

Researching a company history: the McAlpine project

by Iain Russell

During the past twenty years there has been a great surge of interest amongst architectural, social and economic historians in the history of housebuilding in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹ Hundreds of books and articles have been written on the subject, describing housing layout and design, the effects of government housing policy and economic trends, the organisation and technology employed by the industry and the social consequences of building. Several studies of the history of individual building firms have been published, the best known being Hermione Hobhouse's *Thomas Cubbitt: Master Builder* (New York, 1971). Yet the history of public works contracting after the great Railway Age of c1830-60 has received scant attention, despite its great importance. S. Pearson and Son, Lucas and Aird, Sir John Jackson, Thomas Walker and a host of others at the end of the nineteenth century were engaged on contracts worth millions of pounds every year. They each employed thousands of men, and some contractors were instrumental in promoting huge construction projects here and abroad. While their steel bridges, concrete sea walls and earth dams may lack the aesthetic appeal of a row of terraced houses, a town hall or church, they were vital to the nation's industrial expansion, to trade growth and to improvements in public health. Their railways, docks and reservoirs represented huge investments, and had a profound effect on the alteration of Britain's landscape. Many contractors turned their hands as readily to housing estates and industrial, commercial and public buildings. Some of the lessons they had learned on public works about labour organisation and the suitability of new materials and machinery were applied on building sites up and down the country.

R.K. Middlemas in *The Master Builders*

(London, 1963) wrote that British contractors 'spread over the world a transport revolution and affected profoundly the development of modern society. Yet the contractors are the hidden men of history, hard enough to discover and almost impossible to describe'. Until recently, anyone wishing to discover more about the great public works contractors has had to search long and hard to find information in published works. Following the example of Samuel Smiles, several Victorian authors wrote biographies of the great engineers, and modern authors such as L.T.C. Rolt have also written about the Stephensons, Brunel, Locke, Fowler, Baker, Vignoles and others. Their books explain in detail the activities of the men who designed and supervised the construction of docks, railways and reservoirs, but few references are made to the contractors who actually carried out the construction work. Two autobiographies of civil engineers who worked for contractors have been published. Duncan Kennedy's *The Birth and Death of a Highland Railway* (London, 1971) and Robert Brodie's *The Reminiscences of a Civil Engineering Contractor* (Bristol, 1942) describe what it was like to work for the Scottish contractors John Best and John Waddell at the turn of the century, but these are rare examples of books written about the history of the industry by men who worked in it.

The Victorians and Edwardians were half-fascinated, half-appalled by the navvies who laboured on public works. A clutch of authors, including Mrs. Garnett and Patrick Macgill, wrote books describing the navy life-style. More recently Terry Coleman's *The Railway Navvies*. (London, 1965), James Handley's sadly neglected *The Navvy in Scotland* (Cork, 1970) and D. Sullivan's *Navvyman* (London, 1983) have exploded many of the myths about navvies and describe the living conditions and

the ways in which the men worked on sites in vivid detail. However, like the biographers of the engineers, they touch on the history of the development of the industry and the backgrounds of individual contractors after the 1840s only incidentally. Most of their information on the early contractors comes from Victorian biographies of Thomas Brassey, Samuel Morton Peto, and Joseph Firkbank. David Brooke's excellent *The Railway Navvies: That Despicable Race of Men* (Newton Abbot, 1983) is the only book in this genre which provides the reader with more than a cursory outline of the history of the civil engineering industry, and although Brooke's interest is primarily in the navvies he provides useful details on the careers of some of the men they worked for.

For many years interest in contractors was confined mainly to steam locomotive enthusiasts and industrial archaeologists. The former group compiled lists of contractors and their contracts to assist them in tracking down the movements of old industrial locomotives. If their interests extended to the history of old railways, some enthusiasts investigated the story of the construction of a line in order to gain some understanding of its more spectacular or unusual features. Industrial archaeologists have similar motives for doing some research on contractors. For example, David Owen's *The Manchester Ship Canal* (Manchester, 1983) is enlivened by his account of the trials and tribulations of Thomas Walker and his successors in building the waterway.

The Master Builders is the first major modern work to attempt to draw attention to the importance of the civil engineering contractors, and Middlemas traces the history of the industry in the biographies of four of the most successful of these men, Brassey, Aird, Pearson and Norton-Griffiths. Roy Coad's *Lairing* (London, 1979) is the biography of a man who made his name both as a builder and public works contractor, and it has done much to alert the industry itself to the importance and desirability of well researched, attractively produced literature on company history. Nicholas Morgan's 'Some Brief Notes

on the History of James Young Ltd, and James Young and Sons Ltd, Railway and Public Works Contractors' (*Scottish Industrial History*, 6 no. 1, 1983) discusses the businesses of two of the firms most prominent in Scotland at the end of the nineteenth century. *The Dictionary of Business Biography* and the *Scottish Dictionary of Business Biography* are in course of publication², and they will include outlines of the careers of many other British contractors. Researchers working on the latter project have been very helpful in providing important background information for my own project, which is to research the early history of Sir Robert McAlpine & Sons Ltd.

The McAlpine Project has its origins in a chance meeting five or six years ago between Mr. Bill McAlpine, a director of the firm and the holding company Newarthill PLC, and Michael Moss, the Archivist at Glasgow University. Mr. McAlpine mentioned that he and his family were interested in the firm's early years and in the roles of their ancestors in its history. Some efforts had been made to investigate the subject, but the results had not been entirely satisfactory. Michael Moss, an authority on Scottish business and industrial history, lamented the fact that at that time almost nothing was known about the activities of Scottish builders and public works contractors in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The two men agreed to set up a project, based at the University Archives, to track down the materials required for a comprehensive history of the early years of McAlpine, setting the story in its historical context. In August 1979 George Dixon was appointed research officer, and when he left in 1980 to take up another position I was appointed to replace him. We have managed to take the story to the early 1920s and hope to produce some form of publication dealing with the history of Sir Robert McAlpine & Sons from its beginnings in 1868 to the death of its founder, Sir Robert, in 1934.

We looked first for source material at McAlpine's own archives. There was not a lot. Like other firms, McAlpine disposed of most of their early records once they ceased to be

of use in day-to-day business. Storage space costs money, and rather than preserve vast quantities of plans and documents relating to long-forgotten contracts, the firm followed the old business archives principle of 'If in doubt, chuck it out'. Records from the pre-1914 era are scarce. However, those which do survive are of great importance. The earliest is a private ledger for the period 1898-1910. Each of the firm's contracts is recorded in it, with the dates and amounts of each payment made by the client for work completed and, after claims had been settled, the gross profit or loss which McAlpine made on the job. There are pages of accounts showing the firm's outlays and income from property after they re-entered the speculative housebuilding business in 1904, as well as the partners' capital accounts showing their individual shares in the capital of the firm (which did not become a limited company until 1972) and their drawings on that capital. The ledger is far from being a perfect source. It contains only control accounts and rarely includes explanations of exactly what a sum of money was received for, or what it was spent on. The answers to these questions would be found in cash books, plant registers and other ledgers and journals which have been lost or destroyed. Nevertheless from the Private Ledger one can calculate approximately the dates of the beginning and completion of work on a contract, the firm's annual turnover, and the financial situation at the end of each year. The Private Ledgers survive in an unbroken series from 1898 onwards.

A few contract and specification documents from before 1914 have also survived, as have several licenses which McAlpine took out with Hennebique and Coignet, two French patentees of systems of building in reinforced concrete. The vast bulk of McAlpine's records are from the period after 1918 and include staff, property and investment ledgers, inventories, leases, contract papers, agreements, some photographs and the records of subsidiary and associated companies. Until recently they were packed away in 45 tea chests, perched precariously on a shelf about 15 feet above the ground in a plant

repair depot at Kettering. Most of the records are now stored temporarily at Glasgow University Archives and we hope that they will be deposited on a more permanent basis at some other repository in the near future.

McAlpine also have secondary source material which is relevant to the project. In 1919 they published a thick, lavishly illustrated brochure which listed and described the major contracts undertaken by the firm since the 1880s. The names of the client and the consulting engineer or architect employed on each project are recorded, along with detailed explanations of how the work was carried out and the major engineering problems which had to be dealt with. Impressive statistics concerning the size of the workforce, the amount and types of heavy plant used, and quantities of muck shifted or of concrete, steel or brick handled are also given. The unknown author or authors seldom offer precise dates for the contracts. Their estimates of the value of each contract are often wide of the mark and some of the information on contract locations has been proved wrong but, if used with care, brochures such as these, which were produced by many other firms, are useful sources.

Finally, McAlpine have kept the literary efforts of several of the men who have investigated the history of the firm in the past. I have seen only three of these, although I am told that at least seven people, including the novelist Compton McKenzie and the Scottish railway historian John Thomas, have written about the firm. In 1925 Sir Robert's family commissioned an American Rhodes Scholar, J. Saxton Childers, to write a biography of the founder of the firm. *Robert McAlpine: A Biography* was published privately in a limited edition of 763 copies and given to relatives, friends, long-serving employees and valued business clients and associates. Childers' introduction to his *magnum opus* reminds modern readers of the problems of using old biographies as historical source material. He states that:

'I did not care to write about a man merely because on paper he had succeeded; a list of contracts obtained and

satisfactorily completed did not interest me; cubic yards of earth and tons of concrete meant nothing to me; bank accounts were so foreign to my experience I was bewildered by them – no, I would essay to write an outline of the man only if I could feel there was more to the mere shifting of muck, or the building of Wembley or all that businessmen call success. I was, I am, young, and brutal statistics interest me but little'.

Childers' lack of interest in 'brutal' statistics was accompanied by a disregard for the dates and places of events and an unwillingness to put factual accuracy before a good story. He inherited a Victorian attitude of distaste for discussing the process of making money, preferring to eulogize his subject's public-spiritedness, moral virtues and philosophical convictions. When Robert's business career is touched upon, it is in the form of an anecdote to illustrate some quirk of character or to reveal how industrious or virtuous he was. Many old biographies were written in this style, which is more akin to hagiography than biography as we know it today. Childers wrote with little reference to archival material, preferring to record conversations with Sir Robert (then 78 years of age) and his family and close friends. Even when it is obvious that Sir Robert's memory was beginning to fail him, or that some of the stories of others had been distorted by years of retelling or were apocryphal, Childers offers no reservations about the accuracy of his material.

Later researchers fell into a familiar trap. With information on the early years of the firm hard to come by, and with the biography gaining the aura of an authoritative source because of its age and the entry of many of Childers' tales into the firm's folklore, they accepted as fact many of Childers' dubious claims. Every secondary source must be tested wherever possible against primary sources to establish its reliability. While Childers does not always pass this test his book is valuable nonetheless. McAlpine have no archival material relating to contracts

undertaken before 1884. Childers' is the only record of conversations with Sir Robert and others who remembered the firm's earliest days and there are many clues as to where to go, what to look at and in what period to unearth details of some business venture or an important event in the McAlpine family's life.

The records and secondary source material held by McAlpine gave us a framework for our research but, because of gaps in the records and flaws in some of the other material, it was essential to search for other sources of information. We decided to order our research chronologically, studying material from one period of about ten years, writing up our findings in reports, and then moving on to the next decade. In this way we were able to study the evidence knowing the historical background to it. Material which came to light from a later period to the one under consideration was examined, noted, and laid aside until required. We began by investigating Robert's ancestry and early life. During the 1960s McAlpine commissioned the Royal Genealogical Society to draw up a family tree. The Society searched through Parish Registers held in New Register House in Edinburgh to find details of christenings, marriages and burials involving members of the McAlpine family before 1854, when the civil authority made the registration of births, deaths and marriages compulsory. They succeeded in tracing Robert's ancestors back to the mid-eighteenth century when the McAlpines left Argyll to settle in the Scottish Lowlands. We also visited New Register House to examine the enumerator's reports in the censuses of 1841-91. By using parish registers and the census records it was a simple though time-consuming job to trace Sir Robert's family and relations and discover their names, birthplaces, birth dates, occupations and addresses.

As a miner's son in Lanarkshire, Robert does not appear on any other public records or in any other sources we have examined for the period 1847-1867. In 1868 however he started in business as a jobbing brick-builder, and by the mid-1870s he became the leading

building and public works contractor in the Clydesdale area of Lanarkshire, around the towns of Hamilton and Motherwell. The nature and scale of his activities, and his rise to a position of some prominence in the community, resulted in his name appearing frequently in official documents and in other less formal sources.

In 1875 Robert became a speculative housebuilder. In Scotland titles to heritage must be registered. Sasine was the old ceremony of symbolic delivery of land, and after the seventeenth century conveyances of land had to be recorded in the Register of Sasines. Unless a deed of conveyance or a bond and disposition in security were registered within forty days the legal right of the buyer or creditor to the land was not recognised. The Register of Sasines is preserved in the Scottish Record Office (S.R.O.) in Edinburgh and in it one can trace ownership of the property back to 1617³. The Abridgements to the Register are indexed by name and place for each year and so it was a relatively easy task to discover what lands Robert bought and sold and how he set about mortgaging his lands and buildings to raise capital.

From 1855 every county and burgh in Scotland produced annually a Valuation Roll showing the yearly rent or the value of land and heritages in order to aid the assessment and collection of rates. Every property is listed and described and the name of the proprietor, the tenant or occupier, the addresses and occupations of these individuals and the annual rent or rateable value of the property are all recorded⁴. The Valuation Rolls are also held at the S.R.O. and from them we were able to discover the exact location of the houses Robert built and kept to rent to others, as well as the occupations of his tenants and the income he derived from rent.

In 1880, after a period of industrial depression, Robert was forced into bankruptcy. His estate was sequestered – that is, his property was transferred to a trustee whose duty it was to try to realise the bankrupt's assets and divide the proceeds among his creditors. At the meeting of his creditors to elect the

trustee, the bankrupt was required to produce a statement of his affairs, all the deeds required for the recovery or disposal of his estate, and later to submit himself for examination by the agent in the sequestration. After 1839 trustees were required to deposit the sederunt book, minute book, accounts and all papers relevant to the sequestration with the Court of Session, the supreme civil court of Scotland, and these records have been preserved in the S.R.O.⁵. The records of Robert's sequestration are extensive, shedding light on his business ventures during a period for which none of his own records have survived. We were able to discover the names of all his creditors and a great deal about his assets in 1880. Most useful of all, Robert's examination was recorded. During the examination the bankrupt had to answer questions before the Sheriff or the Sheriff Substitute about his business career before the bankruptcy, and Robert's own description of the extent of his business, his annual turnover and his opinions as to why he had failed are of vital importance to any study of his activities during the 1870s. He was discharged from bankruptcy in August 1881.

The Register of Sasines and the valuation Rolls also contain details of Robert's activities in later years when he re-entered the speculative building market. Another valuable source, local newspapers, sheds light on his Scottish career from the 1870s. Robert was a friend of William Naismyth, the proprietor of the *Hamilton Advertiser*, and Naismyth provided his readers with frequent and informative reports of Robert's business ventures after 1875. Local newspapers are often gold-mines for the researcher. During the nineteenth century in particular they seldom failed to comment on any industrial activity in their area of circulation, explaining what was being built and how, and for what purposes, and offering nuggets of information concerning building methods and the personal lives of the men behind each scheme. They also provide the researcher with background material, dealing with the effect on an area of a boom or depression, the local political situation, or public reaction to

inconvenience caused in the neighbourhood by the activities of the contractor or, sometimes, the excesses of his off-duty navvies. Once the location of a contract and the date when work began has been established, the researcher can turn with confidence to the columns of the local newspaper and, by going patiently through each edition, expect to uncover some information. Few of Scotland's local newspapers have been preserved north of the border, but most are kept in good condition at the British Library's newspaper collection at Colindale in London.

Robert's rise to prominence in the Clydesdale area also led him to stand as a town councillor for an area in Hamilton in which he owned most of the houses. He was elected in 1878 and, although the minutes of the council show that he was not particularly active in local politics, local authority records are generally another good source of information on the contractor's activities. During the 1890s and early 1900s Scotland's local authorities embarked on major programmes to improve public amenities and health by building reservoirs, sewage and gas works, and tramways. Robert McAlpine and Sons, so called after Robert's two eldest sons became partners in the firm in 1893, were awarded many contracts for this type of work by Glasgow Corporation. Just before the Great War McAlpine built reservoirs in Wales for many Midland cities, and housing estates for numerous local authorities between 1920 and 1923. Elected councils preserve most of the records of their day-to-day business and these records are made easily accessible to the public at a town hall or regional archives. The awarding of a contract is usually minuted at a full meeting of a council, and reports of the council's engineer, complaints of slow progress or disputes arising with the contractor are to be found in minutes of the meetings of the sub-committee in charge of a project. Most important council records are indexed, and so references to McAlpine were found easily.

In 1884 Robert was awarded his first major civil engineering contract to build the Lanarkshire & Ayrshire Railway. The surviv-

ing records of Scotland's railway companies are held in West Register House, an annexe of the S.R.O. in Edinburgh, and as McAlpine built over 150 miles of railway in Scotland between 1884 and 1904 and undertook other valuable contracts to build warehouses, docks and station buildings for railway companies, these records are another mine of information. Some of the records are far from complete but others, such as those of the North British and the Lanarkshire & Ayrshire Railways, are voluminous. They contain a mass of correspondence, engineers' reports, contracts and specifications, and detailed minutes of board meetings, from which we discovered a great deal about McAlpine's railway work.

The records of other client companies are usually more difficult to track down. Many have gone out of business, and their records have been lost or destroyed. Others have disappeared in amalgamations and their records have not been kept, although large companies such as BP and ICI have archivists who are willing to offer their assistance in searching for information on companies which joined their groups. Some companies are frankly unwilling to help. Singer, for whom McAlpine built a large factory in Clydebank in 1885, is unwilling to allow anyone access to its records, even those from the nineteenth century. Of course not all companies are like this, but many of their archives are stored away higgledy-piggledy in dank attics or cellars, damaged by damp, mice, or years of neglect. The existence, location and extent of company archive holdings can be discovered by contacting the Business Archives Council, which is tracing, listing and seeking suitable repositories for business records.

Other sources of information include technical journals, such as the *Engineer* and the *Proceedings of the Institute of Civil Engineers*. They often reported on a major McAlpine project once the work had been completed, and provide excellent descriptions of important engineering features. The *Contract Journal*, generally a good source for lists of tenders submitted for building and

civil engineering contracts, rarely reported on Scottish contracts. *A Quarterly Letter to Men on Public Works*, edited by the formidable Mrs. Garnett for the Navy Mission Society, is held at Sion College in London. It was intended as a weapon in the struggle to convert the 'heathen' navy and to keep him from drinking and other sinful activities. However in order to ensure a readership Mrs. Garnett published for men in search of work lists of contracts in progress, with the names of agents in charge and facilities such as mission halls and canteens to be found at the sites. There are reports from the missions, lists of births, deaths and marriages and other tit-bits of news which cast light on conditions at the sites. Other printed sources which we found useful are trade and Post Office directories, and brochures published by local authorities to describe a new gas, sewage or water works. The records of the Ministries of War, Air and Munitions are held at the Public Records Office (P.R.O.) at Kew and contain details of McAlpine's government contracts during the First World War. Visits to the sites of McAlpine's old contracts have proved to be educational. Many of the docks, railways and buildings which the firm built now lie derelict, but a visit helps in preparing a description of the lay-out and design.

Finally, the people who worked for the firm or were affected by its activities can provide a wealth of factual and anecdotal information. Old McAlpine hands told us of the characters they worked with, working conditions and labour organisation on the sites, and important details of construction methods used on some contracts which were not recorded in print. We also recorded conversations with some of McAlpine's tenants, from housing estates now demolished. While it was possible to describe the appearance of McAlpine's houses by referring to plans, old photographs and reports in contemporary newspapers, the tenants were able to describe what the houses were like to live in, how the estates were managed, the general standard of living enjoyed by the community and the tenants' opinions of their landlords.

It is certainly true that, because of the uni-

queness of some of the records held at the S.R.O., it is often easier to investigate the history of a firm which was active in Scotland than one in England or Wales. Registries of Deeds were kept only in certain areas, and registration was never compulsory south of the border. Rate Books were kept by local authorities and some have been lost or destroyed⁶. Neither of these types of records provide information on property transactions and ownership in such comprehensive detail as do their Scottish equivalents, the Register of Sasines and the Valuation Rolls. The records of the Board of Trade Bankruptcy Department have been weeded by archivists at the P.R.O. and do not give so complete a picture of a bankrupt's business affairs as do the Court of Session records held at the S.R.O. Nevertheless these are minor obstacles to research, and the other methods of inquiry referred to in this paper can be pursued no matter which area of Britain the company worked in.

Our most difficult task in researching the history of McAlpine was to find out about the businesses of other public works contractors of the period. In the absence of a substantial body of literature on the history of the civil engineering industry and on firms which did not specialise in building, and as few contractors' archives of any size and age are known to exist at present, it was not possible to draw extensive comparisons between McAlpine's successes and failures and those of their rivals. For example, one cannot say with certainty whether McAlpine's figures showing fluctuations in turnover and profit or loss during a given period were consistent with general trends in the construction industry. It is not always clear whether the firm's financial organisation and their readiness to employ mechanised plant, new methods of site management and new construction techniques were pioneering or typical. Articles in trade journals such as the *Engineer*, government reports on the industry, histories of building firms, and comments from other sources offered some clues about trends and innovations in the public works contracting business, but rarely enough to allow un-

qualified generalisations. For this reason the efforts of the Construction History Group to encourage further research and discussion on all aspects of construction are to be welcomed. It is particularly important that representatives of today's construction companies are involved. They are in a position to unearth surviving archives, to trace and interview retired employees about their working lives and to collect and investigate the stories and legends about the past which are the folklore of every long-established firm. Any company which promotes such preliminary research (and ideally it will wish to investigate its history further) will benefit from a greater understanding of its origins and development over the years. It will also contribute to a greater store of knowledge about an important British industry and facilitate further research by both amateur and professional historians.

University of Glasgow

References

- 1) Thanks to Michael Moss, Glasgow University Archivist, and Nicholas Morgan of the University's Department of Scottish History for their assistance and advice during the preparation of this paper.
- 2) The first two volumes of *The Dictionary of Business Biography*, edited by David J. Jeremy, were published by Butterworth Press in 1983 and 1984.
- 3) For the history of the Register of Sasines, and a description of its uses as an historical source, see Gordon Donaldson, *The Sources of Scottish History* (Edinburgh, 1978), p.20.
- 4) See William Bell, *A Dictionary and Digest of the Law of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1861), p.848.
- 5) *ibid*, p.97.
- 6) For a discussion of the uses and disadvantages of these records as historical sources see M J Daunton, 'House Ownership From Ratebooks', *Urban History Yearbook*, 1976, p.21; and C A Archer and R K Wilkinson, 'The Yorkshire Registries of Deeds as Sources of Historical Data on Housing

Markets', *Urban History Yearbook* (1977), p.40. Of course there are many other sources of information on property ownership and building in England and Wales which have been used extensively by historians of the building industry. Perhaps the most important are the Building Plan Registers, equivalent of Scotland's Dean of Guild Court records. The Registers are discussed by P J Aspinall in *Building Applications and the Building Industry in 19th Century Towns: The Scope for Statistical Analysis* (University of Birmingham, 1978).