
Stephani lamenting the desolation of uprootedness and her longing to return: ‘[m]y only wish is to be put back’ (p. 186).

Reading this book is a tug-of-war affair; one is constantly pulled between an appreciation of illuminating and sensitively-observed passages that describe details now lost to us or evoke the joyousness of possession of Kelmscott’s abundant loveliness, and the uneasy recognition that, after all, everywhere the flowers are a little too dense, the fruit a little too ripe, the stage a little too opulently set. This is no doubt due in part to Edward and Stephani’s intake of alcohol and Benzedrine, which they referred to rather more poetically as ‘starlight’, and which they used to heighten their creativity. The sincerity of the couple’s devotion to both Morris and his beloved house is beyond doubt but there is more than a little mawkishness in Stephani’s yearning after him and her invitation to ‘live freely in us’ (p. 91). It is all rather claustrophobic.

What would Morris himself have made of the Scott Snells? It is certainly worth reading *The Starlight Years* in order to decide for oneself.

Kathy Haslam

Steven Parissien, *The Comfort of the Past: Building in Oxford and Beyond 1815-2015* (London: Paul Holberton publishing, 2015), 200 pp., 200 colour illustrations, £40.00 hbk., ISBN 9781907372773.

The Comfort of the Past gives a thorough account of architecture in Oxford over the last two hundred years, although it is stronger on individual buildings than on the general development of the city. The limited index offers only Architects, Builders and designers and Buildings, so that there is no way to check whether Parissien admits the relevance of, say, the Oxford Movement or the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, or even the Greek Revival. Readers of Tony Pinkney’s excellent *William Morris in Oxford* will recall that Morris and the SPAB fought two major campaigns in Oxford, both unsuccessful. In 1881 they opposed T.G. Jackson’s plan to replace the fourteenth-century statues on the tower of St. Mary’s with modern equivalents, eventually provided by George Frampton. In view of this, it is not surprising to find Morris becoming increasingly critical of the Oxford establishment for its failure to defend its built environment from ‘vulgarization’ as in ‘Some Hints on Pattern-Designing’ (1882), where their behaviour is denounced as ‘a disgrace’. It is disappointing that Parissien makes no reference at all to these events. There are numerous attractive illustrations, many of them photographs by Chris Andrews which show Oxford as a Mediterranean city of colourful gardens, blue sky and sunshine.

The overall account is chronological, beginning with the builder Daniel Evans, whose chapels in a classical mode (not in Oxford) asserted the significance and

authority of Methodism in the early nineteenth century. The contracting firm Symm, named after Evans's successor, became the most active agent in Oxford building thereafter. Evans built a classical chapel in New Inn Hall Street in 1817-18, but this was replaced in 1876 by a larger building in the Gothic style, a change representing the overall movement towards the Gothic in Oxford at the time. In the national building boom of the period after 1815, we are told, Oxford 'chose not to mimic the grandiose Greek Revival style then prevalent in London, Liverpool and Edinburgh, but to stick with a tried-and-tested architectural answer which reflected its own peculiar building history – a Late Gothic idiom that had first been used in the fifteenth century' (p. 21). The colleges preferred to employ 'malleable locals' or to rely on master-masons to execute their commissions. This helped to create a quietly unified architectural scene, inclined towards the bland rather than the dramatic. Several well-known architects contributed buildings in this mode, including G.F. Bodley and Thomas Garner, sometimes independently and sometimes in partnership as in the Wolsey Tower at Christ Church and St. Swithin's Quad at Magdalen (from 1881), which was admired by Morris. George Gilbert Scott's Martyrs' Memorial of 1841-43 is described as a 'properly Protestant composition' but nevertheless 'typical of Oxford's conservative medievalism' (p. 60). T.G. Jackson was Victorian Oxford's most prolific and reliable architect; the 'assured stylistic compromise' of his Jacobethan Examination Schools of 1876-82 'set the pattern of Oxford architecture for the next fifty years' (p. 65). No reference is made to Ruskin's 1884 remark about 'this black hole [...] in a style as inherently corrupt as it is unEnglish'. It is surprising to find that, although George Edmund Street established his practice in Beaumont Street in 1852 (at which Morris was to meet his lifelong friend Philip Webb) and was the Diocesan Architect, building the fine church of Sts. Philip and James on Woodstock Road, 1860-66, he was not asked to do any substantial work for the university.

Some more adventurous buildings did appear, such as what Parissien terms the 'delightfully Disneyesque' Shire Hall built by John Plowman in 1839-41, and William Wilkinson's Randolph Hotel, with its 'jaunty if somewhat incoherent Gothic facade' of 1863-66 (p. 36). The latter, it is pointed out, contrasts strongly with C.R. Cockerell's 'classical masterpiece', the University Galleries (now the Ashmolean Museum) of 1840-41 (p. 35). The University Museum of 1855-59 by Thomas Deanne and Benjamin Woodward is a technically innovative building with iron pillars, giving science the position it had come to occupy in the culture. The great Roman Catholic architect A.W. Pugin was invited by two sympathetic dons to produce plans for rebuilding at Balliol – his 'monastic' design of 1833-34 is shown – but it was rapidly dismissed by the Master as far too Catholic. Pugin's only work in Oxford was a Gothic gateway at Magdalen of 1844, which he saw as a riposte to Scott's Martyrs' Memorial;

but it was demolished only thirty-five years later. However, the flamboyant High Churchman William Butterfield was chosen to rebuild the chapel of Balliol in 1854, and later produced the most remarkable Victorian building in Oxford, Keble College, begun 1868. Parissien offers a striking photograph of the enormous brick chapel at Keble, commenting, in one of the many incisive remarks that accompany the images:

Its unapologetically muscular polychromy represents the highwater mark of Oxford Gothic; thereafter the university recoiled from such emphatic aesthetic expressions, and took refuge instead in comforting eclecticism.

(p. 47)

This eclecticism may be seen in Basil Champney's Indian Institute of 1882-84 providing 'a fine visual termination of Broad Street (p. 71), and his Late Gothic Mansfield College of 1887-89, as well as work at New College, Merton and Somerville; in relation to the latter, more might usefully have been said about the influence of the new women's colleges in encouraging more comfortable architectural modes. It was typical that the massive Town Hall and Library complex, completed by H.T. Hare in 1893, replaced a modest Georgian building. Towards the end of the century, some attractive domestic buildings in north Oxford showed signs of Arts and Crafts and the Queen Anne revival (p. 56), as a result of the university's decision to allow dons to marry and live out of college.

The fourth chapter, 'Taste and Comfort', moves away from architecture to design, for no obvious reason. Parissien mounts a strong argument in favour of what he sees as the empowerment of middle-class householders, especially women, by the 'astonishing advances in mass-manufacturing techniques' (p. 77) – nothing is said of the working conditions of those in the factories from which these products emerged. Those who criticised the new furnishings for their supposed vulgarity are dismissed – indeed. We are told that Ruskin 'admired decrepitude, not the gleaming newness of mass-manufacture' (p. 79) – hardly an illuminating antithesis. The Design Reformers are represented as romantic reactionaries. Owen Jones is said to have inspired Morris, two of whose (unidentified) textile designs are illustrated but not commented on. Morris's preference for vegetable dyes is emphasised, a preference which was apparently motivated by a desire to restrict his colour-range, although it is gleefully noted that the popular 'Daffodil' pattern of 1891 used a bright yellow artificial dye. Parissien seems unaware that the design is by John Henry Dearle, who may well have chosen the dyes, or that by 1891 the quality of artificial dyes had improved so much that they could reasonably be used by Morris and Co. Design historians who have admired the Arts and Crafts are said to have blithely ignored the

high cost of their products: ‘for all Morris’s high-flown socialist principles, few working men and women could actually manage to pay for the sort of furniture and textiles produced by his admirably ethical workshop’ (p. 85). The sarcastic tone is regrettable, and there is no acknowledgement of how seriously Morris confronted this issue. Taking a strongly feminist position, Parissien goes on to call Design Reform a masculine position, noting that writers on design like Charles Eastlake often blamed women for the decline of taste – this he extravagantly describes as the ‘victimization of women’ (p. 87), while he makes no reference to women like Mrs. Orrinsmith and Mrs. Haweis, whose books of advice were widely read. It is therefore something of a surprise to read at the end of the chapter of ‘that American doyenne of home design, Elise de Wolfe’; her dining room at the Colony Club in New York (1907) is pleasingly illustrated (p. 89).

In the fifth chapter, wittily entitled ‘In with the Old’, the writing happily returns to a quieter tone. After the First World War there were to be no architectural adventures – the returning servicemen were to be reassured by well-established styles. The architect most successful in this mode was Sir Reginald Blomfield, ‘the ideal architect for the conservative dons of Oxford’ (p. 97). Blomfield had built the attractive Talbot building for Lady Margaret Hall in 1910 and was to supplement it with the Neo-Georgian Lodge Building in 1926. He also published the book *Modernism* in 1934, in which he ‘savaged recent Modernist architecture in a very Oxonian manner’ (p. 98), deploring in particular its cosmopolitanism. After the retirement of Blomfield, Giles Gilbert Scott built for Lady Margaret Hall the Deneke Building (1932) and an impressive chapel in brick, in an Early Romanesque style (1933). Parissien also praises the Neo-Georgian Chapel of St. Hugh’s College, by Buckland and Haywood. In contrast, he is critical of the ‘imperialist bombast and stylistic schizophrenia’ of Herbert Baker’s Rhodes House of 1926-29, although the building looks pleasant enough, with its well-treed landscape, in the accompanying photo (pp. 108-9). He also condemns Thomas Worthington, first for his monolithic Extension to the Radcliffe Science Library, and then for continuing ‘to trot out the same rubble-faced formula across the city’ (p. 111). The one building of the period showing architectural distinction is Edward Lutyens’s Champion Hall, 1935-37, ‘one of the classical masterpieces of Oxford – indeed, one of the most impressive of Britain’s inter-war buildings’ (p. 112). We are led, too, to admire a very different building, the ‘brash, confident, Hollywood classicism’ (p. 117) of the Morris Garages in St. Aldate’s built in 1932 to the designs of Henry Smith, and now thriving as Oxford Crown Court. But in general the ‘comfortable conservatism’ (p. 116) of the Twenties and Thirties did little for the look of Oxford. The New Bodleian Library (1937-40) by Scott is described as no more than ‘a vast book warehouse’ behind its massive rubble walls (p. 117).

Chapter six is entitled 'Brave New World', and is appropriately preceded by a photo of the 'dramatic concrete fan adorning Philip Dowson's Nuclear Physics building of 1967' (p. 123). But we are soon taken back to the period immediately after the war, when architecture continued to be restrained by tradition, as in Edward Maufe's neo-Georgian Dolphin Quad at St. John's (1948-49), Albert Richardson's sedate Principal's Lodging at St. Hilda's (1954-55), Raymond Erith's new library at Lady Margaret Hall, begun in 1959 and his Provost's Lodge at the Queen's College (1958-60), and Thomas Rayson's Tudoresque new range at Mansfield (1960-62). The most ambitious building of the time was Nuffield College, discussed in the previous chapter, perhaps because the money for it was given to the university in 1937 by the motor magnate, of whom we are given a perhaps unnecessarily full account. It was designed by the deservedly little-known Austen St Barbe Harrison and built from 1949 to 1960. The design is described as 'lifeless', and we are told that in his later years Nuffield 'went out of his way to avoid driving past the loathsome building' (p. 121). After this comes Modernism, in the form of the 'Beehive Block' at St. John's by Michael Powers (1958-59), the attractive Kenyon Building at St. Hughes by David Roberts (1964-66), the controversial Florey Building at Queen's by James Stirling (completed 1971), and the Garden Building at St. Hilda's by the Smithsons (1968-70). The influence of Sir Leslie Martin, especially at the St. Cross Building 1961-64, is deplored, while the city authorities are condemned for the Westgate Centre (1970-72) and the County Council offices (1974). We then leave Oxford unexpectedly and dramatically to be given an account of the Classical style employed in some country houses in the county, including Waverton House by Quinton Terry (1978-80), and Tusmore Park by William Whitefield (2004).

The city and university remained more eclectic, and during the mid-80s found their most favoured architect in Richard MacCormack whose buildings place 'the user, and not the materials or fittings, at the heart of the design' (p. 149), to the satisfaction of many clients. His Oxford work includes the Sainsbury building at Worcester (1983) and his 'magisterial and highly effective Garden Quad for St John's, of 1993-94' (p. 151). The prevailing eclecticism made various styles possible, including Demetri Porphyrios's Gothic Grove Quad at Magdalen, 1992-95, John Simpson's Georgian Pipe Partridge Quad at Lady Margaret Hall, begun in 2010, and Robert Adam's Sacker Library of 2001 on a difficult site at the rear of the Ashmolean, making skilful use of circular forms (attractively illustrated on pp. 154, 155 and 156). We are then taken out of the city again to admire revivalist buildings by Ben Pentreath (Fawley House, after 2012), Robert Franklin (conservation work and additions to Hanwell Castle and Wychwood Manor) and Price Dinsdale Associates at Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons in Great Milton. The latter is a fifteenth-century house extended

in the early twentieth century and now ‘a major global culinary destination’ (p. 167) – is this phrase ironic? The chef Raymond Blanc restored and extended the building from 1984 to 1998, using as his builders the firm of Symm, praised throughout the book for their reliability and quality. Parissien likes the Manoir so much that he offers one beautiful double-page and two smaller photos of it. He also uses it for the front cover of the book, where I would have preferred a non-commercial building from the city itself.

Chapter eight is called ‘Exporting Oxford’, and is concerned with the appeal to American Anglophiles of what we may see as, at its best, Oxford’s tasteful traditionalism. Patrons from all parts of the United States during the 1980s – not before? – furnished commissions for work along these lines. Buildings illustrated include the library by Steven Ganbrel at the Plaza Apartments in New York City; the garden facade of Fairfax and Summerson’s house at Litchfield, Connecticut; the study at a house in Greenwich, Connecticut, and two rooms in Los Angeles, by Ferguson and Shamamian; a villa in the Hudson Valley by Gil Shafer; the library in Albemarle House, Virginia, by David Easton, completed 1983 (where, as in other places, the exported building expertise of Symm was used) and, on a larger scale, Whitman College in Washington by Demetri Porphyriac. In conclusion, Parissien observes of the Albemarle House library that it offers the ‘leather-bound assurance’ and ‘well-upholstered security’ of the Oxford tradition transplanted to Virginia (p. 183). To me it looks heavy and surprisingly masculine in the era of feminism.

The final short chapter takes us back to the locality of Oxford and is entitled ‘Full Circle’. Just as the book had begun with church buildings, those of Daniel Evans in the early nineteenth century, it ends, perhaps surprisingly in our secular society, with two ecclesiastical buildings in the early twenty-first. The Edward King Chapel for Ripon College at Cuddesdon in South Oxfordshire, 2011-13, is by Niall McLaughlin. The three photos show an attractive elliptical building with free-Gothic ribs in the ceiling and walls of yellowish Clipsham stone – a material favoured by Edwardian architects. It is said to fuse ‘the bare simplicity of the Early Christian churches with the minimalist Modernism of the 1950s and 1960s and the contemporary reinterpretations of Gothic forms’ (p. 186). At the same time, a new Roman Catholic chapel was built at Culham Court on the eastern border of Oxfordshire by Symm, and designed by Craig Hamilton, an architect admired by the Georgian Society, whose work elsewhere is – perhaps unnecessarily – illustrated. Perhaps this is to make up for the fact that the Chapel of Christ the Redeemer, begun in 2013, is shown only in the plan and elevation. The building is said to synthesise ‘a number of classical traditions and a wide range of materials, with ‘a subtle palette of limestones and woods’ in the interior (pp. 192-3). In these buildings, Parissien concludes, Oxford has

returned to its 'comfortable revivalist axis' (p. 193), a position which he evidently finds congenial. It would be interesting to see whether an account of Cambridge would offer a similar narrative.

Peter Faulkner