Few areas of architectural writing remain more bedeviled by the consequences of labeling and categorization than the Gothic Revival. Many of the divisions thus created can be identified as a legacy of Victorian scholarship, including one of the most persistent, the still widely adhered to belief that it is possible to identify a change of attitude toward the medieval past at some time in the second and third decades of the 19th century, a change of such sufficient depth and consequence that it heralded a new phase in the revival, distinguishing the light-heartedness and frivolity of 18th-century experiments (usually signaled by the adoption of the archaic “Gothick” or even “Rococo Gothic”) from the seriousness and moral purpose of those of the following century (i.e., “Gothic” proper). It has been conventional to attribute this remarkable turn of events to, among other factors, the advances contained in the work of a comparatively small number of antiquaries, including Thomas Rickman, Augustus Charles Pugin, and John Britton. The latter, indeed, as the publisher of a long sequence of well-illustrated volumes on English and Welsh medieval architecture, has frequently been accorded special prominence; few will require to be reminded of the appraisal of his contribution provided by Kenneth Clark’s The Gothic Revival (London, 1928), and the perhaps all too memorable passage, “The old parodies of Gothic were no longer possible.... Britton killed Ruins and Rococo” (p. 95).

One consequence of recent research has nevertheless been to undermine the certainty of this and other such assessments. Attention has been drawn to the fact that it ignores, for example, with details drawn to larger scale. Equally important, it also overlooks the frequently impressive achievements of an even earlier generation of medievalists, the fruits of whose architectural researches, in the shape of comparatively modestly priced volumes, were already widely available before the end of the 18th century. The need, then, for a broad reappraisal of the values and objectives of the “early” revival is obvious, and can be assumed to have encouraged the publication of McCarthy’s The Origins of the Gothic Revival, which, taking the process a vital stage further, focuses on the period 1740–1770.

The publisher’s carefully qualified claim on the jacket, that this is the first book “to examine closely the origins of the gothic revival in England” (italics mine) is, however, a reminder that others have tackled this area of architectural activity, and it has to be said from the very outset that with a few notable exceptions, the buildings selected for analysis will not surprise those already familiar with the accounts of Clark, G. Germann (1972), and T. Davies (1974). Horace Walpole’s Strawberry Hill inevitably figures prominently and confronts the author with a further and daunting challenge, of adding to histories of the same building already provided by W. S. Lewis (Metropolitan Museum Studies, 1934–1936) and J. M. Crook (Country Life, 1973). His response, wisely, has been to engage in a methodical resituting of Walpole’s voluminous correspondence as well as a wealth of supporting documentation, much of which is now deposited with the Lewis Walpole Library in Farmington, Connecticut. No fewer than 50 drawings (five in color) are reproduced in support of this particular part of the analysis, and chart the building’s evolution with unusual eloquence, none more so than John Chute’s proposals for the cloister and gallery, commemorating his close involvement in one of the most radical aspects of the Strawberry Hill design, the conscious asymmetry of its plan and elevations. What though of the feature that most excited contemporary comment, the comparative historical authenticity of its component elements? Walpole’s own antiquarian pretensions, fueled by contact with the Cambridge researchers Tyson, Cole, Gray, and Essex (the last two played an important role in the mid and latter stages of Strawberry’s development), are revealed as of critical importance in this respect, even extending to Chute, whose drawings, it is observed, “are dependent upon archaeological examples only where the evidence indicates that Walpole played a leading role in determining the design” (p. 86).

Walpole’s relationship with Johann Heinrich Müntz is less easily resolved. Unlike Chute, Müntz appears to have been of marginal importance to Strawberry’s final arrangement. His subsequent career is nevertheless interesting enough, encapsulating proposals for a precociously early (if never published) history of Gothic architecture and responsibility (in preference to a counter set of proposals by Richard Bentley) for the Gothic cloisters for Richard Bateman’s The Grove, Old Windsor (1759), which the author describes somewhat provocatively as “the most sophisticated of any designs for gothic revival architecture in the century” (p. 106). Walpole’s subsequent attribution of the executed arrangement to Bentley leads McCarthy to suggest an act of deliberate censorship, which, it is argued, also extended (through the absence of any reference in his writings) to Sir Roger Newdigate’s experiments at Arbury Hall, Warwickshire. If so, his motives on this occasion would appear to have been prompted by rivalry rather than any sense of personal loyalty. Of all mid-18th-century Gothic undertakings Arbury comes closest to Strawberry Hill in scale and seriousness, and McCarthy’s account of its development, detailing the contributions of Newdigate, Sanderson Miller, William Hiorne, and Henry Keene, is to be welcomed as filling a serious gap in Revivalist scholarship. His description of the building (p. 116) as “a showcase of antiquarian gothic,” heavily dependent for inspiration on Henry VII’s Chapel, Westminster Abbey, is entirely appropriate, and takes us to the central achievement of his book, which is at last to bring scholarly focus to bear on what now clearly emerges as a coherent corpus of buildings; these, whether
taken singly or together, are revealed as responsive to a "vigor-ous" antiquarian impulse (p. 3).

Any criticisms of what undoubtedly constitutes a major addition to Gothic Revivalist literature are thus of a minor nature, and relate chiefly to individual assessments. In particular, a special plea surely deserves to be advanced on behalf of James Essex, whose high contemporary reputation is afforded lukewarm support by McCarthy, who is frankly dismissive of the claims advanced on behalf of his manuscript history of Gothic architecture, now described as a "rag-bag of odds and ends of architectural observation, architectural mythology and sheer irrelevances that could never have been dragooned into presentable file" (p. 171). There may be some truth to this, although it surely misses the significance of Essex's scholarship to equate what he identified as the "well established principles" of Gothic architecture with a bland recognition of the "importance of the pointed arch." In fact it was his pioneering interest in the mechanics of Gothic vaulting techniques that distinguished Essex's research, establishing him as one of the first to recognize the significant structural advantages enjoyed by the pointed arch, in particular, its easy adaptation to the problems posed by irregular bay widths. True, it was not until 1809, 25 years after Essex's death, that Thomas Kerrich finally gave the theory coherent published expression (in Archaeologia), making appropriate tribute to Essex and preparing the way, via the writings of George Saunders, for the stone vaulting experiments of James Savage in the 1820s. This, of course, takes us a considerable distance from the historical scope of McCarthy's analysis, which nevertheless ends on an appropriately forward-looking note with John Chute, who as one of the dominant contributors to Strawberry Hill and the architect of his own house, the Vyne, is presented in mildly prophetic guise, prefiguring the aims of a following generation of Gothicists.

Anthony Salvin's active career commenced at too late a date (c. 1820, a full 70 years after work began at Strawberry Hill) for him to be considered by McCarthy, making it all the more difficult to understand why Jill Allibone should now advance him as a "pioneer" of Gothic Revival architecture. It quickly becomes clear, however, that Allibone brings an altogether different perspective to bear on 18th-century Gothic than that provided by McCarthy. Witness her adoption, in the introduction, of the blanket term Gothic and a distinctly slighting appraisal of Fonthill Abbey, which "could not have been regarded as serious" (p. 2). This is not an assessment that I can support or sympathize with; it is therefore to risk laboring a point that I take issue with the author on two further and related matters—her implied dating (p. 3) of the promotion of Gothic as "the national style" of England to the mid 19th century, which ignores the success of the "Gothic is English" campaign of John Carter and John Milner from the late 1790s onward; and her description, on the same page, of Thomas Rickman's activities as a church architect when "he invented a system of nomenclature that is still in use" (italics mine). Although partly correct, Allibone overlooks Rickman's enormous debt to a method of stylistic analysis (in which Gothic architecture was divided into three increasingly ornamented stylistic phases) that can be traced directly to James Bentham's History of Ely Cathedral (1771).

Sober, hard working, and successful, Salvin emerges from this account as the very embodiment of the Victorian ideal, eventually involving himself in no fewer than 356 commissions, all of which are detailed in an extended catalogue of works. Such an enormous output inevitably encompasses buildings of uneven quality. This said, it still comes as something of a surprise to encounter the appraisal of Salvin's talents contained in Mark Girouard's foreword, in which we find his churches described as "seldom interesting," his university buildings "relatively minor," and his restorations "impressive" but "not congenial." Salvin's country houses, it is conceded, "are a different matter," fortunate enough given the fact that it was this area of activity that dominated his office output. Here Allibone is assisted by the survival of the majority of Salvin's more important buildings, as well as the existence of a healthy depth of presentation drawings and other documents, many of which have been unearthed in the process of a thorough research effort. Salvin's notorious reticence nevertheless remains an obstacle, only partially breached by the existence of family diaries and correspondence. Unlike his slightly younger contemporary and sometime critic, George Gilbert Scott, he never committed his views on architecture to paper, and only once expounded his opinions in this respect in public, to the Royal Institute of Architects in 1857, to defend his restoration of Alnwick Castle. On this occasion his description of the original proposals—"to devise Medieval decorations to a plan consistent with modern requirements" (p. 84)—provides an insight into Salvin's achievement as a country house architect, namely, the apparently easy reconciliation of the demands of historicism and modernity, often producing buildings of exceptional compositional power.

The great majority of these adhered to a Tudor-Jacobean synthesis that seems to have held a special attraction to his patrons, most of whom were drawn from a narrow social banding, more or less approximating to the traditional landed gentry. As Allibone observes, one result of this was to make the architect peculiarly vulnerable to the consequences of agricultural depression, a factor that undoubtedly explains the protracted nature of so many of his major commissions. Whether or not designs culled from an amalgam of 16th- and early 17th-century sources accord with the definition "Gothic" is something that stylistic purists will pause to ponder. Even conceding this generous breadth of stylistic interpretation, however, there must be a suspicion that the focus Allibone has brought to bear on the architect, as the exponent of a "Gothic" and "national" style, is simply too confining to do him justice. This might explain the author's evident discomfort when dealing with the sizeable corpus of commissions that extends stylistically beyond such narrow parameters. Thus, at Windsor Castle the source of Salvin's designs for the Clewer Tower (1862) is traced to Viollet-le-Duc's Tour de Trésor at Carcassonne, plans of which were exhibited at the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1855, a thoroughly plausible explanation that prompts the observation that "it is inconceivable that he himself would have contemplated making a direct borrowing from the work of the French architect," it can "only be assumed that this was done at the insistence of Prince Albert" (pp. 145-146).

An alternative, if not particularly exciting explanation is possibly closer to the mark: that Salvin is in fact to be identified as a mildly eclectic architect, and as such remained responsive to a varied range of sources throughout his career, even extending to French classicism and Italian and English vernacular, his interest in the latter (evidenced by his own house, Hawksfold) pointing to a precociously early (1865) response to the Old...
English experiments of his erstwhile pupils, Nesfield and Shaw. Quibbles over interpretation aside, Allibone’s book stands as a solidly documented account of Salvin’s career, although it is McCarthy who has added more substantially to the orthodoxies of Gothic Revivalist studies.

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The brief introduction to this book opens with the striking statement that the Ruskinian tradition “has been arguably the major British contribution to architectural thought in the past 150 years” (p. xv). The architectural and environmental theory constituting this tradition has a strong ethical foundation. Theorists propounded various organic theories about art and sought to integrate art with society more intensively than in the past. In England this tradition began with William Blake and embraced Thomas Carlyle and A. W. N. Pugin as well as the critics that Mark Swenarton considers. In the United States Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Louis Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright were exponents. The tradition, which is synonymous with the Arts and Crafts and Garden City movements, is presented in the ensuing seven chapters. The first six are short, chronologically arranged essays that consider “a key episode and period” (p. xvii) in the thought of each of the following: John Ruskin, Philip Webb, William Morris, W. R. Lethaby, Raymond Unwin, and A. J. Penty. All the aforenamed, except Penty, are well-known, established figures in the history of modern architecture, and their importance is likely to grow rather than diminish. In this regard, Penty’s inclusion seems anticlimactic, although his activities into the 1920s link the earlier writers to the seventh chapter. Entitled “Ruskin and the Moderns,” this is a briefer glance at Ruskin’s influence on the architectural thought of three architects associated with Modernism: Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, and Le Corbusier. Here, Swenarton gives no hint that Wright, born in 1867 (not 1869; p. 199), was of Lethaby, Unwin, and Penty’s generation, not that of Gropius and Le Corbusier. Wright also considered himself at odds with Modernists because he was an Arts and Crafts architect, one who had turned 65 in 1932 about the time his Garden City-like design for Broadacre City was begun. In an even briefer conclusion, the author sheds his historian’s garb and becomes a critic, suggesting how the Ruskinian tradition may be useful still, and how it may not. The author’s style is clear; his method involves posing direct questions at the outset of a chapter or section with the great balance of the text devoted to answers. So it is on the first page of the book as on the first page of the conclusion. “Why should we be interested in the Ruskinian tradition today?” (p. xv), and at the end, “The question to be answered is this: has this tradition . . . anything valid or useful to offer us as we approach the end of the twentieth century?” (p. 201). His answers to both questions involve the various anti-Modernisms dominating architectural thought since the early 1960s. Swenarton sees himself using “a more realistic approach” than is found in earlier studies of architectural thought. These, he claims, are dominated by “idealist notions” grounded in German Romantic philosophy (Kant, Hegel, et al.) therein architectural ideas “are treated as though they were self-generated and as though they existed on a different plane from the everyday world of material life” (p. xvii). Implied is the notion that ideas cannot be self-generated and exist on their own planes.

Swenarton also subscribes to the well-established view that the Ruskinian tradition owes much to the idealist philosophy of German Romantics. But because the author is a self-proclaimed realist, it might be expected the book contains frequent indictments of such thought. This does not occur, however, and in a consistent, unfolding manner the reader is offered hundreds of quotations, some 212 of which are indented, from the principal cast of theoreticians and others. They serve as springboards for the answers to questions already posed by the author. And there are some good questions and matching answers. On an important specific question, Swenarton finds Ruskin’s chapter on “The Nature of Gothic” in volume 2 of The Stones of Venice to be the crux of the tradition (pp. 21–31). Gothic was to be defined “in terms of the character of the people who had made it” and “in terms of the language of its forms” (pp. 22, 24). Broader questions necessarily focus on art and politics, on art and life, on ways that Ruskin et al. saw art functioning in preindustrial societies and on ways it might function in the modern world. The author concludes that he has shown that the Ruskinian tradition “stood rather closer” (p. 201) than previously thought to German Romantic idealism than to socialism and Karl Marx. This may be true in the literal sense that art brought these critics to politics and not the reverse. But because the world today is a far cry from that which Morris envisioned in News from Nowhere, it should be remembered that Mahatma Gandhi and Mao Tse Tung both credited Ruskin as having led them to socialism, just as the various socialist parties in Britain, involving all of Swenarton’s cast beginning in 1849, account for the success and continuing existence of Britain’s Labour Party. However, there can be no argument with the author’s thesis that the Ruskinian tradition saw art and architecture as “an affair purely of the spirit” (p. 203), e.g., that expression and character (which Ruskin found so plentiful in Venice) counted for more than formal beauty.

The jacket of the book quotes Sir John Summerson pronouncing its chapters “well-rounded essays, deeply researched, and essential reading for anybody concerned with the history of the Modern Movement.” The book is certainly a contribution to the now extensive literature on the Arts and Crafts and Garden City movements. Lacking a bibliography, the book includes many of these relatively recent studies in the footnotes. The 42 illustrations are not really integral to the text, and the book might have been differently designed in order to bring down its steep price. Yet the author sheds new light on each figure. For Ruskin, this means a new examination of the period 1847–1852, when his architectural theory evolved in The Seven Lamps of Architecture and in The Stones of Venice. With Webb, who still lacks the monograph he deserves, Swenarton is on even less charted ground. It is significant to learn about Webb’s excruciatingly high personal standards, his preference for the vernacular rather than the Gothic, his adulation of Michelangelo, and his potential anarchism. With Morris, it is refreshing to...