

The New Criterion

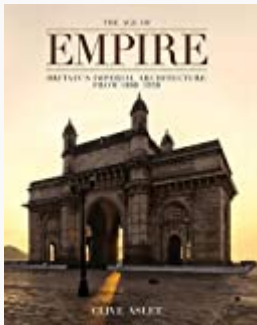
Books September 2016

The Empire's crown jewels

by David Watkin

A review of *The Age of Empire: Britain's Imperial Architecture* by Clive Aslet

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE



Clive Aslet

The Age of Empire: Britain's Imperial Architecture

Aurum Press, 192 pages, \$55.00

The author of this fascinating book has adopted a thoroughly new approach to its subject, one which the reader might not expect from the title, because it might suggest that the architecture described will be that built in the far-flung foreign territories of the Empire, rather than in Britain itself. In fact, though there are passing references to buildings in the Empire, notably in India, Africa, and the Dominions such as Canada and Australia, the section devoted to them is the final thirty-three pages of the 189-page text (less index, bibliography, and picture credits). For Aslet, much of “Britain’s Imperial Architecture” is the monumental buildings that gave a new grandeur to many towns and cities between 1880 and 1930 throughout the United Kingdom, including Dublin, Belfast, Glasgow, Liverpool, and, above all, London. Proud domes and commanding clock towers were frequently the hallmarks of these costly buildings. Aslet includes in this Imperial category a refreshingly wide range of buildings such as theaters, churches, museums, libraries, clubs, shops, ships, and even airplanes and airports. This is in contrast to one of the comparatively few books which touches on aspects of this theme, *Imperial London: Civil Government Building in London, 1850–1915* (Yale University Press, 1995), by M. H. Port, who

explains that “this is the story of civil governmental buildings in London in the period when London was being rebuilt to equip it for its role as the capital worthy of a world-wide empire. That rebuilding was in great measure a rebuilding of the financial and commercial districts.”

The people loved Empire, and so did Victoria.

The far more varied buildings selected by Aslet all share an ebullience and confidence that he traces to the new mood of the people of the United Kingdom, which dated back to the 1880s. He explains that “Before 1880 Britain had long possessed colonies but did not consider them to

be an essential part of her own dna. That changed with the New Imperialism of the 1880s, a political movement that coincided with a surge of popular enthusiasm for the Empire which became nothing short of a rage.” Vital to this was the creation in 1877 of Queen Victoria as Empress of India. This is usually attributed to the colorful Prime Minister and novelist Benjamin Disraeli, but Aslet records that in January 1873 the Queen had told her private secretary that she was already “sometimes called Empress of India,” and asked “Why have I never officially assumed this title? I feel I ought to do so and wish to have preliminary enquiries made.” Aslet claims that “to have her wish granted was a stroke of genius which showed the understanding that the Queen, though retired from the public gaze, had of her people. They loved Empire, and so did she.”

One of the finest of the many superb color plates in this book is that facing the introduction, which shows a giant bronze statue by George Frampton of the Queen Empress in front of the Victoria Memorial Hall in Calcutta. Her voluminous robes spread out extensively on either side, creating an uncanny echo of the huge dome of the Victoria Memorial Hall rising behind her, an effect which Aslet does not note, though he does claim elsewhere that, “Like the Queen’s own girth, the Empire expanded ever outwards.” The Memorial Hall was conceived in January 1901 by Viscount Curzon, the Viceroy of India from 1899–1905, in response to what he described as “such an outburst of feeling from all classes of the population of India” on the death of the Queen Empress early in that month.

The Victoria Memorial Hall, built in Calcutta, then the capital of the British Raj, is a vast, classical palace, serving as an imperial museum. Designed by Sir William Emerson, it is dominated by a superb monumental dome of polished Indian marble. Curzon claimed that it was “erected by the contributions of the Princes and Peoples of India—both European and Indian.” It was not opened until 1921 by the Prince of Wales, the future King-Emperor, Edward VIII, who was to abdicate in 1936. Lord Curzon, the greatest of all the British viceroys, was passionate about architecture and was responsible for the Ancient Monuments Preservation Act to restore many of the historic buildings throughout India which had been allowed to fall into decay. He wrote in 1903 to the Secretary of State for India in London that “I really think that almost the most lasting external effect of my term of office will be the condition in which I shall leave the priceless treasures of architecture and art which we possess in this country.”

India's gigantic rail network still helps to sustain the economy of the whole country.

Another great domed building in Calcutta shown by Aslet is the General Post Office with three colonnades and a dome at the angle. Less distinguished than the Victoria Memorial Hall, this was built in the 1860s by Walter Granville, who had been charged with the design of

important buildings in Calcutta. Turning to the great city of Bombay, we are shown the Victoria Terminal, an enormous neo-Gothic railway station which was the largest building in the sub-continent when it was opened in 1888. Its architect, Frederick William Stevens, is not mentioned by Aslet, though he rightly notes that its pointed arches "are combined with Gujarati trelliswork; surfaces bristle with crocodiles and monkeys as well as heraldic shields." No less importantly, he claims that "bringing the railway was one of the greatest of the Raj's achievements in India." Indeed, it might be said that this gigantic network still helps to sustain the economy of the whole country.

Also in Bombay we see the famous Taj Mahal Hotel, designed by an English architect in a partly Indo-Saracenic style but with a dome improbably inspired by that of the Duomo in Florence. Nearby is the more emphatically Indo-Saracenic Gateway of India, designed by George Wittet to commemorate the landing of the King-Emperor George V and Queen Mary in 1911 on their way to the Durbar at Delhi, which marked the transfer of the capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi. Aslet describes it as "combining a European triumphal arch with Indian decoration," and notes that, "finished in 1921, it became the exit of the last British Troops at Independence, little more than a quarter of a century later." Compare that to when Prince William, second in line to the British throne, recently stayed with his wife in the Taj Mahal Hotel and visited the Gateway to India. They received a rapturous welcome from the inhabitants of Bombay (now known as Mumbai).

India was always seen as "the jewel in the crown of the Empire," but there are fine buildings in British South Africa by the distinguished architect Sir Herbert Baker, who emigrated in 1892 to the Cape Colony where, with a number of others, he was appointed an architect to Cecil Rhodes. The Doric columns and hillside setting of Baker's Rhodes Memorial, Capetown (1909), on the shoulder of Cable Mountain, recall ancient monuments such as the Altar of Zeus (first half of the second century BC, now in the Pergamon Museum, Berlin) on a high terrace at Pergamon. But Baker's masterpiece is the Union Buildings of 1909-13 in Pretoria, housing the parliament of the Union of South Africa, which united four colonies in 1910. Baker chose a valley near the city of Pretoria which he saw as a "natural site for an acropolis." He set his buildings on a narrow platform half-way up, where he created what he called "a semicircular theater as the Greeks knew it." He surrounded this at the top by a hemicycle consisting of a long colonnade of coupled Ionic columns with at each end a tall dome-capped tower, reflected in the pools below, and inspired by Sir Christopher Wren's towers in a similar position over colonnades at his Royal Hospital, Greenwich. The stunning effect of Baker's merging of architecture and nature on a vast scale is well shown in

the double-page plate in this book, so I am surprised that Aslet finds that “The deliberate lack of any central emphasis . . . might be criticized as Mannerist.” For me, the whole scene is perfect.

Baker invited his friend, the architect Edwin Lutyens, to the Transvaal, which led to Lutyens designing the War Memorial and Art Gallery in Johannesburg. Even more importantly, Lutyens recommended Baker to share with him the task of designing the new government buildings at New Delhi. In 1912–14 Lutyens was busy making varied designs for the Viceroy’s House at Delhi, a palace larger than Versailles, yet with surprising modesty always known as a house and never a palace.

“The overwhelming impression is one of controlled majesty”

Baker was designing at this time two Secretariat blocks, each as large as the Houses of Parliament in London which, with their domes and columnar pavilions, flanked the approach to the Viceroy’s House. As Robert Grant Irving observed of the Secretariats in his Indian

Summer: Lutyens, Baker, and Imperial Delhi (Yale University Press, 1981), “Thirty-foot-wide flights of red stone stairs set at right angles to the King’s Way evoked visions of imperial Persepolis and the approaches to its sanctum.” Aslet writes sympathetically of the Viceroy’s House that Lutyens “adapted the Western classical tradition to the climate of the East . . . the overwhelming impression is one of controlled majesty” — a perfect summary of a building that I would choose if I were asked to name the greatest building in the world!

Aslet reminds us that “While the First World War ended the German, Hapsburg, Ottoman, and Russian Empires, it left the British Empire bigger than ever. Its possessions now stretched in an unbroken line from the Suez Canal to Singapore and from Cairo to the Cape.” He stresses that, “For the public at home, the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924 showed what fun it was to run a quarter of the world’s landmass; but the reluctance of some Indian states to participate sounded a warning note.”

Moving back to Britain proper, Aslet recounts the procession for Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee in 1887: “Foggy, soot-blackened London looked dowdy — almost provincial — beside Paris and Vienna whose glittering boulevards were lined with exuberant buildings . . . [thus] London applied itself to improvement in the grand, formal style of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.” A huge new street, Aldwych, proposed in 1889, included Australia House (1913–18) and India House (1928–30) by Herbert Baker, the latter’s interiors beautified by Indian details. Baker also built South Africa House (1930–33) in Trafalgar Square.

The ceremonial heart of London was transformed with the giant Queen Victoria Memorial in front of Buckingham Palace, which was given a grandiose new façade in a French style by Sir Aston Webb in 1913. In the center is the famous balcony which makes possible appearances of the Queen

and the Royal Family. A grand processional route to the Palace from Trafalgar Square was also created, beginning with the Admiralty Arch of 1908–11 by Aston Webb, a triumphal arch with three openings on a giant curve.

In cities outside London, grandiose public buildings invariably had domes, of which one was often not enough. Aslet interprets these as “the equivalent of Elgar’s more sonorous passages, bespeaking imperial self-confidence,” as in Belfast City Hall (1899–1906) with four domes, hinting that Belfast was one of the richest cities in the Empire. The Port of Liverpool Building (1903–07) has a central dome and “also four sub-domes at the corners of the main building, like tent-pegs to stop it from blowing away.”

“The buildings persist, long after the Empire has gone.”

I prefer Cardiff City Hall and Law Courts (1897–1906) by H. V. Lanchester and Edwin Rickards, an admirer of the Austrian Baroque who brought lively sculpture to the building, which is also enlivened by the exuberant tower, unusually placed asymmetrically. Equally

magnificent is their Wesleyan Central Hall, Westminster (1905–11), not illustrated here but overflowing with dynamic Viennese splendor, much carving by Henry Poole, and a breathtakingly theatrical staircase. That such a worldly building should commemorate the founder of austere Wesleyan Methodism marks the victory of Imperial Baroque.

Aslet laments that in the 1970s appreciation of the buildings he loves was at a nadir, but welcomes the fact that “Now a different public response can be seen from the care with which both Admiralty Arch and the old Port of London Authority are being turned into hotels and residences.” He rejoices that “People still dine beneath the mosaics of the Criterion Restaurant in Piccadilly” and that “The buildings persist, long after the Empire has gone.” His dazzling book similarly deserves a long life.

David Watkin is an Emeritus Professor of the History of Architecture at the University of Cambridge.

This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 35 Number 1, on page 114

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