

Notes and Communications

The Canadian Architecture Collection, McGill University

by SUSAN WAGG

In the spring of 1904, Percy Nobbs, the director of McGill University's Department of Architecture, took the unprecedented step of sending his students out to make measured drawings of some of the older buildings in Montreal. In this way, he noted, the department was "seeking to preserve an authentic record of some of the ancient landmarks of Montreal and at the same time to wean its students from drawing paper, photographs and plaster casts and to introduce them to things as they are in solid fact."¹ After Nobbs resigned as director at the end of 1909 in order to carry on an active architectural practice, his long-time friend and successor as Macdonald Professor of Architecture at McGill, Ramsay Traquair, became increasingly involved in the task of amassing a permanent record comprising measured drawings, sketches, and photographs of the old architecture of Quebec. Scottish-born and trained, both men, when they came to Canada in the early twentieth century, were infused with the current British concern for that land's historic buildings, which were being decimated by industrialization. In their adopted country, Nobbs and Traquair became pioneers in the appreciation of eastern Canada's threatened architectural heritage, their legacy to future generations forming a significant part of what is today known as the Canadian Architecture Collection in the Blackader-Lauterman Library of Architecture and Art at McGill University.

The first official record of this collection appears to be a brief statement in the 1917 *University Annual Report* announcing that the "staff of the [Architecture] Department is collecting a number of drawings and photographs of historic buildings in Canada, with the object eventually of forming a record of the older architecture of the Dominion, particularly of the Province of Quebec."² The following year, the photographs of the late Mr. C.T. Hart were purchased by McGill. These included a number of old buildings in Quebec, many of which had been destroyed. During the 1920s, the collection grew extensively. Early in this decade had come a more general realization that much of Quebec's architectural heritage was being carelessly destroyed; the Historic Monuments Commission was created in 1922. Copies of some of the photographs from surveys undertaken by this body found their way to McGill, as did contemporaneous drawings and sketches of old Quebec architecture carried out under the auspices of the Province of Quebec Association of Architects. At the beginning of the 1920s, the measuring and photographing of old buildings

under Traquair's guidance became a regular part of the Architecture Department's annual sketching school. Traquair, who directed the Department from 1913 to 1939, was especially well equipped for this undertaking, since his own training as an architect had included a year spent studying the historic buildings of Scotland for the National Art Survey of Scotland. The measured drawings in black ink on large sheets of heavy, off-white paper that resulted from the Canadian sketching trips are, apart from their documentary value, among the most beautiful works in the Canadian Architecture Collection. The outgrowth of all this work, which was carried out not only by Traquair and his students, but with such colleagues as ethnologist Marius Barbeau and Gordon Antoine Neilson, Research Assistant in Architecture at McGill, was a quantity of invaluable publications. They include forty-one papers published by McGill from 1925 to 1939 under the general title of *McGill University Publications Series III (Art and Architecture)* and the two equally indispensable books by Traquair, *The Old Silver of Quebec* (1940) and *The Old Architecture of Quebec* (1947). These publications, illustrated with drawings and photographs from the Traquair Archive in the Canadian Architecture Collection, are priceless tools for the study of the old art and architecture of Quebec.³

During the two decades following Traquair's retirement in 1939, little was added to the collection. With the onset of the development-minded, vandalistic 1960s, however, architecture students, working under John Bland, director of the School of Architecture from 1941 to 1972, undertook summer jobs with the City Planning Department to make measured drawings of buildings in Old Montreal that were threatened with demolition. Fortunately, public protest led to protective legislation for this historic part of the city. The students' drawings came into the McGill collection, as did others that were done at the time which recorded important nineteenth-century buildings located elsewhere on Montreal Island.

John Bland, who had been an appreciative student of both Percy Nobbs and Ramsay Traquair, continued in the tradition of his two teachers, acquiring photographs of old buildings in the province that had been taken by the Quebec photographer Edgar Gariépy. During Bland's tenure, photographs of old buildings in the Maritimes were presented to McGill by James Acland and Ross Anderson of the University of Toronto, as well as photographs of buildings in Quebec and Montreal that were the gift of A.J.H. Richardson. Furthermore, during the Bland years, a time when the importance of preserving the drawings of Canadian architectural practices was little understood or appreciated, two extremely significant collections were acquired and conserved: the professional archive of Edward & W.S. Maxwell, given by the Maxwell family to McGill in 1954, and the archive of Nobbs & Hyde, given by Francis J. Nobbs, the architect's son, in 1970. These two Montreal firms were among the most respected in Canada prior to the Great Depression, designing notable buildings not only in the Province of Quebec but elsewhere in the Dominion. The Maxwell firm, for example, was responsible for the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal, portions of the Chateau Frontenac Hotel in Quebec City, and the Saskatchewan Legislative Building in Regina, while Percy Nobbs designed some of McGill's finest structures, including what is now the McCord Museum (originally the Student Union), the Macdonald Engineering Building, and the Pathological Institute, as well as the Arts Building and Medical Building at the University of Alberta in Edmonton. These two architectural archives each contain

working drawings for executed buildings, unexecuted proposals, pencil sketches, student drawings and sketches, and — most compelling — watercolour presentation drawings prepared for clients. There is also documentation in the form of architect-commissioned photographs, office records, and letters.

Because the Nobbs and Maxwell material has thankfully been preserved, it is now possible to begin to comprehend the scope and to assess the significance of these major architects' work. In 1975, the author began to study the Nobbs holdings at McGill, ultimately organizing a retrospective exhibition in 1982 and writing the first monograph on this gifted architect.⁴ It is now apparent how fitting it is that his archive forms part of the Canadian Architecture Collection; more than any other architect of his time in the Dominion, he was committed to drawing on Canada's vernacular architecture — such as that being documented by Traquair — as a basis for his own work. This practice he regarded as the key to functional, environmentally sensitive modern design. His archive provides the means to compare his *oeuvre* with that of contemporaries and to study the impact of his designs and of his teaching (he served as Professor of Design at McGill until 1940) on his students, many of whom went on to build successful Canadian practices. Although Nobbs' ideas and buildings went out of style in this country after the Second World War, when Modernism became the fashion, his architectural philosophy contains much that would benefit present-day Post-Modernists seeking to re-establish architectural civility and gentler approaches to design. One hopes the work already completed on Nobbs will be used to awaken a wider public to the beauty, sensitivity, and enduring value of his existing buildings so that as many as possible will be preserved for future generations of architects and laymen alike. Thanks to awareness aroused by the exhibition and monograph, Nobbs & Hyde's University Club of Montreal (1912), in rapidly changing downtown Montreal has now been classified as an historic monument by the Province of Quebec. Yet at the same time, insensitive private owners desecrated one of his loveliest houses, built in the style of an old French Canadian house and before the destructive remodelling, a preeminent example of the relationship between Nobbs' and Traquair's work.⁵

Quite different from Nobbs in their design philosophy, the Canadian-born Edward and William Sutherland Maxwell, whose work was influenced by contemporary modes in the United States and France, were important to the Dominion in another way. When the elder brother Edward began to practice on his own in Montreal in 1892, the taste for American architects and stylistic fashions was gathering force. One of the great Canadian commissions of the end of the 1880s, Windsor Station, built as the Montreal terminus of the recently completed Canadian Pacific Railway, was designed by a New York architect, Bruce Price; while the city's first tall office building, the New York Life Insurance Building, which still stands on Place d'Armes, was the work of yet another New York firm, Babb, Cook & Willard. Even the Parliament Building of the Province of Ontario, erected between 1886 and 1892, was the work of an American — Richard A. Waite of Buffalo. Indeed, Edward Maxwell, who trained and worked for a time in Boston, was sent to Montreal in 1891 to supervise the construction of the new Montreal Board of Trade for his current employers, the Boston firm of Shepley, Rutan & Coolidge, who had designed the building. Yet the enterprising Edward quickly opened his own office and began immediately to attract commissions from leading Canadian financiers

and industrialists, especially the men who were connected with the Canadian Pacific Railroad and its principal banker, the Bank of Montreal. Joined in 1902 by his brother William, who had benefitted from study in Paris as well as in Boston, these two Canadians were well able to compete with their still popular American counterparts. The Maxwell firm is currently being studied by a group of scholars working on an exhibition and accompanying publication devoted to their work, while two publications have now appeared on aspects of their practice — one on the building of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and another on their grand country houses.⁶ It is to be hoped that these investigations will similarly awaken the public to the significance of these architects' work and the need to preserve as much of it as possible.

Systematic inventorying and cataloguing of the approximately 50,000 drawings and 20,000 photographs that had been accumulated took place from 1984 to 1987, thanks mainly to two grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Under the direction of Irena Murray, Head, Blackader-Lauterman Library of Architecture and Art, a team consisting of librarians, architects, and architectural historians analyzed, organized, conserved, and produced three publications, one devoted to each of the three major archives in the collection. They are entitled *Percy Erskine Nobbs and His Associates: a Guide to the Archive*; *Edward & W.S. Maxwell: Guide to the Archive*; and *Ramsay Traquair and His Successors: a Guide to the Archive*.⁷ In addition to providing computer-generated indexes to the contents of the respective archives, these guides contain John Bland's useful biographical essays on the architects, and, in the case of Traquair, who has yet to be given his due, a valuable chronology and a bibliography of all his known publications.⁸ Nobbs, too, wrote extensively, and a bibliography of his scattered journal articles appears in the guide to the Nobbs archive. A part-time curatorial assistant now looks after the collection so that it may be seen by appointment, and work is being completed on listing the remaining material, mainly drawings by students and faculty at the McGill School of Architecture and small collections of the drawings of local architects Robert Findlay, A.T. Galt Durnford, and certain others. Although it is not anticipated that the Canadian Architecture Collection will grow extensively, the library does welcome additions that complement existing holdings.

Architectural records, preserved and catalogued and available for consultation, are unbelievably valuable, not only to scholars and the preservation-minded, but also to current architects and owners who care about historic buildings. A comprehensive history of Canadian architecture has yet to appear, making it difficult indeed for citizens and public officials to make informed judgements concerning what is or is not of architectural value. We should thus be especially thankful for the existence of men like Percy Nobbs and Ramsay Traquair, who had the intelligence and foresight to begin a collection that documents so extensively a vitally important segment of Canada's cultural heritage.

Notes

- 1 "Montreal Letter No. 11," *Canadian Architect and Builder* 17 (May 1904), 88.
- 2 Quoted in John Bland, "Introduction to the Traquair Archive," *Ramsay Traquair and His Successors: a Guide to the Archive* (Montreal: Blackader-Lauterman Library of Architecture and Art, McGill University, 1987), 3. I have drawn extensively on Bland's account of the growth of the collection from 1917 onward.
- 3 Although he executed several architectural commissions in Scotland before emigrating to Canada, Traquair did not practice in this country and his archive therefore does not contain drawings for any of his buildings. Traquair did collaborate occasionally with Nobbs on, for example, the exterior ornament for the Birks Building in Winnipeg (1913) and on the Pathological Institute at McGill (1922).
- 4 The exhibition opened at the McCord Museum in 1982 and travelled to Edmonton, Calgary, and Kingston during 1982-83. The monograph is *Percy Erskine Nobbs: Architect, Artist, Craftsman* (McGill-Queen's, 1982).
- 5 For a discussion of this building, the former A.H. Scott house on Lakeshore Road, see Wagg, *Percy Erskine Nobbs: Architect, Artist, Craftsman*, 28-9.
- 6 The publications are Rosalind M. Pepall, *Building a Beaux-Arts Museum: Montreal 1912* (Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1986) and France Gagnon Pratte, *Country Houses for Montrealers 1892-1924: The Architecture of E. and W.S. Maxwell* (Meridian, 1987).
- 7 The guides are available at a nominal price from the Office of the Director of Libraries, McGill University.
- 8 The Traquair chronology and bibliography were contributed by Janet Sader, and the Nobbs bibliography by Jane Devine. The Traquair guide also contains an essay by Professor Robert Derome of the Université du Québec which discusses Traquair's work on Quebec silver.