

## REVIEW

### *Scotland's Best Churches*

John R. Hume, Edinburgh University Press, 2005. 175 pages, 185 b/w illustrations with 16 pages full colour. Paperback, ISBN 0 7486 2179 2. Price £14.95.

Readers of *Life and Work* have recently been treated to a series of articles on church architecture, art and furnishings by Professor John R. Hume. *Scotland's Best Churches*, the fruit of a lifetime's interest and visits paid to around 4,000 churches, more than 1,000 of which he has drawn, is a must for anyone stimulated by those articles. It also provides clear proof of the wisdom of the Church of Scotland in appointing him convener of the Committee on Church Art and Architecture.

John Hume skilfully includes 184 places of Christian worship from across the mainland and islands of Scotland, each significant building period, and a range of denominations. His own pen drawings, already familiar to many through his illustrations for the Scotland's Churches Scheme volumes, give something of the essence of each building. The fine set of colour photographs, with one exception, were all taken by the author himself. Readers will be interested to learn that a sixth of the Church of Scotland places of worship included had been described in the pages of *The Annual* (1928-70) and *Liturgical Review* (1971-81).

A helpful introductory essay describes the broad sweep of ecclesiastical building from 'Norman' times to the present day. Because of the criterion of 'in use', no early chapels could be included. With that addition, this essay would have provided a complete introduction to the story of church building in Scotland. The buildings are arranged chronologically, from Brechin Cathedral and its round tower to the 1997 rebuild of St Joseph's Roman Catholic Church, Clydebank. There is also a helpful listing by region, and a chronological list with six-figure Ordnance Survey map reference to assist locating unfamiliar places of Christian worship. A select bibliography, glossary and index add to the usefulness of the book. Each building is illustrated by a pen drawing and an 'informative and accessible' text 'without being too architectural-technical', which provides dates and information about its furnishings and personalities

associated with it. John Hume is modest about his text, describing it as 'work in progress', but clearly much painstaking effort has been reduced to clear narrative. The text of each entry is a balanced summary, without providing the reader with overwhelming or unnecessary detail. Those familiar with a building may have the pleasurable stimulation of a quibble. For example, 'The Manna of Ecclesiology', page 20, offers a different analysis of the work of Peter Macgregor Chalmers at the east end of Kelvinside Hillhead. The aesthetically inappropriate work was the 1950s installation of the Belmont reredos.

It is not surprising that John Hume shares with the majority of us and stumbles in the minefield of Presbyterian secessions, suggesting that 'the formation of the Glasite church by John Glas, minister of Tealing, in 1734' was the first eighteenth century secession. The Original Secession, which would become part of the United Presbyterian Church in 1847, is associated with the name of Ebenezer Erskine and his supporters. While the General Assembly did not depose Ebenezer Erskine and his Presbytery until 1740, the problem had arisen before his translation from Portmoak to Stirling in 1731, and the secession is dated by ecclesiastical historians as 1733.

It is surprising that there is no mention of three of Glasgow's great Victorian churches: Govan Old, The Barony or Hyndland. However, strong personal appeal is John Hume's chief criterion for selection, and, understandably, discretion forbids the inclusion of Hyndland after his years of distinguished service, latterly as Session Clerk, to that parish and congregation. Professor David M. Walker demonstrated in his 1990/91 Rhind Lectures (the relevant sections published by the Friends of Govan Old in 1993) that the design of Govan Old was influential until the outbreak of the 1914 world war: 'Govan Old was both an end and a beginning. It transformed Scottish Presbyterian church planning as no building had done before, or is ever likely to do again.' The work of the architects of those three churches is well represented: R. Rowand Anderson by restorations at Dunblane Cathedral and Paisley Abbey, refurnishing and redecoration at Dunfermline Abbey, new churches in Kelso (St Andrew's Scottish Episcopal), and Galston, Ayrshire (St Sophia Roman Catholic); John James Burnet by St Molio's, Shiskine, Isle of Arran and Gardner Memorial, Brechin; and William Leiper by Queen's Park Baptist (formerly United Presbyterian), Glasgow. I also missed the remarkable 'Scots echo of Italian baroque' at Preshome, Moray, built in 1788, credited with being the first

purpose-built post-Reformation Roman Catholic chapel in Scotland, before the saying of Mass in Scotland was officially tolerated. Another gap, St Vigeans, Arbroath, has significance as the first 'careful' nineteenth century restoration of a Scottish parish church. But again, this book is deliberately selective, not comprehensive, nor intended as a final statement.

It seems ill-spirited to complain, but I miss three of my favourite buildings: St Gerardine's, Lossiemouth; St Ninian's, Aberdeen; and the tiny church, its small round tower thrusting up from the gable wall, on the island of Canna. St Gerardine's (1901) is one of the 'low line' churches by John James Barnet. St Ninian's is the sole surviving church designed by Aberdeen Free Church architect, William Kelly. Dr Kelly was for many years involved in the restoration and care of King's College Chapel, and was a co-founder with Professor James Cooper of the Aberdeen Ecclesiological Society. The third, Canna (1914), is a gem, unique in the corpus of Peter Macgregor Chalmers, with its stone barrel vault. It also fits its landscape like the proverbial glove, the cone topping the round tower exactly matching the shape of the mountains of Rum across the sound of Canna.

All in all, *Scotland's Best Churches* is the perfect present to stimulate, or to encourage an existing ecclesiological interest.

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