BOOK REVIEWS


It is a pleasant coincidence that Mr Sussman's book has been published almost simultaneously with Professor Pye's. It sets out to study 'the specific ways in which the English Victorians, the first people to live in a culture dominated by technology, expressed their realization that the use of the machine to perform certain physical tasks created profound changes in intellectual and emotional life', and it attempts this in chapters devoted to Carlyle, Dickens, Ruskin, Morris, Butler, Wells and Kipling. Those on Ruskin and Morris are very good, and possibly the best succinct accounts of their positions vis-a-vis the machine available. Ruskin's thought is explored in all its penetration and confusion, including a brief examination of Professor Pye's theme—Ruskin's advocacy of rough workmanship and decoration, and his refusal to contemplate the separation of designing from making. He shows how 'For Morris, as for Ruskin, the
criticism of society is implicit in the idea of art', and by what steps Morris developed his convictions of the necessity of promoting a true art of the people into a programme for revolutionary socialism.

In view of the wide-spread misunderstanding of Morris's attitude, it is useful to have brought together his many references to the machine, which show that despite the powerful effect of Victorian medievalism on him and his acute awareness of the price in human terms of the Industrial Revolution, he was by no means opposed to the machine as such. On the contrary, the author emphasises that his attitude is best summarised in a telling quotation from *Art, Wealth and Riches*: 'I want modern science, which I believe to be capable of overcoming all material difficulties, to turn...to the invention of machines for performing such labour as is revolting and destructive of self-respect to the men who now have to do it by hand'.

It is a great pity that such an important study of this should have been allowed to appear without an index.

R. S. SMITH

**THE NATURE AND ART OF WORKMANSHIP** by David Pye: Cambridge University Press, 1968, 30s.

In recent years, the ideas underlying the Arts and Crafts movement have come in for considerable criticism, but discussion has been bedevilled by vagueness in the meaning and use of some of the basic concepts. How exactly should we define 'craftsmanship', 'handicraft' and 'workmanship'? What is the role of tools in craftsmanship, and how far can tools be differentiated from machines? What precisely is meant by 'faithfulness to materials'? It is the great merit of Professor Pye's book that he brings the greatest clarity and understanding to problems such as these which have been endlessly argued about, but seldom patiently analysed.

The book is closely reasoned, and cannot be summarised in a review. Those who have studied Morris' writings on the crafts will find the whole book absorbing, but they will turn with especial interest to the penultimate chapter, in which the author brings the body of ideas he has been elaborating to bear upon Ruskin's declaration of faith in his 'Nature of Gothic'. Professor Pye rightly draws attention to the importance which
Morris attached to this famous chapter in *The Stones of Venice* ('One of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century'), and proceeds to submit it to a devastating critique. Ruskin was 'a man of great insight and a great writer', but 'he preferred rhetoric to the exact analysis of ideas'. Ruskin's arguments (or rather pronouncements, since he produces no evidence) can be roughly summarised as follows: Men can only take pleasure in their work if they are allowed to design, as well as to make; Because workmen are unsophisticated their designs will be rough and imperfect, but admirable precisely because of their imperfection; To insist on an exact or perfect finish is incompatible with the workman acting as his own designer, so such a finish is a sign of slavery. Professor Pye makes the telling point that in this chapter Ruskin never managed for long to dissociate the idea of workmanship from carving ornaments, and shows how unjustified it is to attempt to extend his theories, for the most part taken over uncritically by Morris, to all workmanship.

He [Ruskin] did not realize, or so it seems, perhaps because he never had to work for a living, that a fair amount of patient tedious work is necessary if one is to take pleasure in any kind of livelihood, whether it be designing or making, for no one can continuously create and no one ever has. He did not realize there is great pleasure in doing highly regulated workmanship.

It would be quite wrong to give the impression that the author is intent on 'debunking' Ruskin and Morris. On the contrary, he emphasises Ruskin's seminal importance, but he is not concerned with what we can now see was Ruskin's most important contribution to Morris' development—his investigation of the social relations of art to provide a radical criticism of contemporary society. His concern is more narrowly with Ruskin's ideas on the nature of workmanship, and he shows convincingly, I think, that some of these ideas 'were by no means his best'. This stimulating little book, beautifully produced and illustrated, is obligatory reading for those who would understand the Arts and Crafts movement more fully, with all its strengths and weaknesses. Morris would surely have approved that such a penetrating appraisal of the nature of workmanship should have been produced not as a 'library study' by an art historian, but obviously as a result of deep reflection on his experience by a Professor of Furniture Design.

R. S. SMITH