


The first three books under review here come from Yale University Press, whose coverage of art matters continues to earn our respect. But I find myself less enthusiastic than I should like to be about the first, the ‘revised and expanded’ version of Pevsner’s *Pioneers of Modern Design* which first appeared in 1936 and then in revised editions in 1949 and 1960. Pevsner’s well-known account of what would now be called the genealogy of the modern movement which he so greatly admired, presented it as a successful synthesis of three elements: the work of Morris and those associated with him who reasserted the social responsibility of the artist; the art nouveau movement with its freeing-up of design; and the achievements of the nineteenth-century engineers, particularly their great bridges and railway stations, which showed the potential for architecture of the new materials of iron, steel and concrete. Rejecting the Victorians’ mistaken belief in the importance of decoration in architecture and design, and Ruskin’s rejection of the machine, the proponents of the modern, in particular Gropius, succeeded by 1914 in creating a new style at once utilitarian and beautiful, ‘the genuine and legitimate style of our century’ (p. 27). This argument Pevsner put forward in 1936 with energy and conviction — he is a much more passionate writer than his reputation tends to suggest — and the brief Foreword he wrote for the 1960 edition maintained that he still considered this a valid view: it was a ‘happy thought’ for him that even after 25 years, when much research on the subject had taken place, ‘this book did not call for recantation or revision’ (p. 11).

Pevsner’s thesis has of course been the subject of a great deal of discussion and argument over the years, some of which is referred to by Richard Weston in his three-page Introduction. Weston gives a helpful account of Pevsner’s early life as a background to the book, considers his philosophy of art, with its emphasis on the *zeitgeist* as explanatory of styles in art, and argues that Pevsner’s genealogy ‘has stood the test of time remarkably well’, though pointing out some ‘surprising omissions and questionable emphases’ (p. 9). He also suggests, inter-
estingly, that Pevsner’s hostility to what he referred to in his 1960 Preface as ‘the craving of architects for individual expression and the craving of the public for the surprising and fantastic’ may be of particular relevance to the current architectural world, and make the publication of this book ‘timely’. So far, so good. But what Weston’s Introduction does not do is to provide any guidance as to the peculiarities of the text that is to follow; he comments only that it is presented ‘in a large format, and with a quality of illustrations to match’. This hardly prepares us for what follows, which is Pevsner’s text interspersed with small sections following each chapter, dealing with material from that chapter. For example, the first chapter, ‘Theories of Art from Morris to Gropius’, is here followed by brief colour-illustrated sections on Ruskin, Morris, the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the Deutscher Werkbund. These are generally informative, though the section on Morris contains several errors that should surely have been avoided: The Defence of Guenevere and Morris’s marriage are misdated; the old false story of his having been offered the Poet Laureateship is resurrected; the SPAB is wrongly named, and Morris is said to have founded ‘the Hammersmith Socialist League’. But the more important point is that the presence of these sections, with their attractive colour illustrations, distracts the reader from Pevsner’s developing argument. If such material needs to be provided for new readers, it should surely be placed at the end. Or at least we would expect an editor to justify the placing of these sections.

But the book, strangely, appears to have no editor. We only discover from a very brief Publisher’s Note, before the Contents page, the apparent rationale: ‘In order to provide the reader with further information about key themes that occur within the original text ... we have added to each chapter special features as listed in the table of contents. These have been written by Pamela Todd’. There is no further indication of the choices that have been made, and no discussion at all of the changes made to the illustrations of the 1960 edition. In that edition there are 148 black-and-white illustrations, each of them closely related to the matters under discussion: Pevsner was nothing if not a teacher. In the present edition there are considerably more illustrations: 131 in colour, 66 in black-and-white. The quality of reproduction available now no doubt justifies the change; we have become used to the presence of colour on our pages. The change is sometimes great-
ly for the better; the third chapter, ‘Eighteen-ninety in Painting’ is, because of its subject-matter, the chief beneficiary, but there are other outstanding photographs that support the points made even better than the originals: Clifton Suspension Bridge (p. 108) and the entrance to Guimart’s Castel Beranger (p. 88) are fine examples. But the implied assumption of this edition that colour is always better than black-and-white is questionable, and in many cases the original illustrations (many of which are simply omitted here) performed their function better than their replacements. The colour illustrations too often ignore their didactic function, and emphasise striking details and dramatic angles rather than the modernist rationality that Pevsner admired. This can be seen even on the cover. Yale offer us a beautiful picture of a door handle from Wagner’s Karlplatz Station, nowhere referred to in the text, whereas the 1960 Penguin offered four of Pevsner’s most admired buildings whose confident upward sweep was a central part of his argument. It is ironical indeed that a book that was intended to counter aestheticism with a serious commitment to rational design through rational exposition should take a form in which the argument tends to be obscured by pictorial appeal.

I am glad, by contrast, to be able to welcome the second book from Yale, the attractive (and largely unchanged) paperback edition of Alan Crawford’s *C. R. Ashbee: Architect, Designer & Romantic Socialist*, originally published in 1985. Crawford explains in his Preface to this second edition that he has been able to make only minor changes to the text, and that he has therefore not been able to incorporate the research of Craig Fees, which has shown that Chipping Campden was a more progressive place when the Guild arrived there than he had allowed, and of American scholars including Wendy Kaplan, who have provided the basis of a fuller account than he was able to provide of Ashbee’s travels in the United States. However, what we have is still a clear authoritative account of the life and work of one of the great figures of the Arts & Crafts Movement.

In Part One we are given a full and sympathetic account of Ashbee’s unusual life and marriage; Part Two considers his achievement as a designer-craftsman, dealing successively with general principles of design, architecture, furnishing and house decoration, metalwork, jewellery and printing; and Part Three discusses his reputation and
influence, with some conclusions. The four Appendices give useful information about his architectural work, his work to be seen in public collections, the publications of the Essex House Press, and his published writings. Crawford conveys his respect for Ashbee, while placing him clear-sightedly in his context. He notes that when Ashbee made his decision to devote his life to craft, the situation was far from simple: 'All sorts of genteel Ruskinisms were available, and Morris could be reduced [by his disciples] to sighing among flowered chintzes, taste masquerading as social conscience. The Arts and Crafts Movement was as much a product of this cozy, popular anti-industrialism as of Ruskin's searing insights and Morris's courageous logic' (p. 13). Perhaps in this context it is not surprising to find Morris responding less than enthusiastically when the young Ashbee came to tell him in December 1887, less than three weeks after Bloody Sunday in Trafalgar Square, of his ambition to establish the Guild of Handicraft. ‘William Morris and a great deal of cold water’, he recorded in his diary. When he gamely told Morris that he would be forging a weapon for Morris towards the overthrow of Society, Morris replied, ‘The weapon is too small to be of any value’ (p. 28). This exchange could form the basis for a whole assessment of the social impact of the Arts & Crafts; here it may be sufficient to note that many of us are grateful to Ashbee and his associates for what they achieved, even if Society, in Morris's sense, still remains unoverthrown. Crawford's admiration for the Guild is based on his view that it directly addressed the basic problem posed by Ruskin: 'how to find satisfying work in industrial conditions'. Crawford argues, accordingly, that 'All the other Arts and Crafts workshops were dilettante by comparison, concerned with narrower issues of design and workmanship, not work, like the Home Arts and Industries Association' (p.31). This seems to me too sweeping in relation to some of the other enterprises of the movement, but it is nevertheless much to Ashbee's credit that he did see work rather than design as the central question.

Ashbee's world view obviously owed a great deal to Ruskin and Morris, as he acknowledged in 1901 in *An Endeavour towards the teaching of John Ruskin and William Morris*. In 1898 the Kelmscott Press had closed down, and Ashbee brought a press from Hammersmith to the Guild, together with three of the printers. Thus he was able to establish the Essex House Press, whose aim, Crawford suggests, was 'to carry
on the traditions of good printing which Morris had revived' (p. 380). Crawford’s discussion of the work of the Essex House Press, both its texts and its typography, is well-balanced and well-illustrated. He concludes that ‘the [printing] technique of the Essex House Press is a constant source of pleasure’, but adds, ‘It is hard to be equally enthusiastic about Ashbee’s work as a designer’ (p. 396). In creating his Endeavour type, in which his book on the influence of Ruskin and Morris was printed, Ashbee followed Morris’s Golden in the thickness of the letters and the heaviness of effect; but, as Crawford remarks, it lacks consistency and so is unsatisfactory as a book type: it ‘has the easier and more atmospheric virtues of display’ (p. 389). Overall, I suppose that Ashbee stands for us now with others of his generation like Lethaby and Voysey who strove to realise ideals they derived from Ruskin and Morris in the hostile conditions of early twentieth-century capitalism; the last sight we have of Ashbee in this fine book is as a lecturing Don Quixote, in an engaging drawing by William Gaunt, in which he appears, as Crawford says, ‘old, a little feeble, but undaunted’ (p. 428). Crawford concludes by rebutting Pevsner’s account of Ashbee as part of the modern movement, asserting that on the contrary he was ‘a full-blown, drastic, Romantic anti-modernist, shaking his cultured fist at the birth of the modern world’ (p. 396).

We have reason to be grateful again to Yale for commissioning Chris Miele to edit From William Morris: Building Conservation and the Arts and Crafts Cult of Authenticity, 1877–1939. My only reservation about this attractively produced book is over the title, which seems to me to suggest a narrower range of topics than the book actually offers in its ten chapters. The first, by Miele himself, is entitled ‘Conservation and the Enemies of Progress?’ and begins with the statement that ‘The Conservation Movement is entering a critical phase’ (p. 1). The ‘new agenda’ of ‘regeneration, sustainability, social inclusion and the new urbanism’ is presenting a challenge, one that Miele addresses by invoking two traditions within the conservation movement. The more familiar one derives from Pugin and includes Morris: for it, in Miele’s excellent formulation, ‘Old buildings were signs of what freely given, unalienated labour could achieve, celebrations in stone of the pleasure of life as expressed in useful work, the very antithesis of a commodity.'
Protection was an act of defiance against capitalism, a defence of pleasure and humanity, a gesture of hope and possibly also of real practical value to generations to come' (p. 2). This view was based on value judgments, unlike, Miele suggests, the ‘bland, anodyne concept of “heritage” for which no discrimination of value is expected’ (p. 3). The second, contrasting tradition within conservation is traced back to the mid-eighteenth century, in writers whose belief in progress led them to attempt the integration of the old with the new. Miele sees this as a tradition that arose most strongly in ‘the burgeoning culture of English provincial towns’ (p. 14); he discusses developments in Newark, Warwick, York, Newcastle and, later, in Chester, before locating the focus of this ‘progressive school of conservation’ in the Builder as edited from 1844 by the architect George Godwin (p. 23). Godwin’s approach, we are told, was pragmatic, eclectic and urban: ‘Godwin integrated ancient buildings and modern contexts, portraying antiquity as something dynamic’ (p. 24). Miele ends his chapter with a plea for a conservation movement that recognises the significance of both approaches, those of Morris and of Godwin, ‘and so encourages a truly progressive conservation culture’ (p. 28).

From this it is clear that the book will not restrict itself to an academic concern with the past, although the following chapters are concerned more with history. Miele writes again, about ‘Morris and Conservation’, giving a thorough account of his contribution to SPAB, stressing both his enthusiasm and energy and, what is perhaps less often noted, his efficiency. We are also reminded of the significance for SPAB of the appointment of the young architect Hugh Thackeray Turner as part-time paid secretary in January 1883. ‘After Morris’, Miele writes, ‘it was Turner who was responsible for ensuring the future health of the Society’ (p. 51). The other great contributor to the early success of the Society was of course Philip Webb, who is the subject of a very sympathetic chapter by Peter Burman, ‘Defining a Body of Tradition’. Burman sees the qualities of Morris and Webb as complementary, Morris supplying the poetry and Webb the prose of the conservation movement. Burman quotes several important passages from Webb’s letters which show his practical approach and his mastery of detail, as in the discussion of the repair of St. Mary, East Knowle in Wiltshire (which supplies the attractive image for the cover of the
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We learn of how Webb passed on his skills by working with younger colleagues, such as George Jack and William Weir, and come to share Burman’s admiration for his contribution to the creation of what Lethaby praised as ‘a real school of practical building – architecture with all the whims that we usually call “design” left out’ (quoted, p. 98).

Alan Crawford’s chapter ‘Supper at Gatti’s’ draws attention to the close relationship between the early SPAB and the Arts and Crafts movement, and the number of figures from the Arts & Crafts who served on the committee. (Gatti’s was the restaurant in Adelaide Street to which Morris, Webb and other members of the committee would regularly go after their meetings). ‘For these younger men it was a kind of glory time’, Burman writes. ‘And Webb was the centre of it all’ (p. 113). In her ‘Affirming Community Life’ Melanie Hall summarises the situation leading up to the establishment of such official organisations as the London County Council in 1889 and the implications of this for the conservation movement, but perhaps the most interesting part of her chapter is the earlier, in which she deals with ideology and conservation. She notes that the earliest buildings to be chosen for conservation were associated with famous historical figures like Shakespeare, John Knox, Washington and Goethe, so that patriotic feelings came into play. In the next stage, she suggests, attention moved from individual figures to traditional communities, like the vernacular villages established at a number of regional exhibitions; she sees SPAB as belonging to this phase, and focusing on the rural parish: ‘The medieval church surrounded by its parish provoked preservationist sentiment, standing for a pre-industrial way of life and providing an uplifting symbol of the nation’ (p. 133). This view sounds a good deal less radical than that expressed earlier by Miele, who at one point quotes the vicar of a church at New Romney, Kent, who dismissed a letter from SPAB with the remark: ‘Your reasons for the existence of such a Society are to my mind, in many points, very absurd. Your committee includes the greatest Radicals of the day’ (quoted p. 56). Hall’s comment nevertheless provides the context for an illuminating discussion of the establishment of the National Trust in 1895. Only in a third and later stage, Hall suggests, did attention shift to questions of town planning, through the Local Government Acts of 1888, and then to state intervention in preservation. She concludes, optimistically, that the volun-
artist initiatives of bodies like the SPAB and the National Trust now ‘live peaceably within the boundaries of action established by local and parliamentary democracy’ (p. 153).

Michael Drury adds depth to our sense particularly of Webb’s achievement in his consideration of the influence of Morris and Webb on the group he has identified elsewhere as ‘the wandering architects’, in particular Detmar Blow. Then Frank Sharp discusses the work of the SPAB outside Britain in the period up to 1914, reminding us of how Morris’s belligerent approach, sometimes successful in England, succeeded only in offending Italian pride in the campaign over St. Mark’s, Venice, in 1878. Fortunately Morris and the SPAB learnt from this experience and subsequently adopted a more diplomatic approach. James Lindgren’s account of the politics of the preservation of New England antiquities in the early twentieth century reminds us of Hall’s consideration of the ideology of conservation. The Society established by William Sumner Appleton in 1910 chose for preservation chiefly seventeenth-century rural frame houses, based on a reading of colonial buildings as ‘symbols of native character and testaments of Anglo-Saxon primacy’ (p. 231). Through these preserved buildings, it is suggested, there was shaped an image of New England which is still there to be enjoyed by modern ‘heritage’ tourists. A different kind of extension of the original concerns of SPAB is considered by Neil Burton, who provides an account of the emergence of the Georgian Group in 1937, under the witty title ‘A Cuckoo in the Nest’. The photographs of the Group’s well-groomed early leaders – Lord Derwent, Robert Byron and Douglas Goldring – certainly suggest a different world from that of Morris and Webb, and Burton emphasises the difference of the Group from SPAB, calling it ‘an alliance which was uncomfortable from the first and did not last long’ (p. 256).

The book’s final chapter is fittingly by the present Secretary of the SPAB, Philip Venning, on ‘The Continuing Work of the SPAB’. After a summary of the historical changes that have led from a purely voluntary approach to conservation to the present situation in which some measure of state and local government responsibility is taken for granted – a change in which SPAB itself played a part – Venning offers a balanced description of the current situation. While the number of applications for total demolition of relevant buildings has markedly decreased, large-scale proposals, such as those for the extension of the
runways at Stansted and Heathrow, could entail widespread demolition or abandonment of historic buildings. The Society has worked successfully to increase public awareness, and through its educational and training programmes has contributed to the quality of work now being undertaken in the conservation world. But the government has, since 1997, Venning notes, ‘been unashamed about the largesse with which it has treated the arts and the parsimony it has reluctantly doled out to the heritage’ – though he notes in fairness that the Chancellor had in 2000 announced a grant scheme for church repairs equivalent to a cut in VAT from 17.5% to 5.0%. In his conclusion Venning notes the ‘public preference for making old buildings as new’ and ‘the pressure towards the falsification of the past’ exercised by the increasingly influential heritage industry. But, he argues, the Society will reject the consensus where necessary, ‘remaining firmly rooted in a philosophical approach that is sufficiently flexible to ensure its future usefulness’ (p. 296). The book concludes with three appendices, of which the first two, detailed research by Jenny West, specify the membership and casework of the SPAB committee to 1896 and provide biographical notes on all the – remarkably varied – committee members themselves; the third and final appendix contains the Manifesto of the SPAB as written by Morris in 1877 and still printed in every Annual Report. The value of this book is that it so consistently and illuminatingly links the past and present of the conservation movement.

Crawford’s account of Ashbee, considered earlier, showed him to be no uncritical enthusiast for the Arts & Crafts, though he presented the movement as the essential setting for Ashbee’s achievement. In his general account of the movement, he remarked: ‘A hundred years later it is still difficult to know how seriously to take the Arts and Crafts: whether to see it as a crisis of confidence among artists, architects and designers, a deep dissatisfaction with the state of industrial society; or something more playful and mundane, not to be burdened with such large significance, romantic escapism, and eccentricity in the English tradition ... taken as a whole, the objects which the Movement produced present a picture of splendid confusion’ (p.208). Barrie and Wendy Armstrong, the authors of The Arts and Crafts Movement in the North West of England: A Handbook, would not be deterred by such
reservations. Their splendid book – attractively produced and fully illustrated – is a wide-ranging gazeteer that will be of great use to all visitors to the North West with a taste for the Arts & Crafts, surely likely to include many members of this Society. In their Preface, the Armstongs tell us that they visited over 800 sites in their seven years of research, and that they have chosen to interpret the Arts and Crafts in the widest term, beginning with work by Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. in the 1860s and continuing into the 1940s. They also adopt a wide interpretation of the North West, so that the book contains successive sections on Cumbria, Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Cheshire and North Staffordshire. These are followed by an excellent and detailed Who's Who of all those whose work is identified in the gazeteer; this fulfils the function of an index in enabling readers to find all the examples in the area of the work of any craftworker in whom they may be interested, and includes relevant firms as well as individual craftworkers.

Those interested in Morris’s work can find information about, by my count, no fewer than 74 locations, of which the most important, we are told in the Introduction, are St. James’s, Staveley (a Victorian church with a fine east window of 1881 and two small lancets of 1907, and also containing good woodwork by Simpson of Kendal); and the medieval Church of Jesus, Troutbeck (with a five-light east window described here as ‘one of the stained-glass wonders of the Lake District’). We are informed of all the Ruskinian projects in Cumbria; the two country houses on Lake Windermere (Baillie Scott’s Blackwell, now fortunately open to the public through the good work of the Lakeland Arts Trust) and Voysey’s Broadleys (now home to the Windermere Power Boat Club); the landscapes and gardens of T. H. Mawson, who laid out Blackwell’s; and the activities prompted by George Howard, including Philip Webb’s work, most notably in the building of his only church, St. Martin’s, Brampton, with its fine Morris and Co. windows and other decorations. We learn that there is additionally a good deal of stained glass by Henry Holiday and by Christopher Whall and his associates. We also learn about the Northern Art Workers’ Guild in Manchester, founded in 1896, and Edgar Wood, its first Master and the architect of the First Church of Christ, Scientist, built in Victoria Park 1903–08. This building is illustrated on the back cover as well as inside, and its dramatic gabled
façade certainly deserves the description ‘exceptional’; it was disquieting to read that in 2005 the building – listed Grade 1 – is empty and ‘awaiting a suitable use’. In Liverpool the development took a different form, with the establishment of the pioneering School of Architecture and Applied Arts by University College Liverpool in 1894. Major building projects covered include William Lever’s Port Sunlight from 1886, and the Grosvenor Estates around Chester by the architect and developer John Douglas, with his numerous half-timbered black-and-white buildings. We are also informed of various Arts and Crafts activities in Leek, where in the 1870s Morris tried his hand at dyeing at Thomas Wardle’s works, and where Wardle’s wife, Elizabeth, established the successful Leek Embroidery Society.

It would be possible to continue at much greater length in view of the wealth of material that is here assembled and described, but I hope that enough has been done to show the richness of this remarkable gazetteer. The reader warms to the Armstrongs’ liberal and enthusiastic approach, which is nicely represented by their comment on the church of St. Mary’s at Wreay, near Carlisle, which Miss Sarah Losh built to her own design in memory of her parents and sister: ‘Although the work was completed in 1842, it could so easily fit into the Arts and Crafts period 50 years later’. With guides like these, any visit to the North West would be greatly enhanced. In a recommendation on the cover of the book Alan Crawford writes, ‘Just put it in the glove compartment and go!’ Perhaps it would be even more in the spirit of the Arts & Crafts to put it in our rucksacks. At all events, the Armstrongs and Oblong Creative are to be congratulated on their good work; it would be excellent if this book were to be the forerunner of other handbooks for the rest of the British Isles.

Peter Faulkner