values reminiscent of earlier eras in Canadian history. Page 2 stresses the requirement of loyalty to the monarch in taking Canadian citizenship; page 8 (which has one of several pictures of Queen Elizabeth II) informs us that Canada’s rights, responsibilities, and laws “secure for Canadians an 800-year-old tradition of ordered liberty, which dates back to the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 in England”; page 9 refers to “barbaric cultural practices” not tolerated in Canada; page 10 speaks of “a prosperous society in a rugged environment”; and page 11, while acknowledging the importance of Aboriginal peoples in Canada, also tells us that “Canadian society today stems from the English-speaking and French-speaking *Christian* civilizations that were brought here from Europe by settlers” (Government of Canada 2012, emphasis added). We note in these images and texts the familiar themes of monarchic tradition, “ordered” (as opposed to unruly) liberty, antiquity (the Magna Carta reference implying “Britain in North America”), the “barbarous” other, the rugged, northern terrain, a physically fit populace, and the central position of particular ethnicities and of religion (specifically Christianity) in shaping the country’s society *today* (not just in the past). The guide also contains much historical information as well as discussions of ethnic diversity, and it does relate some of the more problematic moments in the country’s history. Still, this document, read by almost all immigrants who hope to be citizens, sets a

particular nationalist tone and emphasizes certain points from its very first pages—points that many immigrants may find alienating. And the Parliament buildings loom in accompanying pictures as a symbolic backdrop.

Admittedly, this guide is the product of a particular administration; the previous citizenship guide (Government of Canada 2005) contained fewer of these references, and perhaps the next guide will stress other aspects of citizenship as well. But the old associations are always available to leaders who wish to draw on them. They will likely continue to resurface in Canadian discourse; and they are deeply connected to the long-enduring, “time-biased” medium (in Harold Innis’s terminology) that is the Parliament complex. Parliament, like Canada as a whole, has what one might call a default hegemonic setting, confirming in its walls Vijay Mishra’s critical assessment of multiculturalism:

“In spite of the multiplicity of claims that have been made on behalf of every ethnic community to declare itself part of a multicultural mosaic (because it is fashionable to do so) the multicultural agenda itself is not of the making of ethnic minorities but of the dominant (white) community for whom the management of what the Canadians have referred to as ‘visible minorities’ is the principal issue [...] A nation’s dominant community [...] is never part of the multicultural mosaic; everyone else is” (Mishra 2005: 3).

The Canadian Parliament buildings are far from unique in having a complex and often problematic symbolic history. No seat of government is without this; certainly the neoclassical Capitol in Washington, D.C., often described as the symbol of an enlightened, republican, secular government, is in reality deeply burdened with troubling associations. But giving ample consideration to the subtexts of any capital city’s government buildings—questioning *whose* nation these buildings have stood for over the years, and recognizing equally whose stories have been left out—does not take away from their architectural beauty or significance, or from the positive principles they also embody (of which there are many, of course). Architecture, like all art, and like all productions generally, carries the baggage of its period, of previous periods, and of periods right up to the present. Embracing this brings depth and nuance to one’s understanding not only of the buildings and their associations, but also of cherished, unquestioned beliefs about identity and history that may not take into account the full scope of that identity and history. Whether or not High Victorian Gothic is “truly a National Style for Canada,” it has stood for many things over the years. Some of these associations seem discordant in 21st-century conceptions of Canada; we may even laugh at the more colourful interpretations that have gained currency in the past. Externalizing the problematic messages, however, or framing Canada as the pawn caught between empires—even in the world of architecture—may have the effect of externalizing responsibility that belongs right in Canada, as architectural historians have increasingly come to recognize.¹⁵ The problematic messages, too, have been part of Canadian history for over 200 years, and they have not disappeared.

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Notes

¹ This statement also suggests that “modern urbanism” is something imposed from the outside and not part of an “authentic” national identity, which one may question, particularly when applied to a modern Western nation state such as Canada.

² The notion that Parliament’s Gothic Revival design tapped into a nascent Canadian National Style is, as Thomas has written, “an *idée fixe* of Canadian architectural historiography to this day, repeated endlessly” (Thomas 2004: 14). I offer an overview here for readers unfamiliar with this discourse. Further details can be found in a number of Gowans’s works as well as in Thomas 1997, among other sources.

³ “Shield of Achilles” refers to an 1860 quote of Thomas D’Arcy McGee: “I see in the not remote distance, one great nationality bound like the shield of Achilles, by the blue rim of the ocean ...” (quoted in Morton 1968:

5). Interestingly, this same nation-building metaphor was used as the title of the 1988 report of the Canadian Polar Research Commission Study, co-authored by Study chairman Thomas H. B. Symons—who, like his colleague W. L. Morton, was a professor at Trent University specializing in the growing field of Canadian scholarship. Addressing in this report then Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs Bill McKnight, Symons wrote, “You will recall, Minister, that Thomas D’Arcy McGee, in his speeches advocating Confederation, dreamed out loud about the creation of a great new northern nation to be bounded by three oceans and so rimmed in blue like the shield of Achilles. It is the conclusion of this study that the creation of a Polar Research Commission to promote the development and dissemination of knowledge in and about the North will help to realize that northern vision” (Symons and Burnet 1988). In these various works and statements, we see a succession of links between the North, the Canadian State, British Victorian values, and High Victorian Gothic architecture.

⁴ Although Gothic Revival architecture flourished in the 1800s, theoretical discussion of Mediaeval Gothic styles began much earlier (see Germann 1972 for a thorough overview and analysis). The style we now call Gothic was prominent in the years c. 1150-1500 (Glancey 2006: 245).

⁵ Young tells the story of Parliament Hill’s design and construction in *The Glory of Ottawa: Canada’s First Parliament Buildings*. The design of Centre Block was awarded to the team of Thomas Fuller and Chilion Jones of Toronto (the former an English émigré), of the East and West Blocks to the team of Thomas Stent and Augustus Laver of Ottawa (both English émigrés) (Young: 28ff). The new Centre Block, built after the 1916 fire and designed by John Pearson, is rather different from the original; but since it maintained the Victorian Gothic style and I am focusing on general associationism, I am leaving this issue aside.

⁶ Further to this point, Bellamy 2001 offers a good overview of Ottawa’s government architecture, demonstrating just how varied it is.

⁷ Although I am not focusing on the château style in this article, I do want to acknowledge that Liscombe 1993 is among the first sources to take on the myth of Canadian National Style.

⁸ Gowans softened his argument regarding Canadian National Style, as noted above, and it may not do credit to his overall career that this issue has become so closely associated with him in particular, given that much of his work focused on very different things. In his 1991 overview of North American architecture, for example, Gowans champions the architectural merits of gas stations and trailers no less than those of monumental buildings, and he devotes ample space to many architectural styles in both the U.S. and Canada. One would not say of this volume that he was living in the “glory” of Victorian Gothic Canada, at least not at that period of his career.

⁹ Comparable examples equating an architectural style with a nation exist in other countries as well, from the United States to Russia to Mexico. An interesting example is the new building of the Grand Kremlin Palace, constructed between 1838 and 1849 (Markova 1990: 12). This structure incorporated “new concepts of beauty and comfort, as well as the ruling dynasty’s desire to stress the age-old continuity of their power” (Markova 1990: 9).

¹⁰ Robert Grant Haliburton’s father, noted Canadian author Thomas Haliburton, was a member of Nova Scotia’s elite who, although his family had migrated from New England (they were among the pre-Loyalists who moved to Nova Scotia following the Expulsion of the Acadians), stressed his Scottish ancestry, “with its possible links with the family of Sir Walter Scott” (McMullin 1985: 38). The senior Haliburton also advocated the establishment of a governing body in Nova Scotia that would be more or less like Britain’s House of Lords, drawn from the those who were of the highest property and had large landed estates (McMullin 1985: 40-41). He argued that “the only sure and solid basis on which it [a government] can ever be built is *religion*, which at once makes us good men and good subjects” (Haliburton 1851: 379, emphasis added).

¹¹ Hutchison was a respected journalist, and one who was not afraid to take on the government. The same year that *The Unknown Country* was published, Hutchison played a part in a controversial story that his paper, *The Vancouver Sun*, published, questioning defence readiness at Navy bases in British Columbia. This was at a time when the press generally did not challenge military and government business. And yet, Hutchison was so respected by William Lyon Mackenzie King that King asked him for an autographed copy of the book. Hutchison was not fringe, and his viewpoints would have carried weight. For full details on the defence story, see the in-depth *Vancouver Sun* article, “The Censor and the Journalist: The Complete Story”, which ran 25 March 2012.

¹² Berger’s 1966 chapter, written during the height of mid-20th century Canadian nationalist fervor, was unusual for its time and has been influential in many critical analyses since.

¹³ There is an interesting parallel between the framing of Canada as strong, male, and rooted in nature, and

discourses around Alaskan identity. Pursell and Hogan write of “an essentially rural Alaska [that] is juxtaposed to an essentially urban Lower 48” and “a rural, healthy Alaskan masculinity [that] is juxtaposed with a decadent, compromised Lower 48 masculinity which, even when rural, is seen as hopelessly tainted by connections to and domination by an urban (effete) hegemony” (Pursell and Hogan 2009: 192)—“even if his occupation and lifestyle tie him [the Alaskan male] firmly to urban Anchorage” (Pursell and Hogan 2009: 194).

¹⁴ I would like to acknowledge here the work of Mihaela Vieru, whose insightful analysis of the citizenship guide informs my own.

¹⁵ Rhodri Windsor Liscombe, in a discussion of the English and French versions of the Canadian national anthem, writes, “Yet the imaginary nation of each anthem was nonetheless founded on erasure, exclusion, and discrimination” (Liscombe 2011: 15).

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