Percy Erskine Nobbs: Teacher and Builder of Architecture

by Norbert Schoenauer

During the first four decades of this century, Professor Percy Erskine Nobbs was one of the most illustrious of McGill teachers and architects. In 1903, at the age of 28, he was appointed to the Macdonald Chair of Architecture and the directorship of the School of Architecture. Although upon his own request, after ten years, he was relieved of the directorship, he continued to teach design until his retirement in 1940.

Born and educated in Scotland, Nobbs was a talented and prolific architect whose buildings still adorn the campus of McGill University. He also designed several commercial buildings in the city as well as many beautiful Arts and Crafts inspired residences in Montreal, Westmount and other suburban communities.

Endowed with many talents, Nobbs was a versatile man. In addition to being an outstanding teacher and architect, he was also an accomplished painter and sculptor, an Olympic medallist, an expert in heraldry, and a leader in Canada in the area of town planning and urban design. Above all, Nobbs was among the early pioneers who not only appreciated Quebec’s building traditions, but taught his students to view its unique rural buildings and grey stone urban houses with reverence.

This year, the McGill School of Architecture celebrates its centennial. It was in 1896 that Sir William Macdonald endowed a chair in Architecture enabling Sir William Peterson, McGill University’s principal, to appoint a professor of Architecture. This effectively created a Department of Architecture within the Faculty of Applied Science, at that time headed by Dean Henry Taylor Bovey, a civil engineer. Stewart Henbest Capper (1859-1925) was selected to be the first Macdonald Professor of Architecture. He was recommended by Professor Gerard Baldwin Brown, a close friend of Peterson. Capper met all the requirements of the new position; he was a well-trained teacher, competent practising architect, and someone “who would have testimonials of the very highest character from the most distinguished authorities.” Capper, a graduate of the University of Edinburgh (like Peterson himself), laid the foundations of the School of Architecture and its architectural library.

Capper’s tenure at McGill lasted only seven years: in 1903, he left McGill to establish another new School of Architecture, this time at Victoria University in Manchester. After his resignation Principal Peterson once again turned to Professor Brown for assistance in finding an accomplished man to fill the Macdonald Chair.

A graduate of Uppingham and Oriel College,
Oxford, Gerard Baldwin Brown (1849-1932) occupied the Watson Gordon Chair of the Department of Fine Art at the University of Edinburgh and lectured on both history and theory of fine arts. Since special lectures were offered in the 1880s by the Fine Art department to students who were pursuing architecture as a profession, Brown had first hand knowledge of young talented architects not only in his capacity as a teacher but also as a prominent figure in the intellectual and academic life of Edinburgh. Brown was acquainted with many Edinburgh architects of renown, such as George Washington Brown (1854-1939), James MacLaren (1843-1890), and Robert Stodart Lorimer (1864-1929), in whose offices young promising architects were apprenticing.

G. Baldwin Brown introduced the notion that since art was "a manifestation of the life and culture of its age," great importance must be "given to the connexion between art and its social background." This interpretation of art had a profound influence upon many of his students and contemporaries, including Percy Erskine Nobbs (1875-1964) (Fig. 1), whom he proposed to Peterson as a candidate to fill the Macdonald Chair.

NOBBS: STUDENT AND APPRENTICE

Percy Nobbs was born at his mother’s family house in Haddington, Scotland, but his early childhood was spent in St. Petersburg, then the capital of Russia, where his father worked in a bank. It was at the School of Design in St Petersburg that he received his first training in art. At age 12 he returned to Scotland for his secondary schooling at the Edinburgh Collegiate School but continued to complement his formal education by attending classes in drawing, modelling and design, first, at Heriot Watt College, then, at the School of Art and, finally, at the New School of Applied Art.

Like his predecessor, S. Henbest Capper, Percy Nobbs enrolled at the University of Edinburgh and obtained a Master’s degree in Arts. Before his graduation he travelled again to Russia as an artist-correspondent, attending the coronation of Czar Nicholas II and Empress Alexandra, granddaughter of Queen Victoria. Back in Scotland, in 1896, Nobbs was articled in the office of Robert Stodart Lorimer, who was a member of the Art Workers’ Guild and a distinguished Scottish Arts and Crafts architect of the romantic traditionalist style.

Lorimer's devotion to Scottish architecture began in his youth when his father, Professor James Lorimer obtained a long lease of the 17th century Castle Kellie, Fife, a romantic but derelict house "with its mellow stone walls, turret stairs and crow-stepped gables." He completed his apprenticeship with Sir Rowand Anderson RSA, who established the National Art Survey of Scotland to encourage the study of vernacular building, and opened his own office with the help of a commission to restore the 16th century tower house of Earshall at Leuchars in Fife (1892), owned by R. W. Mackenzie, a friend of the family. Although Lorimer's work entailed other restorations, such as the Dunrobin Castle near Dornoch, Fife, and Lympne Castle, Kent; he also designed several modest cottages, some of these built in Colinton, a suburb of Edinburgh. Nobbs remained in Lorimer's office for four years.

After successfully passing the Royal Institute of British Architects' examinations, and winning the R.I.B.A. Tite prize (1900) for the design of a free-standing clock tower, Nobbs was elected an Associate of the Institute. Thereafter he travelled for several months in Europe spending considerable time in northern Italy with two friends and colleagues, Ramsay Traquair (1874-1952) and Cecil E. (Scott) Burgess (1870-1971). It was the beginning of a long association in architectural education that would culminate in later years at McGill University.

Returning from his travels in Europe, in 1901, Nobbs moved to London and worked for the London County Council (LCC), headed by William Edward Riley (1852-1937), an effective construction organizer. At the LCC Nobbs gained much practical experience in building operations and was also exposed to several architects who, like Lorimer, were inspired by the Arts and Crafts movement. Owen Fleming, appointed in 1893 to lead the team of LCC designers, was one of the Arts and Crafts architects much admired for his humane designs of inner city housing estates, such as the flats at Boundary Street (1895) and Millbank (1899), as well as for his low density cottage estates, including Totterdown Fields in Tooting (1903). After a while, Nobbs left the LCC to become chief assistant to A.
Hessel Tiltman (1854-1910), a prominent London architect and a Fellow of the R.I.B.A. It was at this point, in 1903, that he was interviewed by Principal William Peterson, and despite his being only 28 years of age Nobbs was offered the Macdonald Chair of Architecture at McGill University.

**NOBBS AT MCGILL**

In his opening lecture at McGill’s Department of Architecture, Nobbs expounded on the importance and influence of material and technical process on design, and averred that “the great quality of truthfulness can only be obtained by having due regard for the natural limitations of materials themselves and the techniques to which they are subjected.” He illustrated this point with a comparison between cast iron and wrought iron works: “A clumsy, thickset heaviness is right and proper and beautiful in cast iron while a lacelike slimness is equally characteristic of the material and technic of wrought iron.” Unfortunately, for economic reasons, wrought iron was continually being copied in cast iron which, in Nobbs’ opinion, resulted not only in a fragile and unsafe railing, but also in a lifeless and ugly product from the artistic standpoint. He concluded his lecture with the advice “to treat materials with sympathy and technics with understanding; to ask what shall this be made of or how will that be wrought before the pencil is committed to the paper; and above all things the negative precept not to sham.”

Nobbs’ views clearly reflected both John Ruskin’s (1819-1900) plea for truthfulness in architecture as well as the Art Workers’ Guild credo “to use materials aright.” And, like most of his contemporary Arts and Crafts architects in Great Britain, Nobbs had little sympathy for the Art Nouveau movement, considering it a mere temporary aberration as well as an eccentric pretense of design in pursuit of originality.

When Nobbs arrived at McGill, he found that the Department of Architecture consisted of Henry F. Armstrong (the only full-time appointed teacher at the School) and two students, Gordon H. Blackader and Harold E. Shorey. Both students had just completed the preparatory first year. A third student, Albert M. Pattison, had left the Department after finishing the second-year course. Blackader would later be seriously wounded at the Battle of Ypres in World War I, which led to his premature death in 1917. The Blackader Library of Architecture at McGill University was founded in his memory, with a very generous endowment by his parents.

Immediately after his arrival, Nobbs (Fig. 2) began to reorganize the four year architecture curriculum into two streams; one, as before, leading to the Bachelor of Science in Architectural Engineering (B.Sc. Arch. Eng.), and the other to a “new” Bachelor of Architecture (B.Arch.) degree. Students in the B. Sc. Arch. Eng. program retained much parallel instruction with civil engineering students, including the prerequisite of Applied Science Matriculation for admission. However, students pursuing the B.Arch. stream were liberated from some of the more demanding technical courses of the Faculty of Applied Science. These Nobbs replaced with courses from the Faculty of Arts; moreover, the less stringent Arts Matriculation (with French compulsory, and Freehand and Geometrical Drawing added) sufficed for admission to this new program. Thus, the preparatory first year of the B.Arch. program now became separate and distinct from that of the B.Sc. Arch. Eng. program. This change resulted in the Department becoming the School of Architecture.
As before, during Capper's tenure at McGill, architectural studies proper began in second year and the amount of time devoted to design studio work increased gradually in the upper years. Generally, lectures were divided in five groups: history, structure, theory of design, ornament and decoration, and professional matters. In the third and fourth years lecture hours were usually from 9 to 10 in the morning, to enable Partial Students, working as apprentices in architects' offices, "to avail themselves of the instruction." Such lectures were recommended "for those studying for the R I B.A. and the P.Q.A.A. (Province of Quebec Association of Architects) examinations."10

With increased enrollment it became necessary, in 1906, to add three new assistants to the School's staff. Cecil Burgess, who had travelled with Nobbs in northern Italy, was appointed to teach "History of Architecture (Egyptian and Byzantine)" and "Building Construction", E.E.S. Mattice taught "Structural Engineering", and Marcel C.T. Beullac, of the Dominion Bridge Works, was responsible for "Professional Practice". Nobbs taught "Design", "Theory and Evolution of Architectural Form", "Building Trades", "Ornament and Decoration", "Science of Planning", and two history courses, "Gothic Architecture" and "Renaissance Architecture".

The principal text book for the History courses was A History of Architecture (1896) by Banister Fletcher, and among reference books were listed From Schola to Cathedral (1886) by G. Baldwin Brown, Auguste Choisy's L'Art de Batir chez les Romains (1873), Violet-le-Duc's Lectures on Architecture (1881) and John Ruskin's Stones of Venice (1886). The text book for "Theory and Evolution of Architectural Forms" was G. Baldwin Brown's The Fine Arts (1891) and reference books were the same as in the History courses. Text and reference books of the "Ornament and Decoration" course included Lewis Foreman Day's Anatomy of Pattern (1892), George William Eve's Decorative Heraldry (1897), Grammar of Ornament (1868) by Owen Jones, Walter Crane's The Bases of Design (1897) and Aymer Valance's William Morris, his Art, his writings and his public life: a record (1897).11

In 1909, Philip J. Turner (1876-1943) joined the staff to teach "Building Construction", while Burgess took charge of the "History of Medieval and Renaissance Architecture", which he relinquished a year later to Thomas Ludlow, a newly appointed Assistant Professor. (Burgess left Montreal to supervise buildings designed by Nobbs for the University of Alberta in Edmonton.) A new instructor, Henri Hubert, a well-known sculptor, was appointed in 1910 to teach "Modelling".

The growth of the School in this period is reflected in the increased numbers of graduates from two, in 1906, to eight, in 1912. With the establishment of a second School of Architecture, the École Polytechnique on St. Denis Street (1907), and the founding of the École des Beaux-Arts on St. Urbain Street (1923) under the direction of a distinguished graduate of the École in Paris, Professor Jules Poivert, there was no pressure to grow rapidly. Far more restricting to growth were the consequences of World War I and the Great Depression of the late 1920s.

A talented and versatile architect eager to design and construct buildings, the somewhat temperamental Nobbs had little patience for administration. Moreover, Principal Peterson disapproved of the School's director seeking ever greater involvement in professional practice instead of devoting all his energies to teaching. This conflict led to Nobbs' request, in 1909, to be relieved of the responsibility of the directorship. His replacement was effected in 1913 with the appointment to the Macdonald Chair of Architecture of Ramsay Traquair (1874-1952)—another friend with whom he had travelled in Italy many years earlier. Nobbs, however, remained on the staff of the School as a Professor of Design until his retirement.

During World War I Nobbs enlisted and was engaged in military training, teaching young Canadian recruits bayonet fighting. Later he joined the Royal Engineers and served as a camouflage expert in France, attaining the rank of major by the end of the war.12 In the meanwhile, Traquair continued to teach at the School of Architecture, and also gave OTC (Officer Training Corps) combat instruction on the McGill campus. Edgar Andrew Collard recalled that during his instruction Professor Traquair would leap in the air, clutching his bayonet-tipped rifle, his kilt flapping about his legs, and shout to the recruits: "What you require is more ferocity!"13
THE PRACTICING ARCHITECT

Shortly after his arrival in Montreal, Nobbs had sought professional involvement in the practice of architecture, arguing that a practice was essential to demonstrate to students the application of good architectural values. And indeed, only one year after his arrival at McGill University, he succeeded in obtaining from its Governors the commission to design the Students’ Union on Sherbrooke Street West—now the McCord Museum (Fig. 3, see p. 87). "The object of the Union was to make the social life of the undergraduate attractive" and it "was to be a Club" in which students of various academic disciplines were to meet, "not as members of their several faculties, but as members of the University."14

Although the building was designed by Nobbs, it was executed in association with the firm Hutchison and Wood, since Nobbs himself had not yet established an architectural office. On the ground floor, the Dining Room occupied the west side of the building, with the kitchen below; while the Grill Room, serving light meals for lunch, was on the east side. On the second level, the most impressive room was the Lounge, and on the third level the large Hall. The Lounge and Hall occupied the entire length of the front. The Union was one of several gifts by Sir William Macdonald, McGill’s great benefactor.

On the 5th of April, 1907, the Macdonald Engineering Building was almost entirely destroyed by fire. Designed by Andrew T. Taylor (1850-1937), the building exterior was solidly built of limestone, but its interior was of mill-construction. Both the interior and the roof of the building were entirely wrecked, and the external stone walls were seriously damaged. Located on the top floor of the building, the Architectural Department, with its valuable collection of casts, models, photographs and lantern slides, was practically wiped out. (Fig. 4, see p. 88) By a remarkable chance some sketch designs (believed to be by Pugin) were saved without serious injury.15

On very short notice, Nobbs was commissioned to redesign and rebuild the structure on condition that it be operational for the fall semester that same year, which, in fact, he achieved (Fig. 5, see p. 89). A bas-relief depicting the legendary Phoenix arising youthfully from the ashes, still adorns the south gable of the Macdonald Engineering Building. The School of Architecture was moved from the top floor to the ground floor of the reconstructed building, an area that the Engineering Library would occupy in the 60s and 70s. To replace the destroyed items of the School’s Museum Room, Professor Armstrong was sent to England, in 1907, to purchase a new collection of casts, photographs and other equipment.16

In 1910, Nobbs entered into a partnership with one of Capper’s first students, George Taylor Hyde (1879-1944). He had graduated from McGill in 1899 with a B.Sc. in Architecture and later studied at M.I.T. This partnership, which lasted until Hyde’s death, resulted in the design and execution of many renowned institutional, commercial and domestic buildings. Noteworthy on or near the McGill campus are the University Library Extension (1921), The Osler Memorial Library (1921), the Pathological Institute (1922-24), the Pulp and Paper Research Institute of Canada (1926-28), and the Royal Victoria College Extension (1930).

The University Library Extension stands out as an example of Nobbs urban design civility (Fig. 6, see p. 89). Not only did he use the traditional building material of the campus, Montreal grey limestone, but he also complemented the existing Redpath Library structure (designed by Andrew Taylor), in spite of the fact that he disliked eclectic buildings. Susan Wagg’s assessment of this building in her monograph on Percy Nobbs is insightful. "Clasped between the end towers of the old building, Nobbs’ elegant addition, with its simplified lines and shape, created a fitting conclusion—both visually and stylistically—to the architectural sequence that unfolded along McTavish Street. Unfortunately, his contribution to this joint architectural effort has been largely obliterated by a later, purely functional addition in reinforced concrete. Modernism’s utter rejection of the past left little room for mercy."17

Other notable non-residential buildings in Montreal designed by Nobbs and Hyde are: The New Birks Building, Cathcart Street (1911); Edward VII
School on Esplanade Avenue (1912); University Club of Montreal at Mansfield Street (1912); Bancroft School, St. Urbain Street (1914); and the Drummond Medical Building, Drummond Street (1929).

In general, Nobbs preferred the middle road of sober architecture; well-built, functional and integral to its surroundings with an appropriate balance between simplicity and the measured use of meaningful ornamentation displayed in selected places. He had a deep passion for architecture, not only as a designer but also as a builder. "Paper design is not architecture" he stated categorically in an article written for The R.A.I.C. Journal. The A B C of architecture, he contended, "must be apprehended out of doors in contact with operations and ruins. The architect may seek consolation in a drawing; but cannot find full satisfaction in creating anything he cannot walk around, or walk into."18

A skilled craftsman, Nobbs was always ready whenever necessary to demonstrate good craftsmanship whether in masonry, sheet metal work or in other trades to his workers or the building site. He was a perfectionist, and so was his life-long partner Hyde.

DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURE

Like most Arts and Crafts-trained architects, Nobbs excelled in domestic design. His first residential design, in partnership with David Robertson Brown (1869-1946), was the now-demolished C.W. Colby House (1905-06). Built for Professor Colby, who occupied the Chair of History at McGill, this house had an unusual twin-gabled front bearing an uncanny resemblance to a cottage in Colinton, Edinburgh, designed by his mentor Lorimer. A year later, this time in partnership with Cecil Burgess, Nobbs designed the J.B. Porter House on McTavish Street, which has also been demolished.

In partnership with Hyde, Nobbs built the John Lancelot Todd country house (1911-13), at 180 Senneville Road, Senneville, an exurb of Montreal. Built entirely of stone, Todd's two-story stately mansion, with an impressive arched porte cochere, a large pillared veranda and sleeping porch, has a steep shingled hipped roof, the angle repeated in its polygonal dormer windows.15

In 1914, five years after his marriage to Mary Cecilia Shepherd, daughter of McGill's Dean of
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Medicine, Nobbs initiated the building of his own family residence at 38 Belvedere Road (Fig. 7, see p. 90). Constructed on the upper slopes of Westmount, this four-story brick building offers its occupants a breathtaking view of the city below. Its steep slated roof and prominent gables, with a subtle flair on the ridge at its gable-ends, are details intrinsic to homes designed by C.F.A. Voysey (1857-1941), one of the most famous Arts and Crafts architects.*

Nobbs' and Hyde's Arts and Crafts design tenets are also evident in a cluster of five charming homes built at 3166-3182 The Boulevard (1921-25) (Fig. 8, see p. 90), Westmount. Four of these homes are semi-detached dwellings, and the fifth, detached. Yet another cluster of homes designed by Nobbs and Hyde is the Grove Park Estate (1924-29), Westmount, a group of houses that, too, reflect the turn-of-the-century domestic architectural trend prevalent in England. These clustered homes also echoed Nobbs' belief that, apart from facilitating aesthetic harmony in a residential enclave, groups of dwellings have an added benefit derived from economics. He argued, for example, that there is a substantial saving in building forty houses together, as against forty houses, one by one. In this spirit Nobbs designed other enclaves for residential projects, such as, Belvedere Terrace, Westmount, and Queen Mary's Gardens, Hampstead.

Additional houses in Westmount designed and built by Nobbs and Hyde were: the H.R. Trenholm House (1921) and the J.H. Magor House (1922), both on Mount Pleasant Avenue, and the F.C. Wilson House (1926), Belvedere Place. On Redpath Crescent, on the slopes of Mount Royal, they designed the G.W. Grier House (1928) and the R.R. Dobell House (1928). On Lakeshore Road in Dorval they built the A.H. Scott House (1922) (Fig. 9), a building that pays homage to traditional French Canadian architecture.20

In all his domestic architecture, Nobbs stressed the importance of good sun exposure and efficient ventilation in all rooms of a dwelling. He also believed that all facades of a home should be given equal design consideration in order to ensure that views of the rear of buildings were as pleasing as those of the front.

*Professor Bruce Anderson drew the author's attention to the presence of Voyseyesque ridge flair.

Susan Wagg's observation that Nobbs attained "the most sought-after goal of progressive Arts and Crafts architects," in the Todd country house, namely "a house that is styleless in the historicist sense—at once modern and timeless" applies to all his domestic design.21

NOBBS, A VERSATILE MAN

Nobbs was also an accomplished painter and sculptor. In his youth, he took drawing and painting lessons from W.D. MacKay, Secretary of the Royal Scottish Academy (RSA).22 He must also have been influenced by Phoebe Traquair (1952-1936), another member of the RSA. She was an accomplished artist of miniature paintings, book illuminations and embroideries and was praised by Ruskin for possessing the spirit of the 13th century. Phoebe Traquair was the mother of Nobbs' friend and colleague Ramsay Traquair, who would later succeed him as director of the school.

Nobbs painted a portrait entitled "Macdonald and Peterson on the McGill campus" for the Students' Union.* During World War I, Nobbs also painted several landscape views of the countryside in France, and later made several paintings depicting his own flower garden (Fig. 10, see p. 91).

Most of the plaster ornaments made by Nobbs for the Students' Union were destroyed after the building's conversion to the McCord Museum. But a few Zodiac signs and one stained glass window, were rescued by Professor John Bland. In the 70s, these ornaments adorned a corridor in the School of Architecture when it was in the McConnell Engineering Building. The beautiful stained glass window "Winter," depicting an old hooded person plodding through snow, still embellishes a window of one of the School's offices.

In addition to being an accomplished artist, Nobbs was also an athlete who won a silver Olympic medal in fencing (London, 1908). As an outdoorsman, he was very fond of fishing and an expert in making flies for

both trout and salmon fishing. "In his youth a railway accident involving a circus enabled him to retrieve the long, white tail of a dead stallion, which kept him and two companions in hair for fishing flies for the rest of their lives."\(^{23}\) *Salmon Tactics* (1934) and *Fencing Tactics* (1936), two books authored by Nobbs, substantiate his expertise in these two fields.

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Knowledgable in heraldry, Nobbs was appointed to a committee with Dr. John G. Adami, chaired by Dean Charles E. Moyse, to prepare a design for a coat of arms for the University, since the previous arms were deemed faulty and inadequate. The committee’s design was accepted and was registered in the Somerset College of Heralds, and is still in use (Fig. 11, see p. 92). The inclusion on the coat of arms of the book, which carries the founder’s motto "IN DOMINO CONFIDO" indicates the possession of University powers. The two ancient French crowns refer to the origin of the site and to the Royal Charter of the University. The three points symbolize our three snow-clad mountains [Mount Royal, Outremont, and Westmount], the martlets being the reversal of the McGill family arms, in deference to our founder. The motto "GRANDESCUNT AUCTA LABORE," selected by Sir Wm. Dawson, is broadly interpreted as "Great things increase by dutiful labor."

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In an article for The McGill News (1940), Nobbs expressed his ideas about a new Canadian Flag. He wrote: "The symbolism requires careful thought. There is already a considerable body of opinion favouring a white field because, it is stated, the first French ships to come to the St. Lawrence flew a square, plain white flag. I am quite prepared to accept the white field for another reason. Snow is white and very beautiful and we have more of it than any other Dominion; indeed than all combined. General opinion also seems to favour the incorporation of a Union Jack somewhere. So long as there is a Northern Ireland, sending members to Westminster, the Union Jack, as we now know it, will stand. Should Northern Ireland, however, cease for any reason to send members to Westminster, it is to be presumed that St. Patrick’s cross (the red saltire now divided with St. Andrew’s cross, which is the white saltire) will drop out....Then there is also considerable unanimity as to the maple leaf (or leaves) finding a place in the Canadian flag.....As to the maple leaf, my view is very clear; one leaf only and that a red one....and after all, the most characteristic thing about Canadian maple leaves is that they can be so very red. These red leaves, fallen on an early snow, are associated with the finest gift of nature in this land—October days....The great national flags of the world are all strikingly simple. If we are to have a national flag let it have that artistic quality."\(^{25}\) Nobbs’ comments were prescient: the red maple leaf on a white field was adopted for the Canadian flag decades later.

**NOBBS AND MONTREAL’S ARCHITECTURE**

When Nobbs arrived in August 1903 at Montreal’s harbor, voyagers were typically disembarking into "an unassorted lot of fragments of wharfs and grain elevators." After hiring a cab, a newly arrived passenger was driven up St. Francis Xavier (rue François Zavier) or St. John Street (rue Saint-Jean), both streets with a picturesque profusion of poles and wires. Crossing narrow St. James Street (rue Saint-Jacques), the traveller would get a glimps of tall and substantial buildings, but after descending into Craig Street (rue Saint-Antoine), a wide thoroughfare, the ambiance suddenly changed: "rows of the neatest old stone houses imaginable" were disfigured "with disproportioned and unattractive, not to say repulsive signs, in apparently some kind of simple and unquestioning faith that they thereby recommend themselves to the general public. A little modesty and tidiness," suggested an anonymous writer with the nom de plume "Concordia Salus," could have made "a wonderful transformation here.... These disfiguring signs are worse than sin, they are blunders, and to architects they are particularly offensive as being a cheap way of obliterating even the finest architecture."\(^{26}\)

Since this article was apparently written by an architect and a newcomer to Montreal, and since the nom de plume "Concordia Salus" was borrowed from the City of Montreal’s coat of arms, it is tempting to attribute the quote to Nobbs. While there is no proof as to the identity of the writer, the sentiments expressed in this article are nevertheless consistent with Nobbs’ critical views. In fact, two years after the publication of
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this anonymous article, Nobbs chaired the Province of Quebec Association of Architects Committee on City Improvements, which advocated the construction of a bridge over the wharves to enable passengers to reach the city after disembarkation without having to cross the railway lines that border the river.27

Later in life, in an article written for the RAIC Journal, Nobbs said that on his arriving at the Montreal docks, he hired a cab that passed the new Board of Trade building (by Brown and Miller), which he liked. Later, he recounted, he was shown the Bank of Montreal building then under construction (by McKim, Mead, and White), and was impressed with its Craig Street (rue Saint-Antoine) facade. Windsor Station, the Place Viger Hotel and the Royal Victoria College (all by Bruce Price) he viewed as mementos of the "American Battle of Styles," a skirmish that had spilled over our border. On the McGill campus the Chemistry Building (now the School of Architecture and School of Urban Planning), by Sir Andrew Taylor (in partnership with Hogle and Davis), he assessed as both reasonable and charming, "in contrast with the Ruskinian freakishness of some of its neighbours." The Royal Victoria Hospital (by Saxon Snell) he opined was a mere copy of Edinburgh’s Royal Infirmary.

Of Montreal’s churches he liked that of the Grey Nuns on Dorchester Street (now boulevard René-Lévesque) designed by Bourgeau in 1871, and St. Patrick’s by Rev. Father Martin S.J., built in 1847. Notre-Dame Cathedral on Place d’Armes (by James O’Donnell), he found dull, but admitted that its adroit plan could accommodate a large congregation. The St. James Cathedral (now Cathédrale Marie-Reine-du-Monde) he viewed as merely “a quarter half-scale model of St. Peter’s in Rome,” which it is. Christ Church Cathedral (by Frederick Wills) represented the Gothic Revival “in full flower.”28 Most of the buildings not favoured by Nobbs were designed either by American or British architects, who did not live in Montreal and had no sense of the Canadian ‘genius loci.’

As a former student of Gerard Baldwin Brown and therefore a believer of his teacher’s credo that art was ideally a manifestation of the life and culture of its age and place, Nobbs searched for a Canadian architectural identity. He extolled the virtues of vernacular buildings built by the original settlers of Quebec and recalled in one of his articles that when he first came to Montreal, architecture was "subjected to the following more or less competitive influences: a) Parisian academism, b) the rarified classic of the McKim, Mead and White tradition, and c) Gothic revivalism in its many forms, including d) American romanesque. A decade and more was to elapse before I became instrumental in interesting the profession and the general public in the sterling qualities of the old architecture of the Province of Quebec, which paralleled the Colonial period in the USA...”29

Nobbs admitted, however, that during the five decades since his arrival in Canada, he witnessed a great improvement in Montreal’s architecture. His "haphazard list of a few good buildings" were: The Macdonald Agriculture College, St Anne de Bellevue—Hutchison and Wood; The Municipal Library, Sherbrooke Street East—E. Payette; The Crane Building, Beaver Hall Square (now Square Frère-André)—H. Vallance; The New Court House, Notre Dame Street East—E. Cormier; Bell Telephone Building, Beaver Hall Hill—E. Barott; the Château Apartments, Sherbrooke Street West—G. Ross; and The Congregation of Notre Dame (now Dawson College), Sherbrooke Street West—J. Marchand.30

Nobbs, even in his old age (Fig. 12, see p. 92), remained a committed Arts and Crafts architect. He never wavered in his convictions, nor did he ever disown the Arts and Crafts tradition—as many others did before embracing the International Modern Style. In Nobbs’ opinion, architects who followed the modern movement to the letter were mere “accommodation engineers” and his sentiment with respect to this new movement is summed up in the last sentence of his book Design: A Treatise on the Discovery of Form (1937): "One must distinguish between modernistic absurdity and modern genius in design—the one denies the past, the other realizes the present as the step between the past and the future.”31

CONCLUSION

Percy Nobbs was an extraordinary man whose contribution to Canada, his adopted country, as well as to Montreal and McGill University was profound. He
was one of the first architects who understood and appreciated Canadian building traditions, such as the traditional architecture of Quebec and Montreal’s grey stone houses, both of which he considered more suitable to local conditions than buildings based on designs imported from abroad. He saw a danger in the "Americanization" of our arts and architecture, and advocated the development of a Canadian design and building tradition, such as our predecessors possessed, but lost during the 19th century.32

Nobbs was a pioneer not only in architecture, but in the planning profession as well. He was a proponent of a comprehensive city plan for Montreal for town planning legislation for the Province of Quebec. When the City of Montreal, in 1941, established a planning department, Nobbs was retained as a consultant.

Percy Nobbs was elected president of the Province of Quebec Association of Architects (1924), president of the Town Planning Institute of Canada (1928), president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (1931), vice-president of the Montreal City Improvement League (1930), joint-chairman of the Montreal Committee on Housing and Slum Clearance, member of the Royal Society of Arts, London (1939), and acting president of the Royal Canadian Academy. He received the Outdoor Life Conservation Award (1952) and was awarded an honorary degree of Doctor of letters by McGill University (1957).

Percy Erskine Nobbs died on November the 5th, 1964, at age eighty-nine, leaving behind a legacy of impeccable works of architecture, and of an exemplary devotion and dedication to both teaching and building architecture. Nobbs’ drawings and artifacts were presented by Professor John Bland to the Blackader-Lauterman Library of Architecture and Art and have become an integral part of the library’s Canadian Architecture Collection and is documented by Irena Murray in Percy Erskine Nobbs and His Associates: a Guide to the Archives/et ses associés: guide du fonds (1986).

Nobbs was born and educated in Scotland, but his life’s work flourished on the shores of the St. Lawrence. His grave can be found on the slopes of Mount Royal.

Notes

3. Ibid., p. 105.
9. Ibid., p. 155.
11. Ibid., pp. 185-187.
17. Wagg, op. cit., p. 41.
20. Ibid., pp. 95-97.
22. Ibid., pg. 2.
23. Ibid., pg. 74.
Percy Erskine Nobbs