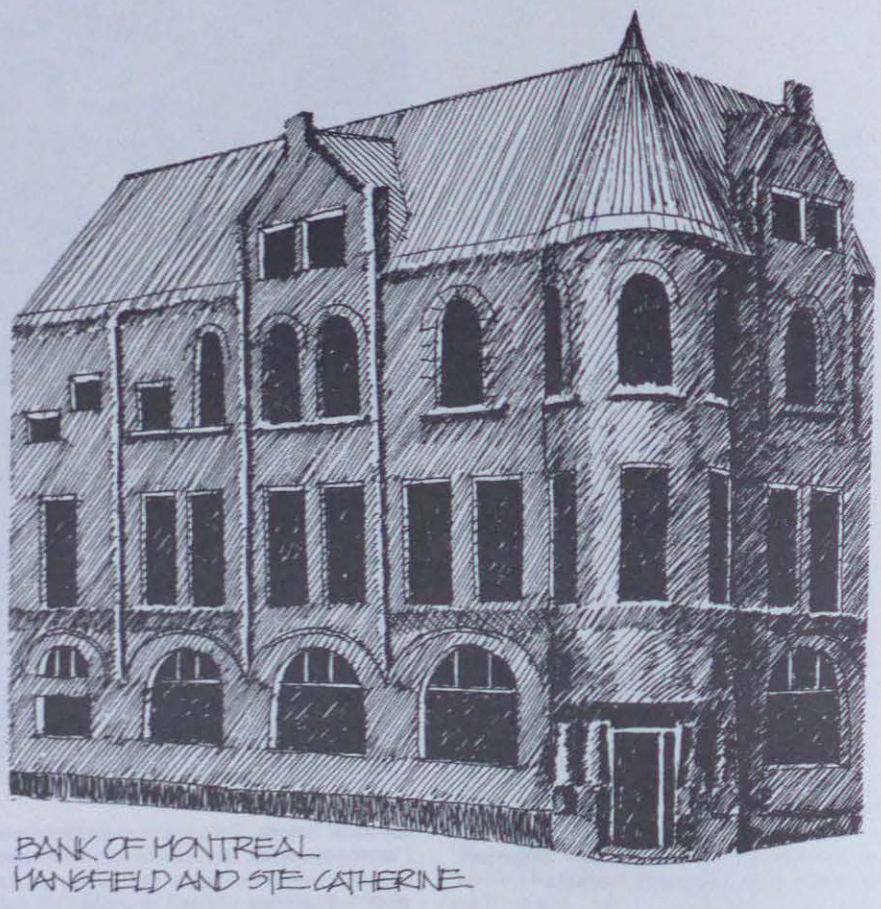
Refining tradition and shaping the character of a burgeoning university...

McGILL'S LATE GREAT VICTORIAN ARCHITECT

SIR ANDREW TAYLOR

by John Bland



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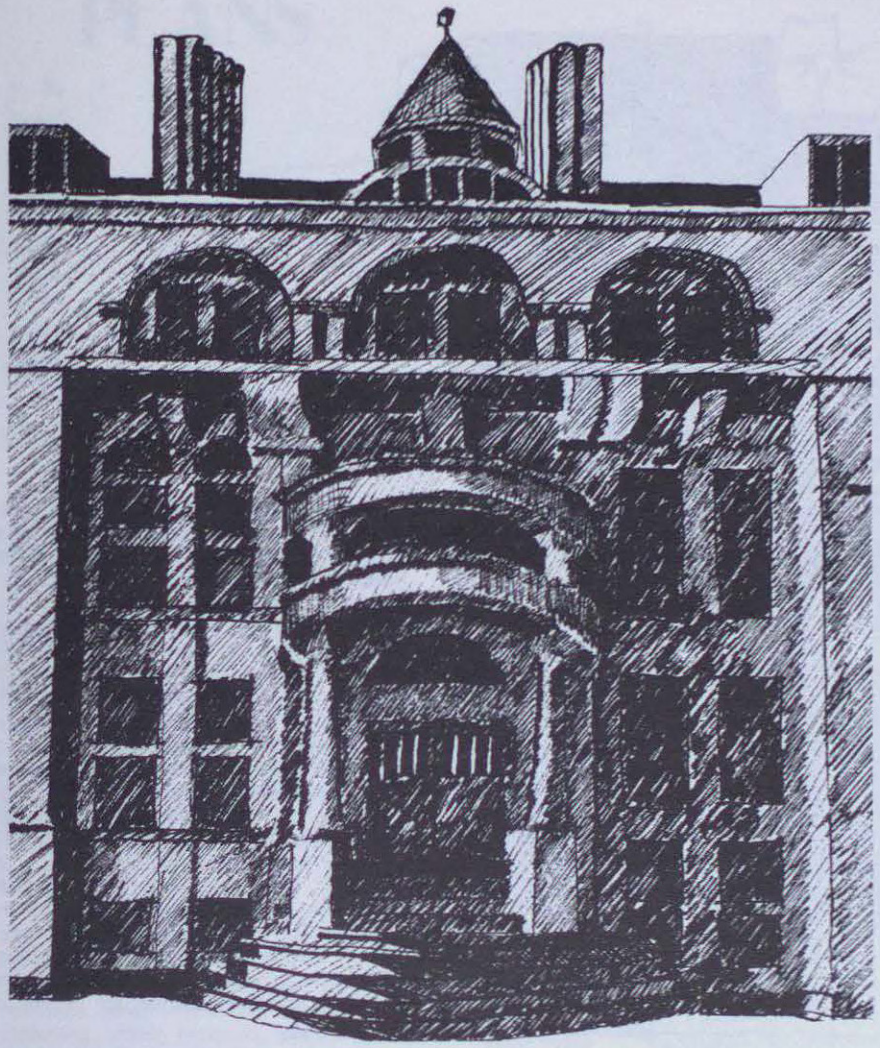
ON DECEMBER 6, 1937, under the heading "Sir Andrew Taylor - Architecture in Canada", the **Times** reported the death of Andrew Thomas Taylor at his home at Hampstead at the age of 87, noting that he had practised for 20 years in Canada where he gained many competitions and medals and was architect to the Bank of Montreal, the Merchants Bank of Canada, and Molson's Bank, and designed many important buildings, including McGill University. However suprising the last mentioned may seem now, when Taylor left Montreal in 1904, McGill had eight buildings and Taylor had designed six of them. Only three survive - the Macdonald Physics Building (1892), now being refitted for the Physical Sciences - Engineering Library; the Redpath Library (1893), the reading room of which now serves as a ceremonial hall; and the MacDonald Chemistry and Mining Building (1896), Taylor's last job for McGill. In addition to these three, in 1904, there were - the original MacDonald Engineering Building (1890), which burned in 1907 and was almost immediately replaced by Percy E. Nobbs on its old foundations; behind it stood the Workman Building (1891), which has been altered so often it can no longer be considered Taylor's; there was also his Medical Building (1894), the forepart of which was destroyed by fire in 1907, leaving the rear part in use until 1966.

All six of Taylor's McGill buildings were designed between 1890 and 1896, in what seems to have been the short peak period of his professional career. All had marked stylistic differences - the Engineering and the Chemistry buildings were symmetrically composed and, like the Arts and Museum buildings that preceeded them on the campus, classically derived; whereas the Physics and Library buildings were asymmetrical and vaguely Richardsonian; on the other hand, the Workman and Medical buildings, in the background of the main group, were plain compositions that depended on proportion and structural rhythms for their melodies instead of such combined with the motifs of a familiar style. Nevertheless, all had agreeable common qualities. Like the first buildings on the campus, they were built of grey stone, although generally lined with brick rather than painted plaster. All had a consistent scale, derived from the limitations of normal masonry-cum-timber construction, and restraints imposed by daylighting the interiors and using stairs for access to the various floors. Finally, all shared a common rational organization of parts, and uncomplicated relationships to their sites (prominent entries; principal rooms and stairways directly accessible; less frequented spaces accommodated on upper floors; service activities in basements; service entries ample and discrete; and natural differences in surrounding ground levels cleverly exploited).

Layout: Mark Poddubiuk

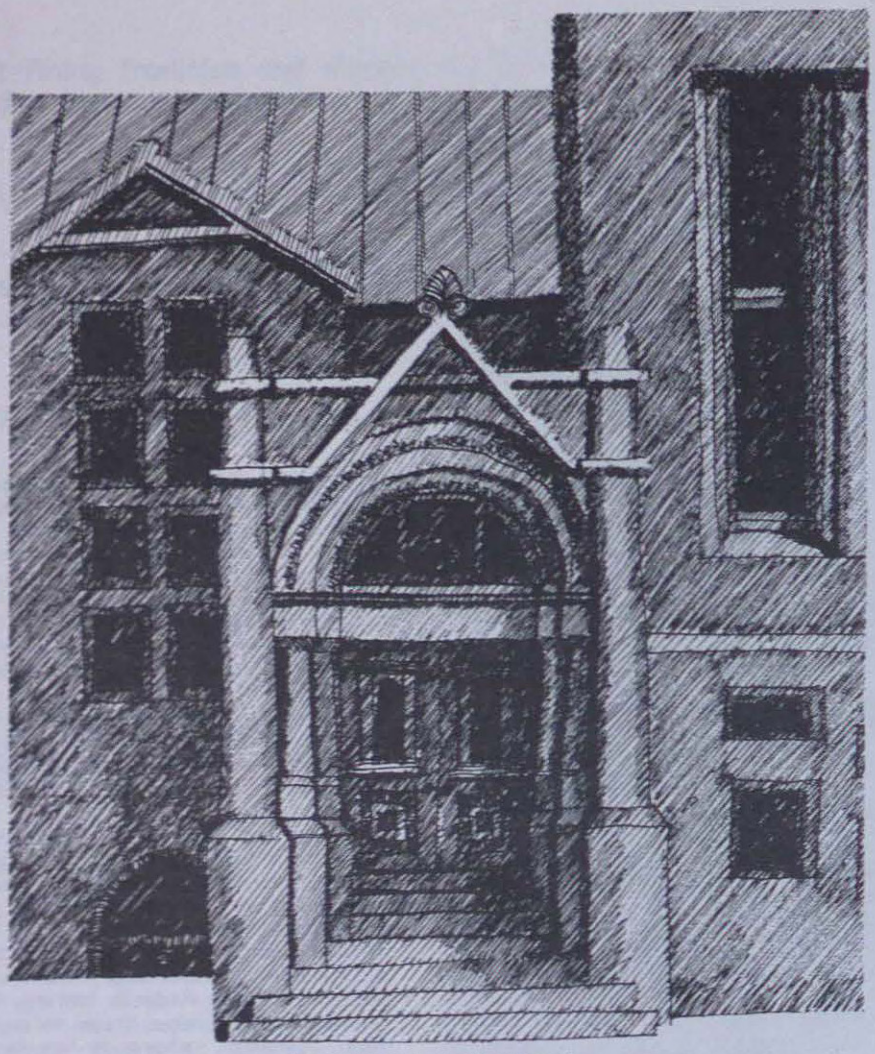


MACDONALD PHYSICS BUILDING

Taylor was evidently a gifted architect and that he had been well trained is indicated in the accounts of his life. Born the son of Thomas Taylor, a publisher in Edinburgh in 1850, he began his architectural studies in the office of Pilkington and Bell; later he worked with Joseph Clarke in London, the diocessan architect and surveyor of Canterbury. He studied in the architectural school of the Royal Academy under Phene Spiers. He was twice a Royal Institute medallist and once gained a Soane Medallion. He practiced briefly in London. **The Builder**, May 14, 1881, illustrated one of his works, Memorial Hall and School, Dover, which was recognized as a brilliant solution to an awkward site. The fact that he obtained second place and premium in competition for the Glasgow Municipal Building, in which over 116 competitors took part proves he had a good deal more than usual ability. In addition, he was most fortunately connected to people in Montreal who found plenty of work for him to do when he came to Canada in 1883. Taylor's mother, Agnes Drummond, was a sister of Sir George Drummond, the leading industrialist and banker in Canada, and of Jane Drummond, the second wife of John Redpath. When Taylor came to Montreal he lived with Mrs. Redpath at Terrace Bank, and opened his studio on St. Francois-Xavier Street in John Redpath's Estate office building. His uncle, George Drummond, was the president of the Bank of Montreal; one cousin, Peter Redpath, was a governor and benefactor of McGill, another, Henry Bovey, was McGill's Dean of Engineering. When he married in 1889, he became an 'in-law' of William Dawson, the son of McGill's Principal, and of Bernard Harrington, the head of McGill's chemistry department.

Among Taylor's first works in Montreal were three Queen-Anne like houses in the apple orchard of Terrace Bank for his Redpath cousins Charles J. Fleet, H.T. Bovey and Francis R. Redpath. While the Fleet house has been demolished, the other two still stand on the east side of the Avenue du Musee. In 1888, Taylor experimented with the popular romanesque revival when he built a spectacular house for his uncle George Drummond. This house stood on the site of the present I.C.A.O. Building and invariably appears in illustrated accounts of Montreal at the end of the 19th century. In the same spirit and using similar materials - red stone, granite and slate - he built the West End Branch of the Bank of Montreal at Mansfield and Ste. Catherine Streets, which although shorn of its roof ornaments and any projecting masonry that could be assumed a hazard to pedestrians, remains a fair example of Taylor's early romanesque. Shortly after these exercises and preparatory to designing the Redpath Library, he travelled to the United States to study such buildings, where it has been assumed he became influenced by one of Richardson's celebrated libraries, not only in the organization of its elements but in the treatment of the romanesque, as the composition of the Physics Building and the book stack wing of the Redpath seems to imply. It is also possible that the uncluttered strength of Bruce Price's Windsor Station, an inescapable example of majestic masonry construction that had just been completed in Montreal, had attracted him. Or perhaps the change to a broader less fussy treatment may have been the result of using hard grey limestone rather than the softer sandstone of the earlier work. Whatever the reason the later buildings are mature works of a high order.

The Physics Building rewards examination, 1) for the compactness of its composition, the suitability of its materials and its solidity; 2) for its proportions, patterns and functional expression; and 3) for the appropriateness of its often witty ornament. Its strong masonry walls are firmly capped by a simple roof,



REDPATH LIBRARY

surmounted by well shaped chimneys and a fine central cupola. Its materials were not only selected for strength and durability but, specially in the interior, for their texture, colour and permanence. Clearly, Taylor preferred to obtain richness and interest without the use of plaster or paint. It is worth noting too, how the arrangement of the big windows in no way detracts from the feeling of strength of the walls but through their frequently arched and blunt cornered openings, the depth and power of the structure is well revealed. Moreover, their size and position, responding to the needs of the rooms they serve, give the facades much interesting pattern and functional expression. Other operational requirements, neatly and decoratively expressed, are the big corbelled balconies, two covered and one opened to the sky, which provided the laboratories with outdoor working spaces. Similarly, a few well shaped projecting window sills, which permitted experiments to be mounted in daylight, sunlight or low temperature, add considerable interest to the facades. The building's carved ornament deftly includes ancient symbols related to physics or the names of physists to be remembered; even the two columns of the portico, marked Power and Knowledge, suggest an equivalence worth contemplating.

Aspects of the design of the Redpath Library, building, furniture and fittings, indicate Taylor was a pioneer in the arts and crafts movement, that had the objective of making the production of a building the work of a team of artist craftsmen as opposed to the work of hired men strictly following instructions. For example, stone and wood carving in the Redpath show freedom to modify given patterns. the caps of the buttresses are all different and individual; the repetition of a standard form was clearly not expected. The carvers of the hammer beams were not only free to make each grotesque head uniquely fierce but to make one with sideburns to resemble Peter Redpath and one with a full beard, Andrew Taylor, work not likely to have been in the specifications.

Taylor foresaw the wave of Classicism that followed the Chicago Fair in 1893 when he wrote, "Whatever may be the result of the Exhibition on the industrial life of the world, I am convinced that the architecture of the Fair will have a powerful influence on the architecture of this continent for good or evil for some time to come". It was not long after that one of the star performers of the Exhibition, C.F. McKim, was invited to Montreal to join him in the reconstruction of the head office of the Bank of Montreal. The results can be seen on Place d'Armes: a triumph for the ideas of McKim and an eclipse for those of Taylor.

In 1904, Taylor retired from practice and returned to England where, with characteristic energy, he devoted himself to public life in the administration of schools, colleges and eventually the University of London, and in local government and in the government of London. At various times he was a governor of Dulwich College, the Haberdasher's Schools, Roedean School. He became a member of Senate of the University of London, chairman of the Managing Committee of University College of which he was an Honorary Fellow, chairman of the Slade Committee and of the Bartlett School of Architecture. He lived in Hampstead, became its mayor and for many years its representative on the London County Council. In 1923 he became vice-chairman of the Council and when he retired he received a knighthood for his public service. A few days after the **Times** listed his impressive achievements in the obituary referred to above, a correspondent wrote to say it was all very well, but what Taylor really brought to bear in his public life was an aesthetic perception and a sense of tradition. The same could be said of his work at McGill.□