

## Resisting Modernism or the last Gasp of the Arts and Crafts?: Church Building in Canterbury and North Otago in the 'Thirties

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**ABSTRACT:** The dominant historical narratives of twentieth-century architecture present the 1930s as the period during which Modernism's claim to be the architectural style of the century was consolidated and when the new architecture began to spread across the globe. In New Zealand, as in the rest of the world, this master narrative has tended to obscure the significance of buildings constructed in more traditional styles. The five New Zealand buildings included in the RIBA's Centennial Exhibition, *International Architecture 1924-1934*, were not, however, the latest examples of Modernism in this country, but relatively conservative designs, including Cecil Wood's Arts and Crafts inspired St Barnabas's Church at Woodend (1932). Wood's building forms part of an extensive group of small country churches built throughout Canterbury and North Otago during the 'thirties. These include Wood's St Paul's, Tai Tapu (1930-31) and Herbert Hall's St David's Memorial Church at Cave (1930), although by far the best known is RSD Harman's Church of the Good Shepherd at Lake Tekapo (1935). These small, unpretentious churches, many built with assistance from a government fund initiated to stimulate the construction industry, made use of modern materials, especially reinforced concrete, but their mode of expression remained conservative. They were often embellished with furnishings executed in the traditions of the Arts and Crafts movement. In most cases these churches were important statements of local identity while at the same time expressing the diverse cultural origins of those who built them. In style they were invariably Gothic yet within that dominant idiom considerable stylistic diversity was achieved. For both architects and their clients Modernism, with its emphasis on internationalism and the machine, was unable to express the rich veins of meaning which such buildings were required to embody. Yet as expressions of the uncertainties of the time, their conservative aesthetic values, their reassertion of pioneering roots and of an enduring local identity were as significant as Modernism's confident assertion of a better, essentially urban, future. At a time when the approaching Centennial events of 1940 was stimulating a reassessment of the country's past, these buildings also acted as powerful statements of consolidated achievements..

The dominant historical narratives of twentieth-century architecture present the 1930s as the decade during which Modernism's claim to be the architectural style of the century was consolidated and the time when the new architecture began to spread across the globe. Pevsner's description of the "spectacular change between 1930 and 1950, the change from a style of pioneers and pioneer countries to a style producing outstanding work all over the world" exemplifies this view of the period.<sup>1</sup> Hitchcock and Johnson's *International Style* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1931 effectively set the historiographical agenda for the period, with

Pevsner's polemical and highly influential *Pioneers of Modern Design* first appearing in 1936. Recent studies have developed a more nuanced approach, without unseating the dominant position of the Modern Movement. William Curtis, writing in 1982 noted that the

the majority of buildings constructed in, say, the year 1930 were continuations of earlier traditions and vernaculars. It is useful to be reminded of this pluralist background in considering the very significance of avant-garde production. Furthermore, the determinist slant of the aforementioned writers tended to leave the impression that a building which failed to ally itself to the new tendencies must be inferior. But the fact that a building might be a transformation of Gothic forms (e.g. the Hood design for the Chicago Tribune) did not

guarantee its inferiority any more than the use of the new style guaranteed quality.<sup>2</sup>

Curtis' caveat is worth keeping in mind since in New Zealand, as in the rest of the world, the Modernist master narrative has tended to obscure the significance of buildings constructed in more traditional styles. Yet from the perspective of the early 1930s it would have been almost impossible to have imagined the triumphant position that Modernism had assumed by the early 1950s. In Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union,

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<sup>1</sup> Pevsner *An Outline of European Architecture* p 421.

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<sup>2</sup> Curtis *Modern Architecture Since 1900* p 287.

Modernism was under attack while in Britain it was still largely the preserve of European émigrés and colonials. This uncertain position is highlighted when one examines the list of works included in the RIBA's Centennial Exhibition, *International Architecture 1924-1934*. The five New Zealand buildings included in this exhibition were all relatively conservative designs and included Cecil Wood's Arts and Crafts inspired St Barnabas' Church at Woodend (1932).<sup>3</sup> From a twenty first-century perspective this hardly seems a representative building of the period but the 1934 exhibition is a useful corrective to the biases of subsequent histories. Wood's building in fact forms part of an extensive group of small country churches built throughout Canterbury and North Otago during the decade preceding the Second World War. These included Wood's St Paul's, Tai Tapu (1930-31), Herbert Hall's St David's Memorial Church at Cave (1930) awarded an NZIA gold Medal in 1934, Wood's St Andrew's Maheno, of 1935-38 and, best known of the group, RSD Harman's Church of the Good Shepherd at Lake Tekapo (1935).

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<sup>3</sup> Helms "The Architecture of Cecil Woods" 1:175. The other New Zealand architects represented in the exhibition were Gray Young, Morton and Young and Stanley Fearn.

Collectively these churches represent important aspects of the architecture of the 'thirties: the period's continued preoccupation with traditional building forms and materials; its tentative response to modern materials, particularly reinforced concrete; its ongoing concern with craftsmanship; its engagement with the specificity of place; and its underlying concern with the expression of identity. These concerns were diametrically opposed to the Modern Movement's rejection of the past, advocacy of new materials and technology and focus on internationalism. Far from being the period of radical architectural transformation it is often portrayed as being, the 'thirties was considerably more complex; a Janus-faced decade during which incompatible architectural tendencies existed side by side.<sup>4</sup>

The building of Arts and Crafts inspired country churches in Canterbury was a well established tradition by the 1930s. Seager had designed timber churches at Belfast and Pigeon Bay in the first decade of the century and Wood's All Saint's, Waiau of 1920-25 was the first of a series of small country churches

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the impact of Modernism on New Zealand architecture during this decade see Lochhead "New Zealand Architecture in the Thirties" pp 466-481.

in which concrete was employed either in combination with local stone or on its own.<sup>5</sup> By the time Wood was commissioned to design St Paul's, Tai Tapu in 1930, he had a well established track record as a designer of meticulously crafted parish churches. St Paul's was, however, an exceptional commission as the church was erected as a memorial to Lady Jessie Rhodes by her husband, Sir Robert Heaton Rhodes of Otahuna.<sup>6</sup> At a time when building construction was contracting as a result of the economic depression which followed the Wall Street crash of 1929, this was a generously funded commission from a wealthy client.<sup>7</sup> The compact Gothic-style church, built to accommodate a congregation of 104, has a square south tower, a broad nave, chancel and vestry. Sir Robert's influence is reflected in the choice of materials and the details of the carving. Lady Rhodes was Australian by birth and this explains the unexpected luxury of Sydney sandstone for the window tracery

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<sup>5</sup> See *Arts and Crafts Churches* pp 3-7.

<sup>6</sup> See *Arts and Crafts Churches* pp 10-11 and Helms "The Architecture of Cecil Woods" 1:168-172.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout this period the building of churches was assisted by a government subsidy introduced to support employment in the construction industry. See Anon. "A Subsidy for Building" pp 25-26.

and mullions in conjunction with exterior walls of red scoria from Banks' Peninsula. Quoins and facings are of stone quarried from nearby Otahuna. Australian birds and animals (kookaburra, kangaroo and emu) are also included in the carvings, giving the building a personalised quality that goes beyond the typical Arts and Crafts practice of employing local materials and motifs. The dedication to Saint Paul is also recognised architecturally by a fragment of a capital from St Paul's Cathedral in London. Embedded in the interior wall of the nave it creates a link between the tiny antipodean parish church and the great metropolitan cathedral on the opposite side of the world. The incorporation of fragments of ancient British churches, or artefacts brought from Britain, into the fabric of New Zealand churches was to become a recurring theme of this period. In spite of its small size, St Paul's functions within a frame of reference that reaches beyond the merely local, its form, materials and imagery evoking a range of references and meanings that are both personal and universal.

Virtually contemporaneous with St Paul's is Wood's St Barnabas, Woodend (1930-33), to the north of Christchurch. Here the budget was much more constrained and for the first

time Wood used reinforced concrete as the principal material.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the finely wrought, traditional details of St Paul's, St Barnabas' presents a measured response to a quintessential modern material. Indeed, it was probably the interest generated by Wood's use of concrete that led to its inclusion in the RIBA exhibition. By 1930 there was an established Arts and Crafts practice of using modern materials such as concrete, the pioneering example being All Saints Church, Brockhampton (1901-2), where WR Lethaby's covered a concrete vault with traditional thatch. In 1912 he argued that architects should overcome their "fear that [concrete] is an inartistic material, and boldly build a railway station, a museum, or a cathedral" in the unfamiliar material.<sup>9</sup> ES Prior had also employed exposed concrete at St Andrew's, Roker in Northumberland in 1905 and there were also local precedents, such as Frederick de Jersey Clere's St Mary's, Karori (1911) and closer at hand, the Guthrie Brothers' St Mark's, Marshland (1926). In form St Barnabas' is unmistakably Gothic in character but the tracery is of a simplified, generic kind that reflects the use of an unconventional material.

<sup>8</sup> See Helms "The Architecture of Cecil Woods" 1:175-178.

<sup>9</sup> Lethaby *Architecture* pp 248-249.

The splayed buttresses and shingled gable ends are clearly derived from Arts and Crafts models but the zigzag mouldings on the tower are an Art Deco motif also found in Wood's contemporaneous commercial work such as the State Fire Insurance Building in Christchurch (1931-35).

In its original form the interior was quite unexpected. Unlike Lethaby, who chose to white wash the fair-faced surface of his concrete vault, Wood coated the concrete interior walls of St Barnabas with a clear glaze, arguably a more "truthful" and certainly a more modern response to the material than Lethaby's. (Although the interior of St Barnabas' was white washed in the 1960s, Wood's St David's Presbyterian Church at Cust (1935), also in North Canterbury, still preserves interior walls of glazed concrete). Perhaps the most unexpected feature of St Barnabas' was the stencilled frieze, now lost, which ran around the top of the interior walls. A contemporary description described this as deriving from Māori motifs and Wood had concurrently used Māori patterns in the decoration of the State Insurance Building. These probably derived from JH Menzies' book, *Maori Patterns, Painted and Carved* (1910), a copy of which Wood owned, but he was

surely also familiar with Menzies' decoration of St Luke's Church, Little Akaloa, with Māori motifs, dating from 1905-6.

St Barnabas', Woodend, demonstrates Wood's ability to respond creatively to the constraints of a limited budget of under £1,200, transcending what were still widely regarded as the limitations of a utilitarian material while at the same time balancing a desire to preserve a sense of tradition with the need to give the church a distinct, local expression. Sadly, an extension designed by Don Donnithorne in 1993 has severely compromised one of Wood's best designs of the 1930s.

St Andrew's, Maheno (1935-38), has more in common with St Paul's, Tai Tapu than the Woodend Church for here too a wealthy local landowner, Colonel Joseph Cowie Nichols of Kuriheka, was the principal donor.<sup>10</sup> The exterior St Andrew's is predominantly English in inspiration, although Wood was also influenced by the reinterpretation of English Gothic by his American contemporaries, Goodhue and Cram. St Andrew's was built from local stone over a core of reinforced

concrete but great care was taken to leave the rubble stone in its natural state, to the extent that Harman, the supervising architect, specified that "if there is a growth of lichen, [it] is to be preserved as far as possible."<sup>11</sup> The principal stone used for the walls was sandstone collected from Nichols' Kuriheka Station, ensuring a similar kind of personal identification between donor and building that existed at Tai Tapu. The exterior boasted an unusually rich palette of materials with additional red volcanic stone from Redcliffs on Banks' Peninsula, along with Timaru basalt and Oamaru stone. The interior was also lined with Oamaru stone but imported oak was again used for the furnishings. However these are decorated with carvings of New Zealand flora and fauna (kea and kākā on pew ends, kingfishers and fantails among other birds on the pew frontals) executed by Frederick Gurnsey who had also worked at Tai Tapu.<sup>12</sup> Local imagery and the exotic materials were thus fused in the building, just as the experience of those who worshipped within the church combined local attachments alongside more distant allegiances to inherited traditions. Such competing loyalties

were also central to the experience of those who commissioned, designed and made the church. Both Wood and Harman had completed their architectural education in Britain and Gurnsey was English born and trained.

A further parallel exists between the Tai Tapu and Maheno churches, since St Andrew's is also a memorial to lost relatives, in this case to the two sons, brother and cousin of the principal donor, Colonel Nichols, who were all killed in the Great 1914-18 War; the west window is dedicated to their memory. As at Tai Tapu, stones from English buildings are also present at Maheno. Carved fragments from English medieval churches, including Canterbury Cathedral, Westminster Abbey and Glastonbury are placed within a panel set into the wall of the chancel, highlighting the desire to evoke origins and assert the continuity of traditions which the architecture of the church as a whole proclaims. The fragments are framed by an inscription that makes this meaning explicit:

These stones from ancient English shrines are placed here in the hope that the spirit which inspired their fashioning will also hallow these walls.

<sup>10</sup> Helms "The Architecture of Cecil Woods" 1:179-184.

<sup>11</sup> Helms "The Architecture of Cecil Woods" 1:181.

<sup>12</sup> Stocker *Angels and Roses* pp 55-56.

At Maheno the medieval fragments embody associations of antiquity, faith and place that the local congregation would have felt to be conspicuously absent from local churches in particular and New Zealand buildings in general. Like the carefully preserved lichen on the stones of the exterior walls, these ancient architectural fragments, which still bear traces of gilding and polychrome decoration signify a yearning for antiquity in a land where few buildings were even a century old.

Wood's supervising architect at Maheno, RSD Harman, had recently completed another small country church, the picturesquely sited Church of Good Shepherd, Tekapo, built in 1934-35.<sup>13</sup> The construction of the church stemmed from a desire to commemorate the pioneers of the McKenzie Basin as well as provide a place of worship. Harman worked in close co-operation with Esther Hope of The Grampians station, who provided the architect with an continuous supply of sketches and notes. However, rather than being identified with one particular family, the Tekapo church was a non-denominational

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<sup>13</sup> See Helms "The Architecture of R.S.D. Harman" pp 10-14; Helms "The Church of the Good Shepherd" pp 112-117; and Lochhead *Arts and Crafts Churches* pp 13-14.

project serving the sparse and widely-scattered population of the region. Harman's design evolved from a relatively conventional Gothic form to the paired down, primitive structure that was actually built.<sup>14</sup> Constructed of concrete with a facing of local stones gathered from the shore of Lake Tekapo, the church stands in surroundings left in their natural, tussock-covered and boulder-strewn state. The compact building, with its simple outline appears as elemental as the landscape which surrounds it. The interior furnishings, designed by Harman and executed by Frederick Gurnsey, celebrate the diverse heritages of the region's settlers. In a building clearly inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement, it may seem inappropriate that the timber used was oak rather than local woods, but oak was specifically chosen to commemorate the national origins of the regions pioneers and to symbolise their steadfastness and endurance. The motifs carved in this exotic timber are, however, local plants and birds. As if to counterbalance the

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<sup>14</sup> Esther Hope's notes and sketches are now held in the Macmillan Brown Library, University of Canterbury. Harman's drawings, showing the evolution of the design, are in the School of Fine Arts Reference Collection, University of Canterbury.

use of oak in the furniture, the open timber roof beams are of native rimu.

This frank acceptance of diverse traditions as much as its spectacular setting, has helped the Church of the Good Shepherd become, for thousands of tourists every year, a quintessential image of New Zealand architecture. The building's orientation, with the altar placed at the west end, further enhanced its relationship to the landscape, for Harman inserted a three-part window above the altar to reveal a view of Lake Tekapo and the southern alps, nature, in effect, forming the reredos. The building's form may represent the distant origins of the region's settlers, but it also provides a frame for the contemplation of the land they made their home.

The decision to build a church at Lake Tekapo was influenced by the recent success of another Arts and Crafts inspired church nearby, St David's Memorial Church at Cave. In common with other churches of the period, St David's also has a commemorative function, being built by the Burnett family as a memorial to Andrew and Catherine Burnett, the first run-holders of Mt Cook Station, although it also functions in a wider sense as a

memorial to the pioneers of the Mackenzie Country as a whole.<sup>15</sup> Unlike the previous examples, which were either Anglican or non-denominational, St David's is a Presbyterian church, reflecting the predominantly Scottish origins of those commemorated. Built of concrete with a facing of glacial boulders gathered both locally and from the Tasman valley, the church is primitive in form with a massive tower and simple arched openings for windows and doors rather than the late Gothic details favoured by Wood.

The interior also has a rugged simplicity, with rough thrown plaster on the nave walls and hand adzed pews of Southland beech. As in the previous examples there is an intimate connection between materials and the lives of those who are commemorated. The base of the pulpit is made from boulders which once formed the hearth of the Burnett's first home at Mt Cook Station, while its top is made from tōtora from a pre-historic forest in the Tasman valley. The font has similar associations; its base is a boulder extracted from the wall of a musterer's hut in the Jollie River gorge, its top the hub of a dray wheel that carried settlers

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<sup>15</sup> Vance *High Endeavour* pp 226-227. See also Lochhead *Arts and Crafts Churches* p 12.

into the Tasman Valley. The bowl is an ancient stone mortar brought from Strath Brora in Sutherland, once used by Catherine Burnett's Mackay ancestors to grind meal. It comes as no surprise that the inaugural service was conducted largely in Gaelic.

The church's dedication to St David, the patron saint of shepherds, was no accident for every aspect of the building was carefully considered for the meaning it conveyed and the associations it evoked. This is an architecture that is sensuous both in its feeling for materials and richly evocative in the range of meanings it conveys, an architecture that represents pride in distant origins but also deep attachments to place.

Such retrospective, even nostalgic sentiments had no place in the Modern Movement which the architects of these churches so resolutely rejected. This was not, of course, because they were ignorant of developments in Europe (Harman designed the modernist house, *Te Mania*, for the Wilding family at Conway flats in North Canterbury in 1937) but because Modernism simply could not provide what they were looking for. With its emphasis on internationalism and the machine, Modernism was unable to express the rich veins of

meaning which these buildings were required to convey. Amidst the political and economic uncertainties of the 1930s the conservative architectural values of these churches emphasised continuity with the past and the reassurance of ancient traditions. For the men and women who were responsible for commissioning them their traditional forms, commemoration of pioneering origins and celebration of identity and place were clearly more important than Modernism's utopian assertions of a better, essentially urban future. They also demonstrate that issues of identity are expressed most clearly, and felt more deeply, when explored at the level of individual experience, or at least at the level of a close-knit community in a particular place.

The approaching New Zealand Centennial of 1940 promoted a desire to reassess the country's past, one manifestation of which was the publication of the Centennial Historical Surveys by the Department of Internal Affairs between 1939 and 1941.<sup>16</sup> The churches built in Canterbury and North Otago during the 1930s can also be seen as products of this desire to re-examine, in architectural terms, what had been achieved since the

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<sup>16</sup> Barrowman "History and Romance" pp 161-177.

beginning of Pākehā settlement. The timber Gothic of their colonial predecessors was no longer an option. New Zealand architecture of the 'thirties could draw on an increasing depth of human experience in the new land and celebrate a growing sense of permanence. The robustness of their masonry construction, the enduring qualities of their materials and the essential timelessness of their forms made these churches as much confident statements about the future as any modernist building could have been.

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