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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The City Churches of Christopher Wren* by Paul Jeffery

Review by: John E. Moore

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present volume makes a significant contribution to this inquiry.

— Mark Schneider
*Virginia Polytechnic Institute
and State University*

Paul Jeffery

**THE CITY CHURCHES
OF CHRISTOPHER WREN**

London and Rio Grande, Ohio:

Hambledon Press, 1996, xx + 385 pp.,

187 illus. \$60.00 (cloth).

ISBN 1-85285-142-2.

Every generation needs its *vade mecum* to the churches built under the supervisory aegis—and, in some (if not all) cases, according to the designs—of Christopher Wren after the Great Fire in London of 1666, especially since nearly every generation since the late eighteenth century has witnessed the destruction of some of those churches. Of the fifty-one churches built in the city to replace the eighty-six that were burned, twenty-three are extant yet much remodeled, while the towers of six others remain standing. St. Mary Aldermanbury, victim along with some twenty other Wren churches of the apocalyptic German bombing raids of World War II, was rebuilt at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri. Before this century, the city's changing needs and an inexorably declining resident population had already brought about the loss of seventeen others.

Jeffery divides his study into two sections, the first entitled "Wren and the Churches" and comprising fourteen chapters, the second a gazetteer. Topics covered include Wren's career up to 1666, the history of Christianity in London, and building materials and functions of pre-fire churches. The author briefly considers city plans put forward by Wren, John Evelyn, and others for rebuilding London, but is reticent to link them unambiguously to continental precedents, even though both Wren and Evelyn had visited and admired the French capital, or as if men of such outstanding intelligence and insatiable curiosity would have been loath to learn from any available source. This conceptual limitation recurs elsewhere. Jeffery writes that a window at St. Dionis Backchurch "was somewhat similar to a Serlian or Venetian window" (89), whereas the illustration (Fig-

ure 17) raises little doubt that those Italianate terms are appropriate. Furthermore, when considering formal sources for architectural details in towers and steeples, the author states that "the borrowings from St. Charles Borromeo [in Antwerp] for the City Churches are too blatant to be ignored" (131). A grudging acknowledgment of obvious sources of inspiration, however, risks failing to identify and understand Wren's subtler citations.

I miss an engagement with the implications of Wren's own account of his process of learning about architecture. During his trip to Paris in 1665-1666, he carefully examined scores of buildings, characterizing all he saw as "a School of Architecture, the best probably at this day in Europe." He promised his unidentified correspondent "to bring . . . almost all France in Paper," and also "purchased a great deal of *Taille-douce*, that I might give our Countrymen Examples of Ornaments and Grottesks, in which the Italians themselves confess the French to excell." Thus his intense looking and painstaking collecting had not only a personal but a didactic and what one might also term a higher national purpose. Readers interested in this topic should turn to a study, the source of quotations in this paragraph, that does not appear in Jeffery's notes or bibliography: Margaret Whinney, "Sir Christopher Wren's Visit to Paris," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 51 (1958): 229-242.

Parliamentary Rebuilding Acts of 1667 and 1670 wrought dramatic changes in the post-fire city. Funds from a tax on coal entering the port of London were collected to finance church building, as were monies raised by parish vestries or through private benefaction, all of which Wren received and disbursed; he also kept the books. A special Fire Court adjudicated property-rights claims and indemnified individuals for land expropriated for urban renewal projects such as street widening. Predominantly flammable materials were replaced with brick and stone, both durable and ennobling. In material and visual terms, a city so reconstituted would have much resembled seventeenth-century Paris.

Overviews are provided of the various church plans adopted, all intended to provide parishioners with unobstructed views of the sanctuary and an enhanced ability

to hear sermons. Two extensions of the coal tax allowed for the completion (or first erection) of towers and steeples. Interior fittings—wainscoting, screens, box pews, baptismal fonts, pulpits, communion tables, altarpieces—were left to the taste, finances, and competitive spirit of individual parish committees. Chapter 13 details the vicissitudes of the destroyed churches, reminding one of the need for eternal vigilance in preserving those that remain.

Scholars of Wren's architecture know that the problem of who actually designed the churches is vexed. Noting a change in the discipline of architectural history, Jeffery states that questions such as "what was done?" and "who did it?" must be supplemented with "how and in what manner was it performed?" and "why in that particular way?" (xviii). By drawing a distinction between old and new practices, he implies that his book will provide a novel look at familiar material. It would have been an achievement to provide any means of differentiating Wren's projects from Robert Hooke's or anyone else's, but that goal remains elusive, as does the promise of a study informed by methodological or interpretive frameworks different from those already applied to the subject at hand.

In discussing drawings related to the churches, Jeffery remarks that "elsewhere considerable emphasis has been placed upon the problems of identifying the various hands" (74). If the author wants to assign specific designs to Wren, Hooke, or the mason Edward Woodroffe, some of that "emphasis" needs explicit recapitulation in his book, along with analyses of paper, watermarks, ink, methods of shading, hatching, applying wash, and the like. Writing of an elevation and plan for the tower and steeple of St. Mary-le-Bow, Jeffery claims that "[Woodroffe's] style makes his drawings easily identifiable," but "that only [this drawing] by him is known for any of the City Churches" (38). However, a comparison requires at least two objects of the same class and, in any case, Jeffery does not characterize Woodroffe's style. In another instance, where an extant site plan for St. Mary-le-Bow is identified as (allegedly) once "among Hooke's papers" (93), Jeffery provides his own neatly drawn plan instead of an illustration of the drawing. How, then, can readers understand

Hooke's drafting style? With Jeffery's plans, too, one does not usually learn what is the historical basis for scaling, especially when the buildings no longer exist. Reproductions of eighteenth-century maps made before any of the churches were destroyed are lacking, as is a modern map with both lost and extant churches clearly marked.

Jeffery assigns to Wren those churches with "regular plans," "well-balanced dimensions" (85), and rather plain exteriors (86), while Hooke gets stuck with plots of irregular outline (85). Jeffery thinks that realigning such plots would have been a simple affair but marshals no evidence to support that assumption. Indeed, the situation he describes in the gazetteer entry on St. Mary-le-Bow suggests that obtaining even small parcels of land was complicated (279–282). Moreover, "Hooke's task was not to produce masterpieces, but to get the churches up and running" (87), or to satisfy "parish vestries . . . content with a rather run-of-the-mill rebuilding" (96). Poor Woodroffe, "[d]espite his many virtues . . . was not a man of ideas" (37), so his purported role as designer can be conveniently dismissed outright. Several towers and steeples of the city churches have long been accepted as Nicholas Hawksmoor's works, and these are discussed in chapter 11, along with those of earlier date, which are largely given to Hooke. To support attributions to Hawksmoor, Jeffery speculates that Wren, "at the age of nearly seventy" (140), would likely have left a demanding design task to his younger clerk, just as Wren, in his "exceptionally busy" middle age (when was Wren *not* busy?), had delegated to Hooke (37). In the case of the towers and steeples, Jeffery would have us believe that admittedly "patchy" pieces of evidence, "taken together . . . provide sufficient support to remove most if not all . . . doubt concerning [Hawksmoor's] work" (147). One could just as easily draw other conclusions.

Jeffery cannot cut the Gordian knot with modes of thought doomed to produce contradictions and anachronisms, nor by putting forward tenuously supported conjectures that are then accepted as articles of faith. For example, Jeffery adduces Hooke's frequent visits to the site of St. Martin Ludgate as evidence of design responsibility, writing with a touch of impatience that "[i]n any other circumstances,

thirty-one site visits by an architect would be regarded as overwhelming evidence" (95). "Wren churches," furthermore, are supposed to have plain exteriors, so the elaborate east end of St. Lawrence Jewry—a church with an irregular plan, thus in Hooke's bailiwick—must be a collaborative work (107–108). On the other hand, Woodroffe, the experienced mason, could not hold a candle to Wren or Hooke. Jeffery takes pains to tell readers that the inexperienced Wren had little claim "to the post of Surveyor General of His Majesty's Works" (33). However, there was no particular training or career path that led one to architecture in seventeenth-century England; thus it is simply incorrect to assert that "Wren . . . had no training as an architect" (34). His education and travels afforded him access to information about architecture that constituted sufficient training. Experience in the building trades would not have served him poorly, but neither was it necessary. Even today, few architects have experience in laying bricks or setting stones. No one had a claim to the post, for the king could appoint whomever he pleased. As the duke of Wellington reportedly said, "No damned nonsense about merit." Jeffery cites Wren's first two commissions (the chapel at Pembroke College, Cambridge [1663–1665], and the Sheldonian Theater at Oxford [1664–1669]), but does not point out that the respective patrons—Matthew Wren (the architect's uncle, bishop of Ely, a Pembroke graduate, erstwhile chaplain to Charles, prince of Wales [later Charles I], a prominent divine ever loyal to the royalist cause who spent more than eighteen years in the Tower), and Gilbert Sheldon (archbishop of Canterbury and an Oxford graduate)—were powerful, respected figures in Charles II's court. To say they had much in common with Wren understates the case.

That Wren had high-placed supporters must not diminish one's appreciation of his considerable abilities and seriousness of purpose, both qualities made manifest by his French tour. While on the continent, he demonstrated an exceptional sophistication about architecture, which gives the lie to a pervasive theme in the first half of Jeffery's book (and in the Wren literature generally), namely, that fate (the Great Fire) catapulted a greenhorn (Wren) headlong into a new field of endeavor. On the

contrary, Wren already knew a great deal about architecture *before* he disembarked in France. Upon returning to England, he possessed an unusual firsthand experience with the latest Paris styles that Charles II rightly put to immediate use.

The Fire Court had to establish property boundaries, and Jeffery names the three surveyors charged with that task, one of whom was Hooke. Each oversaw a particular section of the city, Hooke's being in the east (36). From this, Jeffery "logically" posits a similar division for church design, giving Hooke the east, which he knew well from his surveying work (he also lived there, at Gresham College, where he taught geometry). Wren is assigned to the west, near St. Paul's and his residence at Whitehall, and Woodroffe gets what lies between. But is there not a difference between staking out plots, which does not require a designer's abilities, and planning churches, which does? There is, in any case, no evidence to support this division.

Time and again, Jeffery states that Wren and Hooke may have designed the churches together, and perhaps they did. Yet if the surviving evidence precludes resolving the question of design responsibility, why not frame questions that *can* be answered? A search for absolute authorship blots out acts of cooperation in a culture where collaboration was normal—whether in the government of London, where daily business was transacted in committee, seventeenth-century European science, or Ludovician architectural practice. Something important is at stake here: were Jeffery successful in distinguishing Hooke's churches from Wren's, a substantial corpus of buildings would be added to the former's oeuvre and simultaneously subtracted from the latter's—operations that would materially change our view of their careers and status as architects. However, when the author writes that "many of the post-Fire churches . . . are likely to have been designed by Hooke, although confirmatory evidence for this is thin" (109), and when, in the gazetteer, he fails to step forward with his various new attributions to Hooke (or, for that matter, the old attributions to Wren, so that one almost never learns *who* designed a given church), one can only conclude that the very task undertaken and the efforts expended were all for naught.

In his introduction, Jeffery proposes “to consider the extent and nature of the contributions of the commissioners, surveyors, rectors, churchwardens, and others” (xviii), and his attention to those figures is one of the book’s strengths. But quite apart from the author’s unsubstantiated and useless invention of a topographical division of design tasks, there is a documented distribution of labor among the named individuals who built the churches, brick by brick, stone by stone. Financial accounts and other related written and graphic materials have already been published in three volumes of the *Wren Society* (A. T. Bolton and H. D. Hendry, eds., vol. 9 [Oxford, 1932], vol. 10 [Oxford, 1933], vol. 19 [Oxford, 1942]). Jeffery provides a compendium of some of these historical sources in the gazetteer but would have done well to revisit them with an eye toward a synthetic reconstruction. From the study of overlapping dates of payment or descriptions of tasks performed, what might be inferred about the simultaneous construction of individual churches, or groups of churches, or seasonal rhythms (what happened in the cold winter months?), or family relationships (Jeffery does mention the brothers Christopher and William Kempster, the first a mason, the second a sculptor, both active at St. Mary Abchurch [270]), or the relative cost of goods and services over the course of several decades?

The story of a traveling équipe, two of whom had the remarkable names of Henry Doogood and Chrysostom Wilkins, still needs telling. And what about patterns of work? Edward Strong junior fashioned the steeple of St. Vedast Foster Lane (1709–1712) at Greenwich (146). (Jeffery does not repeat this information in the gazetteer [345–347]; thus a reader starting there might miss it.) Was off-site fabrication typical or unusual? The presence of women in the London building trades must be sorted out. I counted fourteen, three of whom are identified as widows; another five may have been, since men with the same surname appear in the accounts, although these may have been other male relatives. In two cases, a man and a woman (husband and wife?) are named together. Glaziers outnumber painters seven to three; why are there so many women glaziers, and what did women painters—such as Margaret Pearce, widow, active in five of fifty-one

churches—paint? Just the “chocolate brown” (152) east wall at St. Mary-at-Hill, or maybe a fictive curtain or two, or did Pearce simply run her late husband’s business? There were a plumber, a coppersmith, and two smiths, one aptly named Grace Smith. Architecture was one of London’s biggest industries after the Great Fire. How does that sphere of interrelated economic activity compare with conditions in pre-fire London, or with other trades in a city determined to rise from its ashes quickly?

The reader who wishes to undertake such analysis will encounter the inconvenience of a scanty index that omits nearly all the names of the artisans so patiently listed in the gazetteer and provides incomplete citations of other figures. The book under review does not meet the standard of Walter Buchowiecki’s *Handbuch der Kirchen Roms* (3 vols. [Vienna, 1967–1974]), which is an indispensable reference tool not least because of an exhaustive index that permits cross-referencing and potentially enables readers to see connections that did not occur to the author.

Jeffery’s study gathers information to be found in archives or in books long out of print and thus will find a welcome place in research libraries, in anglophone lending libraries whose readers London has captivated, and in the hands of those who wander the city’s streets in search of architectural surprises. For specialists, the book falls short of some of its stated goals. The Wren churches will continue to fascinate future generations, who will profitably turn to Jeffery’s work while they seek answers to new questions.

—John E. Moore
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Andrew Ballantyne

ARCHITECTURE, LANDSCAPE AND LIBERTY: RICHARD PAYNE KNIGHT AND THE PICTURESQUE

Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1997, xiv + 315 pp., 60 illus. \$95.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-521-46200-2.

The eighteenth-century critic, collector, and connoisseur Richard Payne Knight was not afraid of controversy. Although his intelligence and erudition won him many

admirers, his outspoken views and harsh tongue lost him as many friends. He denigrated England’s most famous garden designer, Capability Brown, and his public debate on the Picturesque with Uvedale Price led to the end of their long friendship. His dismissal of the British Museum’s treasured Elgin Marbles as Roman copies heaped scorn on his reputation as a connoisseur, and his publication of the graphically illustrated *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* in 1786 incited scandal because of its blasphemous thesis that Christianity was a developed form of phallic worship. Andrew Ballantyne’s new monograph seeks both to rehabilitate Payne Knight’s posthumous reputation and to explain the fundamental unity of his wide-ranging interests, for he had other, less controversial achievements. He amassed a significant collection of Greek antiquities, designed the house and landscape of Downton Castle, and published works on associationist aesthetics, the Greek alphabet, and the development of civil society. The variety of his activities, although in many respects that of a typical eighteenth-century English virtuoso, has, however, dissuaded any single modern scholar from attempting to analyze all of them. In *Architecture, Landscape and Liberty*, Andrew Ballantyne rises to this challenge.

Ballantyne’s stated aim is to locate Richard Payne Knight and his thought securely within the cultural context of late Georgian England. He combines a biographical study with an analysis of Payne Knight’s principal published texts and provides the intellectual setting of Downton Castle, where Payne Knight lived—a building that has been called everything from a gimcrack castle to a precursor of modernism. By interspersing his text with the published attacks of Payne Knight’s many critics, Ballantyne provides a rounded picture of the various controversies and arguments in which Payne Knight was embroiled. He thus conjures up a lively view of the intellectual world of late-eighteenth-century England, rife with “paper wars” attesting to a literary culture in which aesthetic issues were seen to be of great, and even moral, consequence.

Ballantyne’s consideration of Payne Knight’s morality constitutes his most original contribution to the existing literature, introducing an important but neglected theme in the history of eighteenth-century