W. R. Lethaby at the Central School

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William Richard Lethaby was born in 1857 and died in 1931. In terms of architecture his life spanned Butterfield and Le Corbusier, both High Gothic and the Modern Movement—which he termed ‘ye olde modernist style’. His own career had distinct phases: first, as a brilliant assistant in Norman Shaw’s office; then practising on his own for ten years, producing a small number of remarkable buildings, most of which have survived; after this, at the turn of the century, devoting himself to writing and to teaching at the newly-founded Central School of Arts and Crafts and, from 1901 until his retirement in 1918, at the Royal College of Art, its first Professor of Design.

Today he is probably best remembered as a teacher, and deservedly so, because what the Central School accomplished in the decade of his Principalship was one of the high points of the Arts and Crafts Movement in England. It was therefore fitting that the Exhibition of his life and work of last autumn should have been mounted first at the Central School, in the handsome building in Southampton Row in which it has been housed since 1907. The Exhibition Committee was well served by the designer Ken Mellors of the GLC’s Architects’ Department; and for those unable to visit it, a permanent record is available in the informative Catalogue edited by Sylvia Backe-meyer and Theresa Gronberg, and produced by Lund Humphries to their usual high standard. It lists every exhibit, with generous descriptive notes, illustrating many of them, and contains six essays on different aspects of Lethaby by authorities such as John Brandon-Jones, Gillian Naylor and Godfrey Rubens.

One of Lethaby’s skills was that of making things happen, of getting people together to do things. This showed itself in his share in the founding of the Art Workers’ Guild in 1884 by a group of young architects from Norman Shaw’s office, and The Fifteen, a group of somewhat older designers which included Walter Crane and Lewis F. Day. The Guild’s aim was—and is—to bring together architects, artists, designers, craftsmen—in fact, all the arts needed for building.

What is not generally known is that Lethaby, as one of the Guild’s representatives on the RIBA’s Board of Architectural Education, played a major part in drafting the first RIBA syllabus in 1907, one in which the principles of construction played a central part and the copying of *styles* was discouraged. Alas, this was submerged shortly afterwards under a new classical revival.

Giving a practical basis to the education of designers was one side of the coin: equally important to Lethaby was enabling craftsmen to gain a wider appreciation of their trades through the experience of design. This was the special contribution of the Central School, as is brought out in Theresa Gronberg’s essay in the Catalogue, and
W. R. Lethaby, 1901 aged 43. Lethaby in old age: from Alfred Powell's 'Scrips and Scraps'.

illustrated by numerous exhibits from the School's archives. Further, the section of the Catalogue dealing with the School says that it 'introduced an entirely new concept of design education. For the first time teaching was conducted by practising architects, artists and craftsmen in specially designed workshops. Students learned to design through the mastery of tools and materials. . . . ' This contrasted with the academic approach of other schools which, Lethaby once said, made him think of learning to swim in a thousand lessons without water. Drawing he saw not just as fine art but as an essential means of communication which everyone should master alongside writing.

As Principal (a post nominally shared with George Frampton) Lethaby had a free hand in appointing staff. Most classes were confined to workers in traditional male trades, but already in 1897, the second year of the School's life, there were more women than men in the Stained Glass classes, while from 1899 to 1908 the Embroidery Classes were taught by May Morris herself. Another coup in staffing was the choice of Edward Johnston, who came to the school in 1898 hoping to learn to draw, but who showed Lethaby some of his early attempts in calligraphy: Lethaby was so impressed by these that he created a class in Writing and Illumination for Johnston to teach.

Lethaby's policy at the Central School must have been affected by his experience in his early years in architecture. He grew up in Barnstaple, Devon, and had no academic training, but was articled to a local artist-architect, Alexander Lauder, who both personally decorated many of the buildings he designed, and invented new drainage systems. According to his grandson, Lauder insisted that all the men working on his
buildings should understand one another’s crafts, ‘so that each might feel that he was
building a house and not just practising carpentry, bricklaying, or plumbing.’

Entering Norman Shaw’s fashionable London office as chief assistant, in 1879,
Lethaby adapted himself rapidly to his new circumstances. His facility as a draughts­
man in a dizzying succession of styles was displayed in the exhibition in a variety of
drawings for notable Shaw buildings, including one design for an overpowering
fireplace in an Anglo-French Renaissance manner for Cragside in 1883. Lethaby left
Shaw’s office in 1889 to set up his own, and Shaw demonstrated his generosity by
putting in his way the commission from Lord Manners for Avon Tyrrell—the house
visited by the Society last year—originally the Manners’ country seat, and now,
thanks to the family’s generosity, the residential centre of the National Association of
Youth Clubs.

By this time Lethaby had met someone who was to open new doors for him. This was
Philip Webb, the architect of Red House and Morris’s friend from Oxford days, and a
key figure in Morris and Company. His influence on Lethaby was not confined to
architecture: we read of Lethaby attending a socialist meeting addressed by Webb,
soon to become Treasurer of the Socialist League. This aspect of Lethaby was not
referred to in the exhibition, though it is discussed in the Catalogue by Godfrey
Rubens. Webb was also involved in the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, to whose
first show in 1888 Lethaby contributed drawings. In 1891, Lethaby joined the Society
for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, which Webb and Morris had founded, and
soon joined them in the famous suppers at Gatti’s which followed the Thursday
Council Meetings. Lethaby moved his practice to Gray’s Inn, and thus became Webb’s
neighbour.

Twenty six years his senior, Webb was then at the height of his powers, maintaining a
steady course while the passing fashions ebbed and flowed around him. In his later
years, as an act of homage, Lethaby wrote a heartfelt biography of his friend (happily republished in 1981 with an Introduction by Godfrey Rubens, and a previously unprinted chapter.) In ten years’ practising on his own, Lethaby’s buildings outgrew the stylistic facilities of his period with Norman Shaw, took on board Webb’s directness and respect for local materials, and produced several remarkable buildings, culminating in the tiny church at Brockhampton in Herefordshire, which Peter Davey claims, with justification, as one of the greatest monuments of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

Both Exhibition and Catalogue raised questions about Lethaby which deserve further discussion. ‘A person full of contradictions’ said one critic. Peter Fuller, in his lively contribution to the Catalogue, pokes fun at Lethaby for his remarks in an article on Town Tidying in *Form and Civilisation*: ‘Simple, well-off housekeeping in the country, with tea in the garden; Boy Scouting, and tennis in flannels. These four seem to me our best forms of modern civilisation, and must serve as examples of the sort of spirit in which town improvement must be undertaken.’ This, to the Art Workers’ Guild in November 1916: and it is difficult to know what Lethaby had in mind, with the trenches just across the Channel. A man who shared Webb’s view that ‘to live on the labour of others is a form of cannibalism’, yet whose clients were in the main capitalists and landed gentry: a non-believer who designed at Brockhampton a church effective enough to touch at least one other non-believer: an architect who was part of the Arts and Crafts Movement, but in later life supported a view of the role of the machine in design that was the despair of his earlier colleague Ernest Gimson. These are contradictions, yet not surprising in one who lived in a society so divided.

Lethaby lived long enough to form a view of the Bauhaus, both in its period at Weimar based on a philosophy very similar to his at the Central School (the primacy, for the designer, of craft experience)—and then on a very different tack at Dessau in the later 1920s. But did he? The exhibition did not venture onto this ground; indeed, it stopped short with Lethaby’s time at the Central School; but Gillian Naylor’s thought-provoking essay poses questions about the nature of design which call for serious discussion, central as they are to design today.

Two last recollections of a memorable exhibition. First, Exhibit No.131; which showed Lethaby in 1890 in his most extreme position as a designer: a hexagonal sewing box in walnut, stripped of all style, with only the barest ‘structural’ decoration—a simple herringbone inlay in the lid, and the dovetails showing at the corners. A gawkish piece to look at, yet displaying consummate craftsmanship by Kenton and Co: the lid still shuts gently on a cushion of air. But surely they should have told Lethaby that exposed dovetails however carefully made, were in time bound to stand proud as wood shrinks more across the grain than along it. Perhaps he wanted this: one would love to know.

The other memory is of the captivating collection of photographs and drawings, including the original contract drawings for Melsetter House in the Orkneys, designed for Thomas Middlemore, built in 1898 and ‘discovered’ by John Brandon-Jones during the last war when sent to inspect a country house requisitioned for the Admiral and his staff at Scapa Flow. May Morris described it as ‘a sort of fairy palace set on the
edge of the northern seas'. Without doubt the Society must find a way of making a voyage there soon.

Writing of Ruskin in 1919, Lethaby put forward the idea that a successful prophet is one whose teaching has been absorbed. 'It is the prophet's aim to be thus abolished in absorption: to be lost in diffusion.' Was he hoping that this might happen to him too?