Chapter 10
An Exploration of the Writing and Reading of a Life: The “Body Parts” of the Victorian School Architect E. R. Robson*

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E. R. Robson was the first architect of the London School Board and the best-known school architect in the United Kingdom during the decades following the 1870 Education Reform Act. His travels in Europe and North America—“in search of the best schools”—shaped his book, School Architecture (1874), which became a critical text in shaping the nature of and discourse surrounding school design in England and elsewhere in the late nineteenth century. The text consists of a series of case studies from across Europe and the United States, which Robson identified as indicative of national practices. Robson advocated for English schools a design that reflected national character, English “in spirit” and built “on our own foundations.” This chapter uses a study of Robson’s travels and the production of his book to explore the problems associated with constructing a biographical study.

Early on a spring morning in 1873 the English architect Edward Robert Robson said goodbye to his wife, Marian and their three children and left his house in Blackheath to meet Jonathan Moss, clerk to the Sheffield School Board. As he traveled across London, Robson was excited, what he had been planning for months was now coming to fruition. That said, he knew he would be away from home for over a month, and he would miss his children, particularly the newest addition to the family who was not yet two years old. These thoughts of absences quickly dissolved when he saw Moss, who was animatedly giving instructions to a railway porter about how to organize his many bags. The sound of the Dover train arriving caught Robson’s
ear and he pushed forward through the crowded platform to join his colleague. Robson, not only methodical in everything he did, but also at the same time a bit impetuous, visualized the list of essential items he had drawn up two nights before and with an imaginary pen ticked them off—letters of introduction from Lord Granville, address book, railway maps and timetables, sketchbooks, drawing and writing materials, measuring equipment, a pocket inkstand, various medicines including powdered bay salt to combat seasickness, and several books including the Royal Geographical Society’s *Hints to Travelers* (1854), Francis Galton’s *The Art of Travel* (1855), an old copy of Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*, and two of Thomas Nugent’s guide books to European cities; a third guidebook to the towns and cities of Germany had been mislaid in the recent family move from St German’s Place to the Paragon. Satisfied that all was in place, he greeted Moss; they entered their compartment and settled down for the journey to Dover and the last steamship of the day for Calais.

Over the next month, Robson and Moss traveled on “a tour of school inspection” through Belgium, Germany, Bavaria, Austria, Switzerland, Holland, and France. Their friendship was cemented by this journey so much so that Robson would later design Moss’s residence in Sheffield. This was not Robson’s first or last European tour. He had traveled extensively in Europe in 1858, whether alone or with a companion is unclear; he also, in these early years of his career had traveled around France with the Newcastle architect John Johnson. Robson enjoyed the adventure of travel, could communicate in several European languages and in the later part of his life he traveled around Europe and beyond with his eldest son, Philip, as a judge in architectural competitions. Robson’s “grand tour” of 1873 culminated in the publication of *School Architecture: Being Practical Remarks on the Planning, Designing, Building and Furnishing of School Houses* in 1874.

Our interest in Robson and the production of *School Architecture* turned on a desire to investigate the design differences across Europe identified by Robson as being indicative of national characteristics and identity, to look at how these designs were intended to discipline the body; and by using a case study approach to look at how these designs have been adapted over time as many of the schools built under their framework have continued to be used as sites of learning. However, as with all historical projects, other questions and other diversions shaped our journey from the present into the past. When we started to map Robson’s travels, we suddenly realized how little we knew about such journeys across Europe in the late nineteenth