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Social History in Architecture: The Stone House
of W.R. Motherwell*

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Canadian architectural historians have often studied building
styles for their own sake, with little reference to the social
phenomena they represent. In the United States, however,
historians have begun to analyse the design and spatial
organization of Victorian homes in search of new insights into
the character of nineteenth century middle class society.[1]
A similar approach may be taken to the structures erected by
the Ontarians who came to Western Canada as settlers in the
late Victorian period. This paper focuses on the design of
the farm house of W.R. Motherwell and thirteen houses of
similar shape, size and materials in the areas of British
Ontarian settlement in South Eastern Saskatchewan, near the
communities of Abernethy, Sintaluta and Arcola.

The Motherwell homestead, or Lanark Place, as it was
affectionately called by its builder, is situated in the
Qu'Appelle River basin of south-eastern Saskatchewan. This
region was first settled on a permanent basis in the early
1880's. Responding to the Dominion government's free home-
stead policy and the prospect of carving out a niche in the
prairie wilderness, Ontarian and British immigrants consti-
tuted the principal influx of settlers in the earliest phase.

The first shelters of the early settlers were generally
rude frame, log or sod houses, which were hastily built while
the homesteaders concentrated on the initial tasks of breaking
and cropping the land. These houses were simple and efficient,
commonly possessing only an all purpose kitchen/sitting room,
and perhaps a bedroom or two.[2] However, after the period of
economic consolidation, many Ontarians erected handsome stone,
brick and frame farm houses. The new layouts were large and

elaborate and tended to reflect the cultural origins of their builders. Many of the Ontarian houses in southern Manitoba and south-eastern Saskatchewan conform loosely to the Italianate style that was current in the North-Eastern United States and Ontario in the 1860s, the earlier in Great Britain.[3] While derived originally from Italian rural villas, Italianate represented nor merely the revival of a single style, but was based on a number of sources: the Italian Renaissance and Baroque; rural peasant vernacular; and even Norman Romanesque. The one feature common to the Italianate styles was roundness of arches, windows, doors and surface embellishment. In North America, other basic essentials came to be associated with this style, including wide bracketted eaves and a low pitched hip roof with flat central peak[4] adorned with decorative projections and in some cases cupolas.

In terms of structural organization, North American Victorian design departed significantly from its British roots. A common English practice, particularly for the upper classes, was to build separate wings for servants quarters flanking the main structure. In New England, and in Canada, the rigors of climate militated against a sprawling design, with the result that the service section was usually placed at the rear of the house.[5] This format is suggested in the various publications of Andrew Jackson Downing and other American authors of house pattern books in the mid-nineteenth century, Downing was the source of a certain standardization of Victorian North American domestic architecture through his published series of treatises on virtually all aspects of environmental design. More than merely blue print guide books, Downing's Volumes offered advice to prospective builders on the aesthetic, philosophic and functional attributes that each house should possess.

Evidence of Downing's influence in the development of the architecture of Canada West is found in the series of house plans and commentaries that were published in the Canada Farmer after 1864. Only one of these plans was directly attributed to him but others conform closely to the designs found in his Architecture of Country Houses among others. In reprinting Downing's design for "A Symmetrical Farm-House of Stone", the Canada Farmer echoed the architect's sentiment that its merit lay in the fact that it looked like a farm house and expressed "the beauty of a farmer's life—simple honest, strong and frank—telling its own story at a glance. While unambitious, it is neither mean nor meagre."[6]

In Ontario, builders had practical reasons for emulating Downing's "one and a half storey" designs since local taxes were assessed on the basis of the number of stories.[7] On the prairies, however, assessments were based solely on the value of land. Given quantifiable data, then, it would be useful

at some point to test the hypothesis that the ratio of two
to one and a half storey houses was higher in the west because
of the tax advantages. Yet it is more important for this
study to note that the origin of both house styles can be
traced to Ontarian models. Just as Downing designed houses
of varying expense for clients of different means, the Canada
Farmer offered a variety of sizes and printed more substantial
plans for prosperous farmers. The "Two-Storey Farm-House"
illustrated in the April 15, 1865 issue which has been noted
by Ralph Greenhill and Douglas Richardson in separate studies
of Ontario architecture,[8] also serves as a prototype of the
Ontarian farm house that was duplicated on the prairies.
Block shaped and hip roofed, it was described by the Canada
Farmer as a straight forward square house, intended to acco-
mmodate a large family. "The monotony of the front is relieved
by projecting the hall two feet forward of the main building.
This is carried up and finished with a gable. The roof projects
two feet from the face of the walls and is continued all round
the house, with bold wooden brackets underneath."[9]

While the house in the Canada Farmer exhibited an essen-
tial symmetry of design, many of the prairie stone houses dis-
play no obvious symmetrical intent. To some extent this was a
reflection of the passage into the High Victorian period, with
its emphasis on irregularity and what the Victorians termed
"the picturesque". However, the base plan for this development
remained, as the simple block shape of the Italianate was
well suited to the addition of a variety of surface embellish-
ment,[10] as is demonstrated in the design of the Debenham house
at Sintaluta.

At the same time, the prairie Victorian houses often ex-
hibit a sparseness of embellishment in relation to the
Ontarian counterparts. Where Ontarian Italianate houses
were commonly surmounted by belvederes, and surrounded by
piazzas reminiscent of Tuscan country houses, the prairie
version offered metal cresting, or widow's walks and simple
verandahs. Moreover, the scrollwork in prairie house brackets
and vergeboards was usually either mass produced or the product
of crude workmanship. Thus the Anglo-American prototypes
that had already been modified by Ontarian vernacular influ-
ences, suffered a further dilution of style on the prairies.
Nonetheless, the prairie houses should be viewed in their own
context since builders were often confronted with a shortage
of fine materials and skilled carpenters. While the Victorian
prairie houses perhaps compare unfavourably with their stylis-
tic antecedents they represent the imposition of a sophistica-
tion and elegance of living where none had existed before.

A more immediate and tangible context for the interpre-
tation of the Ontarian prairie farm house may be drawn from
a series of house elevations, layouts and commentaries

published in the Western Canadian agricultural press in the
1890s. Not merely design proposals, these plans were often
representations of existing houses in Manitoba and the
District of Assiniboia and included the Motherwell house plan,
which appeared in the May 5 1900 issue of the Nor-West Farmer,
two years after its completion. Particularly interesting is
a plan in the issue of the Farmers' Advocate which demonstrates
what was considered essential in a prairie farm dwelling.[11]
Entitled "A Convenient and Inexpensive Farmhouse", this two-
storey structure comprised four rooms on the ground floor—a
parlor, dining room, kitchen, and a shed or summer kitchen and
four bedrooms upstairs. A single staircase linked the two
floors.

In comparison with the Advocate's ideal farm home, the
houses in the sample group generally exhibited a much higher
degree of formality and compartmentalization of room function.
Emphasizing the change of life style between life in the one
or two room log dwelling the new houses contained separate
rooms for food preparation, familial activities, formal enter-
taining, and dining. Of the thirteen stone structures examined
in the vicinity of Abernethy, Sintaluta, and Arcola, all had
parlours and dining rooms with large kitchens, which were
usually located at the rear. In most cases a central hall
provided access to the front staircase, the parlour, dining
room and sometimes the kitchen. Others possessed rear hall-
ways that emphasized the demarcation between the formal and
the service sections. Eight of the thirteen study dwellings
possessed rear staircases leading to the farm labourer's
accommodations. In four houses the employees were housed in
separate wings although in only two was access blocked en-
tirely. This structural consignment of servants' and labourers'
quarters to a separate annex emphasized the inherent social
divisions between owner and employee.

It was in the Motherwell design, however, that the
Victorian formality of the Ontarian settlers found its ulti-
mate expression. The symmetrical lines of its front wing,
coupled with its balcony/porch projection, created an air of
sophistication and reserve. The effect was heightened by a
front hall that granted access to the parlour, dining room, and
upstairs only through the opening of doors. Such a stark se-
paration suggests a certain pretentiousness of design, although
the fact that the Motherwell plan made no provision for con-
necting the kitchen to the hallway, even indirectly, is probab-
ly a function of the relatively small dimensions of the house.
As with the other houses the Motherwell plan physically separated
the family from the hired persons' quarters. On the main floor
these divisions were highlighted by a rear hallway and deep
rounded arch that again, provided a buffer zone between living,
business and entertainment functions and the service section.

Thus the noise and odours of the kitchen were prevented from intruding upon the formal areas, while a back staircase permitted cleaning activities such as the removal of chamber pots by domestic servants, to remain unobtrusive. Conversely the front stair permitted "dramatic descent to meet family and guests."[12] Moreover, the modest detailing of the Lanark Place service annex reflected middle class attitudes that regarded only the showpiece front section as worthy of much architectural attention. Indeed, the only embellishment of note was a gingerbread vergeboard and kitchen verandah on the south side of the annex, where a lawn/tennis court provided the focus for outdoor social events. The north side, much less interesting architecturally, was screened from view by trees. Taken as a unit the service annex closely approximates a design published in the November 15, 1864 issue of the Canada Farmer entitled, "A Cheap Farm House."[13] Ralph Greenhill and Allan Gowans have described similar one and one half storey designs with front central dormer window typical of Ontarian rural dwellings.[14] Apart from the dimensions little is known of the original Motherwell family residence near Perth, Ontario, but we do know that Motherwell's father operated a very modest farm of limited productivity. In constructing his service wing to resemble the accommodations of a more humble Ontarian lifestyle, Motherwell had indeed succeeded in putting it all behind him.

In conformity with the Western Canadian practice, Motherwell built two parlours—a rear parlour that served as a family room, and sometime dining area, and a front parlour that was reserved for the formal reception of guests. The rooms could be closed off by drapes as the occasion demanded, and constituted one of the few concessions to utilitarianism in the initial floor plan. Ultimately, Motherwell was obliged to make a number of changes in his layout to permit a more convenient flow of traffic to the different areas of the house. The initial configuration, however, may be taken to represent his traditional, stratified conception of proper social interaction.

At Lanark Place it is said that Motherwell abhorred all forms of social pretension and that he insisted—on pain of imminent dismissal—that his employees sit down to the same dinner table with his family.[15] It was also said that he would not ask any labourer to do what he would not do himself. Such behaviour, however, is not so much representative of egalitarianism as a kind of benevolent paternalism. Motherwell's views on the place of hired men are well documented in his "Practical Pointers for Farm Hands", a pamphlet issued under his authority as Saskatchewan Minister of Agriculture in 1915. Addressed to prospective farm labourers, the pamphlet gave some 200 specific instructions for proper behavior

including recommended social conventions. Hired men were
instructed, for example, never to address the farmer's daugh-
ters by their first name, and never to leave the farm without
announcing their destination.[16]

A similarly subordinate position was occupied by maids,
or in the more egalitarian terminology of the prairies, hired
girls, during the settlement period. Recent American scholar-
ship has shown that the specialization of American home inte-
riors in the nineteenth century was related to the enhanced
economic position of middle class families. Freed of the
proverbial "women's work", middle class wives were accorded
the more specialized role of uplifting the home environment
and caring for the family. A similar process took place on
the Canadian prairies in the Anglo-Saxon community. Where
frontier women in the early settlement period were preoccupied
with the onerous tasks of cooking, cleaning, washing, and even
labour in the fields, the addition of domestic servants enabled
farm wives to assume a new set of responsibilities that in-
cluded formal entertaining, participation in women's and
church groups, and the fostering of an appropriate social and
intellectual climate for their children.[17] The Motherwell
family employed at least one, and often, two maids at
Lanark Place. While it would perhaps be an exaggeration to
say that these hired girls occupied a position similar to
domestic servants in the class-oriented societies of Eastern
North America, there were definite signs of stratification.
As late as the early thirties, Catherine Motherwell was still
using a bell to summon her hired girls.[18]

Some writers would dispute this interpretation of stra-
tification in the society of Ontarian settlers on the prairies.
Georgina Binnie Clark, a settler from the more class-conscious
society of England, was shocked at the degree of egalitarianism[19]
accorded the "hired men" or farm hands in the Qu'Appelle area.
More recently sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset has argued
that the shared experience of exploitation at the hands of
Eastern transportation, financial and political interests
contributed to the creation of a classless society in Saskat-
chewan, which found expression in the agrarian movements after
1900.[20] Recent research has, however, emphasized the essential-
ly conservative nature of the agrarian protest, whose leaders
envisaged no radical restructuring of society, but were con-
cerned primarily with challenging monopolistic grain handling
practices.[21] Among the early agrarian leaders were several
builders of the great stone houses, including W.R. Motherwell.

Many of the stone house builders assumed a high public
profile in their respective communities. Motherwell was the
most prominent figure, serving on the local school board, as
a Justice of the Peace and as the first president of the
Territorial Grain Grower's Association, before embarking on

a ministerial career in provincial and federal politics.[22]
James Morrison and J.R. Dinnin were two of the leading lights
in the Abernethy Conservative Party Association and of the
Anglican Church.[23] H.O. Partridge, a Justice of the Peace,
and David Railton, a founding father of the Grain Growers'
Grain Company, built two of the stone houses at Sintaluta.
Perhaps the most impressive example of domestic architecture
in the three communities, Doune Lodge at Arcola, was the home
of W.H. Bryce, the first reeve of the municipality.[24] Inter-
preted in conjunction with their public roles, the layouts and
elevations of these Anglo-Saxon settlers' houses point to the
conclusion that the achievement of high social status was a
preoccupation with this group.

Kenneth Ames has suggested the possibility of applying
Thorstein Veblen's Theory of the Leisure Class to the inter-
pretation of upper middle class house interiors in Victorian
America.[25] The author of the phrase "conspicuous consumption",
Veblen theorized that having risen above the level of sub-
sistence, people do not employ their surplus wealth in socially
or individually productive ways, but rather to impress others.
Veblen believed that such behaviour was endemic to societies
organized on the lines of private property and profit.

The motive that lies at the root of ownership
is emulation and the same motive of emulation
continues active in the further development of
the institution to which it has given rise and
in the development of all those features of the
social structure which this institution of
ownership touches.[26]

In the initial settlement period, the desire to demon-
strate one's status through external symbols was possibly
heightened by the lack of a clearly defined pecking order
in the frontier society. American settlement historian Allan
Bogue has posited that for up to a generation after the opening
of settlement in an area, a process of jockeying for social
position ensued among aspiring leaders of the community.[27]
Many of the owners of the impressive residences in the study
area were indeed community leaders, and it might be speculated
that the buildings were intended to proclaim their newly won
prestige.

Finally, the Ontarian settlers' preoccupation with building
palatial country residences was so pervasive as to suggest
deeper psychological motivations. For many settlers, the
experience of moving from safe, familiar surroundings to the
frontier undoubtedly entailed some trauma. Many were young
bachelors, and, indeed, the rates of males to females contin-
ued to be disproportionately high throughout the settlement
period.[28] In the early period, prior to the greatest influx
under Clifford Sifton's immigration schemes, settlers were
few and scattered. Cut off from family and friends and iso-

lated from one another, they undoubtedly longed for a more stable and secure community. Wrested from their own society and the woodlands of Ontario, they now were confronted by the hostile barrenness of the open prairie, with few social contacts upon which they could rely.

In this respect one may interpret the building of large stone residences as an attempt to provide the stability that had previously been lacking. Symbolically this structural response to the environment achieved the desired permanence in the form of solid block-shaped design, and in the use of the most durable materials, stone or brick. Concretely, these large houses were intended to house a self-sufficient farm community of family members and farm employees. Having established the legitimacy of his place and lineage in the new society, the homesteader hoped his homestead would remain the focus for succeeding generations

The study of Victorian farm house architecture should add significantly to our knowledge of Western Canadian society in the settlement period. In this study, the close relationship between Eastern Canadian models and Western architecture demonstrates the importance of "cultural baggage" in determining the settlers' response to a new environment. Certainly adaptations were made, as prairie builders employed indiginous materials such as field stone in lieu of the traditional Ontarian brick. Yet the essential designs remained the same and reflected their builders' aspirations to replicate Ontarian domestic structures on the prairies. This trend was most clearly demonstrated in the spatial organization of the settlers' permanent homes, which served to emulate the sophistication and social stratification of the parent society. At the same time the degree of room specialization also depended on the world view of the individual settler. In the Motherwell home, Victorian notions of grace and respectability were taken to an extreme; other house interiors suggest less rigid attitudes to social interaction. A common theme in Western Canadian fiction is the profound psychological impact of the stark prairie on newcomers,[29] and the loneliness engendered by sparse and scattered settlement. In this connection the Ontarian prairie farm house represented an attempt to establish roots. While creating a permanent presence, the stone mansions permitted the establishment of hierarchical structures that lent stability to the emerging prairie society.

Endnotes

1 See Clifford Clark Jr. "Domestic Architecture as an Index to Social History: The Romantic Revival and the Cult of Domesticity in America, 1840-1870" Journal of Interdisciplinary History Vol. VII, No. 1 (Summer, 1976), pp. 33-56

and Kenneth L. Ames, "Meaning in Artifacts: Hall Furnishings in Victorian America." Journal of Interdisciplinary History Vol IX, No. 1(Summer, 1978), pp. 19-46.

2 Kathleen M. Taggart, "The First Shelter of Early Pioneers", Saskatchewan History Vol. XI, No. 3 (Autumn, 1958), pp. 81-93.

3 Allan Gowans, Building Canada: An Architectural History of Canadian Life (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1966), 106.

4 See the "Design for a Country House" Canada Farmer, (January 15, 1868), p. 29.

5 Ralph Greenhill, Ken MacPherson and Douglas Richardson, Ontario Towns, "Houses" (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1974).

6 "A Comfortable Farm House" The Canada Farmer, (March 31, 1973), p. 98.

7 Ralph Greenhill, et al., op. cit.

8 Ibid., and Douglas Richardson "The Spirit of the Place: Canadian Architecture in the Victorian Era". Canadian Collector, Vol. IV, No. 5 (September/October, 1975), pp. 20-29.

9 Allan Gowans, op. cit., p. 107.

10 Barbara A. Humphreys "Western Vernacular Architecture", unpublished manuscript, n.d.

11 The Farmers' Advocate, Vol. 33, (May 5, 1898), p. 198.

12 Kenneth Ames, op. cit.

13 The Canada Farmer, November 15, 1864, p. 340.

14 Ralph Greenhill, op. cit., and Allan Gowans, op. cit., plate. 133, "Characteristic Ontario Farmhouse of the Period 1865-90".

15 Interview with Major McFadyen, former hired hand at Lanark Place, by Ian Clarke, National Historic Sites, Regina, 1976.
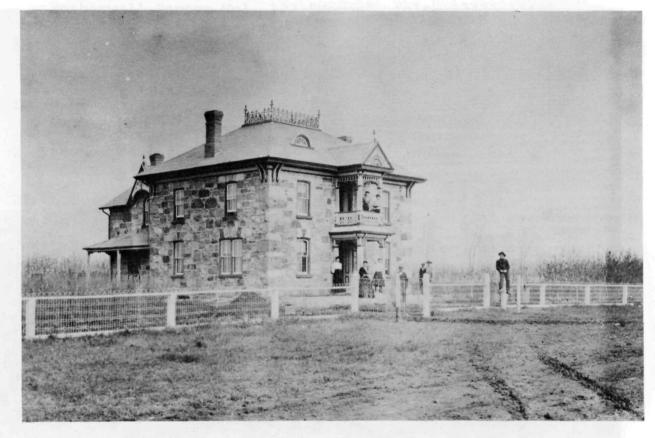
16 "Practical Pointers for Farm Hands" Saskatchewan Department of Agriculture. Published by Direction of Hon. W.R. Motherwell, Minister.

17 See Catherine Motherwell's speech to the Equal Franchise Meeting, Lemberg, Saskatchewan, December 5, 1916. W.R. Motherwell Papers Vol. 123 "Women", fols. 17471-17479.

18 Interview with Lizzie Morris, former hired hirl at Lanark Place, by Lyle Dick, National Historic Sites, Indian Head, Saskatchewan, March 22, 1978.

19 Georgina Binnie-Clark Wheat and Women, (Toronto: Bell and Cockgurn, 1914).

20 Seymour Martin Lipset, Agrarian Socialism, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1950), pp. 199-219.

21 L.D. Courville "The Political Conservatism of the Saskatchewan Progressives", Canadian Historical Association. Historical Papers, 1974, pp. 157-181.

22 Allan Turner, "W.R. Motherwell: The Emergence of a Farm Leader" Saskatchewan History, Vol. XI, No. 3 (Autumn, 1958), pp. 94-103.

23 The Abernethy Abernethan, 1904-1915.

24 Interview with Mrs. J.T. McLaren, grand-daughter of W.H. Bryce, by Lyle Dick and Jean Claude Lebeuf, April 20, 1979.

25 Kenneth Ames, op. cit., p. 27.

26 Thorstein Veblen, The Theory of the Leisure Class, (New York: Modern Library, 1934), p. 21.

27 Allan G. Bogue "Social Theory and the Pioneer" Agricultural History Vol. XXXIV (January, 1960), p. 31.

28 Canada Census of the Northwest Provinces, 1906, Ottawa: King's Printer, 1907.

29 See Laurence Ricou, Vertical Man/Horizontal World: Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1973.

1   Parks Canada Collection. W.R. Motherwell and family in front of
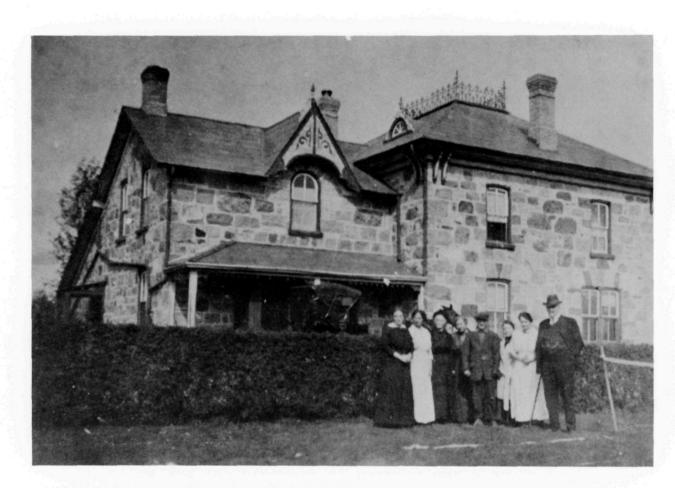   his log house, circa 1890.

2 Parks Canada Collection. The earliest extant photograph of the
Motherwell stonehouse, circa 1904.

3   Parks Canada Collection.   Side view of the Motherwell house, circa
    1915.   Note the stylistic differences in the two wings, the front
    formal section and the rear service annex.

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