

stenographic report of
at Banquet
American
Institute of
Architects
Chicago 1906?

ADDRESS BY PROF. PERCY E. NOBBS.

Professor Nobbs:-

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of that which and those whom I represent, I have to thank you for your friendly feeling toward the Royal Institute, and the Canadian Architects; I also wish to convey to you my sense of indebtedness for your kind hospitality, and the honour you do me in receiving me as the representative of some of their ideas. The last occasion upon which I had the pleasure of supping with so great and distinguished a gathering of my professional brethren, was in London, when the Royal Institute of British Architects did honour to herself by presenting her royal gold medal to your Mr. McKim. (Applause.) The genial Mr. Choate was present at that banquet, and I well remember his assuring our crowded ranks that in this continent there were not only thousands of buildings to be designed, but hundreds of cities, and last we should all take ship to participate in the designing, he went on to inform us that the sight of such American cities as were already designed, was a necessary part of a liberal architectural education. Shortly after that I found myself plying the T-square on this side of the Atlantic. I have not yet built a city ! but I have on several occasions had the good fortune to cross within your borders, and every time I feel my architectural education advances a step by a closer contact with your handiwork than your excellent building papers can afford - for seeing is believing.

To one familiar with the architectural history of the 19th Century in England, (that near past which is too often ignored in

architectural teachings, the near past of which our present is so largely made up), to one familiar with that period in England, an extraordinary sense of parallelism or resemblance occurs on studying American works,- the work of the English classic architects, Smirk, and Tite, and Elms, some sixty or seventy years ago, when the Gothic revival in England was still in its infancy, was wonderfully akin to the rarified classic which we English architects recognize as the distinctively American contribution to contemporary architecture. The kind of work that is we especially associate with the name of Mr. McKim.

It was shortly after a period of precisely such classic architecture in England that the Gothic revival obtained its fullest sanction there and even public buildings came to be "done into" Gothic for a short period.

Gentlemen, you are going to have your Gothic revival too. Anyone who is familiar with a country that has had a Gothic revival can see that,- and some horrible things will be perpetrated (laughter) - when the uninitiated begin to imitate the masters, just as it was with us, because Gothic takes a great deal of knowing, and can't be set down even in "ten books". (Laughter and applause.) May the grace be given you not to mar your your "Battle of the Styles" with the heartburnings and jealousies and bigotries which impart the air of tragedy to the history of our profession in England during the struggle that is past. In any case, you will come out of it very much as we have done, with a rejuvenated as ty lar free classic. You too will have your Norman Shaw. You already have your Pugins and your Bodleys. I feel that a Gothic revival here is to be encouraged precisely because it will lead to a broader view of

classic architecture. It seems paradoxical, but that is what will probably happen.

As a Canadian, there is a matter upon which I would like to say a word. I feel that we in the Dominion owe an enormous architectural debt to you architects of the United States. We have not, been able, so far, to get along without you. Let me assure you many of us, (even in the profession) welcome your great achievements in our cities. We would appreciate your intrusions, more, gentlemen if in addition to their bigness of idea and masterly technique, your buildings on the other side of the border showed a little more ethnographic sympathy. We are still British. I think we will always be British. We speak a sort of English, and some of us try to build a sort of English too. (Laughter) and I hope you will help us.

Now, as an instructor in design in a school of Architecture, that is to say as a professor, who, for a mess of potage incurs the fearful and terrible intellectual and moral responsibility of guiding youths, who will in the course of time, and by the grace of God, become architects (laughter), as one who assumes that responsibility, perhaps a word or two on the subject of architectural education may not be amiss. However, before I take that up, I would like to tell you a little story. Now, this is a chestnut. It has been told before over and over again. I told it in New York at a dinner of the Beaux Arts Society, and my kind friends there, perhaps owing to their Gallic suavity, gave me to understand it was new to them. On their assurance that it is new on this side of the water, I shall risk it again.

It happened that in a London office there was once a draftsman, and I think he is a draftsman still (laughter),-- This draftsman had a younger brother, who came to the same office, and after a fortnight's experience -- I will not tell you who the architect was -- after a fortnight's experience in the office, the younger brother came to his mentor and said: "Say, Bill, aren't there two kinds of architecture?" and Bill assured him that it was even so. Then the younger went on: "Isn't the one called classic and the other called Gothic?" And Bill assured him, it was even so. At length he asked: "Bill, what is the difference between those two kinds of architecture?" Bill thought a minute, and replied. "Why, haven't you noticed yet? The one has cusps and the other hasn't!" (Laughter.).

Gentlemen, I hope the day is coming when we shall have neither Gothic nor classic, (not even with the trivial distinction of the cusps),-- but modern buildings, infused with all the delicacy of the Greek, and the force of the Roman; the mystery of the Byzantine, and the directness of the Gothic; and with the verve of the Renaissance added; and besides and above all these, infused with the character of the people who put them up.

It is deplorable to think that France, Austria, Germany, most of South America, and the greater part of North America, do practically the same things when it comes to building a Music Hall or a Station. Homogeneity, even among civilized nations, can be carried too far. I hope we shall not have that kind of architecture in the future, and I think the report we heard on Tuesday of the Educational Committee, as to what ought to be done in architectural education will help us towards this. It was delightful

to hear such views expressed upon the three important matters,- the teaching of design by designers, the study of the architecture of the past as history writ large, and the necessity for general culture to precede architectural training. The emphasis laid on the last mentioned question was perhaps the most striking feature of the report.

What was reported a year ago at your convention has been taken up very seriously by the Royal Institute of British Architects, and I predict this years' reports will gain even greater attention abroad.

When I came over five years ago, I was amazed when shown through some of your great Schools of Architecture. I had no idea that such organization and equipment for architectural teaching was possible. That was because I was brought up in the English lines of apprenticeship, and I still believe the apprenticeship style to be the best. I often feel American and Canadian Architects are a little apt to leave too much to the schools. You expect more of the schools than the schools can give. There is nothing in the world like being taught by the man you are working for. That is the English way. (Laughter and applause.) I went over several of your schools, as I say, and was amazed. I was pleasantly amazed about most things; but there seemed one extraordinary hiatus. I could not make out why there was in none of your schools any representation to speak of, ^{of} English architecture. Well, it seemed rather strange, and when I came to know a few American architects who had recently passed through these schools, I realized that they were ignorant of the fact that there was as good architecture produced in

England ~~xxx~~ in the XIV and XVII centuries, as was ever produced in Greece, Italy or France. This general ignorance seemed to be part of their doctrine. (Laughter). I began to go into that matter, and I found it was not your fault at all, or the fault of the Schools, it was the British Government's fault.

Let us hope a better state of things will not be long delayed. I am doing what I can to get all the State Inspection Authorities to action, and I trust that ere long casts and photographs of English masterpieces of architecture and ornament will be supplied on easy terms to the younger nations of the Empire. If your schools will but help in the propaganda, there is no doubt but that they will participate in the benefits of the scheme.

I do not think that it matters really whether you train a man up in Gothic or in classic, in the teaching period, so long as you teach him the right way, and by the right way I understand this: that the student should from the very inception be taught to regard scholarship in architectural form as a general culture subject and not as technical education. (Applause). Now, I do not know that it is possible, four thousand miles away from the nearest mediaeval building, to inspire the Gothic sense of elasticity in design. There is this in the study of Gothic, that it forces upon the student's attention the fact that it never stood still for one day. If the American student is to study Gothic architecture with a view to reproducing the letter of Gothic motif in modern buildings in the same way that the classic motif has been "introduced" this last two hundred years, I should implore you to leave Gothic alone. If Gothic

in a Gothic spirit
can be studied in order to help us to solve the concrete and steel
construction problem which we have been discussing, then let us by
all means study Gothic. In so far as such study can help to
emancipate our Classic, I think it is worth risking the toils and
trials of a Gothic revival. To that end, I am prepared to do all
I possibly can to aid and abet American Gothicism. (Applause.)