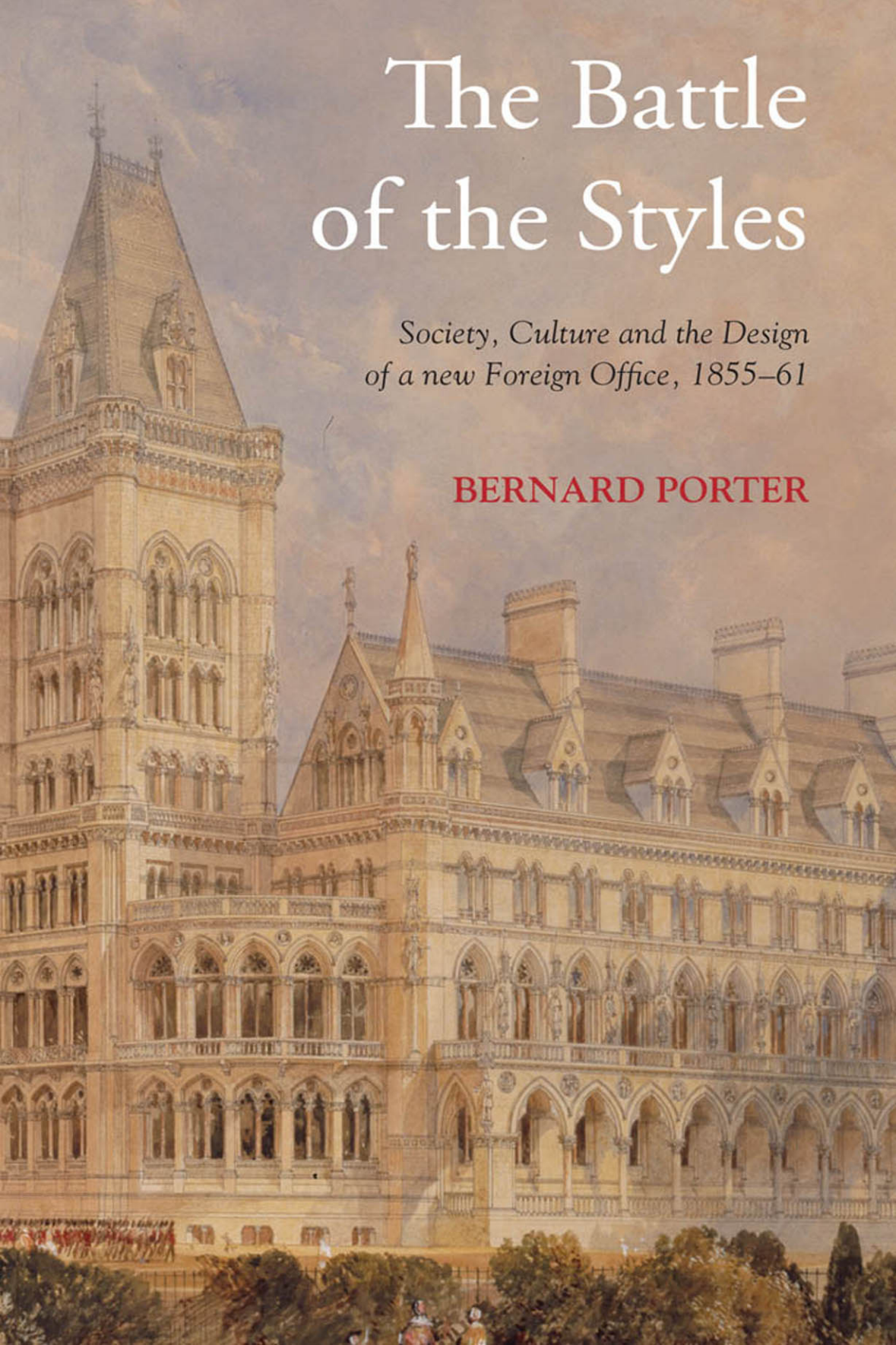
The Battle of the Styles

Society, Culture and the Design of a new Foreign Office, 1855–61

BERNARD PORTER



THE BATTLE OF THE STYLES

The Battle of the Styles

Society, Culture and the Design of the New Foreign Office, 1855–1861

Bernard Porter

Published by the Continuum International Publishing Group
The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX
80 Maiden Lane, Suite 704, New York, NY 10038

www.continuumbooks.com

First published 2011

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 9781441168726

Typeset by Pindar NZ, Auckland, New Zealand

Contents

For Jasmine

Illustrations

Preface

Buildings can be deceptive. The British Foreign Office in Whitehall, London, is a case in point. Looking at it today, and knowing when it was built (in the 1860s), it is natural to assume that it was designed as it was in order to emphasize Britain's great power in the world, now long passed. It is huge, heavy, dominating, vaguely Roman in its details, and topped off with statues of national heroes; all in all rather forbidding, even to new ministers – David Miliband, foreign secretary from 2007 to 2010, admitted to finding it 'intimidating' on his first visit; and so also, presumably, to most foreigners who have to pass through its doors and up its famously grand staircase. We know that it was Lord Palmerston, the great bully (allegedly) of British diplomatic history, who had it built, which must confirm this impression. Indeed, it seems so very obvious, simply from the *appearance* of the building, that few people have bothered to question this reading. 'It was built at the height of our Victorian imperial power,' boasted a BBC television programme about the work of the Office in February 2010, 'specifically to impress foreigners', and in a style chosen 'to proclaim Britain's status in the world'.[1] Of course it was. You only have to glance at it to see that.

But a glance is not enough. Examine the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (as it is now) more closely – the stones, the style, the original designs, the discussions that took place over these, and the more general historical context behind the whole enterprise: more general, that is, than merely 'the height of our Victorian imperial power' – and a very different picture emerges. At the very least, it cannot be as simple as the 'impressing foreigners' scenario; or, I would say, as dull.

For a start, let us look at the basic facts of the building's origin. These are pretty well known to architectural historians, though not, I think, more generally. The circumstances were these. In 1855 the British government decided it needed some new Government Offices, to replace, in the first instance, the Foreign Office, which was (literally) falling about its ears, and the War Office, which was inconveniently scattered all over London. (This was in the middle of a war.) So it held a competition, to help it pick a design. The outcome of that was messy; but the architect eventually chosen from among the winners was George Gilbert Scott, well known at the time as a 'Gothicist' – that is, one who sought to revive mediaeval principles of building – who had produced a Gothic plan. So it looked as though the new Offices would be in that style. Before this could happen, however, there was a change of government, and the aged Lord Palmerston became prime minister. Palmerston loathed Gothic. He could not get

rid of Scott, who had already been promised the job; but he insisted he redesign the building in the 'Classical' style. Scott protested, but eventually caved in, to the disappointment – to put it mildly – of his fellow Gothicists. That was in 1861. (The row was known at the time, and is referred to in all the architectural histories of this period, as the 'Battle of the Styles'.) The result is the building that still stands in Whitehall today, housing not only the Foreign and Commonwealth Office but also the Home Office, and various other departments of state. If it had gone the other way we would have had something like the present very Gothicky St Pancras Station Hotel, also by Scott – and his riposte to the critics of his original Foreign Office designs. Opinions differ over whether that was a lost opportunity or a lucky escape.

It is an entertaining tale, more so than the histories of most architectural projects, though there are parallels. The controversy in the 1870s over the style of the new German Reichstag was one, in that case also won by the Classicists;[2] the debate over the design of a new Copenhagen City Hall in the 1890s was another, this time won by the 'national romantics', who can be seen as Denmark's version of the Goths;[3] and a third was the dispute in the 1920s over whether the British Raj's new capital at New Delhi should be Classical or 'Oriental', where the result was a compromise.[4] The most recent was probably the public row in 2009 between Lord Rogers and Prince Charles over the redevelopment of Chelsea Barracks, with Rogers being the Scott of his day, and Charles the Palmerston, and the ultimate victor there. (A case will be made out here for Gothic's being the 'modern' style in the 1850s.) In the case of the Government Offices the row was enlivened by various skullduggeries, hints of scandal, low farce, some quite good jokes – mainly from Palmerston, who used them to win over support in the House of Commons – and ungentlemanly language all round. The smell of ordure rising from the Thames also played a part. It was a lively affair, worth telling, perhaps, for that reason alone. (I shall be telling it, straight, in Chapter 1.)

But all this must detract from the *significance* of the building itself, in the form it ultimately took, if we want to infer from it something important about the character of Britain at this time. Its style was something of an accident. It could very easily have gone another way. Would a St Pancras Hotel in Whitehall have given off the same aura of imperial power and domination that Scott's final design is said to do? (That may be a matter of opinion. We shall be coming back to it.) In any case almost no one at the time said that British power and domination, or empire, or prestige, or whatever, was what they wanted the building to express. (Of course it might have gone *without* saying; but I think I can show not.) A significant number of MPs wanted no new building at all – foreign secretaries, they said, should use their own town houses for conducting their business – and a much larger number would have preferred the Foreign Office to be much more modest in scale than it turned out. The foreign secretary of the day – who was not Palmerston, as it happens, but Lord John Russell (Palmerston was prime minister) – had not cared

what it looked like so long as it had a roof on to keep his clerks and secretaries dry. His permanent secretary – the top Foreign Office 'mandarin', that is – felt it was far too grand both for his liking and for its purpose. Most of the press of the time thought so too. Palmerston, though he was largely responsible for the way it came to look, never really liked it. The best he could say of it was that it would 'do'. Even its architect, Scott, virtually disowned it. Scarcely anyone beyond ministers and civil servants – and precious few of those – had taken any interest at all in the building while it was being planned and constructed, and those who had did so for a variety of reasons, very few of which had anything to do with the expression of British 'power'. It was not a popular building at the time, and has never attracted much attention subsequently: from foreign and provincial tourists in London, for example, who are mostly oblivious of it as they pass it on their way from Westminster (to see the abbey and the Houses of Parliament, which *are* much loved), to Trafalgar Square (to feed the pigeons). All this must mean that we should be wary, at least, before attempting to read anything important into – or even between the lines of – the present Foreign Office building alone.

The 'Battle', however, was something else. That *was* important, in two ways. The first is in an architectural historical context; where it is supposed, at any rate, to have marked a crucial stage in a wider war that had been going on for the previous 20-odd years between the advocates of the Gothic and Classical styles, for the architectural soul of England, no less. By the 1850s this had established Gothic as the dominant style for churches, colleges and, in its 'Jacobethan' form, for country mansions, but not yet for large urban secular public buildings (despite the new 'Perpendicular' Palace of Westminster; or even because of it). That was the new field the Goths were looking to conquer. The Government Offices, because of their size and importance, were the fortress they needed to topple in order to be able to march on. Both Scott and Palmerston saw it in these terms: Scott as a way of conclusively proving that his Gothic style was suited to every kind of building; Palmerston more apprehensively as the thin end of a wedge that would 'Gothicize the whole of London' if Scott won. So a lot was thought to depend on the outcome. Whether that outcome was as crucial as the contemporary battlers thought is questionable. It was undoubtedly a setback for the Goths, but not necessarily an irreversible one. There are several great public buildings still standing from after 1861 that were built in Gothic (or Gothic-*ish*); including, for example, the new Law Courts in London, much of the South Kensington museum complex, and Manchester Town Hall. (In much the same way, it seems unlikely that Prince Charles's blow to 'modern architecture' in the Chelsea Barracks affair will be a fatal one.) But Scott's defeat, or apostasy, certainly had some effect. We shall be discussing this – the aftermath of the Battle – in the final chapter of this book.

The second thing making the Battle over the Foreign Office worth studying is the light it sheds on the Victorian society of its day more generally, or at least on a part of it; and in particular on the relationship between that society and the artistic culture of the time, or at least a part of *that* – the architectural part. One reason

for this is that it is so well documented. This is where the Government Offices affair scores over most other architectural projects of the nineteenth century (though not quite all). Unusually, it was the subject of widespread contemporary public argument and discussion, arising mainly from the fact that it was publicly funded, and so needed the sanction of the public, represented in this instance by parliament, to go ahead. So, there were debates in parliament about it, which can be read in *Hansard*; a public exhibition of the competition designs (over 200 of them) in Westminster Hall, which was apparently well attended; a flurry of pamphlets published on both sides of the argument; meetings of societies like the infant RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects), which was riven over it, and rival deputations to the prime minister – all of this reported in the press; extensive and often heated discussions in the professional architectural journals; and newspaper leaders, periodical articles and satirical accounts in *Punch*; millions of words in all, approaching the issue of the style of the Government Offices from many different angles.

Further, and crucially: most of these angles were to do with the *associations* of the two styles, rather than 'purely' aesthetic considerations (design, proportion, 'taste' and so on), which is what links them overtly with 'society', and so makes them of particular interest to the social and cultural historian. It is not often that a single and relatively short-lived artistic controversy becomes the focus of such a wide range of contemporary societal attitudes, or 'discourses'. These included religious ones; political; social; national and imperial; gender-related; ideas about 'morality', 'truth', 'liberty', 'modernity' and 'progress'; and several others, including possibly some that I have not prised out of the material yet. These are often confusing, and confused. They also come at a confusing time in Britain's broader history, as 'crucial' and transitional a decade in many ways as it was in the field of architecture. It is for that reason that I shall not be offering a single overarching theory to account for the Battle; except that it – and consequently the Victorian culture and society that it (in part) reflected – *was* complex, and irreducible, therefore, to simple explanations. But it is Victorian society's complexity, after all, that made it so rich and fascinating; and also left us the brilliantly chaotic architectural heritage that it did.

The following chapters will attempt to reduce this chaos to some kind of order, albeit – inevitably – of a somewhat artificial kind. This will explain the loose ends and cross-references that will be found all the way through. Chapter 2 will be on the broader historical background of the 'Battle'; because although the Battle itself forms a necessary context for an understanding of the Foreign Office as it appears today, there lay a context behind that also, which it is essential to be aware of. Some of this, too, was political and social, rather than 'purely' architectural, which means that I shall sometimes stray from the latter, up some historical tracks which may at first sight seem to have little bearing on the question of architectural style, but which by the end of the book I hope to have persuaded readers are in fact germane. Chapter 3 will focus on English architectural history more narrowly.[5]

The following four chapters treat the various discourses that I have found fed into the debate, either overtly or, where I have been able to sense this, implicitly. These include, in Chapters 4 and 5, questions of national, class, religious, political and imperial 'identity'; in Chapter 6, the ethical qualities that were supposed to be reflected by the two styles; and in Chapter 7, the 'modernity' that – despite appearances – both styles claimed for themselves, and the wider debate over that. After all this, Chapter 8 may be thought to be throwing something of a spanner into the works by showing how, despite the wide range of these discourses, the debate was limited in its appeal, and in the interest most people took in it; which, mildly deflating as it must seem, is important if we want to get to the bottom of culture's relationship with society generally, and the way the former can be said to reflect the latter. Apathy and dumb philistinism are difficult to write about, because they do not leave cultural records; but it is important to be aware of them, if only to rein back any propensity we may have to exaggerate the social importance of various aspects of ('high') culture. A study of the 'Battle of the Styles' in its broadest context can, I think, help us to do this. I shall be discussing this and various other general inferences that may be drawn from this whole affair, as well as the legacy of the 'Battle', in my concluding Chapter 9.

This is, I think, an unusual book; a kind of hybrid of architectural and what might be called 'general' history, which I hope may be seen as its strength. Its weaknesses will stem from the fact that I am not a professional or practised architectural historian, as are (or were) those who have written about this event before, in particular Ian Toplis and David Brownlee, but also several others;[6] and the many more who have included an account of the 'Battle' in more general histories of Victorian architecture. I should like to make it clear that this account of mine is not meant in any way to supplant theirs, but only to supplement them. I have found no substantial errors, from my own researches, in either Toplis's or Brownlee's accounts, both of which are fuller than mine on certain aspects of the Government Offices affair, and may well be more accurate and sophisticated in their treatment of some of the more purely architectural or professional aspects of the story. I have approached the task of writing about this subject with some trepidation, as must any scholar trespassing into others' territories, so I am prepared to be corrected. I trust, however, that architectural historians reading this book, with all its flaws, may learn a little from it that augments their understanding of Victorian architecture, as I have learned an immense amount from them. My own background is as a historian of various aspects of British political and social history, in particular imperial, diplomatic and 'secret service'. I have always had a passionate interest in architecture, and Victorian in particular; the first extended paper I ever wrote, in fact, was for a school prize when I was 17, on 'Ruskin and Architecture' (it won); and I have twice dabbled in the subject since then, in a popular article (on Norman Shaw's Cragside in Northumberland) and a couple of pages in a book (on imperial culture). The Cragside article was enough, apparently, to qualify me for membership of the Society of Architectural Historians, but I

imagine the *real* (broader) society of architectural historians has stricter rules for acceptance as one of them. I decided to research and write this book out of an interest in the subject; because of a feeling that, at this late moment in my career, I should allow myself the luxury of working on something that enthuses me rather than topics that I mainly disapprove of (imperialism and espionage); and from a belief that a bit of historical context, of the kind that I think I can supply from my many years of toiling in the broader acres of the nineteenth century generally, cannot be bad for any specialist.

It was at that point in my original draft of this book that my Preface was supposed to end (before the acknowledgements). I thought I had made my purpose plain there, and had, in particular, pre-emptively smoothed down any feathers that might be ruffled by this incursion of mine into an area – architectural history – which is not my normal field of experience and expertise. Specialist historians – and others, I guess – can get quite proprietorial about their chosen patches, and irritated when others venture into it from the outside. I know, because I have had the same feelings about those who have dared to stray into my own major area of imperial history: 'cultural studies' scholars, for example, and Niall Ferguson. But it is an unworthy sentiment, and one that needs to be suppressed, in order to be able to benefit from the new approaches and insights that the interlopers nearly always bring with them. It was to help with this that I concluded, originally, with that last paragraph, which was intended to express the humility and uncertainty I genuinely feel in this field; my great respect for the architectural historians who have written about the 'Battle' before me; and the fact that the present book is not intended to challenge or supplant their work (except insofar as the latter very occasionally get their general history wrong), but merely to supplement it. More generally, I have been at pains throughout to stress that this is a book about the contemporary debate on architecture, rather than the architecture itself. Hence the title. One publisher to whom I originally submitted the manuscript realized this, and rejected it as a result. 'I have enjoyed reading your chapter and outline, but I'm sorry to say that this isn't really for us. The difficulty is that it is written as history about architecture, rather than as architectural history.' That seems fair enough to me. She was looking for 'architectural history', which this book, strictly speaking, is not.

One other publisher's reader, however, clearly did not 'get' this at all; which is the particular reason why I now feel the need to labour the point again. I understand that he is a specialist architectural historian. He certainly took offence at what he thought to be my 'amateur' approach to his subject: a 'sideline' to be 'indulged in', as he called it. He accused me of a number of things: of having 'made his mind up on what he thinks Victorian architecture is, and that's that!', for example, which I can't believe any more objective reader will be able to infer from the book; and of putting forward a version of social history which is, 'to be quite frank, off the wall', though to most other historians it will seem rather

conventional. The main ground of his criticism, however, was that the book was poor 'architectural history'; though when I asked him (through the publisher, as he asked to be anonymous) for examples of faults or errors, he did not furnish any; and when it was pointed out to him that it was not intended to be an architectural history as such, but an account and analysis of a cultural debate that just happened to revolve around this particular building, he responded by accusing me of dishonesty. 'I know what you're saying,' was his reply to the publisher (though it seems clear that it had not occurred to him before); 'but that's the point, I guess. It seems clear that what the author really wants this book to be is an architectural history of sorts – it is, in my view, architectural history *masquerading* [my emphasis] as "social history"'. Most readers, however, would see through this. 'I don't think he's fooling anyone'.

To which I feel I must protest here, emphatically, even indignantly – in case any other architectural historian might be tempted to approach this book in the same spirit – that I'm not trying to 'fool' anyone. This is a book about a *debate*, a 'battle'. It was a very revealing battle in its British cultural, social and political context, which is what mainly concerns me; whether or to what extent that context should be taken on board by architectural historians, in explaining the building of the time, is for them to say. My reader finished by downplaying the importance of 'context' generally for all 'art/architectural' historians; which may mark a very real difference between his sort and mine. Most other historians believe that 'context' is pretty vital – not that it explains everything, but that nothing can be fully understood without it. For example (to revert to the opening of this Preface): it is mainly 'context' that can tell us whether the new Foreign Office took the shape it did in order to express the 'imperialism' of its time, as is sometimes claimed; so that must be a matter on which the general historian is best placed to enlighten the architectural historian. If other architectural historians feel the way my reader does, then I would hope they might at least consider the possibility that 'good' – in the sense of truer, or more sophisticated – context is better than 'bad.' This is what this book attempts to provide: not the first, but a deeper and more elaborate account than exists, so far, of the surrounding context to the 1855–61 debate over the new government buildings in Whitehall. I trust that some architectural historians may find this illuminating. Even if not, however – if they adjudge that it sheds no light at all on the buildings of the 1850s and 1860s – it must shed some on the social, political and cultural life of the period viewed more broadly; which is my main interest here.

This intemperate reader's response, I have to say, surprised me, and is what first alerted me to the possibility that this book may be more controversial than I had any idea of when I wrote it. Hence this little addendum, to alert general readers to this. I don't want to give the impression that I see this book as a final word, about mid-Victorian architecture or anything else. Architectural historians, it now seems clear, will find things to criticize here, though not, I hope, as rudely as my hostile reviewer. If they can tell me where my architecture is wrong ('off the wall'),

or my context unhelpful, I shall greatly welcome their feedback. But please don't accuse me of attempting to 'fool' you. I'm not; but merely trying – as a friendly neighbour from an adjacent wing in the great building called 'history' – to help.

Finally (before the acknowledgements, and while I am in defensive mode), a word or two about my *apparatus criticus*. This partly consists of quite a forest of endnotes, most of which carry the citations that are necessary to any serious work of historical scholarship to enable readers to check, independently, the scholar's sources. Because one of the concerns of this book is the *extent* of certain architectural opinions that were held in the 1850s and 1860s, many of these are multiple. (Almost anything is said *once*; that does not necessarily make it significant.) The endnotes are also used to elaborate on certain points made in the text; obviously ones that I regard as minor or secondary, otherwise the elaboration would come *in* the text; but I may be wrong about this, and this device will enable readers – once again – to decide for themselves about my priorities, and to follow up trails (or 'loose ends') that may be of more interest to them. Some of these are, I think, interesting *per se*, whatever their 'relevance'; so although the notes can be ignored, which is why they are all lumped together at the end, it may do readers no harm to take the occasional glance at them. (They represent a lot of work!)

The *illustrations* form another part of this critical apparatus. They have been selected in order to illustrate crucial points made in the text, so that readers can come to their own judgements about – for example – the range of architectural styles mooted for the Government Offices in 1857, and my characterizations of them. They are not chosen for their artistic quality, or in order to beautify the book. Some are taken from very defective sources – fading woodcuts in greying newspapers, for example – which my publisher was at first reluctant to use at all; but for most of them there were no alternatives, and I felt they were important enough as *evidence* to compensate for their deficiencies in other ways. I hope that readers will tolerate their poor quality, for this reason. They and the thicket of endnotes are all necessary grist to the historian's mill.

My first thanks for their assistance with this project must go to the British Academy, whose 'Small Research Grant' made the work for it possible. My good friends Professor Patrick Salmon, chief historian at the FCO (Foreign and Commonwealth Office), and Professor Theo Hoppen, emeritus professor of Hull University and an FBA, supported my application for that, and have helped in many ways since. John Mackenzie, whom I recommended to Continuum as a possible 'reader' for the book, even though we are – as the imperial history community knows – terrific adversaries on certain issues, but who is also highly knowledgeable on social and cultural history, and, I thought, a fair-minded and generous man, proved to be that in the comments he made on my manuscript, which I have found insightful and valuable. Naturally, I haven't accepted them all. Others who merit particular thanks are Katherine Jones, Justine Sambrook,

Cathy Wilson and Susan Pugh of the RIBA Information Centre and Drawings Collection (though I feel I must add a sour note of complaint here against its unusually high 'permission' fees, which will probably swallow up any royalties I earn from this book); the staff of the Victoria and Albert Museum Drawings Collection (whose fees are more reasonable); Karen Robson, Senior Archivist, Hartley Library, University of Southampton; Kate Crowe of the FCO, who gave me a wonderful and knowledgeable personal tour of the interior of Scott's building; Pamela Clark, Registrar of the Royal Archives; Jenni De Protani, Archivist of the Athenaeum Club; Glyn Hughes of the Meteorological Office National Archive – the last three of whom answered particular queries of mine enormously helpfully (the details are in the endnotes); the staffs of the Public Record Office (as I still prefer to call it); the British Library at St Pancras and Newspaper Library in Colindale; Hull City Reference Library (for its run of the *Builder*); the Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull, especially Vivien in Photography; the Cambridge University Library; St Deiniol's Library, Hawarden; and Kungliga Biblioteket in Stockholm; and, for ideas exchanged between us, Mark Stocker, Preeti Chopra, Ian Morley, Sharrona Pearl, Gareth Atkins and Pedro Guedes. Sections of the book have been aired as papers at conferences and seminars at the universities of Cambridge, London, Yale, MacMaster and Texas (Austin), where feedback from audiences and other participants has been valuable, except in the case of the London one, of 'New Imperial' historians. The paper I prepared for them, incorporating some of the present Chapter 8, was later published as 'Architecture and Empire' in the *British Scholar*, vol. 2, no. 2, March 2010. I should also like to thank Robin Baird-Smith at Continuum for taking the book over after its original editor left the company, and for nursing it through the press. Kajsa Ohrlander will be glad the book is finished, as it kept us apart longer than either of us liked: there is not much work one can do on English Victorian architecture in Sweden. She has also advised me on the gender aspects of my subject, which are her area of academic expertise. My children Zoë, Ben and Kate and their partners have helped in ways they probably do not realize. Lastly, while this book was being completed, my first grandchild was born (to Zoë and Kelwyn), to whom *The Battle of the Styles* is dedicated, with a typical granddad's adoration.

Bernard Porter
Hull, Stockholm and Svartsö
19 April 2010

1

The Battle Joined

During the nineteenth century three great national buildings were erected in London: the Houses of Parliament in Westminster (1840–c. 1860), the Government Offices in Whitehall (1863–74) and the Law Courts in the Strand (1874–82). Each evoked public interest and controversy, much of it surrounding the *style* to be employed, in a period – embracing almost the entire century – when there was no consensus over this, and a huge gulf in particular between those who advocated the 'Classical' (or Italianate, or Greek, or Renaissance) style, or styles, and those who championed the 'Gothic' (or 'pointed'), and variants of it. All three buildings were affected by this controversy to some degree, but none of the others half so much as the middle one of them, the Whitehall buildings, where the row that erupted was popularly dubbed the 'Battle of the Styles'. It may not have been the most important or decisive battle in the more general architectural war it was an episode in; but it was the most public and spectacular. For that reason we shall begin with a straightforward account of it here – that is, of the 'Battle' as it was fought on the front lines, between 1855 and 1861, mainly in and around parliament – before moving *back*, in the following chapter, to place it in its historical context; and then going on to consider the various cultural, social and political discourses that informed it while it raged.

The original motive for rebuilding the Government Offices was the simple one of need. The business of the Victorian state was expanding.[1] The premises in which it was carried on were quite obviously unsatisfactory. Benjamin Hall, the First Commissioner of Works in 1857, thought that 'no public offices in the world' were 'so inconvenient or in so ruinous a state as our own'. He called them 'wretched abortions'.[2] Many were rented: 'the government', commented *The Times*, 'lives in lodgings'.[3] The worst was reputed to be the Foreign Office, an old house on Downing Street that was far too small for its purpose, and actually physically dangerous. If the government held any kind of reception there attended by more than a few foreign dignitaries, the floors had to be propped up from underneath with beams. The favourite story, repeated many times, was of how Lord Malmesbury had once narrowly escaped injury or even death when a ceiling fell in on the desk he had been sitting at just a moment previously.[4] This, as *The Times* pointed out, held the whole nation up to 'ridicule'[5] – especially when compared with the situation in Paris, which, as we shall see, it often was. The problem with the War

Office – the second department prioritized originally – was slightly different. This was that its various sub-departments were scattered all over London, making coordination difficult.[6] That could be serious in times of war. (Maybe it helps explain the British Army's notorious shortcomings during the Crimean conflict.)

The first official government report recommending a substantial rebuilding came in 1839, followed by another in 1854.[7] Architects, anticipating a great commission, started sharpening their pencils. As early as about 1844 Thomas Wyatt produced a design which would have used Inigo Jones's Banqueting Hall as its basis, extending it on one side and adding two towers.[8] The Banqueting Hall is of course only a small part of Jones's original scheme for a 'Palace of Whitehall', whose plans were apparently still extant. A number of people in the 1850s, including the great civil service reformer Sir Charles Trevelyan, thought they might be placed at the disposal of likely architects of any new building.[9] This seems so superficially attractive an idea as to make one wonder why it was not taken up more seriously. Much later Gilbert Scott complained that while his Government Offices were under way 'I had always thrown in my teeth . . . the magnificence of Inigo Jones's building'; but by then of course it was too late.[10] Following the 1854 report the government's official architect, James Pennethorne, was asked to draw up plans and elevations for a new building, with costs;[11] and one John Tarring, whom the *Saturday Review* described as 'a minor architect of obscure fame', also offered a design, apparently on his own initiative.[12] All these were in the Classical style; which may explain the *Saturday Review*'s put-down of Tarring: the *Review* was uncompromisingly pro-Gothic. (But we can see from this how the *tone* of the 'Battle' was already developing.) Both also followed the government line that if these new offices were to be replaced, they should also be brought together in a single block, near to the Houses of Parliament, for convenience. That would have the added advantage of removing many unsightly – typically London, poor, higgledy-piggledy – buildings from the area.[13] It was at this point that the idea of using the project to beautify the capital, make it at least comparable with some of the great cities of the Continent, also took hold – to Palmerston's alarm. ('I see in the Times today a flourishing account of an advertisement by Benj^{n} Hall to all Europe for Plans of new Buildings to cover half of Westminster. When was he authorized to invite competition for such plans . . .?')[14] If it was to be on anything like that scale, of course, the question of 'style' was all the more important.

First, however, ministers and bureaucrats had to get their political masters to agree to any rebuilding at all. To do that they had to pass the obstacle of the 'Radicals' in parliament, the low-tax party, who objected in particular to any government buildings that could be used for *entertainment*, as of course Foreign Offices in particular often are. Why should the taxpayer be expected to provide 'great rooms' where ministers could 'gossip and flirt', as the critics put it; did they not all have great houses of their own they could use for that?[15] (It was left to *The Times* to point out the very undemocratic implications of this: certainly up till then the post of foreign secretary had been virtually restricted to men who

could afford large London houses, but did the Radicals want it to stay like that for good?)[16] There was also a 'wartime' consideration. During the period of this debate Britain fought two major wars, in the Crimea (1853–6) and India (1857–8), which were followed by a huge invasion scare, centring on Napoleon III's France. (Napoleon objected to Britain's giving refuge to terrorists, one of whom had just thrown a bomb at him.)[17] Was this the best moment to be squandering great sums on 'ornamental architecture', when they might be needed to repair the country's defences? Even Lord Palmerston argued this at one point.[18] At length, however, the Commons granted a miserly amount (£90,000) for the purchase of some of the *land* necessary, and the government could go ahead.[19]

It might have gone ahead with Pennethorne's design. He was after all the government's official architect, and clearly expected the contract to come his way. He was also a pretty good architect, judging by the few designs of his that actually materialized, and the many more that were thwarted.[20] He suffered, however, from several disadvantages. By the 1850s his position – formally 'Architect for Metropolitan Improvements' at the Office of Works – had been progressively weakened; partly due to the mid-nineteenth century's dislike of 'jobbery', which his post was supposed to represent.[21] This may also have damaged his professional reputation, which appears to have been unfairly low at this time; even among Classicists, but especially at the hands of the thrusting new Gothicists, who regarded him as the very symbol of the fusty old conservatism in architecture they so much deplored.[22] This was despite the fact that he did occasionally design in Gothic; but then 'true' Goths always disapproved of those who only did it as a sideline, as we shall see.[23] He may also not have had the talent for self-advertisement that was coming to be so important in this new, pushy age. As a result, he cuts one of the sorriest of the figures in the drama that was about to unfold. In May 1856 Pennethorne wrote to the Office of Works to ask what had become of the designs and elevations for the new Public Offices he had submitted many months before, and had been working on – under instructions from a previous commissioner – for at least three years.[24] It was only then he learned that the job had been taken away from him. Sir Benjamin Hall, the current commissioner, who had a particularly low opinion of Pennethorne,[25] had decided that the contract was to be put out to open tender, by public competition. Competitions, of course, were part of the new spirit of this capitalist age. Hall was ideologically in favour of them.[26] Architects were divided – their trade press was constantly debating the principle – but with a strong section favouring them, or at least preferring them to the old way of government patronage.[27] 'Competition is the great struggle for life', proclaimed the *Building News* in March 1860. Spurn it, and architects 'will lose their manly tone and vigour, their self-reliance and enterprise, and fall into a condition as helpless as that of the unprotected female.' (We shall be discussing the 'gender' aspects of this whole affair later.)[28] In August 1855 the *Builder* came out in favour of one for the Government Offices project specifically.[29] That was the course recommended by a report submitted to the House of Commons in

July 1856, and accepted by the government, with the terms of the competition announced in October.[30] Of course Pennethorne could have entered for that if he had wanted, but he chose not to.[31]

Perhaps it was just as well. In fact the Government Offices competition was thoroughly mismanaged. For a start, its terms were odd.[32] It was divided into three parts: one for a 'block plan' for the whole, within certain but not rigid limits (some took this as a licence to redesign almost the whole of west London; one even proposed draining the Thames and turning its bed into a flower garden);[33] a second for Foreign Office elevations; and a third for the War Office. Later on the judges introduced a new rule of their own, which was that no one entrant, even if he had competed in more than one category, could win more than one prize, or 'premium'.[34] (These ranged from £500 to £100.) This meant that the three main prizewinners might – indeed, were almost bound to – produce designs that were mutually incompatible: buildings that would clash with one another, and would not fit on the premiated ground plan. Luckily the government also made it clear that they would not necessarily be committed by the results of the competition, and certainly were not bound to give the contract to the competitors who came first in each class.[35] One of the reasons for this was that the entries were all supposed to be anonymous (though for many this was a fiction), and they did not want to have to engage an architect who, when they learned his name,[36] turned out to be 'of poor character'.[37] That was useful later in getting them off the hook when the overall winner of the Foreign Office competition turned out to be a duffer. Apart from this, the competition was open to architects of all nations, and foreigners, in fact, won two of the 15 prizes awarded.[38] (This was not inadvertent. The foreign entries were not difficult to spot; as well as the mansard roofs, most of them had street names written in French.)[39] Some in the profession protested against this, xenophobically, though for others it was a matter of national pride.[40] Another, better cause for professional resentment was the short time span allotted for the preparation of designs: about six months, or a few days more in the case of those from abroad.[41] (One enterprising British architect who couldn't quite make the domestic deadline went over to Paris to post his entry from there.)[42] Altogether there were 218 entries submitted, though some of them were multiple – alternative Gothic and Classical elevations for the same ground plan, for example[43] – and, at the other extreme, a few seem to have been mere rough sketches. There was no weeding out of no-hopers.

This caused difficulties when the entries were all put on public display in Westminster Hall in the summer of 1857. Superficially that was a success. Following private viewings for Prince Albert and then MPs – we do not know what Albert thought of it all, unfortunately[44] – the public flocked in (free),[45] and seems to have been generally enchanted by the beautifully drawn 'towers, domes, pinnacles, far-reaching corridors, Gothic arches, terraces, statues, with and without trumpets, fountains, triumphal arches' *etcetera* on display.[46] Newspapers were impressed by the depth and breadth of national architectural talent they appeared

to reveal, quite unexpectedly.[47] But they could not really tell. Because there were so many drawings – over 2,000 in all – many were placed badly on the boards that were erected for them along the length of the Hall: too high for people to be able to examine properly, or in dimly lit corners, or next to other entries that put them at a disadvantage.[48] Although fairly strict regulations had been devised in order to facilitate comparability – all the drawings were to be to the same scale, for example – the treatment of the designs differed widely, with some drawn more delicately than others, and less shaded – shading was supposedly forbidden, but 'stippling' was a grey area[49] – which meant that their effect could be overpowered by more boldly drawn neighbours, or by the multiple entries: such as George Gilbert Scott's, who provided more than 30 views of his Foreign Office design alone.[50] There was no official catalogue of the exhibition, though one or two private ones appeared later.[51] Visitors were clearly confused. Some newspapers tried to make sense of it all, but failed: giving up after the first dozen or so exhibits, missing the best ones and frequently getting the ones they did feature – style, and so on – completely wrong.[52] Two honourable exceptions were the professional journals, which managed over several weeks to cover nearly all the entries, but even they confessed that they experienced great difficulties.[53]

This, however, was nothing by comparison with the problems that emerged when the judges were appointed – after the deadline for entries, so that competitors couldn't tailor their designs to their supposed preferences[54] – and the judging took place. The choice of judges was extraordinary. There were seven originally. Four were Scots.[55] They were chaired by the (Scottish) Duke of Buccleuch, chosen mainly, it seems, because he was a duke. Noblemen still had the reputation in Britain of being fair and honourable, which was supposed to be half the battle.[56] They were also of course greatly socially superior to architects.[57] Knowledge of or even more than a smattering of interest in architecture seems to have counted for less.[58] The duke's only connection with the subject was that he possessed a mansion in London – Montagu House – which he was presently rebuilding, in the French 'Second Empire' style. Unfortunately that same house gave him an obvious conflict of interest, standing as it did on or very near the proposed site of the new Government Offices.[59] After the panel's first meeting, Buccleuch resigned from it – though he gave another reason. A second aristocratic member of the panel, Lord Eversley, jumped ship a little later.[60] That left just one upper-class and four middle-class members: Earl Stanhope, president of the Royal Society of Architects; David Roberts, the water-colourist; Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the engineer; William Stirling, MP, the art 'connoisseur'; and William Burn.[61] Burn, another Scot, was at least a professional architect; unfortunately he was also Buccleuch's architect, the rebuilder of Montagu House, so could be said to have the same conflict of interest as the duke, and the same stylistic preference. A little way into their proceedings the committee co-opted a couple more architects, Samuel Angell and George Pownall, to advise them, but without voting rights. According to the *Athenaeum* these were necessary in order to be able to discriminate between really

good designs, and 'architectural dreams and fairy-lands on drawing paper', which the 'amateurs' clearly could not.[62] But they were very obscure men (neither has found his way into any modern dictionary of architects),[63] leading the *Saturday Review* to speculate that their appointment may have been a 'practical joke'.[64] In the event, there is little sign that the amateurs took much notice of them.

One reason for this odd choice of jurors was an anxiety to be seen to stand outside the 'Battle' that was already raging then between the Classical and Gothic styles, as we shall see.[65] Scott had just begun to crusade publicly for the application of Gothic to secular as well as to ecclesiastical buildings,[66] which some contemporaries thought explained the bitterness that entered the debate around then. Before, there had been an uneasy truce; the Classicists had conceded the ecclesiastical ground to the Goths – they couldn't in fact do much else; virtually no one wanted Italianate churches any more – so long as they could still have public buildings, offices, street architecture, great houses and the like, to keep them in employment. This new front that Scott was opening up seemed to threaten their very living. (That was one, perhaps rather ungenerous, explanation.)[67] In 1855–6 there was a widely publicized row at the premises of the RIBA when William Tite, a moderately distinguished mainly Classical architect who was also an MP,[68] openly attacked what he called the current Gothic 'mania', and Scott snapped back, just as intemperately.[69] In this atmosphere it seemed politic to avoid judges who might be committed on one side or the other. Unfortunately that seemed to rule out anyone with any expertise in architecture then. (There were in fact some neutral experts, but the government may not have known of them.)[70] That left them with 'honourable' jurors, but in the main ignorant and impressionable ones.

They seem to have worked conscientiously. They were given a fortnight to peruse the designs after the public viewings finished. Burn and Brunel apparently started work at 6 a.m. each day.[71] The panel's report, issued on 26 June, was claimed to be unanimous. It also gushed about the general standard of the entries.[72] Seven prizes were handed out for the Foreign Office (numbered in order of merit); five for the War Office; and three for the block plans.[73] Out of the 12 prizes for elevations, four (or five, if you count Tudor) were awarded to Gothic designs, which was a creditable result in view of the fact that only around 20 out of the 163 *entries* (excluding the block plans) were Gothic.[74] (Why? was a question often asked. 'Where were the Goths?' We shall return to this later.)[75] That seemed to show that the panel had, indeed, been careful to maintain a balance between the two schools; indeed, it may indicate that this was their primary concern. It could also reflect the superior draughtsmanship of the Goths; Scott's in particular, with his 30-odd drawings, some of them very large, and 'marvellously executed' in 'every portion', according to the unofficial *Handbook Guide*.[76] Gothic, being a 'picturesque' style, was probably more suited to this. For critics, of course, this merely confirmed the danger of 'telling sketches, the curse of architecture';[77] which had been one of their chief objections to the competition system for years.[78] Of the 'Classical'

winners, only one was *strictly* Classical: that is, Roman;[79] the others being mostly French 'Second Empire', or very close.[80]

Both the 'first' premiums, for the Foreign Office and the War Office, went to Classical designs: one French, the other more Italian Renaissance. The problem there, however, was that the winner in the Foreign Office category was an appallingly bad design, by a young architect whose best effort before then had been a plan for 'an Idiot Asylum at Reigate', which on the surface did not seem a very happy precedent for a Foreign Office – and that not even on his own behalf, but as an assistant in a previous firm; but really the jurors should have been able to tell from the drawings how hopeless he was.[81] In the upshot it was revealed that the experts *did*; for all their initial talk of 'unanimity', it is clear that the panel was seriously divided over this design at the very least, with Burn and the two expert assessors placing it only sixth (which itself seems generous).[82] Thereafter Coe and Hofland's design was quietly dropped,[83] being scarcely mentioned in the bickering which, as we shall see, went on about which of the premiated designs were *really* the best. Its chief significance probably lies in what it tells us about the taste and judgement of the group of men who were supposed to be adjudicating on this. 'A triumph of mediocrity', is how one modern architectural historian describes the result.[84]

This must be one of the worst-run public competitions in British building history. One of its most unfortunate results was that it gave no clear lead about who should build the new Government Offices, or in what style; unlike, for example, the Palace of Westminster competition 20 years earlier, where the style had been specified at the outset, and a clear winner had emerged.[85] So far as the 1857 Goths were concerned, though they had won neither of the main first prizes, it left them all to play for still. Their main champion, Gilbert Scott, had come only third in the Foreign Office class – or second if you disregarded Coe and Hofland; but it was later revealed that he would also have come second in the War Office competition if that arbitrary rule had not been invented, disallowing one contestant to be awarded two premiums.[86] Neither of the other winners in either class had come as high in the other. In Scott's eyes that gave him the overall lead. (He pushed his own cause shamelessly, incidentally, which wasn't considered quite cricket.)[87] He was also acknowledged to be the top Gothicist in both categories. With the whole competition so discredited, this was bound to lead to further confusion – and did.

For the moment, however, there was a brief hiatus, caused by another extraneous event – the Indian Mutiny, which broke out in May, and was cited by those who were lukewarm about the scheme anyway as another reason why it should be at least shelved.[88] At the same time it is clear that many MPs and even ministers had been rather taken aback by the grandiose character of so many of the exhibited designs, which they did not want at all. The *Building News* suggested competitors had been misled by the popular designation of the project as a 'Palace' ('of