

John Sidney Swan; a genuine article

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ABSTRACT: The architect John Sidney Swan (1874-1936) represents a little represented group in the history of New Zealand architecture. At the establishment of the New Zealand Institute of Architects in 1905, Swan was one of few architects present, along with William Gray Young (1895-1962), who had been trained in New Zealand through the article system. While training "on the job" was a common occurrence in the early development of the building industry in this country, few of these architects achieved great renown. Swan however, was a prominent architect in his day, designing Erskine Chapel in Island Bay (1906), Saint Gerard's Church in Mount Victoria (1908) and an unbuilt proposal for a Roman Catholic Basilica in Dufferin Street (1912).

This renown may have been due to Swan's mentor, Fredrick de Jersey Clere, the vocal English émigré architect. However, this mentorship does not wholly explain Swan's prolific, and sometimes eccentric practice. This paper is part of an ongoing project to document Swan's work, and develop an understanding of his particular style, which, on the one hand, reflects an awareness of the contemporary English fashions, and yet, on the other, rejoices in an almost theatrical excessiveness, quite contrary both to the evolving architectural austerity of modernism, and Clere's more restrained style.

However mean or inconsiderable the act, there is something in the well doing of it, which has fellowship with the noblest forms of manly virtue; and the truth, decision, and temperance, which we reverently regard as honourable conditions of the spiritual being, have a representative or derivative influence over the works of the hand, the movements of the frame, and the action of the intellect.¹

In 1888 a 14-year-old boy called John Sidney Swan (1874-1936) began work in the Wellington architectural firm of Frederick de Jersey Clere (1856-1952). His employment there was to continue despite the firm's various transformations until 1901. At this time, rumour has it, at the age of 27, and after 13 years continuous employment, Swan, denied architectural partnership in the Clere's firm,

was encouraged, or perhaps forced, to leave and work as a sole practitioner. This paper will explore the circumstance of this event, and its ramifications for Swan's continued career in the cultural context of architecture as a gentlemanly profession.

In "Repositioning Objects," Andrew Benjamin argued that:

History involves the location of an object within a field of activity in which the object comes to have meaning because of that context ... Writing history involves showing in what way the field individuates the particular object; though equally, it is concerned with the question of in what way is the field maintained by the particular reference to it.²

The object "John Sidney Swan," in the context of New Zealand architectural history between 1900 and 1918, is figured within a myriad of clichés and stereotypes, generated both by the architectural profession and New Zealand's colonial history. To find Swan amidst these stereotypes is a continual process of testing authenticated proof against common opinion. In New Zealand history we are presented with dates and places, statistics and economic data, names and their significant achievements, but simultaneously we are plied with standard historic *genre* of the colonialist as pioneer or profiteer. Of architecture, on the one hand we are presented with buildings, the records and reports of their construction, and often of their

¹ Ruskin *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* p 5.

² Benjamin "Repositioning Objects" np.

demise, and on the other we have historical critiques of these buildings, always loaded with personal opinion and contemporaneous pressures. We are also presented with the mythologies that institutions of architecture have disseminated; the gentleman architect, the genius suppressed by the limited vision of clients and budgets, the disgraceful cad who partook in wilful self promotion, the learned master who, if little else, could tell others why his architecture was best. This story of Swan, despite the glamorous trap of "truth," is however one of exploring an individual amidst these stereotypes.

It has been easy to dismiss Swan's significance as an architect as fortunate timing. Between 1890 and the 1920s Wellington's population expanded greatly as the economy recovered from the 1880s' depression. As a result, a large number of buildings and monuments were erected very quickly, particularly office buildings. Regularly applauded fellow architects, such as CJ Toxward, Frederick de Jersey Clere and William Crichton, all of whom were trained in Europe, have had their buildings preserved specifically on the

grounds of architectural quality. While I do not necessarily wish to argue the greater aesthetic value of Swan's work, I have found by tracing out his career certain identifiable features that have possibly isolated him from the flock of the revered. These features include his Catholic faith, his family, as far as I can identify, would have been considered working class, and, aside from his architectural practice, Swan was a successful businessman. A fourth factor, and the focus of this paper, is that Swan was born and trained in New Zealand, by the article or pupillage system.

Education of an Architect

Based on extant school certificates made out to John Swan's younger brother Francis, it is fair to assume Swan attended the local Catholic Marist Brothers School on Boulcott Street. He left school at 14 to work as a message runner for the Post Office. According to Susan Maclean's research,³ such a move was in order to assist the upkeep of his burgeoning family, of which six of the eventual nine children had already been born.⁴ Shortly after this time Swan entered into the employ of the practice of Clere, but if this was directly into the article

process, or possibly ever an article process, is unclear as no article papers for Swan have been found. In Clere's employ Swan was certainly trained as draughtsman, and by 1898 he was the chief draughtsman in the office.

While in Clere's office, if he was an architectural student, we would assume that Swan also attended classes at a technical school to learn more about drawing, design and architectural history. It is possible to conceive, however, that Clere was not training Swan as an architect at all and thus found it unnecessary to skill him beyond those required for a draughtsman. Alternatively, it is possible that Clere felt himself qualified to cover all of Swan's educational needs. Clere, it may be noted, taught briefly on the Wellington Technical College's architectural course.⁵ In Swan's archives, held at the Alexander Turnbull Library, editions of the London *Art Union Magazine* show Swan as a fully paid up subscriber. Membership with the Art Union indicates Swan attempting, though far from England, to keep abreast of contemporary art movements in the Old World.

³ Maclean *Architect of the Angels* p 158.

⁴ The number and age of the children were deduced from the death certificated of John and Louise Swan.

Cochran in the *Wellington City Council Heritage Precinct Inventory 2001*, "Appendix III," indicates there were 13 children.

⁵ Harrison *The School that Riley Built* p 132.

Other than these details Swan's education remains something of a mystery. The article training process itself is wreathed in oblique references and half-hearted descriptions. In the introduction of *The Architectural Association 1847-1947*, Sir John Summerton suggests that while Charles Dickens' story *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843) paints Seth Pecksniff as a terrible architect, the novel is still perhaps the clearest description of the article process.⁶ Article training, as J Wilton-Ely states, was based upon the Medieval apprenticeship system that persisted in England, and thus by default New Zealand.

English architectural education, well into the nineteenth century, still largely depended upon the irregular standards of article pupillage, augmented by lectures at the Royal Academy and travel abroad. In marked contrast to the official basis of the French system, the world of the enlightened gentleman-architect was, in a sense, perpetuated in the privately established and governed bodies such as the Royal Academy and the RIBA - a situation reflecting something of the traditionalist resistance in English politics to centralized government.⁷

Swan's mentor was born with the simpler name of Frederick Clere, in Lancashire, England, in 1856.⁸ Between the ages of 16 and

19, Clere was article-trained by the ecclesiastical architect Edmund Evan Scott, who worked in Brighton. On completion of his article training he moved to London to work for Robert Jewell Withers, where Clere would have been involved in the restoration project of St James, a thirteenth-century church in north-east Lincolnshire. When Clere was 21, no doubt with the understanding that his training was now complete, the Clere family emigrated to New Zealand, arriving in Wellington in December of 1877. Though Clere was made an associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1878, this was not enough to favour him as the 1880s recession began to catch on. Finding no success in Wellington, Clere moved to Feilding where he opened a practice, and managed to find enough work to keep him going. There he met Samuel Goodbehere's family, including his future wife Mary Ann. Goodbehere was a solicitor of reputable standing in the district and Clere's relationship with Samuel, both in familial and business terms was warm and lucrative. In 1883 Clere moved again, this time to Whanganui where he formed a partnership another English émigré, an engineer Alfred

Atkins. The practice in Whanganui fared much better, where Clere attained the appointment of architect for the Wanganui Education Board, and also completed some major projects such as "Overton" homestead for Francis Arkwright in 1884. At the age of 30 he was made an associate of the RIBA, one of the youngest to ever achieve the title. In 1886 Clere moved back to Wellington, opening a branch of the practice Clere and Atkins, though this partnership terminated in 1888, coincident perhaps with the date Swan began work. In 1894 Clere was also made secretary for the New Zealand Dominion Branch of the RIBA.⁹

On these grounds Clere appears as perfectly qualified to train a young architect. Compared to the dastardly Pecksniff, Clere's office was always busy, and his aptitude in design is evident in his various achievements. Clere was also, it is interesting to note, a Freemason.¹⁰ This means little unless we consider the origin and nature of the article system. In the 1912 text *English Apprenticeship and Child Labour: a history*, OJ Dunlop detailed the development of apprenticeship training from the artisan craft training of the Middle Ages. Associated with,

⁶ Summerton *The Architectural Association* p 1.

⁷ Wilton-Ely "The Rise of the Professional Architect in

England" pp 180-208.

⁸ Maclean *Architect of the Angels* p 99.

⁹ Maclean *Architect of the Angels* pp 9-35.

¹⁰ Maclean "Clere, Frederick de Jersey 1856-1952" np.

on the one hand, cheap labour, and on the other, maintaining control over the number and quality of people trained in any profession, the apprenticeship system first appeared in writing in a document from 1261. By 1300 the system had become so prevalent that the London City Council was required to legislate to control practices, thus going in some way to prevent the exploitation of child labour. In 1562 the Statute of Artificers was passed making apprenticeship training, usually of seven years, compulsory before entry into any recognised trade. This Statute remained in effect until 1814 when industrialisation had so reduced the level of skill required by factory workers that such measures no longer made sense. In addition to this, the demand for cheap labour was typically to be met by children, abolishing the Statute of Artificers opened the way to future child exploitation.

While the Statute of Artificers required the registering of any apprenticeship indenture papers with the relevant guild lodge, few of these documents survive. Generally, it is assumed that a seven-year apprenticeship began between the ages of 14 and 17. The

young person would move into the master or mistress' house, living completely in their jurisdiction. In return for accommodation, board and their education, the apprentice would work on any task required, from home and manual labour to skilled tasks related to their future craft. While such a system seems open to easy abuse, the terms of apprenticeships were policed by local guilds and thus, in general, fair standards were maintained. In the seventeenth century it was reported that apprenticeships began to be charged a fee by their mentors. Dunlop suggests that this fee began as a gift to the wife of the craftsman, as a bribe to take suitable care for the child apprentice. This payment of a gift rapidly became a fee, and by the eighteenth century there are records that complain that these fees had become too high.¹¹

In the novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*, the pompous and lazy architect, Mr Pecksniff, is maintained on the exorbitant fee he charged his apprentices, of which he might have two or three a time. Martin Chuzzlewit is two characters in the novel: Chuzzlewit the elder is a wealthy benefactor, and his grandson,

Chuzzlewit junior, benefits from the elder's largess in the form of the article fee to Pecksniff. Chuzzlewit junior and his fellow article Tom Pinch live in Pecksniff's house with him and his two daughters. Did Swan pay a fee to be trained by Clere, or perhaps Clere, starting up his own practice, relied on Swan's youth to provide free labour?

While apprenticeships died out for most trades, Dunlop notes that in trades that were sufficiently wealthy, powerful and highly skilled, the system stayed. The function of the RIBA, formalised in 1834, emerged not least of all to hold jurisdiction over the training of those claiming the title of architect; though the title itself was not legislated in Britain until the 1930s, some 20 years later than in New Zealand. It was stories, like that of *Martin Chuzzlewit* that stimulated, in 1845, young London architects to group together to oppose the conservative RIBA. These young architects formed the Architectural Association, and over time stimulated to provide academy-based education for English architects, similar to that provided in Paris by the Academe de Beaux Arts.¹² In New Zealand, by contrast, William

¹¹ Dunlop *English Apprenticeship and Child Labour* pp 50-53.

¹² McCarthy "Armson and the Architectural Profession" pp 21-24.

La Trobe, director of the Wellington Technical College, adviser on technical education to the New Zealand Government, and member of the New Zealand Institute of Architects, was still arguing, in 1919 for a twin education system of an apprenticeship augmented with classes at a technical college. Such training would last six years.¹³

Swan's article training might be contrasted also with his younger brother Francis' "Complete Architectural Course" training provided by correspondence through the International Correspondence School, Scranton, Pennsylvania, USA. Francis enrolled in 1903, at the cost of £23.15 and complete payments for the certificate in 1907. While there are numerous certificates made out to Francis Swan in the Alexander Turnbull Library, for everything from plumbing to drawing, there is no finalising certificate; Francis never seemed to score below 94%, but it is hard to judge whether this made him a genius or not. Francis was working for his brother at this time, yet Swan did not choose to train him by article, nor for that matter did he advise his brother to article with anyone else. Together the brothers

formed the partnership Swan and Swan in 1915, after Francis had spent some time working in Australia.

Similar to the RIBA, the New Zealand Institute of Architects was incorporated by the New Zealand Institute of Architects Act 1913 with the authority to "control ... the qualifications of those who wish to enter the profession in New Zealand."¹⁴ Established in 1905, as an amalgamation of various architectural societies from around the country, the NZIA's first action was to develop a standard conditions of contract in conjunction with builders and contractors. In the chronicle of proceedings for this year, Swan is listed as a member, but not an associate or fellow of the Institute. In 1912, after Clere lobbied using his role as RIBA Secretary for New Zealand, the NZIA became an affiliate of RIBA. In the 1912 journal a rather odd event is recorded. On 15 December 1911 a meeting was called to amend rule 56 of the NZIA charter to admit all past presidents to the council of the NZIA. This followed a similar, and much-disputed rule, in the RIBA charter. Simultaneous to this amendment, six membership resignations were received from

Wellington architects including JS Swan and his future partner, CA Lawrence. A year and seven months later the NZIA executive committee, including Messers Crichton, Clere, Atkins, and others, calls an emergency meeting. At this meeting it is announced that a group titled the "Society of Architects" sought a meeting with the NZIA at the suggestion of the Attorney General "in order to agree upon a course of action mutually convenient in respect of the [NZIA] Bill." At 5.15pm a committee of this society, consisting of Swan, Lawrence, and others, "were courteously greeted." Through the course of this meeting a settlement was negotiated which amalgamated the two groups. Four members of the society, including Lawrence, signed the arbitration document, but not Swan. As a result of this settlement 14 members of the society were made fellows of the NZIA, and six more made associates.¹⁵ Swan and Lawrence were also made automatic members of the NZIA council, however Swan's attendance to council meetings was intermittent, and he never sends apologies for non-attendance. The issue that caused this split, and the compromises made for the re-integration, are not discussed in the *NZIA*

¹³ La Trobe "The Scientific side of the Architect's Training" pp 46-47.

¹⁴ Johnston "The New Zealand Institute of Architects" p 254.

¹⁵ Minutes, Executive Committee, NZIA, p 25.

Journal, though by judging that an architect such as Swan was not made a fellow prior to this event suggests a class system was being exerted within the NZIA, one that placed architects trained overseas above those trained in New Zealand.

Shades of "John Sidney Swan"

By adding this event to the picture of Swan, he perhaps begins to appear as an aggressive negotiator. Another story of Swan's negotiating skills tells of his unbuilt design for a Roman Catholic cathedral for Wellington in 1912. After producing a very grand design for a Classical building to accommodate around 2000 people, Archbishop Redwood declared the congregation could not afford it. Not only that, but Archbishop Redwood also refused to pay Swan for his design, based on the assumption that he had done the work as a gift. Swan refused to do any more projects for the Roman Catholic Church, though he did continue to do commissions for Mother Mary Aubert's Sisters of Compassion, and the Community of the Sacred Heart.

Discussion with Swan's descendant, his grandson, also called John Swan, tells of a

dictatorial and over bearing paternal figure. John Swan's father, Val, the youngest son of Swan and Gertrude, stated in a 1986 interview, that his father:

... ruled the roost with an iron hand ... No velvet glove business.¹⁶

Val recalls how he was forced by his father to follow the family profession of architecture, and though Val recounts this bitterly in the article, he is listed in the Wellington district voting records as having continued in the profession for several years after John Swan's death. Val's picture of Swan conflicts somewhat with the photographic images of him I have seen.

In a photograph of Swan he stands in a suit of typical Victorian stuffiness: the year is 1898 he is 24. He has been working in Clere's office for ten years. He looks artificially stilled; the time of shutter exposure being longer than this impatient young man would have desired to wait. I like to think that he is dressed for his wedding, the high collar of his shirt and the thickness of his white tie seem exceptionally formal, though not necessarily of the highest quality. He looks prematurely old, as if his hair

was already dusted with grey, and a small twist in his moustache is surely an affectation toward a grander, older image of himself. The background, fading out to nothingness implies it is a studio picture. But if it is a wedding photograph, where is Gertrude?

In a second photograph Swan is sitting in a wicker chair. A pipe is poised either coming or leaving his mouth. In profile his forehead looks much rounder than I would have expected. This photograph was taken in 1909, Swan is 35, he has already built the Moorings and, is, by this time, a self-employed man. John Swan senior, his father, the plumber, died in this year. No mourning band on Swan's arm, if such things were done then. I can't help but notice that his suit is very much the same as Clere's in a photograph from the 1890s. Was it that the conventions of suit were so strict, or was Swan mimicking his mentor? This is surely not a studio portrait, the dark background suggests a domestic space, and I like to assume that he is at home. Even if at home, the photograph is dramatically staged, perhaps taken by Swan's younger brother Francis, many of whose photographs are preserved in the Alexander Turnbull Library.

¹⁶ Doyle "A House Divided" pp 72-79.

The photographs of Swan are very gentlemanly; they are pictures of respectable honesty, a certain degree of sophistication; a gentile solidity. These qualities make up the desired, even prescribed, definition of an architect, but were not upheld by Swan's credentials of training and birth. Despite recent re-writings of history, such as Chris Cochran's glowing descriptions of Swan's buildings, such as St Gerard's Church, and Erskine Chapel, in the new *Wellington City Council Heritage Precinct Inventory 2001*, Swan's standing as an architect has been derided, and the historic significance of his works overlooked. A list of his buildings, for example, the Bank of New Zealand in Grey Street, the house Moana Lua on Hobson Street, and the Wellington Technical College buildings from 1919, can seem like a litany of historic erasure. The making of history is, we must remember, contingent upon the predominating politics of the present. Here, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, architecture is struggling to define itself outside of the class structure from which it emerged, to be more than the exclusive domain of gentlemen and Freemasons. It is in this context that history can take time to address a figure such as Swan.

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