

1701 Beach

A STUDY OF GLENLYON SCHOOL

Jane McGillivray

November 22, 1968.

A STUDY OF GLENLYON SCHOOL

If it had not been for Francis Mawson Rattenbury's architecture, Victoria would not have been the great tourist centre that it is today. The two buildings, the Empress Hotel and the Parliament Buildings, are both his products. People flock to Victoria to see the lighted buildings and to capture the medieval flavour of the Empress. Rattenbury has been described as a surly man who only thought on a grandiose scale,¹ of which these two buildings are manifestations. Because Rattenbury was primarily a civic architect, his domestic architecture suffers. Glenlyon School, his private home at the turn of the century has not been given the same concentrated effort to achieve what might be called a "Rattenbury" style.

Born in England in 1867, Rattenbury trained there with a most reputable firm, Mawson and Lockwood, which was noted for its civic architecture and then he toured Europe. This enabled him to study various kinds of architecture before he came to Canada at the age of twenty-five. These two points are important for they will help to determine his "style". When he arrived in Victoria he had his office and living quarters in the Five Sister's Block at the corner of Fort and Government. Unfortunately, in 1910, a fire destroyed the block along with many of his records.²

.... 2

1. Mr. Helmcken, the city archivist used to play with Rattenbury's son and gave me an insight into his character.
2. It is believed that perhaps his original house plans were also destroyed in the fire.

The land on which the house is located originally belonged to J. P. Pemberton.³ Mr. Black, a local boat builder bought the land either before the nineteen hundreds or shortly after.⁴ He had built a large house on the site which Rattenbury destroyed to build his own house. Rattenbury took out a building permit in 1908 to build approximately a "five thousand dollar house and later a boat house".⁵ This does not say that the construction date is 1908 because the Oak Bay Municipality was only incorporated in 1906 and therefore, they have only records from this date onwards. The house could have been constructed a few years earlier than 1908. Local sources seem to conflict on the exact date.

In any case, I shall assume that the house was constructed in 1908. The only plans available show the alterations that Rattenbury did in 1913 to the main house.⁶ In 1914, Rattenbury constructed a coachhouse for his cadillac "Black Pearl".⁷ The coach house had three main rooms, costing approximately a thousand dollars, no doubt to house his servants. In those days, it was fashionable for a man of distinction to have a chauffeur, a butler, a Chinese cook and a maid.

Rattenbury was a man of distinction but whether he was wealthy

.... 3

3. Oak Bay Municipal Hall has the original landmap for this area.
4. Mr. Cunningham, a building inspector in the early nineteen hundreds remembers this fact.
5. Oak Bay Municipal Hall has the original building permit.
6. These plans can be found in Oak Bay Municipal Hall.
7. Mr. Helmcken provided this detail!

is questionable. He enjoyed bragging about his fortune and his house is evidence of wealth, but then, he was able to get quite a discount on building materials.

A combination of brick, stucco and decorative half-timber gives the coach house a typical English air. Because Rattenbury spent the earlier part of his life in England, the designs of coach houses which he saw there were inbedded in his mind. His coach house finally evolved and in 1914 he hired Mr. Carkeek to build it.

In 1928, Rattenbury went to England with a woman friend after spending a miserable few years with his wife whom he had been living at "arm's length with for some time".⁹ He obtained a divorce and married the friend who was thirty years younger than he. Just as in a typical thriller, his young bride fell in love with the chauffeur and together they murdered Rattenbury who by this time had resorted to drink. As it goes, each received his nemesis - the chauffeur was hanged and the "charming young wife" committed suicide. Rattenbury was a churlish braggard who was tormented by marital and money problems. Perhaps, because of his character, he was unable to develop a domestic "Rattenbury style".

After the murder in 1935, the Royal Trust Company handled his estate. Mr. Ian Simpson, a Scottish gentleman, bought the estate to make a boy's preparatory school. The

.... 4

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.

school was named "Glenlyon" because Mr. Simpson had lived in a Scottish glen through which the Lyon river ran. Very few alterations were made to the actual house as it seemed to lend itself very well to a boy's private school. Only the use of the downstairs rooms were changed. The reception room, done in royal blue decorative plaster for the ceilings and white walls, is now the headmaster's office; the oak panelled library is the boy's lunch room; Rattenbury's morning room is the secretary's office. Upstairs, the six bedrooms have been converted to actual living quarters for the retired Mr. Simpson.

Mr. Simpson did make some additions to the house. In 1966 Marcus and Askew built two classrooms upstairs. Behind the kitchen was added a complete block in 1965 designed by the local firm of Wade, Stockdill, Armour. Alterations were also done to the coach house. In 1937 the architect, Birley, and the builder Dutton, designed and constructed more classrooms to blend in with the original features of the coach house. Behind the coach house in a completely separate block is the gym and more classrooms. These were also done by Wade, Stockdill and Armour in 1961.¹⁰ Over the years, the estate was transformed into a private school but the actual features of the house remain untampered.

.... 5

10. Information on the additions can be found in Oak Bay Municipal Hall.

The house, in essence an English cottage, is not typical of what one might expect a renowned architect to live in. One does not think of the house as being an architect's dream because of the many styles Rattenbury incorporated. The merging of various styles, I think, is due to all the excess material that Rattenbury had left over from his large civic projects. Instead of a true "Rattenbury styled" house, he designed a "catch-all".

Glenlyon, nestled in two and one half acres of waterfront property, has a beautiful garden which helps to create the mood of an English cottage. Rattenbury was very fond of natural beauty, for he says in a critical letter to the Colonist regarding the shrubbery around the Parliament Buildings - "It is rarely that an individual is so fortunate to have the opportunity of erecting the large building amongst the delicate tracery of woodland scenery - and the peeps of huge masses of masonry through the trees gives so distinctive a charm, so different to what one can usually see that words fail me to express my grief at seeing their charm disappear". In the same way, the garden which has been formalized to a certain extent gives Glenlyon a charming appeal. The clinging ivy and the closely cropped shrubs at the base of the house gives a feeling of naturalism - as if the house is embraced within its setting. This concept belongs to the Arts and Craft movement of which Rattenbury was influenced.

English architecture to such a degree impressed Rattenbury that one can glimpse Shaw's genius in Glenlyon. His best work was in the Queen Anne style, "but his most excellent, in the opinion of many, is that in which he developed, rather than abandoned, the Gothic tendencies of his youth".¹¹ Two of Shaw's "most excellent" features, the Gothic dormers and the Queen Anne windows - the ones with sturdy bars dividing the glass into small panes and with its woodwork conspicuously painted white have been adapted by Rattenbury. On either side of the terrace doors, which have been constructed in harmony with the Queen Anne windows, is gauged brickwork used primarily for ornamental purposes. This is also a Shavian idea. The brick, used again in the chimneys enhances the decorative quality but one also finds the brick used in the coal and fruit storage. (of all places!) The thought does not fail to enter my mind that perhaps he had ordered an excess quantity of bricks, used in another project, and rather than waste them, used them where ever possible.

The wall covering, predominately, is shingles with heavy ashlar masonry at the base and half-timber decoration on the seaside. This combination of materials is reminiscent of Richardson's Watts-Sherman house. (This, in essence, is a Shavian house employing shingles as an americanization of Shaw's tiles.) However, Rattenbury used the same materials but in a different manner. One can see that he half

.... 7

11. H. S. Goodhart-Rendel, "English Architecture Since The Regency", Great Britain, 1953; P. 161

heartedly captured in his stonework Richardson's concept of "reality as an expression of the intrinsic quality of stone; its texture, its capacity to bear weight; the constructional techniques appropriate in such a medium".¹² One can also see that stone was more of a convenience for Rattenbury (again, he probably had some left over from another project) than a long considered medium in which to express his ideas because it has spasmodically been used on both ends of the house and not in the middle section. In his treatment of the shingles, Rattenbury has completely failed, according to Richardson's concept to "emphasize the woodiness of wood". Instead of leaving the shingles to weather to a dark brown, he has painted or stained them so as to hide the "woodiness" of the shingles. He might just as well have used vertical clapboard as he did in his boathouse to achieve the same effect. One must consider at this point if there even was a architectural relationship between Richardson and Rattenbury. Rattenbury had travelled across Canada many times and I am sure he must have seen or at least heard of Richardson's work. Therefore, one can draw a comparison between the two.

At a glance, the half-timbered construction on the seaside used purely for decoration does not seem to work very well with the other materials. If one is to understand it, one must think in Ruskin's terms - "ornamentation is the

.... 8

12. A Gowans, "Images of American Living", P. 361.

principal part of architecture which impresses on the building certain characters venerable or beautiful, but otherwise unnecessary."¹³

The interior style is illustrative of William Morris' ideals of architecture. Rattenbury owes it to Morris that "an ordinary man's dwelling-house has once more become a worthy object of the architect's thought."¹⁴ Although the exterior is an amalgamation of various materials with very little coherency and therefore not pertaining to any one style, the interior is reminiscent of the arts and craft movement. Each room has been treated as a work of art and various skilled labourers have impressed their craft. The beautifully decorative plastered ceilings in the dining room and the reception room done in a rosette motif; the oak panelling and the beams in the library; the marble-patterned fireplaces (of which there is one in every room); the tiled bathroom floors, the solid mahogany floors; the thick oak doors with cut-glass doorhandles; the stained glass windows - one with probably Rattenbury's crest on it; the lead-paned windows can all be conceived in the other part of Morris' doctrine - "Real art must be made by the people and for the people as a happiness for the maker and the user."¹⁵ The plasterers, glassmakers and other workers showed extraordinary skill in their craft.

.... 9

13. N. Pevsner, "Pioneers of Modern Design", Great Britain, 1960; P. 19.

14. Ibid. P. 23.

15. Ibid. P. 23.

In fact, they held true the principal that art was not a matter of inspiration but of craftsmanship.

The only room in the house which has not even a glimmer of the Arts and Craft movement is the kitchen. It is a very dreary, depressing room done in the grey Italian marble which was left over from the interior design of the Parliament Buildings. The same marble used in the Parliament Buildings as well as in Rattenbury's kitchen is almost an insult.

Mr. Simpson mentioned that the house was constructed in partitions which could explain why there is no exact construction date. One has the feeling inside that there is really no smooth flowing directional space as if it were really built in partitions. However, there is no proof for this.

In order to really understand the house, one must consider it as a manifestation of the man. Very few people in town can remember him, or if they can, they always seem to emphasize the "shady side" of Rattenbury's character. This led me to believe that there was no real style found in the house and that it can only be considered in terms of a "catch-all" house.

SOURCES

1. The Archives were helpful to a certain extent in that the information there (usually newspaper clippings) gave an overall picture of Rattenbury as the businessman.
2. Mr. Simpson of Glenlyon School let me tour the main house and take some photographs.
3. Mr. Colbert, an employee of the Oak Bay Municipal Hall, showed me all the available plans and referred me to Mr. Cunningham, a building inspector in Rattenbury's time.
4. Mr. Helmcken, the city archivist, enlightened me on Rattenbury's character as he played with his son.
5. Carolyn Speakman, a graduate student, did a paper on Rattenbury. The essay was good to a certain extent, but I feel she over indulged in speculation. She referred me to Mrs. Burton who lives in Duncan and is Rattenbury's daughter. I was advised not to see her as she does not enjoy talking about her father.
6. Perhaps for a more specific biography of Rattenbury and his architectural ideas, one could write to the firm Mawson & Lockwood in England as it is still thriving.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gowan, Alan; "Images of American Living";
Philadelphia, 1964.

Goodhart-Rendel, H.S.; "English Architecture
Since the Regency"; Great Britain,
1953.

Pevsner, Nikolaus; "Pioneers of Modern Design",
Great Britain, 1968.