



Pinecones, flowers and ammonites adorn the windows of Saint Mary's church in Wreay, UK.

ARCHITECTURE

Life in stone

Georgina Ferry enjoys a biography of a little-known Victorian woman who built monuments to nature.

In the village of Wreay, just south of the border between England and Scotland, stands a wholly original building: a synthesis of decorative motifs drawn from early nineteenth-century geology and natural history with an ancient architectural style. This small church, completed in 1842, is the work of a remarkable Victorian, Sarah Losh.

As Jenny Uglow reveals in her intriguing biography, *The Pinecone*, Losh was by the age of 18 a competent mathematician, linguist and classicist, and knowledgeable about science, architecture, politics, philosophy, literature and art. Her nineteenth-century

biographer, Henry Lonsdale, wrote: "With powers to grapple with Euclid and algebra, she had but to give her attention to any subject to master it." She also had a clear sense of her own self-worth. Unlike writers of her time such as Jane Austen, Mary Shelley and Elizabeth Gaskell, she has not achieved worldwide recognition. Yet after her death, Dante Gabriel Rossetti hailed her as a genius, and her work foreshadowed the designs of John Ruskin, Alfred Waterhouse and William Morris.

Books move, but buildings stay in one place. Losh, by building almost exclusively

in Wreay, ensured that beyond her immediate locality only specialists would come to know and admire her work. Panning outwards from this small, largely agricultural community, Uglow uses Losh's story to create a vibrant panorama of early nineteenth-century society that extends throughout the British Isles, across Europe and even to the deadly passes of Afghanistan. Uglow is at ease in the intellectual environment of the era, which she researched fully for her book *The Lunar Men* (Faber, 2002).

Losh's family of country landowners provided wealth, stability and an education infused with principles of the Enlightenment. Her father, John, and several uncles were experimenters, industrialists, religious nonconformists, political reformers and enthusiastic supporters of scientific, literary, historical and artistic endeavour, like members of the Lunar Society in Birmingham, UK. John Losh was a knowledgeable collector of Cumbrian fossils and minerals. His family, meanwhile, eagerly consumed the works of geologists James Hutton, Charles Lyell and William Buckland, which revealed ancient worlds teeming with strange life forms.

Sarah's uncle James Losh — a friend of political philosopher William Godwin, husband of the pioneering feminist Mary Wollstonecraft — took the education of his clever niece seriously. She read all the latest books, and met some of the foremost innovators of the day, such as the mathematician Isaac Milner and the physicist John Leslie.

On their father's death in 1814, Sarah and her beloved sister Katharine inherited substantial property in Wreay and interests in their father's successful alkali factory in the expanding industrial city of Newcastle. Their financial independence secure, neither ever married. Instead, they toured France, Germany and Italy together. In Italy, Losh saw for herself the simplicity of classical Roman and early medieval architecture. Once home, the sisters built a school and a house for the local schoolmaster based on simple, pre-Renaissance forms — the house was a copy of a Pompeiian cottage. After Katharine died, Losh embarked on her masterpiece.

Brooking no argument from the Bishop of Carlisle, she offered to fund the complete rebuilding of Saint Mary's, her village church, on the condition that she "be left unrestricted as to the mode of building it". ▶



The Pinecone: The Story of Sarah Losh, Forgotten Romantic Heroine — Antiquarian, Architect and Visionary

JENNY UGLOW
Faber/Farre,
Strauss and Giroux:
2012/2013.
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► She ignored the contemporary craze for the Gothic, opting instead for a style modelled on the Romanesque: a simple rectangular building with a semicircular apse, and doors and windows topped with round arches.

She made the building entirely her own by adding decorative carvings that combined rich pre-Christian symbolism with natural forms recently brought to light by fossil-hunters and naturalists. Executed by local craftsmen (and sometimes Losh herself) working mostly in local stone and wood, these anticipated the artistic and architectural ideals set out by John Ruskin a decade after the church was completed. Lotus flowers, ammonites and butterflies embellished windows, doorways and capitals; Losh filled the high windows of the apse with the delicate forms of local fossil ferns cut from translucent sheets of alabaster. More than 30 years after she completed her church, and on a much grander scale, Alfred Waterhouse adopted a Romanesque design decorated with flora and fauna for the Natural History Museum in London. Like Losh, he was inspired by visiting Italy and studying natural history, but Uglow cites no evidence that he knew of Losh's work.

Losh's carvings often feature a pinecone, an ancient symbol of regeneration and enlightenment. Uglow points out that the number of spirals winding up from the base of a pinecone always belongs to the Fibonacci series (running 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 and so on, without end). James Hutton memorably concluded that he could find "no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end" in his studies of geological strata. Uglow helps us to see how Losh combined the architectural evidence of past human societies with contemporary invention and discovery, and how she conveyed, through her buildings, a sense of the eternal.

Most of Losh's personal papers and journals, like those of Jane Austen, were lost or destroyed, leaving the biographer to piece together her life from fragments gleaned elsewhere. Sarah Losh remains something of an enigma: a deeply religious woman who built a church that contained no overtly Christian symbols; a devotee of ancient structures and a daughter of the Industrial Revolution; a fashionable beauty and an unmarried scholar and craftswoman.

Sarah Losh chose to express herself in stone, rather than words. In Jenny Uglow, she has found a fine interpreter. ■

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Canadian pianist Glenn Gould recorded Bach's *Goldberg Variations* twice, in 1955 and 1981.

TECHNOLOGY

Baroque geekery

Tim Boon assesses a take on the evolving technology behind recordings of J. S. Bach.

Paul Elie reveres the music of J. S. Bach and loves some recordings in particular, such as Glenn Gould's 1955 rendition of the *Goldberg Variations*. In *Reinventing Bach* Elie sets out to show how technologies — especially developments in recording — have been central to the twentieth century's experience of "the Master's" music.

The book's conceit is that the composer of the *Two- and Three-Part Inventions* was in some sense an inventor, and so peculiarly attuned to being reinvented — through the recording technologies of the past 100 years or so. And, as Elie shows, the power that recording offered, of enabling repeated listening, also accelerated the rediscovery of Bach by generations of musicians.

Each chapter takes a key recording, dwelling to different degrees on the technology used — disc, tape or digital. The chapters are arranged in roughly chronological order and range from takes by Albert Schweitzer and Leopold Stokowski on the famous *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor* to Gould's two recordings of the *Goldberg Variations*

Reinventing Bach

PAUL ELIE

Farrar, Straus and

Giroux: 2012

496 pp. £19.99, \$30

and beyond. Alongside this, Elie threads a biography of Bach, period-setting snapshots of cultural events and an accumulating cast of Bach performers and recording artistes.

Throughout, Elie describes the music, not with the technical terminology of the conservatoire, but with metaphor and simile. His characterization of the *Tocatta and Fugue in D Minor*, for instance, reads: "the pipes ring out once, twice, a third time. Then with a long, low swallow the organ fills with sound, which spreads toward the ends of the instrument and settles, pooling there." What he doesn't do, however, is meet the promise in the publisher's blurb to give us "a nuanced and intelligent examination of the technology" that has made the reinvention of Bach possible.

Elie draws on a wide range of published literature, and

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For more on recording music, see:

go.nature.com/xx3x22

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