CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL: A HISTORY IN STONE OF GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE AND OF THE LIFE FROM WHICH IT SPRANG: BY M. IRWIN MACDONALD

If you want to catch and hold forever the finest essence of the thrill that comes to every traveler at the first sight of Canterbury, you will approach it by the old road of the pilgrims that winds through the Kentish hills and valleys to Harbledown. There, from the summit of one of the ring of hills that enclose the quiet valley of the Stour, you may catch your first glimpse of the ancient priestly city slumbering away the days of its majestic old age by the banks of the slow-flowing river. And it is well to look long, for there, lying in undisturbed repose amid these peaceful meadows, is the record in stone of the eventful centuries that went into the shaping of our lives today. Yet it is not alone the sense of a past which is common to all our race that grips us with a pang of pleasure so keen that it is almost pain, for that comes to us in almost any one of the gray, timeworn cities that have grown old and peaceful since the days when battles raged around their walls and they bore their share in the making of the nation’s history. It is rather the appealing humanity of this quaint old town that huddles so closely around the walls of its stately cathedral, as if seeking protection beneath its shadow even while it guards with its body the sacred and beautiful House of God, into the making of which has gone all that is best and highest in the life of the community. Looking at it from the detached and more or less materialistic viewpoint of the twentieth century, this singleness of purpose, this absolute abnegation of self to a religious ideal, seems almost incredible. We read of the enormous power of the Church during the Middle Ages and of its absolute dominion over the souls of men, but as we look at Canterbury we realize that the ascendancy of the Church was based upon love as well as fear, and that to the simple minds of the people their cathedral was a visible symbol of heaven, a veritable temple of the Most High. No toil of brain or hand was grudged to the glorious work of making it beautiful. The dwellings of men were a different matter. They were of the things that perish, and so long as they served for shelter and defense they answered every purpose. So we see from the heights of Harbledown a city of low red-roofed houses, leaning together across the narrow streets or clustering closely around the little open squares where still stand the stone crosses that once served as sanctuaries for wandering merchants or places where heretics were taught the error of their ways, and,
crowning it all, the gray cathedral rearing its splendid Gothic towers in the center of a noble stretch of green, shaded by great oaks and bounded by a massive stone wall that seems even now to warn all trespassers from the consecrated ground.

Strangely enough, this wall still stands, but we look in vain for the outer wall of the city, which was cast down in the days of Cromwell. The Lord Protector did not relish the fact that the citizens of Canterbury sturdily declared that they were “for God, King Charles and Kent” and would have no traffic with the Roundheads, so the six gates of the city were burnt and the greater part of the wall torn down by the Puritan troopers, leaving both the city and cathedral a prey to axe and torch. Yet, long before the Romans came to British shores, the little group of dwellings that even then were huddled together in the valley of the Stour went by the name of Caer Ceint, “The Fortified City of the Kentish Men,” showing that Canterbury was a walled city before the history of England began. Others called it Dur Whern, “The City of the Swift Waters”—evidence that in those days of its youth the sleepy Stour must have been more lively than it is now,—and this name was latinized by the Romans into Durovernum. It was only after the Saxons came that the town was called Cantwaraburh, meaning “The Chief City of Kent,” and the chief city of Kent it has remained throughout all changes of name and nationality while generation after generation of men have lived within its walls, written thereon the record of their lives and vanished before the onslaught of other and stronger men.

ALTHOUGH the origin of Canterbury is lost in the mists of antiquity, leaving only an old legend of its founding by Lud Hudibras, it is known that the town was flourishing when the Romans conquered Britain half a century before the birth of Christ. Dig down eight or ten feet below its present level and you will find plenty of relics of the four hundred years of Roman civilization that followed its submission to the conquering legions. The centuries passed and the Romans sailed away, but Canterbury remained unshaken in her proud position as the chief city of Kent. There are old stories of ravages by the Danes and of conquest and occupation by the Saxons, but neither of these warlike races had the art to build a permanent record of its own lives and deeds into the city. Yet even in those days Canterbury was a cathedral town. The Saxon King Ethelred and his fair wife Bertha made it their favorite residence and late in the sixth century Ethelred founded both Christchurch, the predecessor of the present cathedral, and the monastery of St. Augustine, one of the earliest institutions of the English church.
SHOP OF THE CANTERBURY WEAVERS, OVERLOOKING THE RIVER.
MERCERY LANE, LOOKING TOWARD
CHRISTCHURCH GATEWAY.
And a Saxon city Canterbury remained, primitive, warlike and pious, until the coming of the Norman, when its real history began. William the Conqueror lost no time in appropriating the rich lands of Kent and, just four years after his landing in ten hundred and sixty-six, he had deposed Stigand, the Saxon Bishop of Canterbury, and installed in his stead Lanfranc, the Abbot of Caen. Like most French churchmen of his day, Lanfranc was a mighty builder, and in his English diocese he saw his chance to follow his favorite pursuit and to glorify God at the same time. Therefore, he had no sooner taken position of his new dignity than he pulled down the simple Saxon church erected by Ethelred, sent across the sea for squared blocks of the famous stone of Caen to be brought in swiftly sailing vessels, and began the building of the great cathedral.

Workers were plentiful when the Church commanded, and Lanfranc’s cathedral was built within seven years, but his successors were builders as well and twenty years afterward Ernulph, the prior of the monastery attached to the cathedral, pulled down the whole east end of the church and rebuilt it on a more splendid scale. Even that did not satisfy, and Prior Conrad, who took up the reins of government at Ernulph’s death, doubled the area of the building, finished the choir and decorated it with all the magnificence of the period. The cathedral was then considered finished, and in eleven hundred and thirty it was formally dedicated to the service of God, the kings of England and Scotland assisting at the splendid ceremony, as well as all the English bishops and nobles. But fortune frowned on the toils and ambitions of the builders, and, eight years after the emissaries of Henry the Second had killed Thomas a Becket within the sacred precincts, the cathedral was almost destroyed by fire. Only blackened ruins remained of Conrad’s choir, and the old chronicles tell us of the uncontrollable rage and grief of the townsfolk at sight of the flames which were eating up the result of so many years of loving labor. But the service of God admitted of no cessation of effort. All the artisans the town afforded were pressed into service, craftsmen were summoned from all directions, and the rebuilding of the cathedral was begun almost before the ashes were cold. It was characteristic of the spirit of the age that the plans for the new edifice aimed at a still greater degree of splendor than had already been achieved. William of Sens, a famous French builder, was brought over by command of the king and given charge of the work. But it was only fairly under way when the luckless master-builder fell from a high scaffolding to the stone pavement below and was carried back to France, living indeed, but never to walk or work again. By this time the national pride of craftsmanship was asserting itself
more and more against foreign influences, so the next builder sum-
moned to take up the task was, as the old records say, "William by
name, English by nation, small in body, but in workmanship of many
kinds acute and honest." This pithy description gives one an idea
of how the building must have gone forward. No lagging was per-
mitted under the rule of the English William, and six years after the
work of Conrad had vanished in smoke and flame, the choir stood
once more fair and complete.

IN THOSE days men wrought freely their own ideas and char-
acteristics into the work of their hands, and so it is that the choir
of Canterbury Cathedral is a history in stone of the Gothic archi-
tecture of that day. Below it stands the famous Norman crypt upon
which rested Conrad’s choir. This crypt was very little damaged by
the fire, and so it remained, an enduring structure of low vaults and
short sturdy pillars, fitted to bear enormous weight. And in their
own way these pillars tell the story of both life and destruction, for
each one stands as an evidence of the loving care and freedom of fancy
of the workers, as well as of the tragedy which for a time arrested all
the work, or rather diverted it into a more immediately necessary
channel. Some of the pillars are carved with quaint primitive pat-
terns, hewn into the stone by the small axe of the mason after the
actual work of construction was done, and others are left plain or
with the carving only begun. The capitals, which gave the chief
opportunity for decoration, show even more definitely the way the
work was carried on and the way it was interrupted. As the carving
was all done after the stone was in place, the construction through-
out the crypt is perfect,—as solid today as it was seven hundred
years ago,—but the carved capitals, which represent the play of the
builders after the actual work was done, tell a different story. No
two are alike. Some show purely Norman ideas of decoration, others
are even more primitive in character and still others are flowering
into richer ornamentation of the Early English period. Some are
complete, very elaborately and cunningly wrought, others are merely
blocked in and many are left untouched. In some cases one, two
and even three sides of the capital are decorated and the remainder
left plain, showing that the work was arrested by the fire.

The choir itself shows in a still greater degree the commingling,
not only of decorative ideas, but also of architectural forms. We
see there the characteristics of Norman and Early English archi-
tecture standing side by side in the most friendly fashion. The build-
ers preserved all they could of the original work of Conrad, so we
see round and pointed arches used indiscriminately, plain and sculp-
CHRISTCHURCH GATEWAY, THE ENTRANCE TO THE CATHEDRAL CLOSE.
CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL FROM THE MONKS' BURYING GROUND, GIVING A GOOD VIEW OF THE CLOISTERS AND OF BELL HARRY TOWER.
THE NORMAN STAIRCASE, A PERFECT EXAMPLE OF NORMAN ARCHITECTURE.

THE GREAT CLOISTER, SHOWING THE FINE EARLY ENGLISH ARCADE.
THE BAPTISTERY, SHOWING THE ARRANGEMENT OF ROOF LINES AND TOWERS OF THE CATHEDRAL.
tured pillars standing together, and the old primitive carving brought into friendly relationship with the most delicately elaborate patterns chiseled in the stone. Men in those days were not possessed with the mania to destroy all work but their own. Rather, each craftsman felt such veneration for his craft that he scrupulously respected the achievements of other masters even while making no effort to found his own work upon precedents established by them. William of Sens therefore preserved as much as he could of the work of Conrad, and that acute honest craftsman, the English William, had equal reverence for what had been done by the French builder, although his own work expressed the English rather than the foreign spirit.

AFTER the rebuilding of the choir the cathedral remained as it was, with only minor changes and additions to the subsidiary monastic buildings, until the end of the fourteenth century, when Prior Chillenden, as indefatigable a builder as Lanfranc himself, rebuilt the nave and transept. Nothing remained of the original building of Lanfranc but the plinth of the side aisle walls, where the stones, reddened to rose-color by fire, still show bits of the old axed carving of his day. Prior Chillenden, like all the other builders, reflected truthfully the spirit of his time and so added one more chapter to the history of Gothic architecture as it is recorded in the walls and towers of Canterbury Cathedral. The style of the new nave and transept was a light Perpendicular and was kept intact throughout, forming a most interesting contrast to the mixture of periods seen in the choir. As one enters the nave through the historic south porch,—where from early Saxon days throughout the Middle Ages were heard and decided all disputes which could not legally be referred to the King’s Court or to the tribunals of the several counties,—one is impressed at once with the immense height of the nave as contrasted with its length. This is due to the arrangement that makes Canterbury unique among all the cathedrals of England and of the Continent,—the placing of the choir on a much higher level than the floor of the nave. This arrangement was made necessary by the fact that the choir, as it now stands, was built over the old crypt and, as is usually the case, the meeting of a necessity became the means for an expression of the greatest beauty.

Moving forward between the rows of lofty pillars that spring up to support the dimly-seen vaulting overhead, you are confronted by the broad stone staircase leading up to the choir, which is shut away from the nave by the screen of wonderfully carved stone erected by Prior de Estria early in the fourteenth century. If morning or afternoon services happen to be in progress in the choir, the chances are
that you will have ample time to study the details of the screen as well as of the pillars and vaulting of the nave and transept. Unless you have a special permit from the Dean to go through the cathedral alone and linger as much as you please, you are not allowed to go beyond the nave except under the guidance of a verger, who will repay any interest you may take in his cathedral with wonderful stories of its past, and at the same time keep a wary eye about him for the possible depredations of souvenir hunters. If you do enter the cathedral during service the enforced pause in your explorations is a blessing in disguise, for, as you walk quietly about in the gray twilight of the nave and hear the clear young voices of the choristers soaring upward to the great vaulted roof only to be sent back in soft waves of sound that seem to fill every corner of the vast building, you begin to realize something of the spell which the sacred service laid upon the simple, devout, emotional men and women of earlier times, and by the time the church is silent again you are one with the spirit of these old days and in a mood to comprehend every subtle meaning of the silent evidences the builders have left us of their beliefs and aspirations.

And you will need the help of such a mood if you are reconstructing in fancy the interior glories of Canterbury Cathedral. Looked at from the outside, it is much the same today as it was in the days when pilgrims from all over Europe came with prayers and offerings. The many niches are empty now, for the statues which once occupied them have long been overthrown and destroyed, but the mellow gray stone, lichen-covered and crumbling as it is, is only the more beautiful for its great age, and the solemn splendor of the stately pile itself seems something beyond the reach of man's destructiveness. But inside there is only the shell left. The embroidered banners and rich hangings are all gone. The magnificent windows of the thirteenth century, smashed ruthlessly wherever they could be reached by Puritan pikes, stones, bullets, have been replaced by the crude brilliancy of modern stained glass, and the many richly-decorated chapels, altars and chantries have been swept away. Henry the Eighth did his royal worst by Canterbury Cathedral, and what he overlooked the Puritans finished. These pious vandals, led by an engaging character known as "Blue Dick," left hardly anything of the noble building but the bare walls and roof, and even the walls were defaced wherever they could be reached. Even the high altar, once covered with what the Puritans described as "the most idolatrous costly glory cloth," was hurled down and the whole place was ransacked for the spoils of war. In this day we feel
these ravages rather than see them, for the work of restoration began soon after Charles the Second came to the throne and has been carried on ever since. With the single exception of the stained-glass windows, the work of restoring the ancient beauty of the cathedral has been most lovingly and judiciously done. Crumbling walls and towers have been rebuilt in exact accordance with the original style and with the same kind of stone, and where the old beauty could not be recalled the restorers have had the good sense to let it alone and leave either a bare space or some marvelous crumbling ruin.

On either side of the choir staircases lead up to the still higher level of the Trinity Chapel, where for three hundred and fifty years the shrine of Thomas à Becket stood as a lodestone to Christendom. Now only a mosaic pavement marks the site of the tomb which once towered aloft, supported upon marble arches and concealed under a covering which was raised at a given signal so that the glories of its piled-up gold and gems might blaze forth upon the awe-struck gaze of the kneeling worshipers. The tomb itself was covered solidly with the gold and rich jewels set into its walls and heaped upon it, for the offerings to the saint were many and costly. The story goes that a huge carbuncle, as large as half an egg, was at one time set in the side of the tomb. This was the somewhat unwilling gift of Louis the Seventh of France, who came to worship at the shrine, wearing in a ring the huge stone known as “The Regale of France.” His conscience told him that the carbuncle ought to be offered to the saint, but vanity forbade, and, having given other rich offerings, he was turning away with the ring still upon his finger when the stone, of its own accord, leaped forth from the setting and fixed itself in the side of the tomb. After such a decided manifestation of the saint’s wishes the king had nothing left to do but to submit with the best grace he might, and the Regale of France remained one of the chief ornaments of the shrine until the days of that somewhat drastic reformer, Henry the Eighth. Being a bit tenacious of the royal dignity and also not averse to enriching the royal treasury, Henry conceived the idea that the wealth of Thomas à Becket would do much more good to a live king than to a dead saint. As he was fond of doing things legally and disdained such crude and direct procedure as going down to Canterbury and helping himself, Henry hit upon the ingenious idea of swearing out a warrant for Thomas à Becket on behalf of Henry the Second, accusing the long-dead archbishop of rebellion, contumacy, treason and usurpation of the office of saint, and commanding him forthwith to appear at Westminster for trial. The warrant was duly read before the tomb and the saint was given thirty days to appear. As, for reasons best known to himself, he failed
to do so, the trial was carried through with due formality, judgment awarded to Henry the Second, and Thomas à Becket was condemned. The decree was that his bones were to be removed from the tomb and burned, his name and the account of his miracles erased from every book and record in the kingdom, and, most vital point of all, his treasures to be escheated to the Crown. By royal clemency the saint's bones were buried instead of being burned, but his shrine was torn down and the treasure, twenty-six cart loads of it, was taken to London. Henry had the Regale of France set in a thumb ring, which he wore with much pious satisfaction.

That is why the Trinity Chapel is empty now of all save memories and the hollows worn in the marble floor by the knees of thousands of worshipers. Yet, steeped in the spirit of the place as one is by the time Trinity Chapel is reached, one only has to look up to where the Watch Chamber once stood on a lofty balcony between the pillars to see in fancy the glow of the fire that warmed it on bleak winter nights, and hear the soft tread of sandaled feet pacing to and fro as the monks kept guard over the shrine and its riches and saw that the troop of savage ban-dogs, tied in the chapel for a further safeguard, did not escape and wreak havoc throughout the building.

CLOSE by the shrine of Thomas à Becket and on the same level is the tomb of the Black Prince, whose fortunes were so closely bound up with those of Kent. Upon his marriage with his beautiful cousin Joan, affectionately called in the old chronicles, "The Fair Maid of Kent," the Black Prince founded a chantry in the crypt of the cathedral and left a clause in his will that his bones should be buried there. For many years after his death masses were sung day and night in the chantry for the repose of his soul, but his body, despite his expressed wish, was given a loftier place in the cathedral. The tomb is simple enough, but the effigy lying upon it is a marvelous piece of thirteenth-century bronze. It is said to be an accurate portrait of the gallant and well-beloved prince, and both the face and the strong, well-knit figure seem to vouch for the truth of this belief. High above the tomb hang the rusted fragments of the armor that he wore, relics that had to be guarded from robbers as assiduously as were the richest jewels of the neighboring shrine.

Standing here one notes an extraordinary feature in the construction of the cathedral,—the decided inward bend with which the walls turn toward each other at the end. This bend was necessitated by the fact that the towers of St. Anselm and St. Andrew both survived the fire, so that the walls of the new cathedral built upon the ruins had to be accommodated to them. To this reverent desire to preserve
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the work of former times is due the great interest and beauty of the building as seen from the outside. Within, one is confronted at every turn with a sense of vanished glories, but once out upon the green one feels that the cathedral, as it is today, differs very little from what it was at the end of the fifteenth century,—the time when it was completed by the building of the great central tower, generally called Bell Harry Tower, from the mighty Dunstan bell that hangs in its belfry.

This tower is one of the best examples in existence of fifteenth-century Gothic architecture, for it is not only most beautiful in design and construction, but shows in every line the lofty purpose that inspired its building. It is the crown and summit of the whole cathedral, and the eye is led up to it by that delightful arrangement of the roof lines and the subordination of lesser towers to the chief, that is so characteristic of the Gothic. On the north side the cathedral proper is so closely interwoven with the subsidiary buildings of the monastery and the cloister that it cannot be considered separately. The cloister, which incloses the old monkish burying ground, is a beautiful example of the early English arcade, decorated with a simple and noble design such as would come naturally to men of large and robust mind, working with big blocks and slabs of sandstone. Another architectural gem is the Norman staircase leading to the main gate of the Priors’ Court. This is a perfect example of the Norman style in its purity, and is quite unrivaled in England. Lanfranc’s wall of defense still encircles the whole cathedral close and separates it from the quietly busy life of the town. This crowds so closely against it that the great Christchurch Gateway, which forms the main entrance, has little shops clinging like barnacles to its massive sides. This gate shows the beauty of the later Perpendicular style. It was built early in the sixteenth century and is in fairly good preservation, although the central niche which originally held the large image of Christ is now empty.

In the old days Canterbury held many buildings devoted to ecclesiastical or semi-ecclesiastical purposes. At one time there were thirteen churches within its walls and three without, in addition to many monasteries, leper-houses, almonies, priories and hospitals; but of all these only the cathedral, the gateway and the towers of Westgate remain. The town has been destroyed and rebuilt over and over again, but through all the centuries its character has persisted. It is still a town of staid and industrious merchants and artisans, clustering close as of old under the shadow of its ancient gray cathedral, and he who views it with understanding may reconstruct from its life today the splendid history of its past.