

REVIEW

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Architecture in Britain and Ireland, 1530–1830. By Steven BRINDLE. 290 mm. Pp ix + 582, 448 ills. Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art/ Yale University Press, London, 2023. ISBN 9781913107406. £60 (hbk).

There are several things that need to be said about this book. The first will be obvious to anyone conversant with architectural and/or art history in that the title under review is very similar to John Summerson's *Architecture in Britain 1530–1830* (1953). First published in 1953, Summerson's volume was one of the first to appear under the over-arching series *The Pelican History of Art*, a high-quality and scholarly collection established by Nikolaus Pevsner in 1945. Its success was pronounced and the book subsequently passed through nine editions, the last published in 2000. Despite its longevity, Brindle points out that Summerson's formative architectural analysis, ranging between the early-Renaissance and Gothic Revival periods, has fundamentally remained set in aspic, unlike Pevsner's *Buildings of England* series and Colvin's *Biographical Dictionary* (1995), which 'evolved and grew over time'. Regarding its forebear, Brindle adds '[while] his bibliography grew with each edition, the text was only slightly altered'. As the series title suggested, Summerson's emphasis was on the evolution and development of classical architecture set within the wider canon of art history – it is with this concept that Brindle takes exception, noting 'it was obvious at the time that there were other ways of thinking about architecture'.

In observing the perceived weakness of Summerson, there can be no doubt that *Architecture in Britain and Ireland 1530–1830* offers a differing perspective on the history of our built environment. Furthermore, few can argue that Brindle not only puts his money where his mouth is by heroically reassessing the topic, but also that he does so in some style. The result therefore is a far broader study that steers away from an art history perspective to explore a

'ground-up' view of architectural development, thereby considering the skill of the architect, the commitment of the builders and the progression of design and style – all set within the wider boundaries of the cultural, social and economic history of the age. In doing so, the author's real accomplishment is to measure the whole canon of three centuries of architectural achievement, not just elite country houses and compliant churches, but vernacular, industrial and transport infrastructures across Britain and Ireland (although Wales, it seems, gets less of a look in).

Comparison between these two 'standard' histories is a dangerous pastime, but is hard to resist. Both books follow a similar chronological progression of stylistic developments – in Brindle's case 1530 to 1660 (Gothic, Renaissance), 1660 to 1760 (classical) and 1760 to 1830 (neoclassical and Gothic) and both explore the contribution of those responsible for bringing them to fruition. So what does Brindle offer in his book that Summerson does not?

There are a few key areas where Brindle is in the ascendancy. The book profits greatly from Brindle's sharp intellect and astute and perceptive opinion that drives a lively narrative, which in itself benefits from the masses of architectural scholarship published since 1953. Hence, tried and tested architectural themes that have pre-occupied architectural historians for years, such as continental influences, taste and fashion, architects and aesthetics, collaboration, anti-quarianism and architectural education, are explored in new and stimulating ways. Such themes guide the author's pen as he charts the decline of artisan-based architecture and the rise of an 'off the shelf' pattern book approach executed by new types of professional architects. There can be no doubt that Summerson's study still holds relevance today; however, Brindle's treats architecture in a more contemporary way as theatre, as a social experience and as human achievement. Humanising the process, from drawing buildings on paper to creating a structure through the conduit of various trades and skills, is one of the great achievements of this study. Furthermore, bringing Ireland into focus

is a welcome supplement and opens new doors for interpretation.

The second point to make is the sheer size of this book. Weighing in at 2.6kg (5lb 11oz) and with 592 pages, the large format makes it unwieldy and very tricky to read without some kind of physical support. This, to my mind, is counterproductive surely a standard text on a subject should, for practicality's sake, be more convenient to handle and store. On a more positive note, the production values – design, organisation and print quality – should be praised, although some might consider the quality of the paper to be rather mean. The twenty-three chapters are divided into three chronologically arranged parts, each concluding with an informative, conclusive ‘deep dive’ section (identified by the sub-chapter title ‘Architecture Culture’) that focuses on ‘The Impact of the Renaissance’, ‘Architects and Craftspeople’ and ‘A Whole New World’. The text benefits from the author's ability to sift large amounts of source material, hence the end matter is packed with 1,644 footnotes, some 1,200 bibliographic entries and a robust index. Full colour and black and white illustrations appear prolifically throughout the volume, many sourced from Wiki Commons and the Historic England Archives. In addition, there are handy plans and useful isometric drawings.

A third point to make is the content itself. What Brindle presents is truly staggering. Each chapter portrays a collaborative approach to creating and constructing buildings set within the social and cultural framework in which they were made. Despite having an academic reputation to uphold, the book does not suffer from

over-explanation, nor does it fail in its treatment of each equally significant architectural movement. This is a confident and erudite study, which is not surprising given the experience and character of the author first as properties historian at English Heritage and second as a well-published author and prolific speaker.

To conclude, we, the readers, must be thankful that the book exists. Full credit must be extended to the team at the Paul Mellon Centre for British Art/ Yale University Press for the commitment and endeavour in producing such an ambitious work. Yet it is the author's familiarity with his subject and his ability to challenge orthodoxy that creates a very straightforward narrative that will appeal to specialists and generalists alike. While Summerson's book is insightful, learned and readable, Brindle's is no less so; in many ways it is more engaging, if at times more diffuse, which can be distracting.

This book is not for the faint-hearted. Regardless of its achievements it is hard to use, difficult to handle and exasperating to read without a book stand. It is a sad reflection, therefore, that after all Brindle's work and effort, Summerson's may remain the immediate reach-for book in this field.

Colvin, H 1995. *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840*, 3rd edn, Yale University Press, New Haven
Summerson, J 1953. *Architecture in Britain 1530–1830*, Penguin Books, London

PAUL HOLDEN