

Richard G. Carrott, *The Egyptian Revival: Its Sources, Monuments, and Meaning, 1808-1858*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978. 221 pp., 136 illus., \$20.00

J. Douglas Stewart

Volume 7, numéro 1-2, 1980

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076899ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076899ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Stewart, J. D. (1980). Compte rendu de [Richard G. Carrott, *The Egyptian Revival: Its Sources, Monuments, and Meaning, 1808-1858*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978. 221 pp., 136 illus., \$20.00]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 7(1-2), 142-143.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1076899ar>

was magical, melancholic, and magnetic.

Fonthill Abbey was widely noted at the time. Turner painted it from various angles. Constable felt that 'the entrance and when within is truly beautiful. Imagine the inside of the Cathedral at Salisbury or indeed any beautiful Gothic building, magnificently fitted up with crimson and gold, antique pictures, in almost every niche statues, large massive gold boxes for relics etc., etc., beautiful and rich carpets, curtains and glasses ... all this makes it on the whole a strange, ideal, romantic place, quite fairy land.'

Beckford, facing prodigious debts, sold his transitory abbey in 1822 and moved to Bath where, by 1827, he had created a second, very different tower, with the help of a hitherto unknown architect, H.E. Goodridge. The building, with an asymmetrical jagged plan topped by a square Italianate tower, was furnished as richly as, although differently from, Fonthill. Beckford's collecting of books, pictures, and artifacts was a life-long passion.

Beckford set his two imaginative structures in 'natural' gardens, amongst the first of the English picturesque landscape estates. Following Uvedale Price and his uncle Charles Hamilton, Beckford chose common, native shrubs and trees, planted as a wilderness, in preference to the fashionably orderly, formal garden. He endorsed Price's romantic linking of the work of old masters with the proper disposition of water and trees and agreed with Price's emphasis on roughness to provide animation, spirit, and variety. Believed to be influenced by Claude's panoramic landscapes, Beckford produced at Lansdown Tower a park even more virginal in feeling although thoroughly controlled in fact than that he had created for his earlier folly at Fonthill.

Beckford's aesthetic interests were certainly not restricted to exterior matters. Not only were his dwellings appointed with luxurious furnishings of unfashionably 'exotic crimson, scarlet, purple and gold'; they were also embellished with a prodigious and catholic collection of miniatures, bronzes, jade, Venetian glass, porcelain, and pictures. At least twenty of his old masters are now owned by the

National Gallery in London, including Giovanni Bellini's *Doge Leonardo Loredan* and Raphael's *St. Catherine*. Yet the critic Hazlitt heaped venom on Beckford's collection, claiming that it contained 'not one great work by one great name.'

In Lees-Milne's biography the facts as well as some of the colour of William Beckford's life are detailed. With the help of numerous illustrations, we are led to Beckford's fantasies. But dynamism and excitement are sadly lacking, due undoubtedly to Lees-Milne's acknowledged 'copious' borrowings from secondary sources, especially Boyd Alexander's superior biography, *England's Wealthiest Son* (1962). *William Beckford* follows the other book in format and detail, yet omitting Alexander's penetrating psychological analysis.

There are at least two reasons for Lees-Milne's interest in Beckford. An extensively published diarist, Lees-Milne now lives at 19 Lansdown Crescent, Bath, a house once owned by Beckford. And the author has a fascination for historic architecture and, for a time, worked for the National Trust as, in his own words, its 'unqualified historic building secretary.' This explains Lees-Milne's focus on Beckford as a builder while virtually ignoring his writings. (In his book entitled *William Beckford*, Robert J. Gemmett redresses this balance by emphasizing the writings.) Lees-Milne's sections on Fonthill and Lansdown Tower are the strongest, while he gives only sketchy details of Beckford's collection and concentrates on its fiscal aspects. *William Beckford* is a general book intended for a general reader: it suffers from that consequence. In an attempt to 'point out briefly ... the significance of an extraordinary Englishman,' Lees-Milne has sacrificed excitement to brevity.

ANN DAVIS
Delaware, Ontario

RICHARD G. CARROTT *The Egyptian Revival: Its Sources, Monuments, and Meaning, 1808-1858*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978. 221 pp., 136 illus., \$20.00.

This book has two drawbacks. Although one will find in it illustra-

tions of Egyptian Revival monuments from Tasmania to the United States to Tasmania, the author claims that 'it is only in the United States that a significant number were constructed' (p. 3). In a footnote he adds 'roughly eighty monuments by thirty architects; not including European examples.' He further confines the scope of his study to the years 1800-58. 'That there were later ones both here [the United States] and abroad is not denied. But these are merely a few isolated instances of the picturesque, or, at least, of the attention-seeking. They cannot be considered as a serious part of the Revival' (p. 3).

Both of these faults stem from too narrow a focus on the subject. Is one to reject as merely 'picturesque' or 'attention-seeking' a building with battered piers such as H.B. Creswell's Queensferry Factory, Flintshire, of 1905? Pevsner has called this 'the most advanced British building of its date.' (See J. Physick and M. Darby, *Marble Halls*, London, 1973, no. 66.) Or what of Walter Allward's Canadian Great War Memorial at Vimy Ridge, France, with its splendid pylons, battered piers and walls, and monolithic masonry? It was designed in 1921 and unveiled in 1936, an eloquent testimony to the vitality of the Egyptian Revival style, at any rate in the funereal context, right down to the end of the Academic Tradition.

It is interesting to note that the author cites very few Canadian examples of the Egyptian Revival. Those omitted include Samuel Keefer's designs for the Union Suspension Bridge across the Ottawa River and his project for a suspension bridge at Bout de l'Île. Another omission is the very powerful Stuart Monument in St. Paul's Churchyard at Kingston, Ontario. There is no documentation on this monument (Fig. 6 reproduces a woodcut of 1894 by William James Thomson) but the stylistic evidence points very strongly to George Browne, the Belfast-born architect working in Kingston during its capital period, 1841-44.

One of the sources for the Stuart Monument was probably the great Trentham Park Mausoleum, Staffordshire, built in 1807-08 by C.H. Tatham. Its design was engraved. Pevsner, who called the Mausoleum

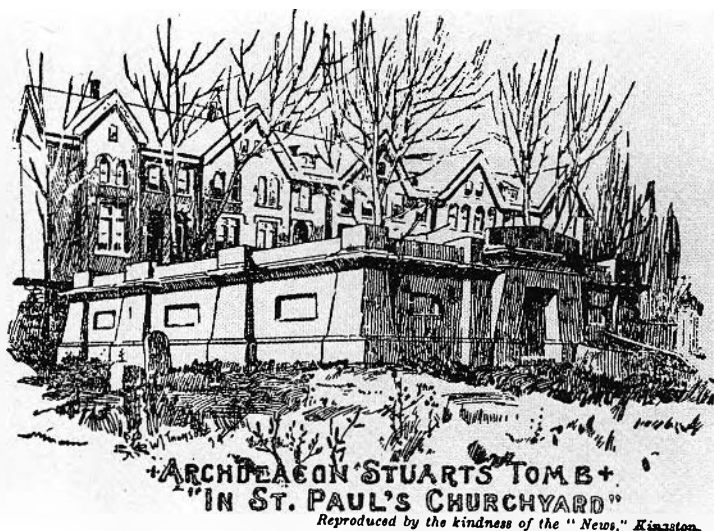


FIGURE 6. Monument to Archdeacon G.O. Stuart, Kingston, perhaps ca. 1841-44.

'magnificent but somewhat sinister,' used it as a cover illustration for his *Staffordshire*. Two years after the completion of the Trentham Park Mausoleum Thomas Harrison of Chester designed and built a large Egyptian Revival monument on the summit of Moel Famau, North Wales, to celebrate the Silver Jubilee of George III. This monument was badly damaged by a storm in 1862. Yet as late as 1887 plans were made to rebuild it in honour of Victoria's Golden Jubilee. (See *Country Life*, 16 June 1977, p. 1670.)

Neither the Trentham Park Mausoleum nor the Moel Famau Monument is noticed by Carrott. These and the other omissions suggest that he has not really cast his net quite widely enough, that a full account of Egyptian Revival monuments has yet to be made, and consequently that the statements quoted here in the first paragraph are questionable.

But the above reservations should not detract from the very real merits of this book. Carrott writes with enthusiasm and wit, and has a great love for his subject. He tells us, incidentally, that although his book began as a dissertation it 'did *not* grow out of a seminar' (italics mine).

What Carrott is really concerned about is the 'serious' Egyptian Revival monuments built in the United States in the pre-Civil War period. He rightly excludes as 'Commercial Picturesque' buildings

such as Mrs. Trollope's 1829 shop and tea room with its Egyptian columns which was erected across the river from Hygeia in Cincinnati: 'the purpose of the exotic style cannot have been for any more profound reason than to attract attention to Mrs. Trollope's Bazaar' (p. 56).

The meaningful Egyptian Revival in America is, to Carrott, that which called up funereal associations, because of the Renaissance tradition of obelisk memorials and pyramid tombs, or else the idea of Egypt as 'the Land of Wisdom and Mystery.' It was for this latter reason that the style could be, as he notes, 'applied to a wide range of structures such as those for a school, museum, or library; and even a medical college' (p. 133). But both notions evoked ideas of the Sublime and the Timeless, which were so much part of Romantic Classicism. Formally, the severe geometry of the Egyptian style also appealed to the period. All of this complex iconography is lucidly explained by Carrott.

The author sees the major Egyptian Revival buildings in America as courthouses and prisons, and indeed he devotes a long appendix to the greatest of these, New York City's Halls of Justice and House of Detention (better known as the 'Tombs') designed by John Haviland, 1835-38. 'Here,' as he says, 'the style became the symbol for humane rectification and human regeneration. If the mode was first

employed for practical reasons of economy (vis-à-vis Gothic), it soon became symbolic of the new enlightened prison discipline. To mark the new attitude it was necessary to use a style other than the old Gothic one reminiscent of dungeons and oppressive gaolers' (p. 134).

Carrott believes that the serious Egyptian Revival style ended in America towards the middle of the nineteenth century. There were various reasons:

... unfunctional aspects such as the problems of fenestration in a windowless architecture, flat roofs in a climate anything but torrid, and the weathering of battered walls. But most of all the propagandizing of Pugin, Ruskin, and the Camden Society, along with the general religious revival betokened by the rise of Methodism turned popular taste against the heathen associations of Greece, Rome, and Egypt. For the Egyptian style there were no deep cultural values germane to the American sociological psyche; vis-à-vis Gothic, which evoked an entire religious tradition, or Classical Antiquity, which called forth a vital political heritage. (p. 136)

One might add that the work of scientists in destroying the old Ussher chronology concerning the age of the world must also have had its effect. When one believes (as most people did until the middle of the nineteenth century) that the world was created in 4,004 B.C., then architecture like that of Egypt might literally seem 'eternal,' and evoke the requisite emotions. But it is difficult to sustain such feelings when you come to believe that the earth is millions of years old.

In conclusion, one should note that Carrott's book is handsomely produced, and lavishly illustrated. It is also very modestly priced.

J. DOUGLAS STEWART
Queen's University

ALLAN BRAHAM *The Architecture of the French Enlightenment*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1980. 288 pp., 424 illus., \$55.00.

Allan Braham, Keeper and Deputy Director of the National Gallery, London, who collaborated with Peter Smith on *François Mansart* (London, 1973) and with Helmut Hager on *Carlo Fontana: The Drawings at Windsor Castle* (London,