

A Personal Journey

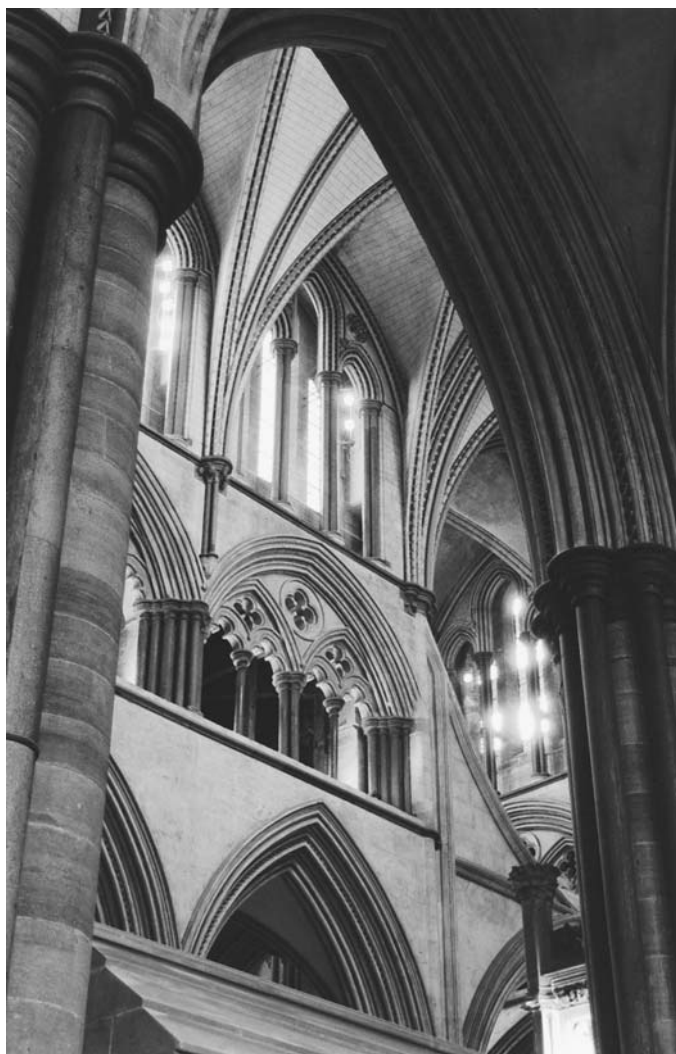
Awe. Inspiration. Humility. These words just hint at the powerful responses evoked by the great Gothic cathedrals of Europe. The visionaries who dreamed them command our admiration and respect, and the audacity of those who actually built them elicits disbelief. How, we may wonder, did ordinary people manage these feats of tremendous physical and creative effort during a time, to quote Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), when life was "nasty, brutish, and short"? Technology in the twelfth to sixteenth centuries was rudimentary, famine and disease were rampant, the climate was often harsh, and communal life was unstable and incessantly violent. Yet communities with only a meager standard of living managed to make the immense investment of capital demanded by the construction of these great edifices. They mobilized the spiritual and civic determination needed to sustain building projects that sometimes spanned centuries. And they created buildings whose exquisite beauty continues to amaze us today.

This is a book about this grand undertaking—the great Gothic enterprise that produced the hundreds of cathedrals and great monastic churches that dot the landscape of Europe. Most other books about cathedrals are devoted to a single building or a set of buildings, and the different styles of columns, vaults, buttresses, altars, and stained glass we find in them. My aim is different: it is to understand the very idea of a cathedral—any cathedral. What did it

stand for? What conception did it embody? What sort of a cultural artifact was it? In his classic work, *The Interpretation of Culture*, the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz observes about Chartres cathedral that, although it is made of stone and glass, to understand and see it for what it is, we need to understand the relations among God, man, and architecture that governed its creation and that it embodies.¹ I believe this remark applies as well to all great medieval churches, and his assertion expresses well the fundamental aim of my book.

People who are familiar with my background and training have been surprised to learn that I have undertaken this project. Nothing about my past career as a teacher, researcher, and academic administrator anticipates it. My degree is in sociology, which I taught for seventeen years while on the faculty of Princeton University. My courses there and elsewhere dealt with topics far removed from the subject of this book. Moreover, I have never formally studied medieval history, art, or architecture, nor have books about the medieval period been high on my leisure-time reading list—that is, until about a decade ago, when I began working on this project. Most important, my inspiration did not come via the familiar academic route of a deductive descent from atop some grand theory for which the Gothic cathedral provides a compelling example. It came by the opposite route. I fell in love with one particular cathedral—the Cathedral Church of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Salisbury in England, the building that Samuel Johnson described as “the last perfection in architecture” (Figure 1).²

My passion for Salisbury Cathedral compelled me to learn more about it. What I discovered whetted my appetite to learn more about the other cathedrals and great churches of Europe, and by now I have read about many of them. With my wife and partner in this project, Julia Fremon, I have visited several dozen, most of them in England, and a few on the continent. For the past six years we have led travel/study trips for Americans who want to study some of the cathedrals and abbey churches in southern England, so we have gotten to know those particular churches really well.



1. *One of my favorite interior views of Salisbury Cathedral, looking upward from the side aisle.*

Each of the cathedrals and great churches we have visited has its own character, its own beguiling beauty, and that makes it difficult to name a personal favorite. If forced to name just one in England, I suppose Julia and I would say Wells because of its coherence and infectious charm, the carvings on its capitals, and the great scissor arches at the central crossing; however, the mixture of Gothic and Romanesque architecture at Winchester makes it for us a close second. In any case, such ranking in no way diminishes the passion we share for Salisbury.

This immersion in cathedrals led me to ponder and try to answer the three questions that, in our experience, people most often ask about them: Why did people build these great structures? How were they built? What were they used for? Attempting to answer these questions forced me to move beyond the study of any one building and to think instead about the cathedral as an idea, in an effort to understand the fundamental notion embodied in it. This book explains what I have learned.

I have divided my story into five main sections followed by a concluding chapter. Part I, “A Grand Undertaking,” describes the great era of cathedral-building in Europe from 1134 to 1550 and explains in a general way what I have learned about how such buildings were actually constructed. Part II, “History,” examines the social and economic context of this era to help us understand why this great period of Gothic cathedral-building occurred when it did. Part III, “The Gothic Look,” identifies and explains the principal features that make a cathedral Gothic. Part IV, “The Religious Experience,” explores how the human search for religion is reflected in the cathedral’s form and how that form, in turn, fulfilled its religious function. It includes an examination of the role that dead people, especially saints, played in cathedral-building. Part V, “The Gothic Community,” explores how cathedrals both served and shaped the medieval world. The Conclusion draws comparisons between Gothic cathedrals and other monumental building projects that occurred at other times in human history, in an

effort to help us understand the fundamental human impulses that produce them.

Before turning to these matters, however, I want to say a few words about how I came to fall in love with Salisbury Cathedral. The story spans my whole adult life, beginning at Stanford University in 1958. As a graduate student in sociology, I began to collaborate with a graduate student in anthropology named Alan Howard, and we coauthored several papers over the years. In 1969 we planned to work together in London for the summer, but before I arrived, Alan moved out of London to the tiny village of Idmiston, near Salisbury. During our three months of work together in Idmiston, Alan and I became good friends with Peter Rothwell, the person to whom this book is dedicated. Peter is a native of Salisbury, where he runs the family business, a chain of fish and chips shops scattered throughout England. Julia first met Peter in 1985, and the following year we spent our entire summer vacation as guests in his house. We have been going back annually ever since, and we now lease a flat four doors from the main gate to the Cathedral Close.

Peter's house is a special place. It sits within the Cathedral Close, just down the street from the eastern entrance at St. Ann's Gate, and literally down the walk from the cathedral and its great surrounding lawn. We could not go to the market, or to the post office, or for a walk or outing without passing the cathedral. At night it is bathed in the glow of huge floodlights, and during the evenings we spent in Peter's sitting room, the tower and spire loomed large through his window. Over a period of years, without our fully realizing it, the building quietly insinuated itself into our souls.

In the beginning, our fascination took the form of observing and admiring its great beauty, particularly its wonderful spire (Figure 2). But in 1986 a major renovation project was begun to replace and restore much of the stone on the tower and spire, stone that had been badly damaged by the elements, including acid rain. Huge steel girders were placed over the central crossing, and on them workers erected ten stories of scaffolding around the entire tower,

right up to the base of the spire. (It was estimated that the scaffolding, laid end to end, would span a distance of thirty-three miles!) Over the next few years we followed the progress of teams of workers scampering around the vast corset of scaffolding perched 180 feet or more off the ground, and we found ourselves wondering *how* the cathedral had been built in the first place.

One day in 1991 we were watching the building through binoculars, following the activities of the workers high up at the base of the spire. Work teams and materials were being transported there by means of an elevator mounted on steel runners attached to the side of the scaffold and running all the way to the top of the tower. We could hear the elevator's motor start and stop at each of the levels as work crews and materials were dropped off and collected. As we watched their progress, we began to muse about how teams of masons were brought up to the work site when the tower and spire were originally built, in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries—when there were no mechanical tools or electric-powered elevators to transport workers, stone, and mortar from ground level to the workplace, which at its tallest point is 404 feet above ground. Clearly there would have been a challenging “commute problem” each day as work crews had to ascend the tower and spire and then return to ground level at day's end.

As we pondered this difficulty, we soon found ourselves asking other questions about how the cathedral had been built. Where did the materials to build it come from? How long did it take to complete? Who were the workers, and where did they come from? Who designed it? How was the work organized, and who organized it? How was it paid for, and why did those who built it think it a worthwhile use of scarce resources? How could such a structure have been assembled in a place and time when the population was small, living standards extremely low, life expectancy short, states either nonexistent or weak, and methods of transportation primitive? In short, exactly how did people of the thirteenth century manage to create such a magnificent structure?



2. *Our friend Peter's house lies just a few feet from this corner of the Salisbury Cathedral green.*

With these and similar questions in mind, I set out to find answers in published histories of Salisbury Cathedral. It seemed a simple project for a summer vacation; I would learn the answers to my questions, and that would be that. But I soon discovered that not much has been written about the building of Salisbury Cathedral, and I could find almost nothing about the questions of greatest interest to us. The records and accounts for the period of construction of this cathedral have never been located and are presumed lost. The few records that have survived pertain only to the decision to build the cathedral and to the governance of the diocese and the cathedral during the period of construction.³ The only way to learn about how Salisbury Cathedral might have actually been *built* was

to read books about similar cathedrals that were under construction at the same time. Initially, I turned to literature about other Gothic cathedrals in England and quickly learned about the close connections between them and the great churches on the continent, particularly those in France. As I absorbed these materials, my eyes were opened to a new range of questions that went far beyond the somewhat narrow engineering and organizational matters that had first attracted my attention. In addition to asking “how,” I was drawn to the other questions that animate this book, namely, “why,” and “for what purposes.”

To answer them I began reading tomes about medieval theology, music, and philosophy. I learned about the political economy of medieval society and the role cathedrals played in stimulating economic development. I read books about religious fervor, about relic cults and the pilgrimages they spawned. I studied the demography of thirteenth-century England. I read about the organization of building trades there and in continental Europe, about the systems of medieval agriculture from which the labor to build cathedrals was drawn, and numerous other topics as well. After a while I offered a series of courses through Stanford University’s Continuing Studies Program, and Julia and I began to lead trips to Salisbury and to sponsor an ongoing seminar for adult enthusiasts who have contributed their own original research.

Though I have learned a great deal, I still have a long way to go. Even so, I believe that I have learned enough about Gothic cathedrals to enable me to “read” them more intelligently than I previously could. My hope is that this work will enable you to feel the same. I warmly welcome you to join me in the quest to comprehend these awesome, mysterious, and magnificent works of humankind.