

6 The Guide

Amongst all the intense talk of Art and Beauty in the Guild and the Exhibition Society, no one seems to have had much time to think out what the words meant. William Richard Lethaby (1857–1931) set himself the task of producing definitions for the late nineteenth century.

In the summer of 1879, Norman Shaw went into his assistants flourishing a copy of *Building News* in which some of Lethaby's drawings had appeared, asking "What do you think of this? I am going to write and ask him to come here."¹ Shaw was taking a gamble: up to then Lethaby had spent his whole life in the provinces and had no academic training of any kind.

He was the son of a Barnstaple frame maker and was apprenticed to a local man, Alexander Lauder, painter turned architect, who must have had much influence on Lethaby's early years, for Lauder was an inventor of new technical devices such as ventilators and drainage systems, as well as being a vigorous artist craftsman who, as his grandson recalled, "would decorate many of the houses he built with huge sgraffito murals, terracotta friezes and high-relief ceramic tiles, all carved and modelled with his own hand."² And "he used to insist that all the men working on his own buildings should have an understanding of one another's craft, so that each might feel that he was building a house and not just practising carpentry, bricklaying or plumbing."³

Leaving Lauder, Lethaby worked briefly in Derby and Leicester before entering the Shaw office at twenty-one. It was another world: the big, fashionable metropolitan practice in which older, university educated men like Edward Prior and Mervyn Macartney were at home. The shock must have increased Lethaby's natural diffidence and modesty, but in a very short time he was a leader in the larking which so surprised Robert Weir Schultz when he

joined the firm in the early 1880s after apprenticeship in the dour Glasgow office of Rowand Anderson.⁴ One singularly dull afternoon Shaw and Lethaby held a cricket match in the office with T squares and an india rubber;⁵ it was a very different place from Shaw's own nursery in Street's office.

But it was Lethaby's talent that made him Shaw's chief clerk—and perhaps more: an acquaintance once referred to Lethaby as Shaw's pupil "'No', said Shaw, 'on the contrary it is I who am Lethaby's pupil'."⁶

For all his prolific artistic talent, it was as a teacher that Lethaby made his impact. In *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* published in 1891, two years after he had left Shaw, Lethaby set out to ask "what . . . are the ultimate facts behind all architecture which has [sic] given it form? Mainly three: *First*, the similar needs and desires of men; *secondly* on the side of structure, the necessities imposed by materials, and the physical laws of their erection and combination; and *thirdly* on the side of style, nature. It is of this last that I propose to write."⁷

In *Cosmos* (Lethaby's nickname for the book), he expanded Ruskin's concept of "naturalism" and put it forward as the origin of style in architecture: "if we trace the artistic forms of things, made by man, to their origin, we find a direct imitation of nature."⁸ From a vast magpie's nest of myths drawn from peoples as different as the Byzantines and the Abyssinians, the Chinese and the Incas, Lethaby pulled out what he believed to be the guiding principles of symbolism and form of all previous architecture, for instance the sun as the sign of going out and coming in, "pavements like the sea" and "ceilings like the sky".

But Lethaby was quite clear that man's past perceptions of the macrocosmos should not be a guide to the future of architecture. The high architectures of



41 William Richard Lethaby. Window, Church of St. John the Baptist, Symondsburry, Dorset (early 1880s). An example of Lethaby's early design work



42 *Lethaby. Avon Tyrell, Hampshire (completed 1893), south front*

past ages were the products of tyranny, "each stone cemented in the blood of a human creature . . . such an architecture is not for us, nor for the future.

"What then will this art of the future be? The message will still be of nature and man, of order and beauty, but all will be sweetness, simplicity and freedom, confidence and light; the other is past, and well is it, for its aim was to crush life: the new, the future is to aid life and to train it 'so that beauty may flow into the soul like a breeze'."⁹

This vision is virtually identical with that of *News from Nowhere* (first published in instalments in the *Commonweal* the year before). By the early '90s Lethaby was very much under the influence of Morris and Webb and was drawing away from Shaw, who was by then becoming increasingly formal and classical.

In his earliest years as a practitioner in his own right, Lethaby filled in his time and augmented his income by making drawings and designs for Morris & Co.¹⁰ And his rooms were near to Webb's in Gray's Inn. Lethaby had met Morris and Webb through SPAB and, while still in Shaw's office, had become

converted to their view of society. Shaw distrusted Morris whom he regarded as "just a tradesman, whose only object was to make money, and as for his Socialism, that was just a pose. He thought that instead of producing expensive textiles and wallpapers . . . Morris as a Socialist should devote himself to the manufacture of cheap chests of drawers and wallpapers at 10½d a piece."¹¹ But for Lethaby's socialism, Shaw had a good humoured tolerance; the father of one of his pupils with whom Lethaby had agreed to go on a sketching tour "rushed up to see Shaw in a great state: 'I hear my boy is going sketching with a socialist', to which Shaw replied, 'he's perfectly harmless, I assure you, perfectly harmless'."¹²

Lethaby's architecture must also have seemed harmless to Shaw, for the first building Lethaby completed by himself, Avon Tyrell near Christchurch, Hampshire (the commission was Shaw's setting-up present), is a very Shavian house. Completed in 1893, its main rooms face south and are

43 *Avon Tyrell, west front*



divided from the entrance and servants' quarters by a long internal corridor running from east to west, which is intersected at right angles by a huge hall that cuts across the house from north to south—in essence very similar to some of Shaw's large country house plans of the 1880s. Similarly Shavian are the great mullioned windows and the three Queen Anne bay windows on the south front. These are not unlike the oriel windows in Shaw's own house (p. 40) with leaded lights, timber frames, a curved transom over the centre and bands of moulded plasterwork between the glazed areas (now replaced at Avon Tyrell by tiles). But at the top of the same elevation is a row of four projecting gables, not so very different from those which Lethaby's neighbour Philip Webb was designing for Standen in the same years.

With what seems conscious idiosyncrasy, Lethaby placed the bays, not centrally under the gables, but—almost but not quite—under the valleys between them, emphasizing the difference between the Webbian top hamper and the Shavian base. The back

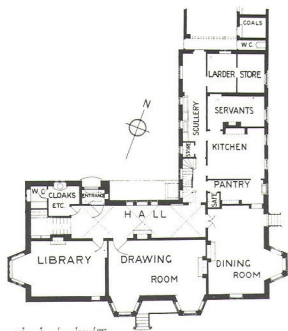
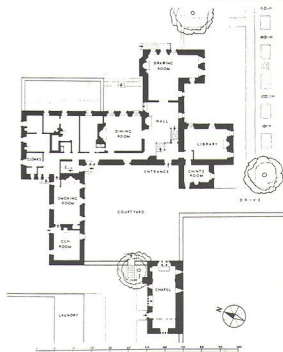
of the house is much less formal, with windows of all sizes and shapes arranged over a series of receding planes closely mirroring the functions within.

Lethaby's next house, the Hurst, at Four Oaks near Birmingham, was much smaller, but it also had many Queen Anne motifs. For instance, on the south front, two large bays with segmentally headed sash windows rose up through the pitch of the roof. But the plan was remarkably different, much more like Webb's Red House—L shaped and one-room-and-a-corridor deep. Lethaby's client, Colonel Wilkinson, was plainly more fond of sun than Morris, for the Hurst's orientation was the reverse of the Red House, with the main rooms facing south and west. Sadly the effect of this orientation on the open space enclosed by the two wings cannot now be seen, for the house has been demolished. It was one of only six major buildings put up by Lethaby.*

* Apart from the ones discussed in this chapter, there were the Eagle Insurance Company offices, Birmingham (chapter 10) and High Coxlease, a house near Lyndhurst, Hampshire.



44 *Lethaby. The Hurst, Four Oaks, Birmingham (1893—now demolished)*


45 *The Hurst, ground floor plan*

47 *Melsetter House, ground floor plan*

46 *Lethaby. Melsetter House, Hoy, Orkneys (completed 1898)*

His next commission was for another Birmingham businessman, Thomas Middlemore, who had retired to Hoy in the Orkneys. Melsetter House was completed in 1898. Its plan is a most sophisticated development of Webb's additive layout. Two thin, interlocking Ls ingeniously incorporate, at half levels, an existing small farmhouse and allow the main spaces—drawing room and library—to obtain both the main views and sunlight from the south and west.¹³ The exterior is as closely modelled on local tradition as even Webb would have wished, with white harled (roughcast) walls, crow-stepped gables and greenish Caithness flags on the steeply pitched roofs. (Orkney shares a tradition of building with the north-east coast of Scotland.) The fenestration, with bold stone surrounds to the small paned sash windows, resembles that of an eighteenth-century Scottish vernacular mansion, but with Ruskinian changefulness in its disposition.

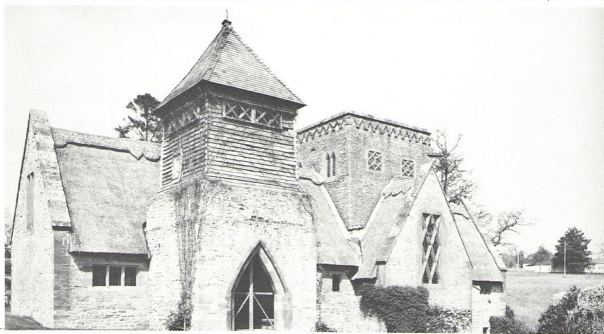
May Morris described Melsetter as, "a sort of fairy palace on the edge of the great northern seas, a wonderful place, this building which was remotely and romantically situated with its tapestries and its silken hangings and its carpets, which came from my father's workshop. It seemed like the embodiment of some of those fairy palaces of which my father wrote with great charm and dignity. But, for all its fineness and dignity, it was a place full of homeliness and the

spirit of welcome, a very lovable place. And surely that is the test of an architect's genius: he built for home life as well as dignity."¹⁴

Lethaby's last work is the tiny church at Brockhampton in Herefordshire, and it is his most curious. Built in 1901 and 1902, it is constructed like no other church on earth. The thick walls are plain, of local red sandstone, and the roof is carried on simple, great pointed stone arches that spring virtually from floor level. But the slope of the roof is made of unreinforced concrete, which outside is covered by thatch in the local tradition. This stone-thatch-and-concrete structure* is topped by a tower over the south door, the upper half of which is clap-boarded and capped by a pyramid covered in shingles.

Spatially, the church is like a minute cathedral, with a big square crossing tower that shoots light diagonally downwards and, in the nave, square-

* The mixture of concrete and thatch, bizarre as it seems at first, was not simply picturesque. As well as giving visual reminders of local buildings, the thatch was an excellent water-proofing material and provided very good thermal insulation. Combined with the high thermal mass of the concrete, the insulative thatch gave the roof properties (for instance slow response to sudden changes of external conditions, absence of condensation) that are still being pursued today: indeed a mixture of thatch and concrete would still be an excellent combination if thatching were not now so expensive. Thermally, the Brockhampton roof was one of the most sophisticated constructions of its day—and more so than many of our own.



48 *Lethaby. Brockhampton Church, Herefordshire (built 1901–1902), from south-west*



49 *Brockhampton Church, interior*

topped windows in deep embrasures which give an ever varied play of horizontal light. Simple though the building is externally, though quietly relieved by much arcane Cosmos-like symbolism, the interior is rich with finely carved choir stalls, Burne-Jones tapestries and Christopher Whall's stained glass.

The church is one of the greatest monuments of the Arts and Crafts movement. Yet it nearly broke Lethaby, who had insisted on being master builder as well as architect. John Brandon-Jones says that "So much responsibility was thrown on Lethaby himself that the strain brought him to the verge of a breakdown and he never repeated the experiment."¹⁵

A parallel career had opened to Lethaby in 1896 when he was appointed first Principal of the LCC's Central School of Arts and Crafts. Lethaby the teacher began to emerge. The school was described by Esther Wood shortly after it opened. Studios were open during the day but "teaching is done entirely in the evenings . . . the students assemble in their various departments; each branch of study being open to men and women equally, with the exception of the life class for men. Some curious varieties of personality and character may be seen in almost every room. Young and middle aged men, strong manual labourers, refined and scholarly-looking craftsmen, quiet, earnest girls and smart little lads scarcely out of their fourth standard, are gathered together round the tables and desks or thinking out their designs plodding steadily on at some set task."¹⁶

This was the realization of Lethaby's ideal of a school for everyone involved in building, which he described in a 1904 essay on architectural education. "The highly artificial separation of the present system is obviously most disastrous to progress in building, and I feel most strongly that up to a stage all who are to be engaged in building in any skilled capacity should meet in schools common to all."¹⁷

But what was progress in building? Where was that future that Lethaby left undefined at the end of *Cosmos*? Gradually Lethaby evolved the answer.

In 1896 he was a disciple of Morris, decreeing that "beauty can only be brought back to common life by our doing common work in an interesting way."¹⁸ This thesis was gradually refined: "All work of man bears the stamp of the spirit with which it was done but this stamp is not necessarily 'ornament'. The unadorned indeed can never stand as low as that which is falsely adorned in borrowed, brazen bedizements. High utility and liberal convenience for the noble life are enough for architecture . . . Consider

any of the great forms of life activity—seamanship, farming, housekeeping—can any-one say where utility ends and style, order, clearness, precision begin?"¹⁹

Utility and need for Lethaby were the key: "there is . . . a brown-bread and dewy-morning ideal of beauty, and a late champagne-supper ideal. Who would say which was the right one were it not for Necessity's 'You must'? We have to love the health ideal, or cease to exist."²⁰ To fulfil this ideal in architecture, "experiment must be brought back once more into the centre of architecture and architects must be trained as engineers are trained. . . . The modern way of building must be flexible and vigorous, even smart and hard. We must give up designing the broken-down picturesque which is part of the ideal of make-believe."²¹ Yet innovative as the new architecture should be, "no art that is only one man deep is worth much; it should be a thousand men deep. We cannot forget our historical knowledge, nor would we if we might. The important question is, can it be organized or must we continue to be betrayed by it? The only agreement that seems possible is agreement on a scientific basis, on an endeavour after perfect structural efficiency. If we could agree on this we need not trouble about beauty for that would take care of itself."²²

The thousand men had come to Lethaby's elbow when he led the cohorts of the Arts and Crafts movement to produce a design for the Liverpool Cathedral Competition (1902). Lethaby, Henry Wilson, Halsley Ricardo, R. W. Troup, Weir Schultz were joined by sculptor Stirling Lee and Christopher Whall, the stained glass artist. The building was to consist of a gigantic nave-and-choir, roofed by a series of concrete vaults folded together in a curved corrugated carapace. The walls were buttressed by a series of chapels surmounted by concrete semi-domes, and the whole composition was dominated by a stupendous, tapering detached campanile. If one ignores this entirely original feature, the effect is curiously middle-eastern, and, as John Brandon-Jones has pointed out, it "must have been based on the Byzantine studies made by Lethaby and Weir Schultz".²³

Lethaby later said of concrete that it "is only a higher power of the Roman system of construction. If we could sweep away our fear that it is an inartistic material, and boldly build a railway station, a museum, or a cathedral, wide and simple, amply lighted, and call in our painters to finish the walls, we might be interested in building again almost at



50 Lethaby et al. *Liverpool Cathedral competition design (1902–3)*, produced by a team of Arts and Crafts workers captained by Lethaby

once."²⁴ But the assessors of the competition, Shaw and Bodley, were not impressed, and the scheme was not even placed.

Liverpool Cathedral was Lethaby's last venture into designing buildings. He not only found himself in emotional difficulties organizing the work on Brockhampton as he believed it ought to be done, but

he believed himself too ignorant to continue. "It is absurd . . . that the writer should have been allowed to study cathedrals from Kirkwall to Rome and from Quimper to Constantinople; it would be far better to have an equivalent knowledge of steel and concrete construction."²⁵

The rest of his life was devoted to teaching at the Central School, then at the Royal College of Art, and to looking after Westminster Abbey, to which he was appointed surveyor in 1906, after which for twenty years Lethaby looked "upon myself here as the family

butler"²⁶ and cared for the fabric according to the strictest SPAB principles.

It was writing rather than building that made him one of the most influential architects of the turn of the century. And it was through his essays that Lethaby, talented, kindly, erudite, persuasive, perceptive and forward looking, yet always prepared to temporize, became one of the betrayers of the gospel of Ruskin and Morris. As he became more and more divorced from the realities of ordinary building, his theories became increasingly opposed to many of the original Arts and Crafts ideals. By 1915, perhaps because of the pressures of the War and the example of Germany's successful industrial use of some of these ideals, Lethaby was preaching that "We must bring our new Chippendales, Flaxmans and Cranes into our industrial commerce."²⁷ The Puginian paradox of the relationship between designer and craftsman was to be resolved firmly in favour of the designer and the machine.

Ideologically, Lethaby had removed one of the two basic objections to machines raised by Ruskin and Morris. For the Ruskinian objection to machine production of grotesque facsimiles of craftsmanship could be countered by Lethaby's argument that ornament was no longer necessary in ordinary building and, where it was necessary, it would be a natural outcome of everyone living the good Arts and Crafts life. Yet Lethaby's "brown-bread and dewy-morning" ideal could scarcely be enjoyed by factory hands, roused in the dark by the mill hooter and required to spend nine or ten hours a day labouring intensely as appendages to machines. This was the reality of most industrial life in the first decades of this century and nowhere did Lethaby come to terms with the objection of Ruskin and Morris that minding a machine reduced the minder to slavery.

Certainly, he had an excuse, for, as the comprehensive historians of technology have written, "scientific industry, even during the second half of the nineteenth century, did much to diminish danger, hardship and squalor".²⁸ But the relationship of man and machine had not fundamentally changed.

To change that relationship, a revolution was necessary—either social (which Lethaby, socialist though he was, would not accept) or technological (which he could not foresee). His acceptance of the early twentieth-century industrial *status quo* was a reversal of his early ideals, in which a young architect would "associate with himself, not thirty draftsmen in a back office (a number which I understand has [in

1892] been exceeded) but a group of associates and assistants on the building itself and in its decoration."²⁹

It is unfair to suggest that Lethaby was the Iscariot of the Arts and Crafts movement, for, being the most articulate of the generation which succeeded Morris, he provided a mirror to the development of the movement, and his later essays were the reflection of a revolution which had lost its impetus.

He had, after all, been one of the leaders of the movement: in setting up the associations, in carrying forward the messages of Ruskin and Morris, in producing innovative buildings, in methods of work and teaching. His leadership was of the best, most natural kind. On Lethaby's death, Alfred Powell recollected, "he was about the jolliest companion anybody could dream of, always full of life. It seemed as though his five wits were multiplied by eight or ten, he had so much sensation, and his senses were all so continuously alive. It was that which made him so sympathetic to everybody; there was no kind of person he could not sympathize with."³⁰ Mackail, (Morris's biographer) recalled that Lethaby lived, "not with his head in the clouds, but with his head in air which had something superterrestrial about it; and when he descended to the ordinary levels of earth he was often like someone who had strayed into darkness."³¹

Lethaby had lived long enough to know that the new architecture of the twenties had no more achieved real functionalism and escaped from iconographic imperatives than had Pugin fully succeeded when he found in purest Gothic the answer to his search for a truly practical architecture. The Modern Movement, he said, was "only another design humbug to pass off with a shrug—ye olde modernist style—we must have a style to copy—what funny stuff this art is."³²

Lethaby's life, for all its turns and twists, was totally devoted to art. On his grave is the epitaph "love and labour are all", yet a truer memorial is perhaps to be found in the hall of the Art Workers' Guild, where Lethaby looks across the ranks of the Arts and Crafts movement to confront William Morris at the other side. Morris's shaggy majesty gazes at a rather sad Pooterish face, walrus mustached and close cropped, with deep-set, kindly thoughtful eyes. It is the confrontation of idealism and disillusion.



51 Lethaby, High Coxlease, Lyndhurst, Hampshire (1900–1901)

1 Weir, Robert W. Schultz "William Richard Lethaby", paper read before the Art Workers' Guild on 22nd April 1932 and published by the Central School of Arts and Crafts in 1938. This architect's name is confusing. Before the First War, he called himself Robert Weir Schultz, which he then changed to Robert Weir Schultz Weir.

2 Thomas, Brian *RIBA Journal*, Vol. LXIV, 1957, p. 218

3 *Ibid.*

4 Weir *op. cit.*

5 Robert Shaw quoted in Saint, A. *Richard Norman Shaw* p. 187

6 Weir *op. cit.*

7 Lethaby, W. R. *Architecture Mysticism and Myth*, republished by The Architectural Press, London 1974, p. 3

8 *Ibid.*, p. 4

9 *Ibid.*, p. 8

10 Brandon-Jones, John *RIBA Journal*, Vol. LXIV, 1957, p. 220

11 Blomfield, Sir Reginald *Richard Norman Shaw*, Batsford, London 1940, p. 12. Blomfield is here paraphrasing notes by Robert Shaw, the son of R.N.S.

12 Weir *op. cit.*

13 The plans were first published by John Brandon-Jones in *AA Journal*, March 1949, p. 168–169. Brandon-Jones, who was stationed in Orkney during the Second War, gives a beautifully evocative description of the house.

14 Morris, May, in *RIBA Journal*, Vol. XXXIX, 1932, p. 303. She was speaking at the memorial symposium in the year after Lethaby's death.

15 Brandon-Jones, John *RIBA Journal*, Vol. LXIV, p. 220

16 Wood, Esther *Architectural Review*, Vol. II, 1897, p. 241

17 Lethaby, W. R. "Architectural Education", in *Architectural Review*, Vol. XVI, 1904, p. 161

18 Lethaby, W. R. "Arts and the Function of Guilds", first published in the *Quest*, Birmingham 1896; reprinted in Lethaby, W. R. *Form in Civilization*, Oxford 1957, p. 162

19 Lethaby W. R. "Architecture as Form in Civilisation" (1920), in *Form and Civilization*, *op. cit.*, p. 7

20 Lethaby, W. R. "What shall we call beautiful?" Originally published in *Hibbert Journal* 1918; reprinted in *Form in Civilization*, *op. cit.*, p. 121

21 Lethaby, W. R. *Architecture*, Williams and Norgate, London 1911. The quotation comes at the end of Lethaby's beautiful succinct little history of architecture for laymen.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 249

23 Brandon-Jones, John *RIBA Journal*, Vol. LXIV, p. 220

24 Lethaby, W. R. *Architecture*, *op. cit.*, p. 249

25 *Ibid.*, p. 247

26 Quoted by Powell, Alfred, in *Times Literary Supplement*, 17th April, 1973

27 Lethaby, W. R. "Design and Industry", an address delivered to the Design and Industries Association in 1915. Reprinted in *Form in Civilization*, *op. cit.*, p. 44

28 Singer, Charles et al *A History of Technology*, Vol. V, Oxford 1970, p. vii

29 Lethaby, W. R. "The Builder's Art and the Craftsman", in *Architecture a Profession or an Art*, ed. Shaw, R. N. and Jackson, T. G., John Murray 1892, p. 168

30 Powell, A. H. *RIBA Journal* Vol. XXXIX, 1932, p. 311

31 Mackail, J. W. *op. cit.*, p. 312

32 Quoted in Macleod, Robert *Style and Society*, RIBA, London 1971, p. 67