

Medievalism and Australian Gothic

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Within the discipline of Australian studies, the term “gothic” has some considerable currency, though principally in the field of architectural history. English Gothic was the main style of ecclesiastical architecture in nineteenth-century Australia, with the result that this style dominated the material and symbolic landscape of a great many Australian cities and towns. It is not surprising, then, that “Australian gothic” can be used without qualification to refer to architectural styling. It is the title of a recent book on the subject, for instance (Andrews). But the term “gothic” also has currency in the fields of Australian literary and cultural studies, where it is used in discussion of a range of forms: exploration narratives; prison and convict literature; nineteenth-century poetry; modern fiction, especially the “domestic gothic” of Christina Stead and Elizabeth Jolley, for example; and some contemporary forms of Aboriginal cultural production (Turcotte).

“Medievalism” on the other hand, has relatively little currency in Australian studies. While some work has been done on the pedagogy and institutionalization of medieval studies in Australia (Barnes, Clunies Ross and Quinn; d’Arcens), “Australian medievalism” names an only barely established field. In the hope of extending this field, I am currently editing a collection of essays provisionally titled *Medievalism and the Gothic in Australian Culture*. In this collection, I am encouraging my contributors to articulate some possible relations between these two terms, “gothic” and “medievalism,” both as disciplinary formations, and as a means of understanding Australian culture, especially in its relations with its European, or more specifically, its British colonial past. A second aim is to think about what might be distinctive about Australian medievalism; that is, what might distinguish it from American medievalism, for example, or from British heritage culture.

The two terms “gothic” and “medievalist” do not exist in any easy relationship, however. “Gothic” is the more extensively theorized term, and certainly has the longer history. Its trajectory is traced most recently by Chris Brooks, who writes powerfully of the ways in which “the semantics of Gothic” could be deployed to a range of radical or conservative ends, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While his principle concern is with architecture and design, Brooks also discusses gothic fictions and their fascination with extreme sensibilities, with imagined states, the supernatural, the unconscious, and so forth. And in a brief epilogue, “Twentieth-century Gothic,” he writes that “gothic has effectively moved

from being a literary genre to being a category of the consciousness, one way in which we experience and shape the world" (412).

The very conceptual mobility and fluidity of gothic, permitting its easy invocation in a range of global contexts, provides a suggestive model for thinking about medievalism. At a thematic level, Chris Baldick warns against "any inflexible identification of Gothic with specifically medieval settings" (xv). However, it is precisely that capacity of Gothic to move beyond its initial medieval forms and scenes of representation (the abbey ruins or the castle, for example) that is so suggestive for medievalism, especially in non-European contexts. Once medievalism is released from such literalism, it can become a much more fluid and flexible category, less tightly tied to notions of revivalism, and more evocative of different forms of signification, including the more playful, improvisatory modes typical of much contemporary medievalism. In such modes, medieval culture becomes a source of images, narratives, styles and fashions that can be recombined and used in a freefloating system of signs, tied only loosely to their original referents, and less firmly linked to self-conscious attempts to represent or to revive medieval intellectual, social or cultural forms. That is, contemporary medievalism often belongs, not to the order of representation, but to the order of the simulacrum, in Jean Baudrillard's sense.

Another way of conceptualizing this difference, perhaps, might be to distinguish between a first-order medievalism (the mode of conscious revivalism), and a second order medievalism (post-medievalist responses to that more earnest mode). Nineteenth-century medievalism, then, isn't important or interesting just as a reflection of nineteenth-century ideas about the past: the architecture, the designs, the fiction and poetry of the nineteenth-century all have their own cultural afterlife in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This, too, is part of the story of medievalism. Postmodernist, or secondary medievalism is not peculiar to Australian medievalism; it is a feature of contemporary global culture, which thrives on appropriation, on play, on fantasy, and on anachronism. However, the particular circumstances of European settlement in Australia render it especially interesting for a comparative study between these different modes.

The most dominant aspect of Australian medievalism probably *is* its gothic architecture, but these beautiful cathedrals, churches, banks and university quadrangles don't signify either "the medieval" or "the gothic" in any straightforward way. In fact, from the first voyages to New Holland at the end of the seventeenth century to contemporary and post-modernist cultural bricolage, European culture in Australia is roughly coterminous with the general shift in the gothic from its first conception as a version of medieval revivalism to its more diverse contemporary sense as a hybrid form, concerned with the uncanny, with deracination, with a particular

set of sub-cultural styles, and so forth. Similarly, examples of Australian medievalism are scattered across a range of cultural forms and practices, in addition to its nineteenth-century architecture. Moreover, because Australia still experiences itself very much as a post-colonial nation, with a very vexed and troubled relationship with British culture, Australian medievalism has the potential to offer a very distinctive set of meanings about heritage, tradition, and cultural recuperation.

In spite of this complexity, however, the dominant discourse on “Australian gothic” is still bound closely to a fairly restricted sense of architectural history. Brian Andrews’ book of that title focuses principally on ecclesiastical architecture in the English Gothic style. Andrews takes his main point of orientation from what he calls “the earnest, archaeologically informed, self-conscious approach to the style of A.W.N. Pugin and his followers that began in the late 1830s” (xx), in Australian design, that is, roughly fifty years after the First Fleet arrived to establish the first penal colony in New South Wales in 1788. While Australian patrons and clients commissioned building designs in a wide range of styles, it was Gothic, under the influence of Pugin and his followers, that came to be associated principally with ecclesiastical architecture. Over fifty such examples of designs for churches and their fittings, dating from the 1840s to the first decade of the twentieth century, were built from plans commissioned by Australian clients from English architects, most famously, Pugin himself. But there were also many such designs executed by Australian architects. From this period date William Butterfield’s two Anglican cathedrals (St. Paul’s in Melbourne and St. Peter’s in Adelaide), William Wardell’s St. Patrick’s Catholic Cathedral in Melbourne, and Edmund Blackett’s designs for a number of churches and cathedrals in New South Wales, as well as countless other smaller churches and similar buildings in Australian suburbs and country towns.

These designs are underwritten by a number of conflicting desires and impulses. Many of them reflect an uncritical internalization of Pugin’s idea of gothic as the “natural” style for ecclesiastical architecture; others reflect more integrated models of urban design; still other impulses simply reflect the architectural fashion of the time. Many represent the desire to make Australian towns look as English as possible, part of a desire to rebuild a sense of home and to construct a tradition, in a terrain where everything seemed so unutterably modern, and where daylight must have seemed so unutterably bright. Before St. Mary’s cathedral in Sydney was destroyed by fire in 1865, one writer commented that Archbishop Therry had introduced too much light: for him, the columns, canopies, seating and galleries with their Gothic decoration

would have been calculated to afford a pleasing mellowness, were not this effect interrupted by the flood of light which is admitted

on every other side by the double row of windows (Kerr and Broadbent, 85 .

To the gothic imagination, this church made a more pleasing subject of contemplation once it had been destroyed. Andrews quotes from a letter to the editor, in the *Tasmanian Catholic Standard*, of 1869, four years after its destruction.

Dear Sir - To a Catholic visiting Sydney, the ruins of St. Mary's Cathedral constitute the most interesting sight in the city. Whilst gazing upon them he is filled with feelings of veneration and awe ... Seen on a calm moonlit eve, these ruins forcibly remind the beholder of one of England's ruined abbeys; the stillness of the night and the celestial rays of Diana giving a serene air to the pile, and rendering the visitor for a while oblivious of the fact that he is in Australia, where all works (excepting Nature's are modern (Andrews 4 .

This letter displays a kind of second order nostalgia: a gothic nostalgia for an English gothic nostalgia. Such heightened feelings of veneration and awe are inaccessible in the relentless Australian sunlight, but under "the celestial rays of Diana," the ruins become a powerful mnemonic for England, and gothic England at that. But the "oblivion" praised here is also a longed-for forgetting: forgetting one is actually in Australia.

Much nineteenth-century architecture can be seen in this way, as an attempt to fill up what was seen as an empty landscape. After all, Australia was known as "terra nullius": a legal concept that was overturned only as recently as 1992 in the Mabo judgment of the High Court (this judgment recognized native title based on the continuous practice of traditional laws and customs . While church architecture is certainly the most visible sign of the gothic revival and medievalism in Australia, a number of other public and private buildings also used gothic-inspired designs to a more ostentatious effect, as Andrews shows. The ANZ bank (1883-8 , in Melbourne, designed by William Wardell, is a famous example. From the same period in the 1880s, a period of great prosperity in Melbourne, also date a number of spectacular, "boom-style Gothic" buildings by William Pitt in central Melbourne: the Melbourne Stock Exchange, the Safe Deposit, and the Rialto Buildings. These buildings seem to make more of a statement about architectural fashion and the capacity for elaborate display, in gothic style, than the highly motivated, earnest choice of gothic for ecclesiastical building.

Andrews concludes that Australian Gothic "fills a small and perhaps increasingly *irrelevant* [my emphasis] corner in our national consciousness. It is centered around those ubiquitous and generally commonplace churches of our suburbs, towns and villages" (142 . While it is true that gothic style no longer dominates Australian architecture, such a statement reveals the

risks of letting one aspect of gothic - in this case, architecture - seem to stand as a synecdoche for the much broader range of complex cultural movements that such a label could describe. Moreover, the purer forms of architectural historicism that emphasize the moments of genesis and original design can tend to obscure the social and cultural meanings those buildings take on, well after their initial inception and first decades of use. Wardell's Melbourne bank, for example, was voted by readers of *The Age* newspaper as Victoria's favourite building as recently as 1987 (Andrews 25). The afterlife of gothic or medievalist artifacts also has its own story to tell. This second-order aspect of medievalism is a very promising area of study, but ecclesiastical architecture will give us only a very partial and limited picture here.

Andrews does not discuss university architecture in detail, though most early Australian examples were resolutely gothic. The Universities of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide, founded in 1850, 1853 and 1874 respectively, all feature elaborate gothic architecture, while Sydney's Great Hall was designed as a smaller scale replica of Westminster Hall in London. Melbourne and Sydney also both feature a quadrangle system modelled on the Oxbridge colleges, while Sydney's coat of arms tellingly combines features of the arms of Cambridge and Oxford. The four great stained glass windows at Sydney's Great Hall map the allegiances and affiliations of the university beyond dispute: they feature images of the founders of the Oxford and Cambridge colleges; the succession of British royalty from William to Victoria; and a series of artists, writers, scientists, lawyers, and men of letters, from Bede, through Chaucer to Milton, William Harvey, John Locke, Edmund Burke, and finishing with James Cook, who, of course, "discovered" the east coast of Australia in 1770.

Now, it is true that like the churches discussed by Andrews, these universities belong to a particular period of architectural fashion and design that has long been superseded. Contemporary university architecture in Australia bears little resemblance to these designs. And yet it is also important to look at the afterlife of these buildings, too, to consider their role in the intellectual and cultural life of their cities. These structures are deeply photogenic, for example, and bespeak a strong sense of tradition, while also embodying a very distinctive English idea of what a university should look like. They are in high demand for conferences, theatre, film, and for advertising (especially fashion and wedding photography). Their gothic features figure prominently on the universities' websites, in promotional material directed at alumni, and at the very lucrative markets for full fee-paying students from South-East Asia. In this light, Australia is seen as closer, cheaper, and, increasingly, safer than the UK or North America as a study destination. Sydney and Melbourne have a distinct advantage, stylistically, in this competitive market, and many students comment,

walking through the quadrangles or past the residential colleges, that these two campuses, in particular, look like “a real university.”

Paradoxically, questions of historical authenticity very quickly drop away in this context, forgotten in a willing embrace of simulation. No one expects Australian university campuses to be “really” medieval, but at least this part of the nineteenth-century university looks and feels like a “real” university. Where representation assumes a minimal equivalence between the sign and the real, the image in the order of simulation “bears no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulation” (Baudrillard 11). So, for example, the nineteenth-century Law quadrangle at the University of Melbourne belongs to the first order of medievalism as representation, that aspect of the Gothic revival that naturalized medieval style for university architecture in the nineteenth century, just as the University of Melbourne as an institution was itself modelled on the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. But for contemporary tourists and photographers, the quadrangle signifies a rather different notion of tradition, or perhaps nostalgia: nostalgia for the nineteenth century. As Baudrillard remarks, “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (12). Here, the cultural afterlife of the medievalist artefact participates in the order of the simulacrum.

The university context is a very particular site for such simulation. I think it is not unreasonable to say that, as an institution, the university has undergone more radical change than the church over the last hundred years. It is more accessible to rewriting, more open to re-invention and re-modelling, more exposed to popular culture, mass media, and so on. It thus becomes a very productive site on which to consider the second-order medievalism I have briefly introduced in this paper.

In the 1920s, the fourth side of the quadrangle at Melbourne was added to match the nineteenth-century buildings on the three other sides. And in the 1970s, an underground carpark was built almost directly beneath part of this quadrangle. The carpark extends out underneath a formal lawn and a number of European plane trees, while the design of the carpark features concrete vaulted arches that echo the sandstone arches of the quadrangle above. Cunningly, the plane trees are planted directly above these columns, while the roots of the trees seek water down the columns themselves. This is a very popular site for advertising and film-making. The Mel Gibson film, *Mad Max*, shot a number of scenes here (a piece of futuristic gothic cinema, if ever there was one), and the carpark currently features in a local car advertisement. Here, the gothic signifies both futuristic minimalism and also a complex citation from the more traditional structures not too far away, above ground.

This kind of post-modernist gothic, as we may call it, has taken us a long way from the narrower, more academic understanding assumed by

Andrews, asking us to think in quite a different way about the forms of medieval representation that are possible in non-medieval spaces, or in countries with no medieval history of their own. Walking through a nineteenth-century university quadrangle, or worshipping in a nineteenth-century gothic cathedral in Australia, offers just enough verisimilitude to allow the willing subject to imagine himself or herself in, at least, a nineteenth-century English university or cathedral, and possibly even a medieval one. Driving into a concrete vaulted underground carpark offers a different experience altogether. There's no real attempt here to "represent" the medieval, in the nineteenth-century sense, of an architectural space we might inhabit in ways reminiscent of medieval uses of space, ways that might revive some aspect of medieval spiritual or intellectual tradition. Rather, the medieval functions here as a site of images to be plundered and recombined in quite different contexts, images that owe as much to pastiche, to quotation and to re-invention, as they do to representation, with the added pleasure for the university community of recognizing this learned architectural quotation.

Much of English and European medievalism is predicated on inhabiting medieval spaces, but the medievalism of post-colonial countries enjoys a rather more complex relationship with the medieval past. In many cases, that relationship is grounded not just on differences in time and space, but on a different kind of cultural relationship. I want to discuss an example I have considered elsewhere, in a different context (Trigg 7-8), but one I still find both productive and suggestive. Like the underground vaulted carpark, it invokes medieval tradition while also insisting on its resolutely modern context. The motto of Macquarie University, founded in 1964, in northern Sydney, is "and gladly teche." The motto was suggested by the first Chancellor, A.G. Mitchell, the author of *Lady Meed and the Art of Piers Plowman* (1957), a medievalist and linguist who also specialized in the Australian language. The university's historian comments on his "suggestion of genius":

"In words of great simplicity and directness," Mitchell told the Council, "it describes the two inseparable interests and responsibilities of the university scholar." To select part was not to obliterate the rest of the line but to adopt a device long familiar among classical scholars, in quotation from the scriptures and in modern English poetry -- "that of quoting part of a line of verse, or part of a sentence and leaving to the reader the pleasurable satisfaction of supplying the context". . . . He was offering the Clerk of Oxenford as the institution's ideal and symbol (Mansfield and Hutchinson 58).

Chaucer provides the focal point for the university community's potential to imagine its relationship to tradition, by recognizing and completing a

Chaucerian text. At the same time, Macquarie was being established as a comparatively radical institution of tertiary education, giving due importance to new subject areas and the break-up of traditional disciplinary formations. Medieval poetry serves as a reassuring link to an older world of scholarship, while the juxtaposition with the University's coat of arms, featuring the Macquarie lighthouse tower, signals its very local resonance in the "new" world.

Interestingly, the very specificity of this lighthouse caused problems when the University sought to register its arms in a heraldic blazon: "The arms of the University shall be on a field vert, the Macquarie lighthouse tower, masoned proper, in chief the star Sirius, or. Motto: And gladly teche." Mansfield and Hutchinson quote the letter from the Lord Lyon King of Arms in Edinburgh, Sir Thomas Innes of Learney: "Where people ask us to include a representation of this or that building, or even send us a photograph asking us to reproduce their beloved dog, we have to point out that this would not be regarded as efficient or satisfactory heraldry" (58). This contemptuous response from the heart of empire is a good indication of the complex negotiations faced by postcolonial nations seeking to articulate a sophisticated relationship with tradition. As the final blazon shows, the University went ahead with the Macquarie lighthouse anyway, in spite of Sir Thomas's strictures.

This is in many ways an exemplary story about modern relations between Australia and British tradition. In contrast to the early colonists' desire to build Gothic cathedrals in a way that might help them forget, for a moment, where they were, here we see the Australian desire for British recognition, for continuity with medieval heraldic and literary tradition, yet a willingness to adapt those traditions to their own needs, and their own very local landmarks. We also observe the British rejection of Australian claims to that continuity; and the Australian insistence on following its own path, regardless.

This dialectical aspect of postcolonial culture needs to be taken into account in discussions of Australian medievalism. It is too often tempting, perhaps, to think of medievalism as operating in only one direction, as we focus our attention on postmedieval attempts to revive, to recreate and even to re-invent aspects of medieval culture. The medieval is so clearly the past, for us; acts of medievalism so clearly take the medieval as a starting-point. Yet as we know, medievalist acts of recuperation also take place in specific social and cultural contexts, bringing together both an idea about the past and an idea about the present. As the field of Australian medievalism develops, it will be an important aspect of this work to take sufficient account of all those contexts. We need to consider not only the original medieval narratives, traditions, and cultural forms that are invoked in Australian acts of medieval recreation; but also the complex cultural

relationships between medieval culture, British “ownership” of that culture, the nineteenth-century revival of that culture, and more local struggles for cultural autonomy.

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