

Ian Hamerton, ed., *W. A. S. Benson: Arts and Crafts Luminary and Pioneer of Modern Design* (Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club, 2005), 303 pp., £45.00 hbk, 281 illustrations, ISBN 18514 94766.

THE OBITUARY OF William Arthur Smith Benson (1854–1924) in *The Times* of 9th January 1924 describes his metalwork as ‘almost an inevitable feature of Morris decoration’. However, as Alan Crawford points out in his sensitive foreword to this book, he has normally been ‘allotted a short and standardised slot’ in histories of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Crawford gives three reasons for this: Benson’s machine-made lamps encapsulated him as one of Pevsner’s ‘pioneers of modern design’, seemingly requiring little extra comment; little has been known about his personal life and career, and the sheer number of his designs for light-fittings and hollowware have daunted researchers. Crawford goes on to describe how, thanks largely to the recent discovery of Venetia Benson’s diaries which provide daily accounts of their married life and his architectural projects, this book has made ‘sense of Benson’s place in the Arts and Crafts movement as a whole’. It is the first substantial book devoted exclusively to his life

and work.

Like William Morris, W. A. S. Benson was born into a prosperous upper-middle-class family and primarily made his living by providing goods for the upper and middle classes. Educated at Winchester and New College Oxford, he observed Ruskin's 'Hinksey Diggings' and absorbed many of his precepts. Encouraged to practice metalworking on a lathe by his uncle as a young boy, and always having a 'lathe room' in the house, he was fascinated by engineering and boats, but decided on architecture as a profession. Between 1877 and 1880 he was a pupil of Basil Champneys (1842–1935) at 32 Queen Square, in close proximity to Morris's workshops and offices at number 26 which moved to Merton Abbey in 1881. He met Edward Burne-Jones at a morning rehearsal of Wagner in 1877 and this encounter was to prove the catalyst for his career in the Arts and Crafts. Burne-Jones used him as the model for the king in *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*. In 1878 Benson began to design furniture and metalwork, helping Burne-Jones with designs for a piano case. Through him, Benson met Morris in 1878 and became a close friend, Morris giving him the nickname 'Brass Benson'. Morris and Burne-Jones encouraged him to start a business, initially making simple furniture for Morris & Co. but soon expanding into the manufacture of the distinctive metalwork for which he is best known.

The development of the domestic use of electricity in the 1880s and the invention of the light bulb by Swan/Edison (1879) opened the field for lighting design. Benson's simple designs with exposed rivets echo in metal the ideals of honest construction and fitness for purpose of Arts and Crafts furniture; evidently inspired however, not just by natural forms, but also by the machined beauty of propellers and reflectors. It is this aspect of his work and his enthusiasm for new technology and invention which make Benson a 'pioneer of modern design'. As Hermann Muthesius wrote in *Das Englische Haus* (1904) 'Benson was the first to develop his designs directly out of the purpose and character of the metal as material ... (he) was the leading spirit in electric appliances in England'.

In 1882 Benson moved into large premises in Eyot Gardens, on the corner of Hammersmith Terrace not far from Kelmscott House, and became closely involved with Morris in substantial contracts for decorative work involving metalwork and lighting schemes. He acquired a

studio as office and showroom on Campden Hill Road, centrally situated for the Holland Park set and close to the home of his future wife Venetia, a god-daughter of John Ruskin. He served on the committee of the Art Workers Guild and involved himself in the Home Arts and Industries Association in 1884. Mackmurdo credited him with the idea for the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society where he was to provide a diplomatic foil for Walter Crane's outbursts. He also supported the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings and helped in the reorganisation of the Victoria and Albert Museum. In 1914 he became a founder member of The Design and Industries Association. He gave frequent lectures and his publications include *Notes on Some of the Minor Arts* (1883) and *Notes on Electric Wiring and Fittings* (1897). He collaborated with Morris on an exhibition in Manchester in 1884 and took part in major national and international exhibitions until the Great War.

Benson's business expanded and in 1884 he opened showrooms in New Bond Street. In 1890 he built a larger Hammersmith factory on the corner of Eyot Gardens, employing more than 100 people. Forms of supply for the domestic use of electricity were still at the experimental stage, and he encouraged the promoters of the London Electricity Supply Company which aimed to supply London with electricity from a power station in Deptford. He supervised the wiring of many large houses, hotels, churches and public buildings, including Standen (1893) for Philip Webb, which is still lit by original Benson fittings. Samuel Bing employed him to provide interior and exterior lighting for his *Maison l'Art Nouveau* in 1895.

In 1900 Benson & Co. was registered as a limited company, with Benson as Chairman, and he employed Henry Currie Marillier (1865–1951) as Company Secretary. In 1904 Benson and Marillier were approached by Frank and Robert Smith, managers of Morris & Co. since Morris's death, with an offer to sell them the Firm. They accepted and ran both companies jointly, despite evident personal conflict, until 1908 when Benson continued to run his own business while Marillier concentrated on Morris and Co. Decorators Ltd. Both remained a director of the other's company. Benson's architectural practice continued until the First World War mainly serving clients somehow connected with his social circle. He extended the Burne-Jones' house in Rottingdean through a linking wing to an adjacent

house and designed much of its interior and furniture. When war broke out in 1914, Benson & Co. obtained an order for 100,000 hand grenades from the War Office and Morris & Co. made prototype airship propellers and torpedo directors.

In edited studies, written in collaboration by a number of expert authors, the subject itself can fall between any number of stools; this book manages to avoid that trap. Peter Rose's chapter on 'Design Reform and Arts & Crafts' provides an unusually clear background account of British nineteenth century design reform movements and the personalities involved in them: it should be placed on the reading lists of faculties of Design History. Avril Denton provides a biography of Benson which has made full use of Venetia Benson's diaries, includes a wealth of incident and places him firmly in the privileged, artistic social milieu which included Edward and Georgiana Burne-Jones and William Morris. She describes how, in February 1896,

Benson visited Morris, who began by insisting how ill he was and ended by talking books and asking to see William's twelfth-century New Testament, which his father had bought for £15. Upon seeing it, Morris was very eager to buy it because it came from the same church near Dijon as his copy of a manuscript by Josephus. Georgie Burne-Jones wrote to tell them they were selfish not to sell it when Morris wanted it so badly, so the Bensons accepted his offer of £250. It gave Morris great pleasure although he was too ill to look at it for more than a few minutes at a time. After his death in October of that year, the manuscript was valued at about £20,000. (p. 63)

Ian Hamerton provides a lavishly illustrated study of Benson's metal wares and goes on to collaborate with Salah Ben Halim in a description of the history of lighting development, including Benson's revolutionary lighting schemes and individual designs. Mark Golding's chapter on 'The Furniture and Interior Designs of W. A. S. Benson' describes how Benson's most famous furniture designs were those produced for Morris & Co., but that he also made furniture for J. S. Henry, Coalbrookdale, W. A. S. Benson & Co. and Shapland & Petter. In the longest chapter in the book, 'W. A. S. Benson: Gentleman Architect', Ian Hamerton gives detailed accounts of Benson's proven architectural works, mainly extensions or alterations to existing buildings, but also substantial country houses. This is a welcome study of a

neglected area of his work, but it would have been useful to have illustrations of original plans; apparently these were not available. The last chapter, by Tony Hampton, describes Benson's inventions, patents, and the numerous imitations which his designs encouraged. Benson was remarkably ingenious, imagining many 'firsts', including a paper cup, oven-to-table ware, the Benson patent switch (1892) and most attractive patent cast iron, ornamental windows (1897). His patent construction material, *Texyl* – corrugated, reinforced iron sheets embedded in cement for use on roofs, partition walls and even exterior walls – was surely a precursor of prefabricated, mass-produced panels. He applied for about 35 patents and registered nearly 150 designs between 1880 and 1915. The appendices provide illustrations from original catalogues, illustrated lists of Benson's architectural works, patents, registered designs and trademarks and even a fascinating chart of his commercial and social circle – an impressive trawl of political, artistic and literary echelons between c.1830 and 1940. This book will delight anyone with an interest in the Arts and Crafts Movement and provides an overdue reassessment of W. A. S. Benson's career.

*Diana Andrews*