Godfrey Rubens’s Lethaby

Ray Watkinson

A big book on Lethaby—the big book on Lethaby—has long been needed, and now we have it, in Godfrey Rubens’s William Richard Lethaby: his life and work, 1857–1931, from the Architectural Press (£30). For most of this century, Lethaby, like Philip Webb, has, to use Blake’s phrase, ‘been hid’, even though everybody knew him as the inventor and first Principal of the LCC Central School of Arts and Crafts. Neither belonged (though Webb so easily might) to the High Gothic Revival that made such reputations as Scott’s and Street’s; nor to the new opposing wave that so fully expressed the peak of imperialism, of which Lutyens was the great beneficiary. Lutyens and Lethaby were exact contemporaries; both men of genius. Lutyens, child of an ex-Crimean officer turned painter, grew from his bohemian boyhood to be identified with the rich and powerful, gave us the Cenotaph, India’s capital, New Delhi and some splendid country houses. Lethaby, child of an austerely religious country craftsman, came up through his brilliant gift as a draughtsman into the world of Fine Art—and in mid-career turned back to his roots, to the art of building, architecture as service, gave us half a dozen buildings, London’s Central School, and a rich flood of ideas on art and architecture. He, more than anybody, brought into being the Art Workers’ Guild and the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, and shares with Morris the central place in that world in which so many made successful careers while holding ideas deeply different from either of those founding fathers.

A whole generation younger than Morris, nearly forty years younger than Ruskin, Lethaby drew much from both: yet what was essentially Lethaby lived and moved before ever he read their words or knew them face to face. As Ruskin was the key that unlocked Morris, so Morris unlocked Lethaby, as he did so many of his younger contemporaries. Of all those disciples, three carried, each in his own way, important parts of Morris’s philosophy into the twentieth century—Lethaby, Ashbee, and Ernest Gimson. Gimson and Lethaby worked together as Kenton and Co, making good furniture—a short-lived venture not quite like Morris Marshall Faulkner and Co. Ashbee and Lethaby worked more expansively: both architects, both were draughtsmen of the sort of brilliance that in the work of Street, Shaw, Viollet-le-Duc, dazzled on the grand scale. These younger men had less desire to dazzle, more need to work in the spirit of George Herbert’s ‘who sweeps a room as to God’s laws/makes that and th’action fine’. Though God had no place in their scheme of things, their room like Herbert’s was the world; and like his, their humility held at heart an unbending pride—not to bow the neck for success and honours, but to follow in all things the well doing of what needs to be done. And that is one of the definitions of art offered by the boy from Barnstaple: perhaps the largest definition of that inexhaustible subject, to which the latter half of his life was given over: the bibliography at the end of this book will astonish even those who thought they knew their Lethaby.
Well, now we have him as whole as we are likely to get him. In ten chapters the man is looked at through his work—buildings, books, furniture, ornament; analyses of Westminster Abbey and Sancta Sophia, lectures, reports—on educational matters, on imperilled buildings for the SPAB. It opens with his boyhood, a brief account of his craftsman father and of his first remarkable master, unknown Alexander Lauder, with his own smaller scale but real genius. Nor is it amiss to have recorded that this boy went to the same school that in the 1690’s had taught John Gay, whose Beggars’ Opera and Rural Sports have more to say to us than some of his high-gilt contemporaries. Between 1898 and 1902, Lethaby’s buildings culminated in three of special character, and designs for a fourth unbuilt, that would have been more remarkable than any other, by him or any native contemporary.

These are: the sensitive remodelling and expansion of Melsetter into a great house, the tiny chapel of SS Colm and Margaret attached to it, and All Saints, Brockhampton, Herefordshire—a true Arts and Crafts church if ever there was one. The little chapel points us back over twenty years to designs which had won Lethaby awards in the Building News competitions during 1877. One, ‘for a Mountain Chapel’, closely pre-figures SS Colm and Margaret, which is essentially the same in plan and arrangement, though smaller by ten feet—only 35 feet long within walls, and seating only forty worshippers. Under its split-stone roof lies not the first-intended vault, but a concrete shell of high twin-centred section like the Treasury of Atreus, and not a bit less gothic for that. So small as to hug the ground like a Lakeland byre, its eaves barely head-high; so small, as not to need the ribs that strengthen a similar concrete shell that roofs Brockhampton—there, astonishingly covered with thatch, for no mere reason of picturesque effect. Brockhampton, with its stubby transepts and larger scale is but an expansion of the same essentials. Where SS Colm and Margaret is stripped to an utter minimum, only a tiny bell-cote jutting from one gable, Brockhampton has, as well as its squat crossing tower, a taller, weather-boarded tower rising from its South-side porch: the original Mountain Chapel drawings show a double bell-cote extending the porch upward, while a vestry juts out on the North side, matching the Brockhampton transept: all three play with the same elements.

Yet it seems to me that there is one primal source for all: the crude little 14th century chapel that for three centuries before Lethaby became a pupil there had housed Barnstaple’s Grammar School—shown on p. 18. Small, barn-like, lit by a three-light window from one end, forms lining its length, it is the twin of that other tiny room over the Old Market Hall of Mere in Wiltshire in which William Barnes, a man after Lethaby’s own mind, opened his school, forty years before Lethaby sat on the benches of Barnstaple. In buildings like the imagined Mountain Chapel, SS Colm and Margaret, All Saints, we have not only the fruit of a life’s pondering the nature of building, but of a seed sown in childhood, reaching its largest manifestation in the never-built design of 1902. This, which survives in drawings and a half-model, was entered for the new Anglican cathedral of Liverpool. Had it won the competition, not been instantly banished to the cellar, we should now for many years have had in that city a genuine modern building on the grand scale, embodying all that Lethaby thought a building should be—not an exercise in modern or any other historically affiliated style, but generated by its own necessary functions. Remarkable as it would have been for its expressive form, it would have been even more so for the material in
The Grammar School, Paternoster Road, Barnstaple.
Model of Liverpool Cathedral.

Liverpool Cathedral. Plan and elevation.
Design for a mountain chapel. 'Ingenious, picturesque and suggestive', it was thought to be very successful.

which that form would have been realised. What was planned was a complete structure in concrete, that should cater as completely for the manifold life of a cathedral as any of the late Middle Ages, and must therefore assert, but in no way imitate, the forms of the earlier buildings. No less than the builders of that High Gothic, Lethaby would have used the true nature of his material to raise tall walls, recess chapels, pierce windows, build a campanile which instantly if by chance evokes Gaudi’s Sagrada Familia, while the cathedral’s great grey back speaks of Byzantium, its structure wholly evident. In buildings like these, on their differing scales and within their restricted uses, we may also see pre-figured some realisation of that architecture which Morris hints at so vividly in News from Nowhere—written a decade before these designs were made. How Lethaby would have rejoiced to be able to build in that ‘Nowhere’.

In the discussion of the fruitful eighteen eighties, three pages are given to ‘the most strange and disturbing drawing ever done by Lethaby’—illustrating—or not illustrating—Rossetti’s poem, ‘Rose Mary’, which derives from Scott, from Coleridge, from Poe, in that order. Strange it may be, and not wholly successful: an exploration rather than an achievement, it has, as well as intrinsic interest, a place as symbolising the duality of Lethaby’s largest concerns. In it, the stolen and malign beryl-stone is revealed as Rose Mary gazes into its shrine: on this passage the drawing is based. She takes her sinning father’s sword to split the stone, and in that instant is released in death.

The altar which Rossetti describes is a sleeping snake on whose coils stands a nameless creature, its wings supporting the sinister stone. That snake is not what Lethaby draws, but lies flat to the ground, where his serpent rises spirally up a polished column that does not figure in the poem—an active image, of movement, not of sleep or death. Nor does Rose Mary appear in the drawing. Lethaby’s serpent is Rose Mary transformed, as would be consistent with Godfrey Rubens’ identification of a
borrowing by the artist from Keats' 'Lamia': yet this is no more Lamia than the whole is simply an illustration of Rossetti's words. Lethaby is exploring a symbolic complex from which he retreats as he draws. In changing Rossetti's coiled for his own rising serpent, he must provide another form for its support—the column: the phallic symbol, as he well would know: but this dislocates other parts of Rossetti's image—the winged beast unknown, and the burning tapers. Winding up the column, the serpent confronts this creature, now become an eagle—and we see impending the battle between eagle and serpent of Shelley's 'Revolt of Islam'. In doing these things, Lethaby moves halfway to another ancient image from an Indian source—no passively malignant stone, but a vital inner force, poised to drive upwards. Here in his drawing lives the very opposite of Rossetti's sin-ridden dream: not Keats's Lamia, but Tantric Kundalini, the sexual dynamic that Lethaby seems to have given wholly to his work. A man who did not marry until forty-five, and then a spinster of fifty, may well be thought thus to have sublimated sex.

This drawing is well compared with another, the design for the AA Sketchbook, of the same date, 1889, based in part on some in the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, well known to Rossetti, Morris, Burne Jones: a mixture of fantasies architectural and sexual and of the mystery of number. Lethaby's AA drawing takes elements much like those which form his image of the Beryl-shrine, and elaborates them into a handsome whole which, among other things, makes play with spatial ambiguities: ambiguities which themselves could only be invented with the evolution of formal, quasi-mathematical perspective in the late 15th century, and then, instantly expressed ambiguities of unanticipated kinds. By omitting any living element (he is affected by the drive to abstraction of the end of the century) from this drawing, serene and beautiful in its subtle play of spaces and forms, he expresses something of the wholeness for which he thought we who make and inhabit buildings of every sort should strive; and from its inner space invites our contemplation of the mystery of the infinite outer which contains it. It is beautifully done: yet let Kundalini rise within this shrine, and its still walls will burst, the white moon fall crashing into the fountain. Like much of the groping towards universal symbolism, science, and faith that characterises the last third of the nineteenth century, so the last third of the fifteenth was full of conjecture and pretence as well as of emergent science and rational philosophy. The age of Erasmus and Leonardo was the age too of Paracelsus, and the Hypnerotomachia was a well of mixed waters. Lethaby must get his own meanings clear if he was to use successfully any image, any symbol, let alone the clumsy esoterics of this source. As to symbols, and his passion for an expressive architecture, there lies always at the back of his mind his Bible-illuminated childhood. Before ever he knew of Rossetti, or of Anna Jameson and her great books, he had heard read in Chapel such portentous words as pomegranate, beryl, jasper, chalcedony, chrysoprase, topaz—from the pages of the Revelation of Saint John the Divine, and from the First Book of Kings, whose fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters tell of the making of Solomon's temple, and of the office of the workman therein. No wonder that in the end for Lethaby as for Morris, the famous chapter in Ruskin's Stones of Venice pointed to that whole art of architecture that belongs to the wholeness of community.

Perhaps Lethaby the man never quite emerges from the documentation of his work or even from the memories of close friends, though the witness of those who knew him
and of letters to and from, attests a man well-loved as well as much admired, even reverenced for his work, for his ideas; yet who held separate a centre to which nobody quite penetrated. But perhaps our itch to know a man is foolish, since even those whom we know face to face, we can know only in part, and each of us is subtly different to each friend, let alone to strangers remote in time. Perhaps it is because the force of the personality expressed through work makes us wish to know more of what even in daily life we might have found elude us; and a life so wholly dedicated to work as multifarious in Lethaby’s case as in Morris’s demands much of us if we are to understand it. And with Mackail’s great life of Morris, and the allied Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones by Georgiana in mind, we may well expect in other related cases, like Lethaby’s, more than can be given. So here, the man appears most through the account of his work, the things he did and made, and in the working relations necessarily set up with others through his work. Of more intimate personal relations there is nothing, nor are we led to expect it; and indeed the works do speak for and of the man.
One topic takes up much of the book, and in the nature of his thought and inquiries could never be far from our thought and inquiry—education, a field which he made very much his own, with effect far outside the search for the good training of craftsmen and architects which first directed him. It might well be that for his work in this field more than any other, he would have wished to be remembered: he and Ashbee took further than any of their contemporaries the idea of remodelling education on doing rather than getting and giving information, and while Ashbee’s work lay in his Guild and School of Handicraft, Lethaby moved into the world of public education, in part inspired by the hope so many, including Morris, found in the newly constituted London County Council. By education he meant very much the education of the whole person, and it is perhaps in his thought on education as much as in his work as architect or designer-craftsman that we best perceive the great curve of his life which swings him first away from boyhood beginnings through the practical realisation of powers first discovered in boyhood and at last back again to them in his setting up of the Central School and the extensive writings on learning and building—better words perhaps than education and architecture to express the nature of his developed concerns. This curve is fully displayed in this book; I think the better for not resting on a formal pre-conception that had to be used to shape the book, but for having been discovered in many years of labour on it. It is no less a merit to have shown him so clear of the long and well-loved shadows of Morris and Ruskin while showing how important they were in his development, his mid-career abandonment of the prestigious, the evident enormous satisfaction he got out of his work, not least as a teacher.

As to his socialism, this was by no means the same as Morris’s, any more than Morris’s mature thought was the same as Ruskin’s which yet he said had been the only light shining in his youth, and had set him on the road to that practical socialism, as he put it, in which he went beyond his Master. There was nothing of Ruskin’s paternalism in Morris: even before he understood that he was becoming a socialist, he had seen the importance of the working class (to him, very much those who worked with their hands) as the dynamic of the future. Lethaby, unlike Webb and Faulkner, who at an earlier day than his own friendship with Morris, had been well able to go forward whole-heartedly with Morris into his practical socialism, could not engage in direct political work. His socialism was addressed more inwardly to the problem of designer and craftsman within the large frame of architecture, and it was chiefly to his fellows in these fields, or those entering them, that he addressed himself. Even though he came at last to do signal work for a general education of a new, activity-based kind, he came to this through his desire to give better training to designers and their workmen. It was not as an outsider that he came to see the inherent wrongness of the beaux-arts tradition of training for architecture, but as one who had come up within it. Trained as an articled pupil, more conscious than most young architects would be of the material base of his trade in building and its materials, he very early won success with his fine drawings—won the Soane Medal and the Pugin Scholarship, and moving into Shaw’s London office from the provinces, moved very much into the upper ranks of the fine art practice. It is as if he fought his way back in the late seventies to his own origins to end by renouncing what had in his beginnings served him so well, and remaking his philosophy over into the one by which we remember him. In this remaking, he
escaped with the help of the new sciences of history and anthropology from the narrow if exalted Eurocentricity that shackled most of his fellow architects. In this he is at one with Morris, more than with Ruskin; though the enormous breadth of Ruskin’s knowledge is not to be underestimated. All three come to establish a new perspective, with the Byzantine world seen as the great fountain head, from which the Gothic and Islamic forms of architecture, and its attendant crafts, grew out of what used so monstrously to be called the dark ages. It is a beautiful outcome of Lethaby’s work that he should have become Surveyor of Westminster Abbey, and have written two major works, one on that Abbey, the other on Sancta Sophia: this gives a simple view of his breadth.

This book will be of permanent value not only in making accessible Lethaby’s range but in illuminating through him and his work, the nature of the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the many movements within it: the conflicts within the architectural profession and the struggle towards an architecture for the modern world, not a mere modern architecture; and all this moving into our own century, now as near its end as was the nineteenth when Lethaby was at the height of his young powers. Here is a real service performed, with lavish illustrations of what can be illustrated visually. Though on that there is this word to be said: Lethaby would not have found this book acceptable as a designed object; for he, like Morris, understood the book as architecture, and this is far from meeting his requirements. Just as his idea of house or church, office or cowshed began with what had to be done and the necessary materials for doing it best, so with a book. Just as strength and consistency, colour and texture of stone are part of the design which may first have been mere lines on paper, so typographical design is not only a matter of shaping of pages, choice of type-face, placing of illustrations. It must take into account the book in use—how it will feel in the hand, how it lies on a desk, how it will last. This book, no doubt on the basis of better catering for the lateral spread of some of its many illustrations, has been based on a nine inch square page. This gives an oblong of eighteen by nine when open, uncomfortable to hand, especially as the choice of paper adds needlessly to its weight even without a substantial binding. No doubt this choice was in part suggested by the wish to print picture and text uniformly at one operation: but the illustrations are half negated by the dim grey of the ink and lack of definition; details vanish into this faint fog to leave us guessing; one of the worst instances is one of the most important pictures of the model for Liverpool cathedral whose unique character we can hardly guess at. The practice of architecture and design was Lethaby’s life, and it is a grave disservice done to him, the author, and the reader so to treat the visual element. Nor is it only that the pictures are so gutted of their drama—no advantage is actually taken of the inconvenient format in the placing of illustration on page—which seems to have happened, no more. The text fares better, though this page again gives an inordinate line too long for good reading. The choice of type face has of course the best of precedents, since it is Imprint, designed and produced at remarkable speed by Monotype in the latter part of 1912 to meet the deadline for the first, January 1913 number of the magazine of the same name, of which Lethaby was the inspirer and to which he and younger men contributed wisdom and learning: among them, Edward Johnston—whom Lethaby installed, so to speak, as the heir of Morris in the regeneration of calligraphy: Everard Meynell, Ernest Jackson, and J.H. Mason also
shared in editing it. It is strange that there is nothing in the book about either magazine or type face. A late development in Lethaby’s life, this was not the least significant: to him a book was no mean matter: in content and form it called no less than a building for the welldoing of what needed to be done, and through Imprint he helped to carry forward into this century, and into commercial practice, the good that Morris had done with his Kelmscott Press. The new type was based on Caslon, a conscious tribute not only to the excellence of that first great English face, but to Morris also, who had used it in his first moves into typography and book-production when at the Chiswick Press he meddled in the production of his *House of the Wolfings* and *Roots of the Mountains*, before ever the Kelmscott Press was set up. If, as is to be hoped, there is one day a popular edition of a book that should be widely available, let us hope that it will be produced in a better format which will pay silent tribute to Lethaby.

But we have waited long for this, and welcome it wholeheartedly.

*Ray Watkinson*