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# THE GOTHIC SENSIBILITY OF FRANCIS JOHNSTON

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*The impetus for Gothic Revival architecture in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Britain and Ireland arguably emanated from patrons with commissions for new buildings or the remodelling of old structures in Gothic styles. Yet these commissions relied on imaginative and informed responses from architects, who understood what was required of them and could interpret general ideas to produce architecture that satisfied their clients and led to further commissions. The historiography of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Gothic revival has revealed that, alongside the antiquarian study that was promoting a growing understanding of medieval architecture, Gothic was viewed through the perspectives of the Picturesque and the Sublime.<sup>1</sup> Historians have recognized that some architects used medieval sources and were adept at producing picturesque designs, but there has been little investigation into architects' perceptions and understanding of Gothic.<sup>2</sup> Did they share the sensibilities of their patrons for the Picturesque and Sublime? Did they engage with antiquarian writings and debates? How did architects develop an understanding of Gothic construction? This article will investigate these questions by considering the case of Francis Johnston (1760–1829), the foremost Irish architect of this period.<sup>3</sup>*

It was not until the setting up of the Institute of British Architects in 1834 that architects in Britain and Ireland had a forum that would oversee training and the acquisition of knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Before that, architects had to educate themselves to appreciate, understand, and apply Gothic in their designs. Architect-writers reveal how they were progressing in that endeavour, and a brief summary of their writings on Gothic suggests that, while they were influenced by antiquarians and dilettanti, many used practical experience of medieval buildings to develop an understanding of their construction and aesthetics.

When Classical aesthetics prevailed, the merits of Gothic tended to be ignored, and appreciation of Gothic was a formidable initial hurdle. Christopher Wren had first-hand knowledge of medieval fabric, and, in his surveyor's reports on Salisbury Cathedral (1668) and Westminster Abbey (1713), he was one of the first architects to articulate an appreciation of the structural qualities and aesthetics of Gothic.<sup>5</sup> But, nearly a hundred years later, another pre-eminent English architect, William Chambers, was still only expressing admiration for Gothic and calling for measured drawings rather than engaging with medieval architecture at a practical level.<sup>6</sup> By the late eighteenth century Gothic was also valued as a uniquely expressive medium; a channel for the Sublime.<sup>7</sup> This was articulated by John Soane in 1788, when he wrote about his emotional response to Gothic architecture: 'the light elegant examples in



Fig. 1. Portrait of Francis Johnston as a young man, oils, unsigned and undated. (*Armagh County Museum*)

many of our cathedrals, churches, and other public buildings, ... are so well calculated to excite solemn, serious, and contemplative ideas, that it is almost impossible to enter such edifices without feeling the deepest awe and reverence.<sup>8</sup>

Chambers and Soane may not have had to engage with medieval buildings at first hand, but architects commissioned to restore cathedrals and the colleges of Oxford and Cambridge did. One of these architect, James Essex, developed a keen interest in the structural logic of medieval buildings, and, mentored by the antiquarian Richard Gough, director of the Society of Antiquaries from 1771 to 1797, wrote notes for a projected history of Gothic architecture, known to contemporary scholars but never published.<sup>9</sup> Essex provided James Bentham – whose *History of Ely Cathedral* was published in 1771 – with measured drawings of the cathedral,

and he probably inspired the antiquarian to assert the importance of looking closely at architectural details in order to establish stylistic periods for medieval architecture.<sup>10</sup> The imperative to look before categorising was adopted by a number of antiquarians such as James Dallaway (1763–1784) and John Milner (1752–1826), who both proposed chronologies of medieval architecture based on style.<sup>11</sup> But it was a self-taught architect, Thomas Rickman, a passionate observer of the stylistic details of medieval buildings, who established the definitive nomenclature of medieval architecture in his book, *An attempt to discriminate the styles of English architecture*, first published in 1817.<sup>12</sup>

Close observation lay behind the other great strand of scholarly antiquarianism that would impact on the design of Gothic Revival buildings: the production of systematic measured drawings



Fig. 2. 'West elevation of Armagh Cathedral in its present state' dated 1785, attributed to Francis Johnston. (*Armagh County Museum*)

of medieval buildings based on contemporary standards established for ancient Greek and Roman architecture. Although such projects were promoted by antiquarians, significant contributions were made by architectural draftsmen and practicing architects. James Cavanah Murphy (1760–1814) produced a volume of measured drawings of the church at the Portuguese monastery of Batalha, published in 1795, the first volume of engravings of Gothic architecture that aimed for the same level of detail and accuracy as those illustrating classical antiquities published earlier in the eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup> John Carter, commissioned by the Society of Antiquaries to produce measured drawings of several English cathedrals, published plans, sections and elevations between 1794 and 1810, which were outstanding for their ambition, accuracy and clarity of presentation.<sup>14</sup>

#### FRANCIS JOHNSTON c.1778–1796

Surviving evidence for studies of architects' perception and understanding of Gothic is frequently lacking or fragmentary. This is true for Francis Johnston (Fig. 1), who published nothing on architecture and from whom only one measured drawing of a medieval building survives.<sup>15</sup> (Fig. 2) Two extant documentary sources, however, can be used to investigate his taste: a journal of a tour he made in Wales and southern England in spring 1796; and a copy of the sale catalogue of part of his architectural library.<sup>16</sup> The journal, although referred to by writers, has never been analysed, and the catalogue has not been discussed in the literature on Johnston. In fact Francis Johnston, the first professional Irish-born and Irish-trained architect, has received very little scholarly attention.<sup>17</sup> The remainder of this article will discuss his engagement

with Gothic during his formative years between c.1778, when he moved to Dublin, and c.1806, when he was established as an architect whose practice included the design of castle-style houses.

Born in 1760 and raised in Armagh, Johnston was apprenticed to the English architect, Thomas Cooley (1741–1784) in Dublin. Having won the competition for the Royal Exchange, Cooley moved to Dublin to supervise the erection of what was for Ireland a progressive classical building. Cooley also received commissions for Gothic structures, two of which Johnston completed after Cooley's death. These latter projects, both for Richard Robinson, the cultivated Archbishop of Armagh, reveal much about Johnston's introduction to Gothic Revival design.

The brief to replace the single-stage tower and stumpy spire of Armagh Cathedral with a two-stage structure based on the late fifteenth-century tower of Magdalen College, Oxford was progressive in its use of a medieval model.<sup>18</sup> But, contrary to advanced restoration practice as carried out by James Essex at Ely and Lincoln Cathedrals, where the architect was concerned to match new designs with existing structures and so remain faithful to the intentions of the original architect, the Armagh project disregarded its context, superimposing a physically heavy, elaborately decorated tower onto a relatively small, plain cathedral. The result was that the original structure showed signs of severe strain during construction, and the tower was taken down before it was completed. After Cooley's death in 1784, Johnston rebuilt the former Armagh tower with a 40-foot spire on the original supports.<sup>19</sup> Two years later, asked to erect a new spire onto the existing three-stage medieval tower of St Nicholas Dundalk, Johnston's preoccupation was with aesthetics rather than consistency: 'In Dundalk I planned and directed the erection of a spire on the Church, which though very plain and simple has a good effect from its good proportion to the tower.'<sup>20</sup>

The second project was a development of Cooley's commission to produce twelve designs



Fig. 3. Ballymakenny Church (C of I), Co. Louth, west elevation, attrib. to Thomas Cooley, n.d.. (RIAI Murray Collection, *Irish Architectural Archive*)

for small auditory churches, intended as models for modest parish churches in the diocese of Armagh.<sup>21</sup> Like most new Irish churches designed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Cooley's designs had a simple hall plan, and most had a west tower. Symmetrical, with box-like silhouettes, the designs were conceived within a classical framework. Decorative details made the churches either 'Gothic' or 'classical'. For his 'Gothic' designs Cooley developed a pared-down vocabulary of simple pointed arches with Y or intersecting tracery for his windows and undecorated arched panelling at the base of the steeple. This can be compared to English contemporaries such as John Carr and Timothy Lightoler whose parish churches incorporated ogee arches, quatrefoils and more elaborate tracery.<sup>22</sup> Cooley developed design No. 10 for the parish of Ballymakenny, Co. Louth, adding hood mouldings, including an ogee hood moulding over the main tower window.<sup>23</sup> (Fig. 3) It was erected in 1785 by Johnston, who made additional small

changes: intersecting tracery for the nave windows; triangular finials for the ogee hood mouldings. The tone restrained, the novelties geometric rather than authentically Gothic, we see him inventing details within the Georgian Gothic vocabulary established by Cooley.

For fourteen years after Cooley's death in 1784, before he visited England in 1796, Johnston's exposure to contemporary Gothic taste was largely through books and, in the early 1790s, through contact with his patron, the wealthy Irish antiquarian William Burton Conyngham. The young Johnston probably had access to the first antiquarian books to focus on Gothic. He owned Daniel King's *Cathedral and conventuall churches* (1656), although since Johnston's catalogue gives no record of when he acquired his books it cannot be assumed he had access to it in the 1780s and 90s.<sup>24</sup> (Fig. 4) The older antiquarian books in particular may have been bought once Johnston was an established architect and significant collector of medieval art.<sup>25</sup>

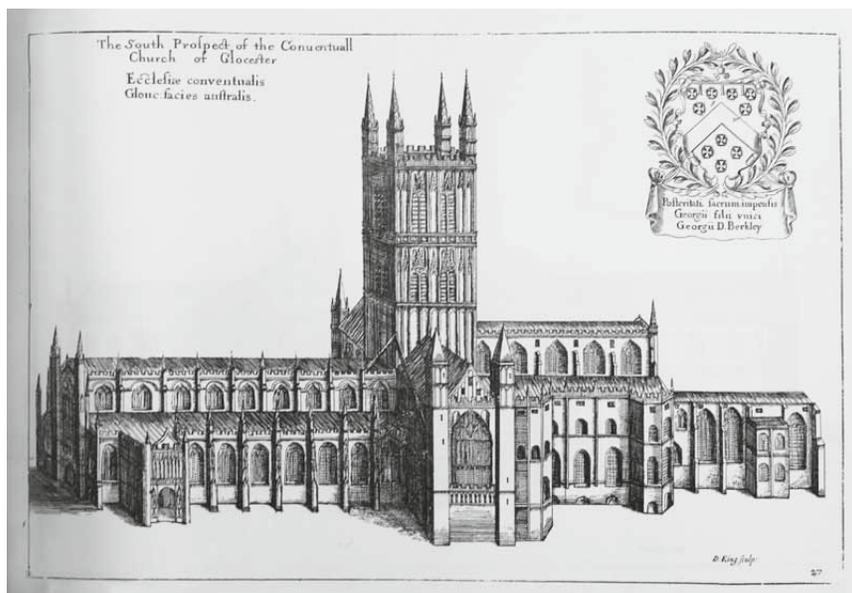
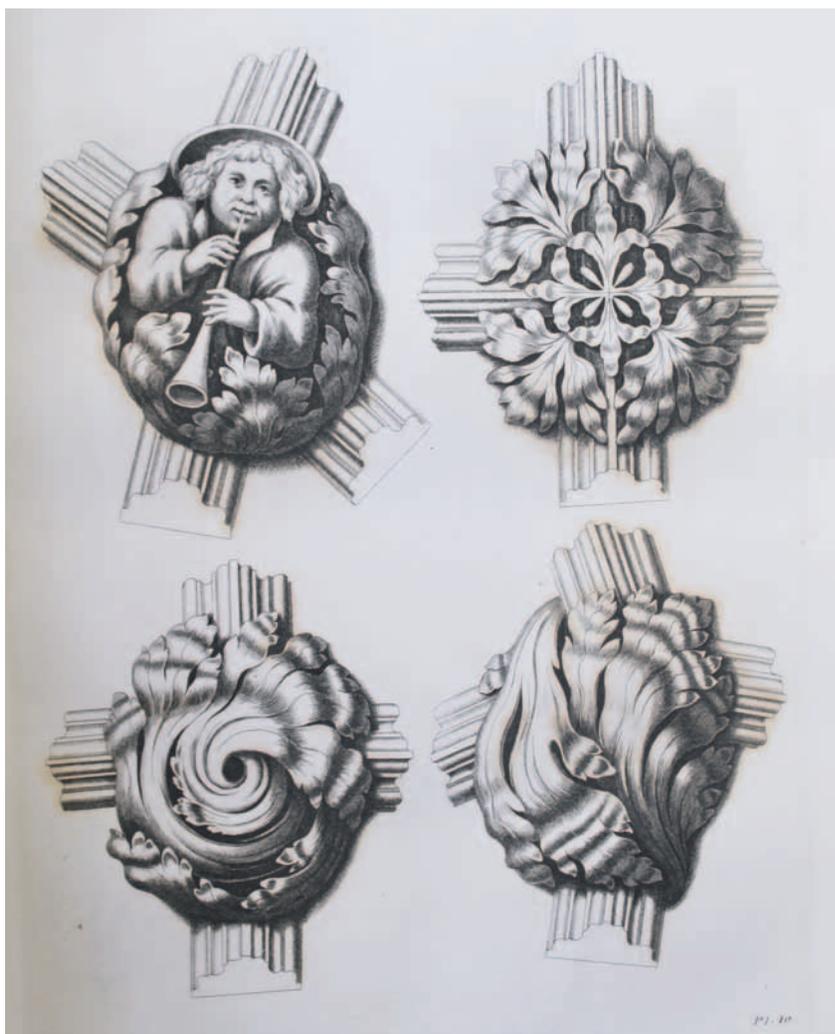


Fig. 4. Gloucester Cathedral, south elevation, from Daniel King, *The cathedral and conventuall churches of England and Wales* (1672), pl 27. (Board of Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin)

Fig. 5. York Cathedral, four bosses, choir end, from Joseph Halfpenny, *Gothic ornaments in the cathedral church of York* (1795–1800), pl. 10. (*The Board of Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin*)



It is likely, however, that he had access to Armagh Public Library where there were many early to mid eighteenth-century antiquarian publications: John Dart's history of Westminster, Francis Drake's history of York Minster, Thomas Wright's 1748 edition of *Louthiana*.<sup>26</sup> Document-based histories, these books relegated architecture to small sections of spare description, but some contained useful plates; the second volume of *Louthiana* had engraved perspectives and plans of castles and tower houses.

Francis Johnston was not a member of the Society of Antiquaries of London, and his catalogue does not list its publications – *Archaeologia* and *Vetusta Monumenta* – though he may have read these volumes in Armagh Public Library.<sup>27</sup> The Society's cathedral series are not in Johnston's catalogue either, though after 1808 he had access to them in the Royal Dublin Society.<sup>28</sup> But he owned two significant antiquarian books published in the 1790s outside the ambit of the Society of

Antiquaries: Joseph Halfpenny's *Gothic Ornaments in the Cathedral Church of York* and the anonymous *Specimens of Gothic ... from ... Lavenham in Suffolk*.<sup>29</sup> (Fig. 5) Halfpenny's book would have been particularly congenial for Johnston; it was not expensive as it could be acquired piecemeal from 1795 to 1800, and the illustrations were well drawn and clearly presented. As clerk of works responsible for stone repair under the architect John Carr during the restoration of York Minster in the early 1790s, Halfpenny, also an artist and engraver, had scrutinised the roof bosses, capitals, and finials from scaffolding at close range and made detailed drawings. The published engravings were given deep shadows and presented as individual specimens, several to a page, largely innocent of an architectural

or historic context. These striking images could be readily used as models for an architect for whom chronologies of medieval architecture were not a primary concern.<sup>30</sup> In the introduction to his book Halfpenny quoted Chambers's observations of 1791 on the admirable qualities of Gothic and his recommendation that surveys of prominent churches be undertaken, demonstrating the influence of Chambers's endorsement of Gothic for antiquarians and architects in the last decade of the eighteenth century.<sup>31</sup> *Lavenham*, published in 1796, a book that presented rendered architectural details of the exemplary late Perpendicular Suffolk church, extrapolated plans of window mouldings onto elevational details, making drawings of accurate medieval profiles available to architects.<sup>32</sup>



Fig. 6. West elevation of the Church of Batalha, from James Murphy, *Plans, elevations, sections, and views of the church of Batalha* (1795). (*The Board of Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin*)

James Cavanah Murphy's book on the church at Batalha published in 1795 was an expensive book and is not in the surviving portion of Johnston's library catalogue. (Fig. 6) However, he knew the book well, using some of the decorative details to inform his designs for Charleville Castle.<sup>33</sup> It is most likely that he was introduced to *Batalha* by William Burton Conyngham, the patron of both Murphy, and, from 1794 to 1796, Johnston. Although Murphy celebrated the Gothic character of his subject through closely observed drawings, in his introductory text his advocacy of the church was grounded on his understanding that the Gothic of Batalha realized the standards set by French classical theorists, of whom he had a close working knowledge.<sup>34</sup> Gothic was mediated by the classical in this text, and in ways that would have been easily recognizable to a classically educated architect. For example, Murphy admired architectural qualities in the church at Batalha that were appreciated as being intrinsically classical, such as sparse ornamentation, and a 'grand and sublime' effect that 'derived, not from any meretricious embellishments, but from the intrinsic merit of the design.'<sup>35</sup> He alluded to French theory with his use of the word 'ordonnance' to denote the interrelation of the parts of the Gothic church, and, by referring to projects which had resulted in ancient buildings being 'measured and delineated', he alluded to the leading late eighteenth-century classical text, James Stuart and Nicholas Revett's *The antiquities of Athens measured and delineated*, thereby associating his own project with their well-regarded example.<sup>36</sup> These references would have appealed to Johnston, who would have encountered Murphy's book at the time when he was maturing as a classicist, employed by Blayney Townley Balfour and his wife to design and build Townley Hall (started in 1790), which would be his neoclassical masterpiece.

Apart from quite possibly giving Johnston access to his library, William Burton Conyngham probably stimulated Johnston's interest in Gothic architecture

in other ways, by revealing his interest in Irish and Iberian medieval architecture and his feeling for the Picturesque. A fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London, Conyngham was a patron of the Gothic Revival, commissioning James Wyatt in 1785–6 to redesign his house at Slane as a modern castle, and he also employed artists to record Irish medieval architecture to supplement his well-regarded drawing collection.<sup>37</sup> The majority of the Irish drawings were in the established Picturesque topographical genre – buildings depicted as three-dimensional objects in a landscape – and contained limited antiquarian information. However, some drawings revealed a focused interest in architectural features. Angelo Maria Bigari's perspectives of ruined abbey churches showed details such as arch mouldings, and Gabriel Beranger's drawing of a drum column in St Mary's Church, Wexford, depicted its moulded base and foliate capitals in plan and elevation.<sup>38</sup> If, as seems likely, Conyngham showed Johnston his drawing collection, it supplemented knowledge Johnston had gained independently, a possibility indicated by an observation Johnston made towards the end of his life that reading descriptions of Irish medieval architecture in Thomas Bell's manuscript for a book on Gothic architecture had revived for him buildings not seen in years.<sup>39</sup>

Conyngham stimulated Johnston towards an appreciation of Picturesque Gothic by his commission for a south-east entrance to Slane Castle beside a bridge over the River Boyne. (Fig. 7) Johnston responded with a battlemented and towered gateway with flanking screen walls terminating in turrets. Although the gate itself was formally symmetrical and owed much to classical ideas of grandeur, Johnston's screen wall was irregular, with unmatched end turrets on ground that sloped towards the river, and discreetly echoed the late fourteenth-century bridge with his use of roughly coursed squared rubble limestone, revealing a Picturesque sensibility. His detailing was inventive and owed little to pattern books, particularly



Fig. 7. Slane Castle, Co. Meath, battlemented gateway, Francis Johnston, c.1795.  
(photograph by Judith Hill, 2012)

the zigzag voussoir terminations which broadly referenced Romanesque chevrons.<sup>40</sup> Johnston's feeling for the castellar Picturesque would have been stimulated by James Wyatt's work on the castle which, although symmetrical, had a dramatic silhouette derived from substantial corner towers, a vast round tower to the south, battlements and turrets.

#### JOHNSTON'S TOUR IN WALES AND ENGLAND, SPRING 1796

Johnston was 36 when he landed at Holyhead in the early hours of 25 March 1796 for a tour of Wales and England of which three weeks is recorded in a surviving diary.<sup>41</sup> His route, travelling by coach, took him through North Wales to Shrewsbury, south to Portsmouth – passing through Coalbrookdale, Worcester, Tewkesbury, Gloucester, Bath, Bristol, Salisbury, and Southampton – where he turned north-east for London.<sup>42</sup> It was an architect's journey in which he made detours to visit country

mansions – many were familiar to him from *Vitruvius Britannicus* – along with great medieval castles and cathedrals. The diary, probably an *aide-mémoire*, charts the journey concisely, and it shows that, armed with expectations about British buildings, Johnston wanted to see them for himself, to acquire additional information and to make his own judgments. It also reveals his surprise and delight. Encountering the great and solidly built Caernarfon Castle, the many timber-framed houses of Tewkesbury, the frenetic busyness of Bristol, the wild, flat Salisbury Plain and the soaring spire of Salisbury Cathedral, Johnston remarked in his journal, each time, that he had seen nothing like it before; 'the cathedral', he wrote of Gloucester, 'far surpasses anything I have yet seen, and indeed my expectation'.<sup>43</sup> This was his Grand Tour, his first encounter, quite likely, with the world beyond Ireland.

Johnston did not travel through North Wales as a Picturesque tourist, though he was not oblivious to the picturesqueness of the landscape. Sir Watkin Williams-Wynn had sponsored the first Picturesque

tour of North Wales in 1776, and the area became more widely known through Paul Sandby's *XII Views in North Wales* (1776) and Thomas Pennant's *Tour in Wales* (1778–81).<sup>44</sup> Picturesque tourists followed in their footsteps to see the views of rugged landscapes depicted in these books. Johnston, however, took the most direct route from Conway to Llanwrst, travelling at night, though when he left Llanwrst early in the morning, he commented on the beauty of the mountains, and he first saw Corwen against what he described as a picturesque background of rocks.

Before he embarked on his eastward coach journey, Johnston visited the medieval castles at Caernarfon and Beaumaris, as well as recently constructed Gothic revival buildings commissioned by Lord Penrhyn and Viscount Bulkeley. At Penrhyn Hall Johnston looked critically at Samuel Wyatt's recent reworking of a medieval house. Penrhyn Hall had until 1782 consisted of a slim tower of possibly recent date and a fourteenth-century hall with low eaves flanked by irregular three-storey wings.<sup>45</sup> Wyatt had added rooms to the east side for which he designed a classical façade. He had remodelled the west elevation in a Gothic style by adding battlements, a false tower to balance the existing, re-fenestrating the facade with pointed arch windows, and designing a pointed-arch entrance decorated with foliate crockets and flanked by annuletted columns; the improvised form of this entrance suggests a source such as Batty Langley's *Ancient architecture, restored, and improved*, first published in 1742. Wyatt had turned a rambling medieval house into a symmetrical pattern book-derived idea of a Gothic castle. With a backdrop of mountains and a view of the sea, Penrhyn had a picturesque setting, and Johnston, who appreciated it as an 'old castle' set in a wide and dramatic landscape, was disappointed with the new entrance front: 'The front is dressed up with towers battlements Gothick door etc but not in that substantial style which the situation & character of the building requires.'<sup>46</sup>

To criticise a castle for not being robust enough for its wild setting implies a Picturesque sensibility. And this Johnston undoubtedly had. He rejoiced in the way that medieval castles related directly to their setting, summarising the impression made by Caernarfon Castle in a few simple words: 'The castle is a noble old building, stands boldly on the beach'.<sup>47</sup> However, where Picturesque tourists yearned for the irregularity and pathos of ruins – Caernarfon was criticised by some for being too well preserved – Johnston was looking for heft and bulk in his romantic setting.<sup>48</sup> He was impressed by the scale, workmanship and strength of the nearby medieval castles. 'This castle', he wrote of Caernarfon, 'both in design & execution surprised me much as I had not before seen anything of the kind so great & so masterly executed.'<sup>49</sup> For him, the vast expanses of undecorated, undamaged walls and polygonal towers were an architectural joy, speaking of feats of design and construction that were not to be seen in modern buildings. His response was similar at Beaumaris Castle, where he was impressed by its apparent impregnability: 'The castle is very extensive – & has been very strong having a Counter Wall & town all round it'.<sup>50</sup>

The contemporary writer who came closest to Johnston's way of thinking about castles was Edward King, an antiquarian, who valued military architecture as an expression of its function.<sup>51</sup> He was critical of the view that castles should be appreciated as picturesque objects in the landscape, stressing instead their defensiveness, observing that as a result 'They have ... frequently ... a rude sublimity of thought and design manifested in their Architecture'.<sup>52</sup> Focusing on function and its aesthetic implications, he regarded the castles as a building type rather than a pictorial subject.

Although Johnston's criticism of Wyatt's work at Penrhyn Hall points to expectations about the character of a particular building type, his phrase, 'which the situation & character of the building requires', is also seamed with associationist thinking.

He was discussing a house not a functioning castle and it must, he implied, suggest the right ideas. Humphry Repton, whose career as a landscape gardener was well established by the mid 1790s, and who would express his practical ideas, so well attuned to his clients' desires, in a series of publications, would echo Johnston's prescription in a book published in 1803.<sup>53</sup> When discussing garden buildings, Repton sent a clear message that the design should reflect the chosen 'character, situation, or uses'.<sup>54</sup> A house designed as a castle should look strong. An appropriate character was important because this was the means by which it could convey the desired messages. In Warwick Castle, he wrote: 'and in other great mansions of the same character, the proud baronial retreat "of the times of old", has been adapted to the purposes of modern habitation. Let us preserve the massive strength and durability of the castle, and discard the gloom which former tyranny and cruelty inspired'.<sup>55</sup> Appropriateness only had to be skin deep; after all, the new building was not really a castle.

Neither King nor Repton had published the books referred to here by 1796, so we must look

elsewhere for the origin of the ideas being discussed. A common source for the concept of appropriate character in architecture may have derived from contemporary architectural theory as disseminated by Soane and Chambers. In his *Plans, elevations and sections*, John Soane wrote that ornaments should be appropriately 'simple, applicable and characteristic of their situations', and that they should 'tend to shew the destination of the edifice, as assist in determining its character, and for the choice of which the architect can assign satisfactory reasons'.<sup>56</sup> Chambers made a similar point in his *Treatise*. The idea derived from French classical theory expounded by Marc-Antoine Laugier and Claude Perrault.<sup>57</sup> The notion of appropriate form implies the existence of a variety of styles and a reason for choosing one rather than another. This derived from the classical tradition whereby the five orders of architecture were each regarded as having an individual style, which, through the association of ideas, expressed a particular character.<sup>58</sup> In the early eighteenth century this notion was extended to other, newly fashionable styles such as Gothic and Chinese, used in garden design. As Gothic became an increasingly popular

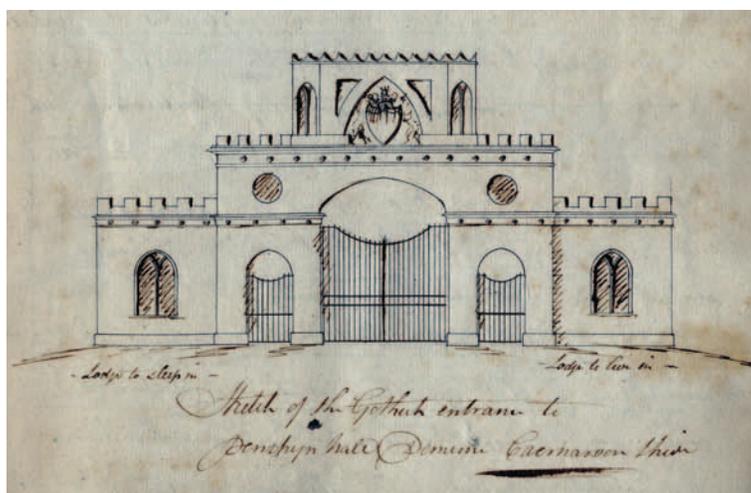


Fig. 8. 'Sketch of the Gothick entrance to Penrhyn Hall demesne Caernarfonshire', Francis Johnston, 26 March, 1796, Tour diary, f. 3r. (*Armagh County Museum*)

choice for houses and churches, the tradition of canonical architecture was replaced by aesthetic relativism in mainstream architecture and the notion of appropriateness was applied to widely different architectural styles.

Johnston viewed historic buildings as artifacts in the contemporary world, solid and striking in their context, and, where not in ruins, of practical use. Unconcerned about historical appropriateness, Johnston praised the way in which Lord Bulkeley had placed a bowling green and tennis court within the walls of medieval Beaumaris Castle.<sup>59</sup> Johnston applied the same uncritical approval to modern interiors and fashionable furniture added to older houses. At Penrhyn he admired Wyatt's new interior: 'There are some excellent modern apartments in it ... & very fashionably furnished'.<sup>60</sup>

Johnston appreciated the garden Gothic he saw for its Picturesque qualities: at Baron Hill, Lord Bulkeley's residence, he admired the setting of a Gothic tea room 'near the strand on the mount [which] is a handsome octagon building in the castle stile fitted up for a Tea Room'.<sup>61</sup> He sketched a symmetrical entrance gate flanked by two lodges with simple Gothic detailing at Penrhyn Hall.<sup>62</sup> (Fig. 8) It resembled his approach to the Slane commission, and his attention to it suggests that he was using the tour to pick up alternative ideas in a similar idiom for future commissions.

Of the four cathedrals that Johnston visited in England his descriptions of Gloucester and Salisbury, although brief, are illuminating. Of Gloucester, he wrote:

'Gloucester ... cathedral by far surpasses any thing I have yet seen, and indeed my expectation – The lightness & true proportion of the buttresses – the neatness of the belt course & elegance of the Gothic screen & pinnacles of the tower cannot be described – The inside is spacious & beautiful. The great window wonderful, 50 feet by upwards of 40. In short I cannot express my opinion of this church but I have a plan of it'.<sup>63</sup>

Of Salisbury:

'The Cathedral is a beautiful light gothick structure with a just uniformity of style in every part – The tower & spire for height lightness & elegance of execution I cannot describe. It much surpasses what I expected – but unfortunately the strength of the material and delicacy of the design were not well considered as there are some very serious fractures in the tower which tho' secured by the abilities of the Gt. Sir Christopher (in my opinion) still threaten the downfall of this incomparable edifice'.<sup>64</sup>

His admiration is unmistakable: he found these buildings wonderously beautiful and technically impressive. There is also awe; he is lost for words to describe them. This is partly the rapture of an architect absorbed by the details of cathedral Gothic – the design of Gloucester's buttresses; Salisbury's tower. But there is something too of the recognition of the ability of these buildings to induce Sublime emotion; the soaring height of Salisbury's tower and spire; the vast extent of the east window in Gloucester; and the ecstatic feeling that words were inadequate.

Johnston's reading had not equipped him to comment on the variety of styles displayed in these cathedrals; he did not even appreciate that the choir screen in Gloucester had been designed by William Kent in 1741. He acquired a plan of Gloucester, which may have come from the second volume of Browne Willis's survey of cathedrals published in 1742.<sup>65</sup> If so, the plan, typical of its period, was drawn at a small scale so that it gave little information on the structure; the profiles of the columns were indistinct, the window joinery was omitted and there was no reflected ceiling plan.

Johnston's brief accounts of Salisbury and Gloucester betray his classical sensibility. His words echo that strand of late eighteenth-century thinking which regarded the application of rules and mathematical knowledge to be intrinsic to Gothic architecture. Johnston commented on the 'true proportion' of the Gloucester buttresses, and the

‘elegance’ – suggesting the harmonious assembling of parts – of the tower’s pinnacles. Drawing attention to the pronounced vertical and horizontal elements of Gloucester – the thrusting buttresses and pinnacles and the ‘neatness of the belt course’ (probably meaning the string courses that encircle the tower) – Johnston showed awareness of the geometric logic that underlay what he appreciated as a balanced design.<sup>66</sup> Like many of his contemporaries, he admired the consistency of Salisbury Cathedral.<sup>67</sup> This idea derived from Francis Price, an eighteenth-century surveyor of Salisbury, who established the cathedral as an exemplar of medieval architecture in his book of 1753.<sup>68</sup> The idea that Salisbury exhibited consistency was disseminated by James Bentham, who attributed the cathedral’s ‘uniformity, symmetry, and regular properties’ to its construction in a single short timespan.<sup>69</sup> Regarding medieval architecture as regular and consistent postulated a theory about the nature of medieval ecclesiastical design that was an alternative to the conception that it was picturesque and asymmetrical.<sup>70</sup>

The word that jumps out in Johnston’s comments on Gloucester and Salisbury is ‘lightness’. It was often used by his contemporaries – John Carter referred to Gothic as *the* ‘light and elegant style’ – almost always to denote approval, but in such a variety of ways that its meaning is difficult to decode.<sup>71</sup> It was the term used to distinguish Gothic from classical architecture, and to differentiate between heavy round-arched styles (Saxon and Norman) and later Gothic.<sup>72</sup> The word could refer to the visual effect derived from the many composite elements of Gothic architecture, which gave it its linear character. This was how John Milner used it in his 1806 *Treatise on ecclesiastical architecture* in his description of the nave in York Minster.<sup>73</sup> Others used ‘light’ to denote restraint, a connection made by the Laugier in his *Essai sur l’architecture* where he expressed admiration for the lightness and economy of Gothic construction.<sup>74</sup> ‘Light’, however, could also refer to highly decorated architecture.

In late eighteenth-century English architecture the monumental and sparsely ornamented were contrasted with the light, the decorated and elegant. This was articulated by William Porden in 1779 with regard to James Wyatt’s designs: ‘On the outside he is simple, plain and bold; within light, fanciful and elegant.’<sup>75</sup>

The clue to Johnston’s meaning of the word ‘light’ might be found in his descriptions of the Gothic revival churches he encountered in Bristol. They were modelled on later Gothic styles and were more elaborate than the churches he had designed in Ireland. They were also different from each other. St Nicholas, built between 1762 and 1769, has seven bays of Perpendicular windows and a tower capped by a spire. The nave of St Paul’s, built between 1789 and 1794, has three-light Y-traceried windows, several of the tower windows have ogee arches of the Decorated period, and the west end has pronounced gabled and panel-decorated buttresses. St Paul’s has a three-stage tower capped by two diminishing stages, which, although Gothic in detail, is classical in form. Johnston made no reference to the styles of these churches. Instead, he commented on their lightness. Of St Paul’s he wrote; ‘[It] is a new church just finished – built in a light plain Gothic style ...’<sup>76</sup> Johnston’s association of ‘light’ with plainness suggests that he used it as a synonym for restraint. He was not referring to structural restraint as Laugier had done, but to decorative control. This idea is suggested by the fact that he likened St Paul’s to St Nicholas; ‘St Nicholas’ abt 25 years built in a similar style very handsome & well finished.’<sup>77</sup> Despite their stylistic differences, the churches give an equivalent, broadly classical, impression from a distance; although both buildings display spiky Gothic features on their towers, the naves could be read as rectangular boxes, and the exterior details were lightly inscribed with shallow mouldings. It was presumably this common theme that Johnston approved. Here Johnston was admiring a different version of the regular, slightly classicized Gothic

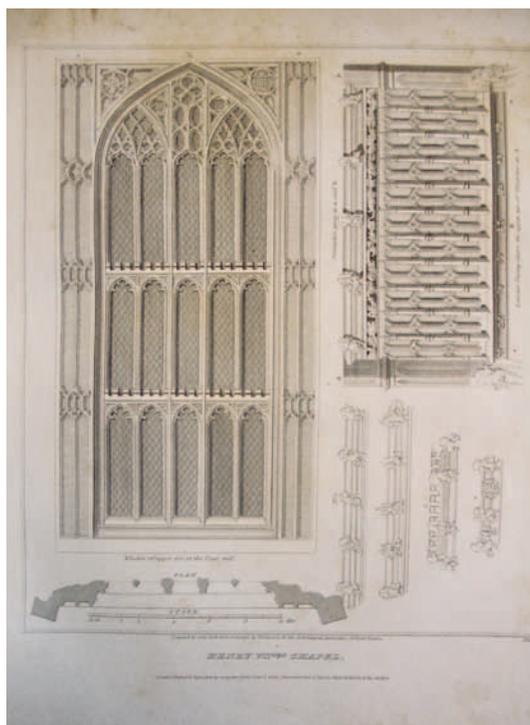


Fig. 9. 'Henry VII Chapel, Window elevation', from John Britton, *The architectural antiquities of Great Britain*, vol 2 (1809), plate 7. (*Irish Architectural Archive*)

ecclesiastical architecture that he was commissioned to build in Ireland.

In his journal Johnston commented on a contemporary debate about the structural strength of the tower of Salisbury Cathedral; '... there are some very serious fractures in the tower which tho' secured by the abilities of the Gt Sir Christopher (in my opinion) still threaten the downfall of this incomparable edifice'.<sup>78</sup> In his report on the fabric written prior to renovations in 1668, Wren correctly suggested that the spire had been constructed after the tower, the latter consequently strengthened with iron bands.<sup>79</sup> His successor, Francis Price, corroborated Wren's analysis, and alerted his contemporaries to the continuing stresses and their

structural implications. Price added iron bands to both spire and tower, large-scale drawings of which were included in his book on the cathedral published in 1753.<sup>80</sup> Neither of these works is listed in the surviving portion of Johnston's catalogue, and it is probable that his comment on the structural problems of Salisbury derived from a travel book that, like him, erroneously attributed the remedial iron bands to Wren.<sup>81</sup> What is particularly interesting is that Johnston contributed his own opinion to an issue that had engaged architects of the calibre of Wren, suggesting confidence, no doubt derived from his experiences in Armagh and Dundalk.

#### IRELAND 1796–c.1806

For about twenty years after he returned from his 1796 tour, Gothic would play an important part in Johnston's work as an architect. Between 1800 and 1825 he designed and executed nine castles – one of which, Charleville Castle, was a new building of powerful architectural expression – several churches, and his masterpiece, the viceregal chapel in Dublin Castle.

During this period, knowledge of medieval buildings derived from antiquarian scholarly study and analytical architectural drawings increased significantly, maturing with Rickman's book of 1817, Pugin's *Specimens* (1821) and *Architectural antiquities of Normandy* (1828), two of which Johnston possessed.<sup>82</sup> But, when Johnston began to design Charleville Castle in 1800 and the viceregal chapel for Dublin Castle in 1807, these books had not been published.<sup>83</sup> He did, however, acquire antiquarian books published between 1800 and c.1806 that had the potential to significantly advance his understanding of medieval architecture at the levels of detail and overall aesthetic character, and inform him of contemporary debates about stylistic periods and the role of invention in Gothic Revival design.

John Taylor's *Essays on Gothic architecture*,



Fig. 10. Front elevation of Charleville Castle, designed and built by Francis Johnston, 1800–1809 (Will Pryce/@Country Life Picture Library)

published in 1800, was an edited compilation of late eighteenth-century antiquarian scholarship published in a cheap, sparsely illustrated octavo volume aimed at a wide audience.<sup>84</sup> This book introduced Johnston to Thomas Warton's 1762 ground-breaking but rudimentary taxonomy of Gothic, James Bentham's more empirical 1771 study of Ely and John Milner's 1798 survey of Winchester.<sup>85</sup> The volume included a letter from Milner purportedly clarifying confusion relating to current debates about taxonomy and the origins of Gothic – he was in fact presenting his own case – and focused on architectural concerns such as size, scale, the overall impression of details, planning and classical values.<sup>86</sup> The book was perhaps most

stimulating for a Gothic Revival architect in the section where Milner drew attention to the linear character of his favourite style, 'second pointed' period Gothic (defined by him as belonging to the late thirteenth to mid-fifteenth century): 'the infinite variety of ribs, arches, bosses and other ornaments, all grow out of the main columns, with the regularity of Nature in the vegetable kingdom, and also with her wise contrivance [is able] to combine strength with beauty'.<sup>87</sup>

This description, with its vivid organic metaphor and attention to the structural components of architecture, would encourage an architect to look more closely at stylistic details. Other publications prompted receptiveness through memorable images. In *Architectural antiquities of Great Britain*, a publishing phenomenon that ran to five volumes and presented measured surveys of cathedrals as well as more modest buildings, John Britton gave his readers access to accurate, precisely located details.<sup>88</sup> (Fig. 9) This was a useful resource for the details of a Gothic style. Britton's text was not based on a clear taxonomy, but this was supplied by James Dallaway in his history of English architecture.<sup>89</sup> Dallaway not only gave clear guidance about which buildings illustrated which style, but showed why knowledge of stylistic periods was important for a designer of revival architecture:

‘... if a church should be built in 1806, purporting to be an exact renovation of one erected in the reign of Henry VI and the pointed arches should bear an indented moulding, or the roof of the ailes [*sic*] equal that of the nave, we might fairly determine, that the architect had not studied a pure style, or that he had widely deviated from every known instance of the date he pretended to imitate.’<sup>90</sup>

Dallaway framed this argument in terms of Gothic as a rule-observing style, but he also inadvertently demonstrated how a good classification system based on empirically observed details could set a standard for the revival.

In his *Treatise on the ecclesiastical architecture*



Fig. 11. View of north front of the Viceregal Chapel, Dublin Castle (1807–1815) and the reconstructed Record Tower (1811–1814), Francis Johnston.  
(*Photograph by Davison and Associates; courtesy of the Office of Public Works*)

of England during the middle ages, John Milner also presented a taxonomy of styles.<sup>91</sup> His book was polemical; he based his three periods on an organic model of progression from early vitality through maturity to final degeneracy, and advocated the second period – epitomised by York Minster nave – as the best model for revival architecture.<sup>92</sup> The book contained a valuable account of the style of each period based on an empirical observation of details, and, with his call for ‘the scientific architect’ to make a careful record of architectural specimens belonging to each period, and his adamant injunction that periods should not be mixed, he looked towards a future in which authenticity would be the guiding principle.<sup>93</sup> However, there were other ways of reading the *Treatise*. These readings tapped into the eighteenth-century understanding

of appropriateness and character, for Milner vividly evoked the arch form of each period – acute for the first, ‘perfect or equilateral’ for the second and ‘obtuse’ for the third – and attributed a character to each: the first achieved sublimity with heavy, plain architecture; the second through fine balance, the third through ‘magnificence, ingenuity, delicacy, and elegance’. Such an appraisal could encourage an application of Gothic styles according to appropriate character rather than striving for imitative accuracy.

#### CONCLUSION

Johnston’s patrons and the authors he read directed him to view Gothic architecture at a number of different scales: in the far distance, as he would when

producing a perspective drawing; in the middle distance at the scale of an elevational drawing; and in close up detail. By 1796 he had learnt to appreciate Gothic architecture from afar. He could evaluate castles and demesne buildings as picturesque objects in the landscape. He could respond to cathedrals as a stimulus for sublime emotions. He had an intellectual appreciation of appropriate character: strength, for example, for a castle. He also had a developed middle distance perspective. This is seen most clearly in his appraisal of aesthetic balance and restraint in medieval cathedrals and Gothic revival churches, in his drawing of the Penrhyn gate lodge, and his appreciation of stylistic consistency in Salisbury Cathedral. What he lacked when he visited Wales and England was an eye for detail. This was supplied in some measure in the books published in the first decade of the nineteenth century in which stylistic periods were described, characterised, appraised, and recommended for new buildings. ‘This directed Johnston towards an appreciation of authenticity that incorporated the notions of both accuracy and appropriateness.

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- 4 See S. Kostof (ed), *The architect: chapters in the history of the profession* (2nd ed., Berkeley and London, 2000).
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- 6 Chambers expressed admiration for the ‘lightness in [the] works [of Gothick architects], an art and boldness of execution; to which the ancients never arrived’, and he advocated surveys so ‘that the Gothick structures [will be] more considered; better understood; and in higher estimation; than they hitherto seem to have been’: William Chambers, *A treatise on the decorative part of civil architecture* (3rd ed. London, 1791), p. 24.
- 7 The Sublime was an established concept by the mid-eighteenth century, when it was definitively defined by Edmund Burke in *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*, (expanded ed. London, 1759).

- Burke did not discuss cathedrals in his book, but in the chapter on power inserted into the second edition of 1759 he described the experience of the power of God in terms of the Sublime: 'But whilst we contemplate so vast an object ... we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him': Edmund Burke, *A philosophical enquiry*, p. 119.
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  - 21 Erica Loane, 'Architectural drawings by Thomas Cooley in the public library Armagh' (Undergraduate dissertation, Trinity College Dublin, 1983).
  - 22 T. Friedman, *The eighteenth-century church in Britain* (New Haven & London, 2011), pp. 212, 226–9.
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  - 26 John Dart, *Westminsterium* (London, 1723); Francis Drake, *Eboracum* (London, 1736); Thomas Wright, *Louthiana*, 3 vols (London, 1748); Armagh Robinson Library, P001498092, William Lodge, 'Catalogue of books in Armagh Public Library' (1780).
  - 27 *Archaeologia* and *Vetusta Monumenta* are listed in William Lodge's 'Catalogue of books in Armagh Public Library' of 1780.
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- 33 Hill, 'Perceptions and uses of Gothic', p. 142.
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- 38 *Ibid.*, fig 165; Peter Harbison, 'Barralet and Beranger's antiquarian sketching tour through Wicklow and Wexford in the autumn of 1780', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 104C:6 (2004), fig 12.
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