

type, researchers will welcome their publication. The frequent quotation reflect the overall strengths and weaknesses of the book, adding colour and immediacy to Gibson's descriptions, but interrupting the flow of the prose. More seriously, Gibson does not move beyond description to explain the significance of the Columbia brigade in the history of the Oregon Country.

John Stuart knew the Fraser-Peace and the Fraser-Columbia routes, but when asked to recommend one or the other in 1822, he demurred. Only when George Simpson experienced the Fraser-Peace route himself in 1824-5 did the Hudson's Bay Company turn to the Columbia brigade. Clearly, Gibson is the pre-eminent authority on the Columbia brigade today. However, not unlike Stuart, Gibson takes no clear stand. Readers expecting an interpretation of the importance of this transportation system will be disappointed. Gibson does not pose nor answer any interpretive question. Was failure the central theme in the history of the Columbia brigade? Does the North West Company's decision to use the Peace River route during the climactic years of its continental struggle with the Hudson's Bay Company represent its failure of imagination? Was John Stuart, who inaugurated the route in 1813 and was convinced of its superiority, rendered ineffectual by his diffidence? Was the Hudson's Bay Company's decision not to explore its employees' suggestions as to how to make the Columbia route more efficient a serious error? Or was the Fraser-Columbia route itself, like Donald Creighton's St Lawrence River, fatally flawed? What were the consequences of any of these failures? Gibson is certainly qualified to answer questions like these, but he does not do so here.

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*Fred Cumberland: Building the Victorian Dream.* GEOFFREY SIMMINS. Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1997. Pp. xii, 345, illus. \$115.00

Just what we don't need: another biography of a nineteenth-century Toronto architect. This was my initial reaction to Geoffrey Simmins's *Fred Cumberland: Building the Victorian Dream*. Indeed, with a few notable exceptions, the field of Canadian architectural history is constructed almost solely of the life stories of relatively famous architects of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Toronto and Montreal. Implicit in nearly all their biographies is the suggestion that each man deserves attention as the true progenitor of a Canadian style.

Frederic William Cumberland (1820-1881) shares much with these other celebrated Canadian architects. Most of his buildings can be

found in Toronto. He established important client networks through key social institutions, in his case Toronto's Mechanics' Institute and the Canadian Institute, designing buildings for them as a way of showcasing his considerable talents. He specialized in particular building types: houses, educational buildings, churches, post offices, and courthouses. And he and his partners prospered during a time period in which wealthy and powerful Canadians – he designed houses for Egerton Ryerson and Casimir Gzowski, among others – used architectural form, quite intentionally, to define themselves.

What's different about Cumberland, however, is what makes Simmins's book refreshing. He emigrated to Toronto from London about 1847 and practised architecture for only fourteen years. After 1858 Cumberland enjoyed considerable success as the managing director of the Northern Railway and served as the Conservative representative from the District of Algoma in the Ontario legislature from 1867 to 1874. As Simmins makes clear in his lavishly illustrated biography, Cumberland was basically an ambitious and domineering businessman who used Canada as a place to advance his own social position.

Simmins tells his story largely through textual sources, especially diaries, letters, newspaper accounts, and office records, as well as Cumberland's architectural drawings. And he tries to debunk several myths about his subject's life along the way. First, he contends that the young Cumberland never worked for the famous British engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, as R.F. Legget had written in *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. Second, Simmins's understanding of the architect's style of railway management differs substantially from business historian Peter Baskerville's, who suggested in a 1978 article that Cumberland 'kept too much executive power in his own hands.' According to Baskerville's entry on Cumberland in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, co-authored with Frederick H. Armstrong, Cumberland's ethical conduct as a railway manager was also highly questionable. Although Simmins acknowledges these episodes, in general he defends his subject's reputation, underlining Cumberland's knack for raising funds among English investors.

A third recurring question is Cumberland's design of University College, undoubtedly the 'jewel in the firm's crown.' Simmins devotes an entire chapter to the 1856 commission, which he calls 'a singular building in the history of Canadian university architecture.' This commission was clearly an insider deal, as Cumberland was himself a member of the university senate that appointed the building committee. Simmins argues, nonetheless, that Cumberland had substantial experience by this time and was a reasonable choice.

The weakness of Simmins's *Fred Cumberland* as a work of scholarship is its three-part organization. Part One chronicles the details of Cumberland's life and career; Part Two is an analysis of his architecture, organized by building type; and Part Three is a *catalogue raisonné* of Cumberland's works. This divorce between Cumberland's life and his architectural production represents a sorely missed opportunity to explain the complex links between architecture and its social context.

Other choices mark the work as being grounded on some rather conservative models offered by art history. For example, throughout *Fred Cumberland*, there is an attempt to isolate the architect as an individual. This is most evident in Simmins's analysis of Cumberland's drawings, where he speculates that William George Storm, his partner after 1852, was mainly responsible for building details, while Cumberland was the source of the big ideas. The complexity of planning large buildings by this time was such that architects, even senior partners, often acted only as advisers to an assorted group of specialists. To suggest that their responsibilities can be isolated in this way from the knowledge and experience of their colleagues or employees is at best unfair.

Other hallmarks of an art-historical (rather than spatial) approach to architecture include Simmins's penchant for decoding stylistic choices and his search for precedents for Cumberland's buildings. For example, the author suggests, in a chapter devoted to 'Assessing the English Heritage,' that the configuration and stair in Cumberland's design of Osgoode Hall resembles the work of British architect Charles Barry, and that the latter was the 'single most important influence on the development of Cumberland's architecture.' Simmins's conclusion, too, that Cumberland should be remembered for his architecture before his accomplishments in other fields seems to contradict his persuasive general argument about fluidity among the professions at this time in Canadian history.

By far the most imaginative part of Simmins's biography is his reconstruction of Cumberland's architectural theory and practice through a unique collection of personal and business records. Indeed, his creative use of two sources, the diary kept by the architect's wife, Wilmot Mary Bramley, and the firm's records of everyday practice ('a rare cache ... now in private hands'), marks this volume as a solid contribution to the flourishing genre of Canadian architects' biographies. Whether the 'great man' approach to the history of Canadian architecture should continue to dominate the literature is another question entirely.

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