The Arts and Crafts movement was the creation of many and quite different personalities, most of whom were born in the 1860's and became disciples of John Ruskin and William Morris. They were influenced principally by the art critic's attack on the detested Victorian world which he developed with great conviction in that marvellous chapter 'The Nature of Gothic' from The Stones of Venice, where he argues that the greatest social evil was the division of labour. Briefly he said that where the arts of building and decoration were divided between designer and maker, art could be nothing but slavish; 'One man's thought', he wrote can never be executed by another man's hands'. The implication, and it is the one that Morris seized on, is that man can only produce beauty when he is freely living in a free society. Writing of this chapter Morris said, 'To my mind and I believe some others it is one of the most important things written by the author, and in future days will be considered as one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century. To some of us when we first read it, now many years ago, it seemed to point out a new road on which the world should travel . . . For the lesson which Ruskin here teaches us is that art is the expression of man's pleasure in his work'.

It was Ruskin's moral criticism and Morris's proposal, variously interpreted, that stood behind much of the thought of those men, the generation of the sixties, for it provided the justification of their diverse efforts to bring art and life together in the creation of the Arts and Crafts movement. Some, like Walter Crane and Ashbee believed that the movement would revolutionise society and bring socialism into being — but not Morris. No hope, he saw without a political revolution. Now to what degree, if any, social change was hurried forward by the movement is a debatable point, but what is not in doubt is the way its members, by linking art and life, revolutionised design and architecture. The vital force of the movement extended into many walks of life, where some, inspired too, by Ruskin's Guild of St. George, founded utopian groups which took News from Nowhere as their model. At one extreme it linked up with nudism, vegetarianism and the proselytes of the Simple Life and at the
other those realists who pioneered town planning and invented Functionalism.

Charles Ashbee, Ernest and Sidney Barnsley and Ernest Gimson, who were all trained as architects, had very different personalities. The last three were somewhat shy retiring men of few words, but Ashbee, gregarious and flamboyant, published too many. Thus Morris's lectures, when they heard them in the mid 1880's, in some respects, influenced them in different ways. Where Ashbee, who came to believe in co-operatives and his mission to change society, was probably more affected by Morris's socialism, the others found his humanism and workmanship more important. But there must have been much common ground. Ashbee's romantic crusade against the age seems closer to that kind of liberal anarchism that Gimson took from Auberon Hebert's Voluntaryism, than Morris's Marxism. To the preservation of the countryside, old buildings and craftsmanship all were deeply committed.

Only Gimson worked closely with Morris in the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, but Ashbee, whose attachment to Morris seems the more emotional, bought the Kelmscott Press plant after his death and employed its staff in his own printing venture the Essex House Press. Not suprisingly the quality of the presswork was high, but the same cannot be said for the typographical design, owing to the use of 'Endeavour' and 'Prayer Book', two embarrassingly ugly typefaces Ashbee designed and sometimes used, quite insensitively, with Caslon. With certain exceptions neither Ashbee or Gimson carried out the work that they had designed.

Ashbee's adventure in the organisation of society started when he founded the Guild of Handicrafts in the East End of London, then much peopled with the Toynbee Hall 'do-gooders', where after training, a growing band of Cockneys practised the artistic crafts and were introduced to co-operative work and the ideas of community living. Fiona MacCarthy's The Simple Life: C.R. Ashbee in the Cotswolds is an account of the life of the Guild and how it fared after its members decided to remove their homes and workshops to Chipping Camden then a remote Cotswolds town. In this well written and entertaining story, the scholarship, almost everywhere of a high order, is lightly worn and the narrative, running along at a good pace, gives a convincing picture of an important, if ultimately unsuccessful experiment in challenging society and changing the conditions of life and employment for craftsmen. But do not look to this useful work for information about anything connected with the design and making of the Guild's products, the exact nature of Ashbee's involvement or a study of its clients, for that was not the author's intention.
Mary Comino’s *Gimson and the Barnsleys: ‘Wonderful Furniture of a commonplace kind’* is very different, being the first comprehensive account of the work and influence of these craftsmen who established workshops, mainly for furniture-making, in the Cotswolds. The author, too, is a less practised writer, who has experienced some difficulty in marshalling the mass of material at her disposal, where a rather more analytical, synthesizing and comparative view would have been welcome. In a way, it is the reverse of Fiona MacCarthy’s book, for where she concentrates on the personalities at the expense of the artifacts, in this book the characters of these extremely individualistic craftsmen are scarce touched upon. It is a pity that a number of small errors have crept into this valuable work as, for example, where the St. George’s Guild set up by Norman Shaw’s clerks is described as ‘a Guild of Handicraftsmen and Designers in the Arts’ when it was little more than a talking shop. The sub-title of the book is confusing, because it is not, as it appears to be, a comment made on Gimson’s or the Barnsley’s work, but was said by Gimson himself and referred to Lethaby’s furniture. In my opinion, too, the influence of Ford Madox Ford’s carpenter-made furniture sold by Morris & Co. is underestimated; that it was looked to as a standard of excellence by Lethaby and his friends is shown by their decision to include a piece in the 1890 Arts and Crafts Exhibition though it had been designed thirty years before. Lethaby’s seminal essay on carpenters’ furniture does not get a mention either, which, with its design philosophy and criteria for construction and decoration, must surely count as the equivalent of the manifesto of this youthful group of architects and designers.

There is a great deal of difference in the physical appearance of the two books under review. *The Simple Life*, designed by Alan Bartram, is better printed and typographically by far the more interesting; however the keying and arrangement of the footnotes though they add sparkle to the pages, could be improved. The other volume is not up to this standard. For some incomprehensible reason, it is printed in a dirty brown ink, which has blurred the presswork and reduces the sharpness of the illustrations, in some cases to a sepia fog. The indexing too is odd since it does not contain, for example, the names of the Barnsleys or Gimson.

It is easy to imagine the inhabitants of Morris’s utopia, described in *News from Nowhere*, when they came to make the furniture for their cottages, to have been guided by Lethaby’s aforementioned essay. Here, its final paragraph, with its brief receipt for the self-sufficient joys of the Simple Life, sums up the idealistic beliefs of the Arts and Crafts movement in its first years and, despite their differences, those of the craftsmen here discussed who tried to unite art and labour:
Should you make all these [pieces of furniture], with a bookcase that you must yourself design — I think you might buy a nice clock—then, with some flowers in the window, a cat and good plain things to eat, I am sure you ought to be happy.

Godfrey Rubens