

Ghost Storeys: Ralph Adams Cram, Modern Media, and Deconstructive Microhistory at a Canadian Church by
Cameron Macdonell

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Ghost Storeys

*Ralph Adams Cram, Modern Media,
and Deconstructive Microhistory
at a Canadian Church*

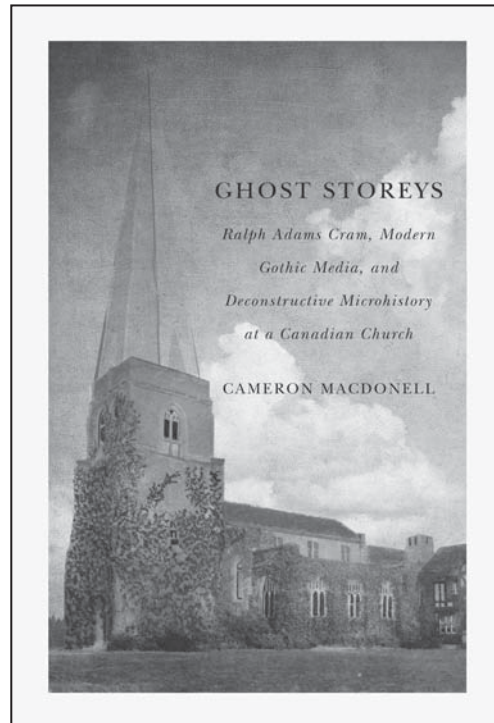
By Cameron Macdonell

Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017. 301 pages. \$35.95 paperback, \$110.00 cloth. ISBN 978-0-7735-4989-0 (www.mqup.ca)

Cameron Macdonell's *Ghost Storeys* is an unusual book, but in a good way.

Ghost Storeys explores the cultural significance of St. Mary's Anglican Church in the southwestern Ontario community of Walkerville. As the subtitle indicates, it is a work of "deconstructive microhistory." For readers who may be unfamiliar with such terminology, deconstruction emphasizes the unreliability of texts as mechanisms for articulating and apprehending truth, while microhistory explores the characteristics of particular entities—for example, vulnerable individuals who have been shunted to society's margins—and their interactions with larger (and, often, oppressive) societal forces.

In examining St. Mary's, Macdonell engages profitably with both of these methodologies. That he has done so is no small feat. After all, in view of its epistemological scepticism (as expressed in the writings of the philosopher Jacques Derrida), one could be forgiven for seeing deconstruction as fundamentally incompatible with microhistory, whose practitioners—including cultural historians Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Zemon Davis—have painstakingly worked to capture the everyday experiences of ordinary (that is, non-elite) people whose lives, they have shown, were often extraordinary. Indeed, Ginzburg—whose book *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976) is among the most renowned microhistori-



cal works—denounced deconstruction as “nihilistic... trash,” testifying unequivocally to the tension that exists between the two methodologies (9). Yet *Ghost Storeys* makes effective use of both deconstruction and microhistory, blending the former’s insistence on the elusiveness of truth with the latter’s empirical rigour. The result is an illuminating, fine-grained study.

Built between 1902 and 1904, St. Mary’s was the vision of the acclaimed American architect Ralph Adams Cram (1863-1942). Cram was an unreconstructed Anglophile who eschewed the Puritanical Protestantism of his forebears and embraced Anglo-Catholicism after a spiritual epiphany. Cram bitterly resented destabilizing phenomena—including the horrifying “three r’s,” meaning Renaissance, Reformation, and Revolution—that obliterated the cultural and metaphysical cohesiveness of medieval Catholicism and

ushered in the disorder and irreverence of a modern age for which he felt nothing but contempt. Fired by such views, Cram waged architectural war against modernity, as evidenced by his dedication to what is widely known as the Gothic Revival Style.

However, as Macdonell explains, the term “Gothic architecture” is anachronistic in two respects. First, while the term is usually applied to European structures of the late medieval era, it refers to a northern people—the Goths—whose sack of Rome occurred centuries before that period, and who were erroneously associated with characteristics (e.g. “vaults with pointed arches”) typical of buildings bearing their name. Second, it was the sixteenth-century Italian scholar Giorgio Vasari who originally used the term “Gothic” in reference to the architectural style that prevailed across much of Europe between the Classical era and the Renaissance. Consequently, in Macdonell’s words, “the Gothic adjective is both too early and too late to represent... [the architecture] of later medieval Europe” (15). Cram remarked on the irony of attributing what he felt was “the most delicate, scientific, beautiful, even metaphysical product of the mind of man... [to] a tribe of savages.” Nevertheless, he occasionally used the term “Gothic” in discussing his treasured architectural tradition, equating it with other “epithets applied first in contempt... [but which] gradually become a synonym of honour” (20). Yet Cram also used the term pejoratively not in reference to late medieval buildings, but instead to the modern style against which he raged.

Three brothers—Edward, Franklin, and James Walker—paid for the construction of St. Mary’s and gave it to the Anglican diocese in which Walkerville is located as a gift in honour of their deceased parents, Mary and Hiram, from whom they inherited a fortune. (Hiram Walker, whose

wealth largely derived from a whisky distillery that he operated in the community that bore his name, had been instrumental to Walkerville’s growth.) Macdonell’s analysis of this gift, and of the phenomenon of gift giving itself, is one of his book’s most stimulating contributions. Drawing on Derrida, he observes that gifts are, strictly speaking, an impossibility: rather than being purely magnanimous gestures, they invariably evoke some form of debt in the recipient—a sense of gratitude, or a desire to reciprocate—whether such an outcome was the intention of the gift-giver or not. In substantiating his contention, Macdonell invokes the Magi, the “wise men” who bestowed presents on Jesus, and notes that, while their motivations (at least from a Christian perspective) may have been pure, such expressions of devotion can be seen as bringing forth a metaphysical debt that will potentially be “repaid” in the form of divine blessings.

Yet St. Mary’s was a gift in another way. In addition to being a gift from the Walker children to their parents, it was also a gift from Edward Walker, the principal backer of the church-building initiative, to God. The reason? He was dying from a supposedly sinful disease—syphilis—for which he anxiously sought a miraculous cure. Unsurprisingly, Edward Walker hoped to prevent a judgemental public from learning of his illness, given its sexual nature and associations with prostitution. Thus, Cram integrated encoded allusions to Edward Walker’s diseased condition within St. Mary’s on the dying benefactor’s behalf. For instance, the church features a stained-glass window that, ostensibly, depicts Christ’s Sermon on the Mount. However, while it does indeed depict Christ holding forth before his disciples, the window also depicts a leprous man, bowed in prayer, who is missing both his left arm and his right hand. Cram

included this figure, Macdonell suggests, as a veiled metaphor for Edward Walker's syphilis-stricken state, and his corresponding yearning for deliverance.

Pop-culture-savvy readers will be familiar with the concept of figurative "Easter eggs"—hidden messages and "bonus" features included in modern forms of entertainment such as movies and video games that people "hunt" for in much

the same way that children hunt for actual Easter eggs. Macdonell reveals that St. Mary's Anglican Church is replete with such treats, with the aforementioned window being only one example. For this reason, and many others, *Ghost Storeys* is unusually enjoyable.

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Residential Schools and Reconciliation *Canada Confronts Its History*

By J.R. Miller

Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017. 348 pages. \$39.95 hardcover. ISBN 978-1-4875-0218-8 (utorontopress.com)

The cover of *Residential Schools and Reconciliation: Canada Confronts Its History* by well-known historian J.R. Miller depicts a painting by artist David Garneau entitled *Not to Confuse Politeness with Agreement* in which an Indigenous man faces a Mountie. Both figures have thought bubbles over their heads, though one contains a square and the other a circle. This is an apt choice for the cover of a book that focuses on the complicated and divisive topic of Canada's recent attempts by the government, churches, and Canadian public to grapple with the harmful legacy of residential schooling and how best to "reconcile" that past. Miller argues that though many strides have been made in advancing reconciliation, that ultimately "it is still incomplete" (7), in no small part due to the inability of many non-Indigenous Canadians to move past their view of Canada as a benevolent nation that has supposedly looked out for the best interests of Indigenous peoples. Indeed, we are living in a time in which Prime Minister

Stephen Harper apologized for Canada's role in the residential school system, calling it "a sad chapter in our history" and then, only months later at the G20 Summit, Harper claimed that Canada had "no history of colonialism." Regardless, Miller still holds out hope for the potential of reconciliation, however halting the process has been over the past thirty years, focusing on "how historical understanding has evolved and how Canadians have struggled to come to grips with the negative aspects of their country's past" (6).

Miller, professor emeritus of history at the University of Saskatchewan, is the author of many works about the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada including *Shingwauk's Vision: A History of Native Residential Schools*. In *Residential Schools and Reconciliation* Miller begins where *Shingwauk's Vision* finished, during the period after the dismantling of the residential school system. Miller asks his readers to evaluate the historical context of reconciliation, keeping in mind both obstacles