



Battle of the Styles: Society, Culture and the Design of a New Foreign Office, 1855-1861

Bernard Porter

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The present-day Foreign Office in Whitehall is an imposing building whose genesis is bizarre. In 1857 a competition was held to pick an architect, which provoked a huge row between the rival 'Classical' and 'Gothic' schools, which a 'Goth' (George Gilbert Scott) won – but was then forced to re-design in Classical. The circumstances surrounding this fiasco furnish the starting-point for this book; which then goes on to analyse the debate that preceded this decision, for the light it sheds on the complex nature of British culture and society then. Among issues raised were contemporary and conflicting understandings of Britain's (or England's) national and imperial identities; of religion and morality; of history, 'modernity' and 'progress'; and of class and gender. The debate offers an unusual insight into the relationship between all these matters and 'high culture' generally. This account of it should be of great value to cultural and social historians, as well as to any architectural historians interested in the broader historical context surrounding this and other great monuments of the time.

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