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Gothic Visionary

ALEXANDER NORTH 1858-1945

by John Maidment

UNTIL the final decades of the 19th century, the majority of the buildings in Australia constructed in the Gothic style were, if not outright examples of plagiarism, extremely unimaginative in concept.

There was a lack of inventiveness or originality in their design and this was to be found in much of the work of such exponents as Blacket and Wardell, who seemed to be either oblivious of, or out of contact with, contemporary developments overseas.

The subjective synthesis of Gothic as shown, for example, in the work of Brooks, Burges, Butterfield, Pearson and Street took a long time to reach the colonies. Much of the ecclesiastical work of these architects was conceived on a grand scale, relying upon the adaptation of French Gothic forms and the lavish use of materials. Only in the work of Horbury Hunt (especially in his cathedrals at Armidale, Grafton and Newcastle) do we see a startling reinterpretation of Gothic forms and original approach to design,

and imaginative use of brick-work.

The latter material was largely eschewed in church design last century, at least in Victoria. An exception was in the work of Joseph Reed, the Melbourne architect, who employed polychrome brick-work lavishly, although mainly as a superficial form of decoration for his exteriors.

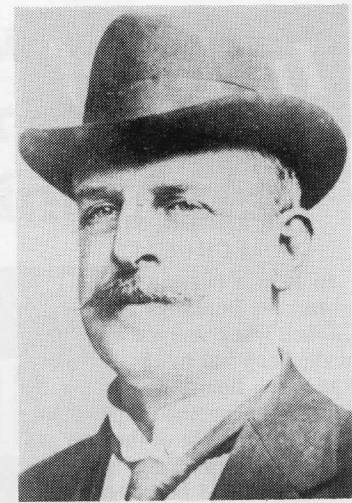
Fresh concepts in Gothic architecture were brought to Australia towards the end of the 19th century by architects migrating to this country who had experienced contemporary developments in this genre in England. Some had worked with well-known exponents of Gothic design and were thus in a sound position to transplant these concepts to Australia.

One of the most noteworthy architects to work extensively in the Gothic idiom during this period and into the 20th century in Australia was Alexander North. North was born at Huddersfield, Yorkshire in 1858, the son of a linen draper, and studied at the

Kendall and Lambeth Schools of Art - the latter a breeding ground for many artists and sculptors at the time. He also worked with James Cubitt, an architectural theorist and well-known nonconformist church architect, on his design for the Union Chapel, Islington, London, a 'blustering High Victorian' building (Pevsner) of impressive scale in red brick.

In 1883 North won the Gold Medal in the National Competition in Architecture, conducted by the South Kensington Schools, for his design of a cathedral in an original Gallic style. Some features of this design (transept dome, transept facades) were later adopted by North for some of his Australian church designs.

North arrived in Melbourne in late 1883 on the S.S. *Orient* and soon found his way to Tasmania where he not only found work as an architect, but also fell under the spell of the indigenous flora and fauna. In arts and crafts fashion, the latter were incorporated into his designs as architectural motifs.



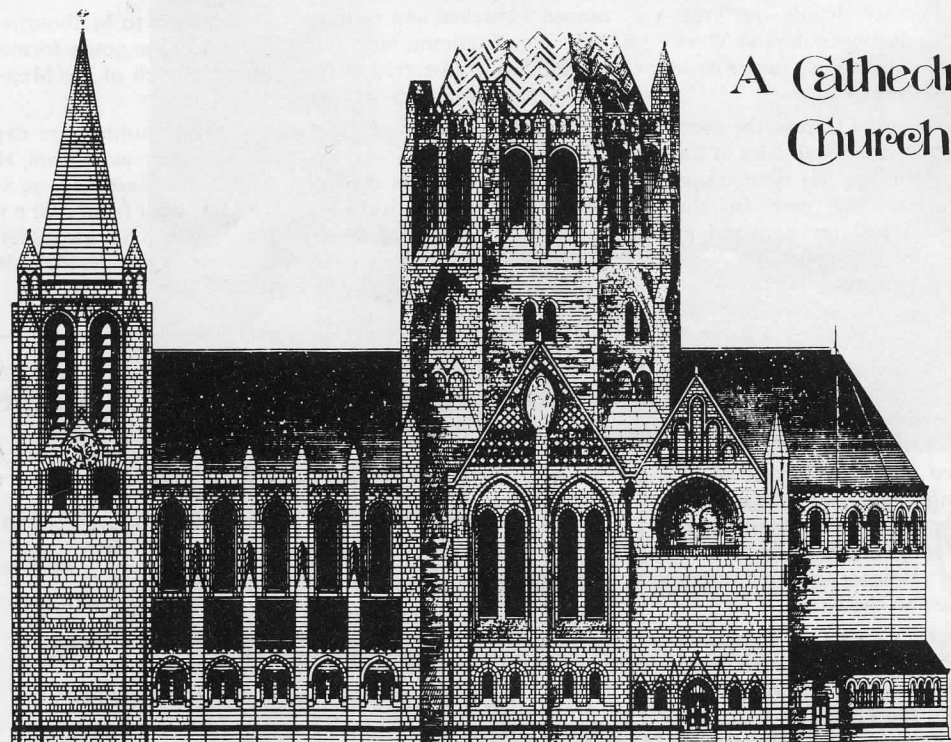
Alexander North

One of North's earliest designs was for St Michael and All Angels' Church at Bothwell, in the Tasmanian midlands (1889). Built in a light sandstone, this church has a French feeling in its design, with large plate-traceried windows and foliated capitals to the transept arcades. The stone fireplace at the west and is a distinctive feature. Tasmanian ferns were undoubtedly the source of inspiration for the design of the pew-ends.

A number of his smaller churches are scattered through Tasmania. They are usually built in either timber or brick and some embody a distinctive broach spire of sheet iron on a wooden framework.

North's three most ambitious Tasmanian church projects were

Design for a cathedral (1882) which won a gold medal in a competition conducted by the South Kensington Schools, London. Although never built, a number of features of this design appeared in later buildings.
(Courtesy La Trobe Library.)



A Cathedral Church.

(Advertisement)



Trinity College Chapel, University of Melbourne. West front; note brick archway, flanking turrets and fleche.

in Launceston, where his office was located for many years. Holy Trinity Church replaced an earlier building and was planned as a very large town church - a broad five-bay nave with passage aisles and lofty clerestory, shallow transepts, and a spacious chancel with a large rose window sited high above the altar. The overall length would have been more than 170 feet. Regrettably, only the transepts and chancel were ever completed, the arch to the nave being walled in with galvanized iron as a 'temporary' expedient. North's drawings show an enormous tower and spire at the west end and indicate what would have been, if complete, the most impressive Anglican parish church in the country.

At the Church of the Apostles, the nave of an earlier bluestone building by Henry Hunter was extended by North and transepts, chapels and chancel added. North's work here has a strongly French air, especially the massive pillars at the crossing with their shafts in a contrasting material, and the two large windows at the east end, on either side of the reredos.

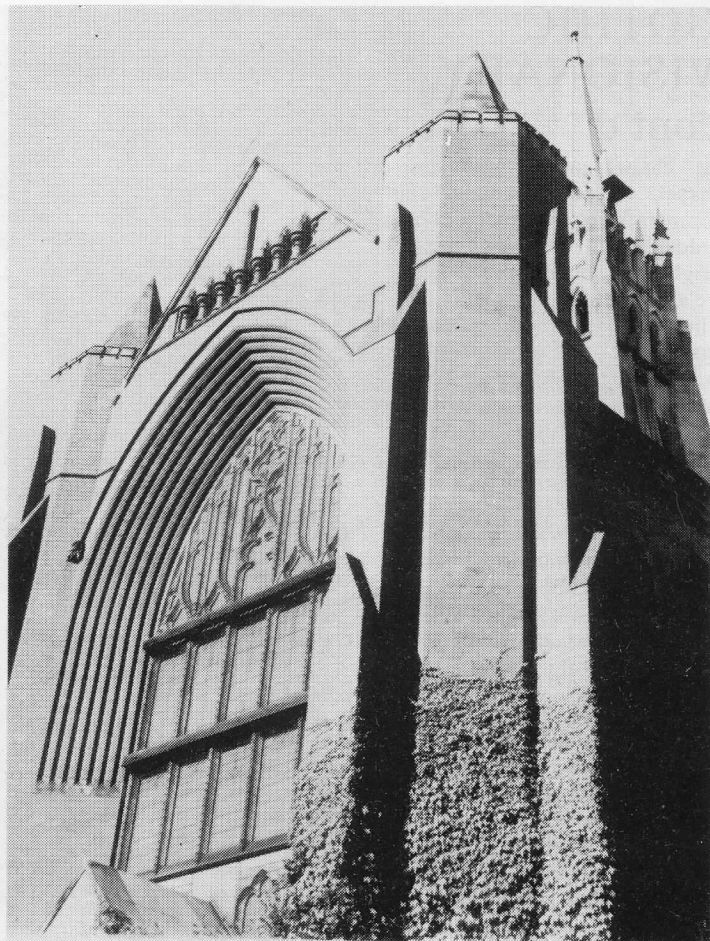
The greatest challenge in North's career as a church architect was presented at St John's Church where the fabric of an earlier Regency-Gothic church was incorporated into his design for a vast red brick and sandstone building. This embodied an internal dome over the crossing, maybe inspired by Byzantine practice. The chancel and transepts of this church were completed by day labour over a period of 10 years (1901-1911) in

which time the design was extensively modified. These parts of the church were vaulted in reinforced concrete - possibly the earliest instance of such a practice in Australia. Three bays of the nave were added in 1938 on the old foundations, but North's visionary plan still awaits two western towers, a vast central tower and an additional bay to the nave for completion - clearly an impossibility in this day and age. The interior exhibits a masterly control of scale and space and there is some notable carving in stone and timber.

North and his junior partner Louis Williams moved to Melbourne in 1913 and quickly built up a thriving practice, specialising in church work, but also designing commercial and domestic premises. Plans for churches, church halls and schools were produced, mainly for the Anglican church, together with designs for church woodwork and fittings.

The partnership's *magnum opus* at this time was the chapel of Trinity College at the University of Melbourne - another visionary design which was thankfully completed to the initial conception and under the architect's supervision. Although less than 100 feet in length, this building yet again exhibits an extraordinary control of space - the impression given by the interior is of a seemingly boundless area. This effect is emphasised by the adoption of a masonry bridge spanning the chapel which supports the organ and delineates

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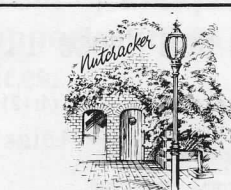
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the chapel proper and ante-chapel. In passing under this comparatively low space one is suddenly confronted with the full height of the building and a massive arch leading to the sanctuary. The choir stalls and capitals again embody naturalistic motifs; the pew ends were carved by the accomplished art-nouveau artist Robert Prenzel. The exterior of the building is similarly inspired, especially the composition of the west front with its flanking turrets, recessed arch embracing a large traceried window and portal, and a playful copper and concrete fleche on the roof ridge of original design. Altogether a masterpiece of original Gothic work.

Another impressive design of North's was the Church of St Andrew, Clifton Hill (1916). This design incorporated a massive central tower in reinforced concrete and a short nave of three bays with passage aisles and tall clerestory. Part of the fabric of an earlier church designed by Twentym & Askew about 1885 was incorporated, hence the employment of bluestone rather than brick. This small masterpiece had all the spaciousness and proportion of a tiny cathedral; it was demolished by the Anglican church about 1975.

A number of other designs for churches, schools and halls were produced by North & Williams at this time. They included St Paul's, Ascot Vale (design never completed); St Mark's, Camberwell (hall); Geelong Grammar School (completion of chapel); St James's, Ivanhoe (hall and school); All Saints', Kooyong; St Peter's, East-



Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Launceston. East front, showing rose window, ornate decoration in gable, and fleche.

ern Hill (hall); Church of the Epiphany, Meredith (apse); All Souls', Sandringham; and Melbourne Church of England Girls Grammar School, South Yarra (hall - now converted to chapel and library).

One of the final designs produced by the partnership was for the Peace Memorial Methodist Church, Epping Street, East Malvern (1921). Here, massive brick quasi-towers at the 'west' end frame a noble arch leading to a

large perpendicular-traceried window - a development of the theme shown at Trinity College Chapel. Parapets have been eliminated here and large eaves sweep over the brick walls. The interior is impressive and all the furnishings were designed by the architects in a distinctive style using local timbers. This church is no longer in use and its future is uncertain.

In 1920, North returned to Tasmania. The partnership was

dissolved and Louis Williams continued on his own - subsequently building up the largest ecclesiastical practice in the country. North was actively engaged in his work until the late 1930s and died at his property 'Holm Lea', Rowella, on the banks of the Tamar River north of Launceston, in 1945. He was aged 86.

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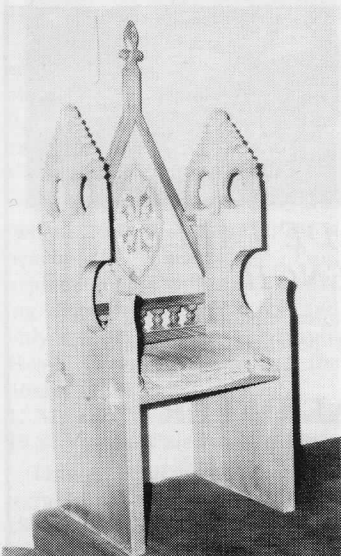
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St Andrew's Anglican Church, Clifton Hill, a distinctive design with central tower. Now demolished.

North's church architecture is notable for its imaginative use of red brick, its superb control of scale, form and proportion, and the element of grandeur and drama it often encompassed. It was his own synthesis of Gothic

and was in no way derivative. North was undoubtedly an architectural visionary - his plans often far exceeded his clients' capacity to pay for their completion, and few of his designs, regrettably, were finished exactly as he intended.

His buildings often have a strikingly three-dimensional quality - a sculptural feeling which is accentuated by sunlight and shadow. His grasp of proportion was excellent and he frequently endowed his designs with a strong sense of vertical compression through effective massing of parts and division of horizontal planes, such as facades, into narrower vertical segments by the use of buttresses, tall windows, columns or turrets. He was the 'complete' architect for he designed not only the building but also its



Chair embodying natural motifs in carving; in St Michael's Anglican Church, Bothwell, Tasmania.



fittings: furniture, iron-work, stained glass and decorative features such as mosaics.

In his total mastery of the design of churches and their contents in Australia, North had few rivals at the time. Only Robin Dods, in Queensland, and Walter Butler and Robert Haddon, in Victoria, can be compared with North, yet none approached the quantity and extent of his contribution. It is to be hoped that North's church buildings in Victoria and Tasmania will be

cherished and preserved with similar fervour to those of his distinguished predecessors Blackett, Reed, Wardell and Hunt.

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Sources of material for this article have included North's birth certificate; shipping lists; assorted manuscripts and designs in the possession of North's descendants; newspaper clippings from the North collection; various journals including *The Building News*, *The Builder & Contractors' News*, *Building*, *Architecture*; Louis Williams.

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