

Andrew Randall Cobb and the Mount Allison Memorial Library

Sir Charles G. D. Roberts, often referred to as “The Father of Canadian Literature”, lived his boyhood days in Westcock on the outskirts of Sackville. Charles Scobie in his book on Roberts relates the story of Sir Charles returning to Sackville for a visit in 1938 when he was nearing his 80th year and touring the Mount Allison University campus with the President, Dr. George J. Trueman. The Sackville Tribune reported his visit and Roberts’ pronouncement: “It is the most beautiful campus that I know in Canada. It is the most picturesque, varied and well-treed campus I have seen in Canada.”



A significant reason that Roberts was inspired to make this declaration was the recent addition of three picturesque buildings to the campus landscape: the new Memorial Library, the new Science Building (now known as the Flemington Building) and the reconstructed Centennial Hall. All three buildings were designed by the architect Andrew Randall Cobb. When his Dartmouth First Baptist Church was designated a Heritage Property in 1982, the architect Andrew Cobb was described as “one of Canada’s great architects”.

Andrew Randall Cobb was born in Brooklyn in 1876. He lived his teenage years in Greenwich in the Annapolis Valley and attended high school at Horton Academy. In his final year at Acadia University he was awarded a scholarship to study architecture at MIT in Boston where he received his M Sc in 1904. For three years he gained practical experience in architectural offices in Cleveland before crossing the Atlantic in 1907 to pursue further studies at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris. The Ecole was considered as the school that set the standard in architectural education at the time. Two of his friends and schoolmates there went on to become Directors of the Schools of Architecture at MIT and Harvard. In 1909 he returned to Nova Scotia to set up architectural practice in Halifax, the first formally trained architect to practice in the Maritimes.

Andrew Cobb’s architectural career was prolific. He may be best remembered for the many cozy and intimate Arts & Craft houses that he designed for local families. Two of these were for the industrialist Cyrus Eaton, the “Thinker’s Lodge” in Pugwash and a summer home in Deep Cove. In 1912 Andrew Randall Cobb was commissioned by Dalhousie University to undertake master planning for the university’s first major expansion. He was involved in the design of most of the early buildings on the campus including the Science Building, the MacDonald Library and the Arts Building. In 1922 Cobb was retained to design the new campus for King’s College on land provided by Dalhousie University. During his career Cobb designed many schools, churches, theaters and public buildings including the Halifax Forum, Provincial Building and Public Archives of Nova Scotia.

In 1990 the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia organized an exhibition entitled “Rich in Interest and Charm: The Architecture of Andrew Randall Cobb 1876-1943”. In the Director’s Foreword to the exhibition catalogue Bernard Riordon

writes: "It is appropriate that our first major effort in this area be directed to an architect whose work so clearly demonstrates the important task we all share in preserving our heritage." In the Sponsor's Foreword Dr. Allan Duffus, himself an architect, describes Andrew Randall Cobb as "a remarkable gentleman" and "a man of many talents and interests. He was an architect's architect, a fine draughtsman, and an artist in his own right. He was equally well known for the energy he devoted to the promotion of the arts and his special interest in drama and music." Andrew Cobb was one of the six founding members of the Nova Scotia Association of Architects in 1932. In 1940 he became the first Canadian architect east of Montreal to be elected a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects. Andrew Cobb was also a founding member of the Nova Scotia Museum of Fine Arts, today known as the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. He was a talented painter, good friend of Arthur Lismer, the first president of the Nova Scotia Society of Artists and exhibited in their first exhibition in 1923. Cobb was a board member and architecture professor at the Nova Scotia College of Art and in 1934 received an honorary degree from that institution.



The life of Andrew Randall Cobb came to a sudden end in 1943. He was traveling to his office in Halifax from his home in Bedford when the bus he was riding was struck by another vehicle and Cobb was killed by flying glass. In the exhibition catalogue for which she was the guest curator, Jean B. Weir writes: "Nearly forty years after his death, Andy Cobb, as he was known to all, is remembered as much for his generous, fun-loving spirit, his sense of humour, his music-making talent for playing the saw, and his skill as an amateur magician as for his comfortable houses and impressive public buildings."

The seed for the establishment of Mount Allison University was sown in 1839 through the generosity of the local merchant, Charles Frederick Allison. However it was not until 1843 that the Wesleyan Academy opened its doors in a building erected on the rise of land behind what is today known as Campbell Hall. To accommodate women the Ladies Academy opened its doors in 1854 in the White House located approximately where the Crabtree Building stands today. But it was not until 1863 that the third institution, the degree-granting Mount Allison Wesleyan College, was created. The College Hall was sited on lands to the northwest of the President's Cottage. For 83 years these three institutions coexisted, each with its own precinct positioned about the centrally located President's Cottage.

In essence the College Hall was the first university building. It was an austere three-storey wooden box with a low-hipped roof sited approximately where the old Memorial Library sits today. The College Hall was the complete university in itself with dormitory on the top floor and administration and classrooms below. The lands about it were developed to serve as the university academic campus until the building boom of the 1960's. With a pressing need for more space Centennial Hall was erected in 1883 in a commanding position atop the hill to house administration and teaching spaces and a chapel on the top floor. It was an impressive sandstone building with large gothic windows high in the gable ends. In the same year the College Hall was moved to a new site on Salem

Street where the Bennett Building now stands and renovated to become the men's residence known as The Lodge. In 1903 the building was raised by five feet to add another floor and renovated to accommodate engineering and science studies and eventually became known as the Old Science Building.

In 1913 the College finally became known as Mount Allison University. In his short "The History of Mount Allison University 1839 - 1989", John Reid states: "By this time, a daunting series of major crises - spanning most of the first half of the twentieth century - had begun to inflict Mount Allison. Serious financial problems led to the accumulation of a large debt by 1910. The First World War brought its own crop of grief and difficulty. Student and alumni lives were lost and disrupted: 73 died and many more suffered wounds or disease. Enlistments greatly reduced male enrolment at the university ... capital projects such as the construction of a badly-needed science building had to be indefinitely postponed for financial reasons." However the end of the War brought a resurgence of student numbers and new buildings had to be planned.

It is of little surprise that the architect Andrew Randall Cobb would be commissioned to embark on the planning for the needed growth. By this time his planning for Dalhousie University and King's College had established Cobb's reputation as a designer of institutional architecture. It would seem that Cobb carried out some campus planning and prepared concepts for several new buildings. But a priority was placed on the building of the new Memorial Library. It is difficult to comprehend today the grief that was borne by the small university community of that day having been inflicted with such horrific losses during the War. The Memorial Library was conceived, financed and constructed as a monument to those lives lost.

Because of financial difficulties the Memorial Library was not completed until 1927. It was fittingly placed by Andrew Cobb in counterpoint to the Centennial Hall on the approximate site of the first university building, the College Hall.

The design of the Memorial Building imparts a bold unadorned form with square-pitched roof and strong clean gables. It is built of rugged local red sandstone setting a standard for future university structures. On the upper floor running from one end to the other is the elegant reading room with an arc-vaulted ceiling and large airy windows. It is a handsome edifice. The second building completed by Cobb was the New Science Building, now known as the Flemington Building, which opened its doors in 1931. It was carefully positioned by Cobb to complete the university quadrangle formed with the Centennial Hall, Old Science Building and the Memorial Library. Cobb used the same palette of materials and forms as he used in the Memorial Library. Then in March of 1933 disaster hit. Three buildings were destroyed by fire, first the Third Mount Allison Academy and two weeks later the Old Science Building and the Centennial Hall on the same night. The Old Science was not rebuilt but Cobb was asked to rebuild the Centennial Hall on the same foundation and reusing some of the old masonry. The new design provided an extra floor of usable space and the gothic windows and tower disappeared. This was the last building to be designed by Andrew Randall Cobb at Mount Allison. But for over 40 years his quadrangle was the academic focus of the university ... and the Memorial Library was its heart.

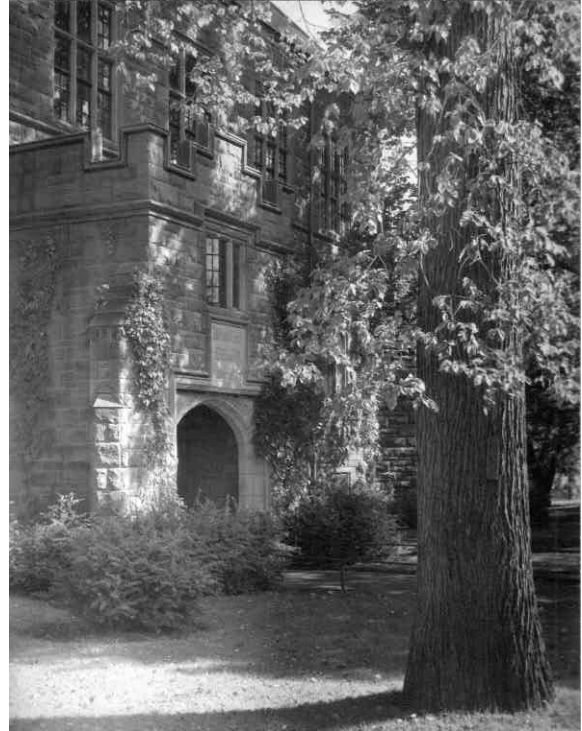


As a young boy I lived in Sackville for five years just after the end of the Second World War. I recall vividly my many strolls through the beautiful Mount Allison campus with my violin in hand on my way to a lesson in the picturesque old Conservatory of Music. Winding my way up onto the university grounds past the tennis courts on the corner, I stood before the west entry of the distinctive Centennial Hall and there before me opened up a scenic well-treed vista to my destination. Passing along and looking to my left down through the trees was a view of the simple form of my favorite building, the Memorial Library. Then I moved by the equally rich and bold forms of the Old Chemistry Building on my left and the curious Owens Art Gallery to my right. And then I was at the back door to Allison Hall with the Victorian Conservatory attached to the west end to my right. My violin teacher, Miss Doreen Hall, had a wonderful studio in a circular turret with a large window overlooking the scenic Lily Pond and located at the end of a long corridor with another large window that looked west over the rugby field. On Saturday mornings my sister and I experienced classes in applied arts in the basement of the Owens Gallery making things out of clay, leather, copper and other materials. On some afternoons I would wander down to my favorite building, the handsome Memorial Library, where the lady who worked there, Miss Smith, would allow me to look at books. With no doubt these boyhood memories of Mount Allison were a strong influence in my choice of architecture as a field of study. And I clearly understand why ten years earlier Sir Charles G. D. Roberts pronounced: "It is the most beautiful campus that I know in Canada."

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As a footnote to my passion for conserving the old Memorial Library and the beauty and heritage of the Mount Allison campus, I must tell you that nearby there is another Andrew Randall Cobb building. The Central Presbyterian Church was erected in Moncton in 1915. Now known as Central United Church, it too has become weary and lost its functionality. But today as I write the old building is breathing new life as it is being renovated and enveloped with dramatic new glass and steel construction. The new mission of the building will be to provide cooperative work space for non-profit agencies in the community and it will be called the Peace Centre ... what an exciting concept ... and what an appropriate way to conserve the work of a master !

Visit ... www.communitypeacecentre.ca .