

AMATEUR GENIUS

WREN THE INCOMPARABLE, by Martin S. Briggs; Allen and Unwin, English price 35/-

(Reviewed by Walter Brookes)

I have with a great deale of paines finished the designes for it, if they may be usefull, if it happen they bee not thought soe I shall not repent the great satisfaction and pleasure I have taken in the contrivance, which aequalls that of poetry or compositions in Musick.

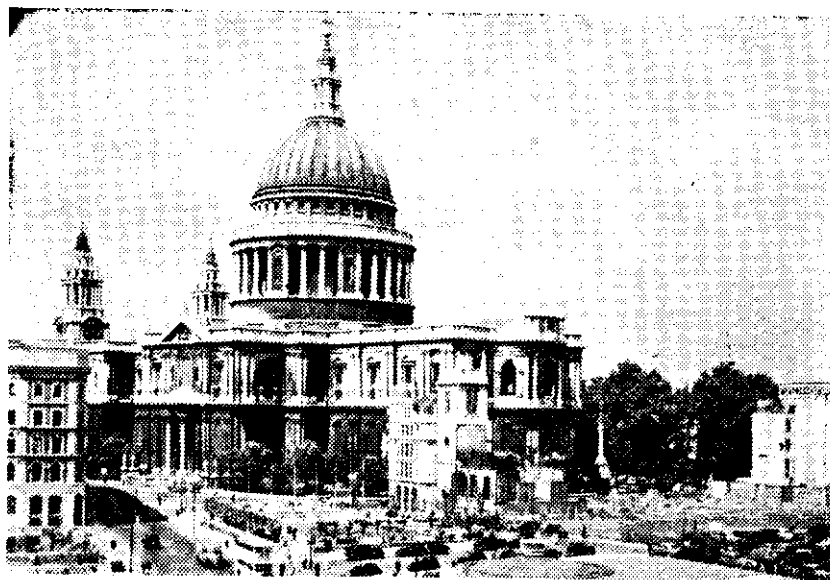
IT is interesting to note this attitude in a man so practical and scientific in his outlook as Wren. He was, in fact, a genius—able to combine true idealism with the technical perfection that results from continued application to work. His life makes a fascinating study—this is not a biography—and the study becomes a wider one of England in her classic period of architecture.

England would be as hard to imagine without Wren and St. Paul's as it would be without Shakespeare and his plays. Yet Wren was actually an amateur in architecture—"besides," Mr. Briggs casually observes, "Wren never had any architectural training." He was an educated man, a scientist, a mathematician, and an archaeologist. He was Savilian Professor of Astronomy when he turned

seriously to architecture, and his interest in it kept him in London when he should have been at Oxford. His friend Thomas Sprat writes: "The Vice-Chancellor did yesterday send for me, to inquire where the Professor of Astronomy was, and the Reason for his Absence so long after the Beginning of Term."

It was an absence which certainly justified itself. Wren's architectural output was enormous, and he can be said to have directed the course of modern architecture in England as well as exercising an influence indirectly on the rest of Europe. The classical style which he adapted so successfully has never completely gone out of fashion for public buildings. It can be added that, in the form which it achieved in the hands of the Adam brothers, it was later introduced to Russia and Catherine the Great by Cameron, and that today it is being revived by the Soviet as the most suitable form of architecture for the Russian people.

One of Wren's first designs for St. Paul's, the "Great Model," was, in fact, rejected because it was not sufficiently functional—it did not quite suit the requirements of the Anglican service, and the 35 years during which the Cathedral was built were a period of tremendous



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activity for Wren. He continued to design other churches, palaces, schools and houses, modifying and improving the plan of the Cathedral as his experience grew. He had time, too, to devote to science, mathematics, and archaeology, to the affairs of the Royal Society, of which he was a founder, and even to

making a pre-fab: "Sir Xtopher Wren hath completed the itinerant house for His Ma'esty into Ireland for him to lye in the field: it is to be taken to pieces and carried on two waggons that it may be quickly fixt up." His post as Surveyor-General, moreover, gave him the duties of a modern building inspector,

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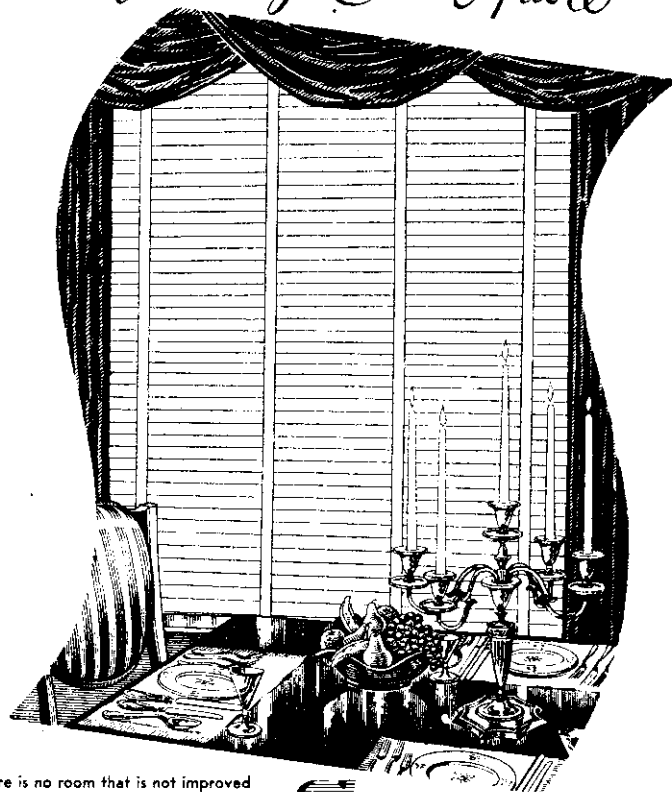
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