

The survival of the works of Charles Rennie Mackintosh by Ian Monie

Mackintosh was for long neglected in Britain, in spite of the efforts of some architectural writers to draw attention to his achievement. Thomas Haworth and the Glasgow School of Art did much to document and preserve his work; following the appearance of Howarth's monograph in 1952, and an exhibition in 1953, interest in Mackintosh began to revive. Further exhibitions and publications, and reproductions of his furniture, contributed to the continuing growth of Mackintosh's reputation, but many of the architect's buildings remained under threat and a Society was formed to campaign for their preservation and to foster interest in his work. Recent years have seen additional publications, with more in prospect, and including the Mackintosh Society's regular Newsletter, together with some television productions.

Mackintosh was so far ahead of his time that his work met with hostility in Scotland, and in England he was only once invited to exhibit. Although his designs were praised in Europe, particularly in Germany and Austria, he received only one foreign commission. Having suffered various setbacks he gave up architecture and design to paint, and after his death his work was largely forgotten in the West of Scotland. A monograph by Howarth and McLaren Young's centenary exhibition rekindled interest in Mackintosh, whose watercolours and furniture now fetch very high prices in salerooms, but Mackintosh's surviving buildings are in danger of neglect and destruction. The Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland and the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society are attempting to preserve his existing work.

The Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society endeavours in a variety of ways to interest its members and increasingly members of the public in his work, believing that an informed and enthusiastic

public is the surest protection against the neglect and destruction of his remaining work.' That H. Jefferson Barnes, Chairman of the Glasgow based Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society, should write these words in 1977 might come as a surprise to the casual observer of recent high saleroom prices of Mackintosh's work, but to the serious student they are further evidence of the long history of scant regard for Mackintosh (1). His career began promisingly in 1890 when, as a student of Glasgow School of Art, Mackintosh won the coveted Alexander (Greek) Thomson travelling scholarship for architectural students in Scotland. This increased his prestige and he accepted an invitation to lecture on Scottish baronial architecture to the Glasgow Architectural Association (2) shortly before his departure for Italy. His Greek Thomson competition drawings and a design for a Science and Art Museum won a South Kensington National Silver Medal in 1891, but provoked a critical article in *The Builder* (3). In 1892 he won the National Gold Medal at South Kensington for drawings of a chapter house, the dome of which was later incorporated with modifications into the extensions to Messrs. Pettigrew & Stephens's Glasgow warehouse.

At the suggestion of Fra Newbery, the enlightened young headmaster of Glasgow School of Art, Mackintosh began to work in conjunction with fellow students Herbert MacNair and the Macdonald sisters. This group became known as 'The Four' and developed the 'Glasgow Style' of design. (In due course MacNair married Frances Macdonald and Mackintosh married her sister Margaret.) 'The Four' exhibited successfully in the School and later at Liege in 1895, but in the following year Mackintosh designed a poster for *The Scottish Musical Review* which was bitterly criticised (4). The developing style of paintings, furniture and craftwork of 'The Four' was arousing interest outside Glasgow, but at the London Arts & Crafts Society Exhibition of 1896 their work created a storm of protest from the public and from critics, excepting Gleeson White, editor of *The Studio*. They were not invited again to exhibit in England, but White visited Glasgow specially to meet them and was impressed by their vitality. His well illustrated article (5) on Mackintosh and the Macdonald sisters established their reputation as being a distinctive school of design completely independent of

the English Arts & Crafts movement, and the wide circulation of the magazine amongst European artists receptive to new ideas brought European fame to Mackintosh in particular. The work of 'The Four' was reviewed in a continental journal (6) as early as 1898.

Talwin Morris, art manager of the publishing firm of Blackie, was attracted by the members of the group and exhibited on occasions with them. It was Morris who advised W.W. Blackie to employ Mackintosh as architect of his new home in Helensburgh, 'Hill House', the most impressive of Mackintosh's domestic commissions. The architect had few influential friends but was fortunate in having two prominent champions in Glasgow. Despite strong criticism and opposition, Fra Newbery insisted that Mackintosh's design was accepted from amongst the entrants in the limited competition for a new School of Art in Renfrew Street. In the same year, 1896, Mackintosh was introduced to Miss Kate Cranston and from a small start he designed and supervised the decoration of the Cranston tearooms, and designed furniture for her home 'Hous'hill'. The tearooms kept him in the public eye because constantly one or other of them was in the process of being redecorated, extended or re-furnished. The most complete project, the Willow Tearoom, of which he was architect and interior designer, went almost unnoticed by the British journals but was lavishly praised in a very lengthy and well illustrated article in Alexander Koch's *Dekorative Kunst* (7).

Mackintosh was as well served in Europe by Alexander Koch as he had been in England by Gleeson White. In 1901 Mackintosh's competition design for Haus eines Kunstfreundes (House of the Art-lover) was judged to be one of the three best entries and was published by Koch in 1902, with a long preface by Hermann Muthesius (8). In Koch's exhibition apartment, designed by Peter Behrens, at the International Exhibition of Decorative Art at Turin, each plate from the publication was framed and displayed, and Mackintosh became recognised on the continent as an architect and not simply as an interior designer. Muthesius, who had studied English domestic architecture when he was attached to the German Embassy in London from 1896 to 1903, wrote a three volume work (9) in 1904 in which Mackintosh was featured prominently.

Although his fame in Germany and Austria was established, Mackintosh's only European commission was for an interior of a music room in Vienna. At home his work was so far ahead of his time that he met with hostility. He had difficulty because of his designs for Scotland Street School in 1904 and even Fra Newbery could not prevent the Governors from obstructing his plans for late alterations during the completion of the second phase of Glasgow School of Art in 1907 to 1909. He resigned in 1913 from the architectural firm in which he had risen from apprentice to partner, but found insufficient work in Glasgow and settled in Chelsea in 1915. He was given no further worthwhile commissions, produced 40 paintings of some interest and died in 1928.

Upon the death of Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh in 1933 the contents of two studios (watercolours, flower paintings, architectural drawings, sketches and furniture) were valued at £88.16s.2d. Everything was disposed of except the drawings and paintings which were held in trust in Glasgow by William Davidson for Sylvan, the only son of Herbert and Frances MacNair. Davidson and Geoffrey Waddell arranged a Memorial Exhibition at the McLellan Galleries in Glasgow, and a few of the paintings and drawings were sold, the rest being given away or stored in Davidson's warehouse. The exhibition was given good press reports and led to a handful of articles being published that year, notably one written by E.A. Taylor (19). Mackintosh then became of complete indifference to most Glaswegians and his Buchanan Street and Argyle Street tea-rooms were destroyed with hardly a whimper of protest. Miss Cranston's residence 'Hous'hill' was damaged by fire, was bought by Glasgow Corporation and demolished to clear the site for a municipal housing scheme. The fixtures were not saved. Nikolaus Pevsner gave due emphasis to the historical importance of Mackintosh in 1936 (11) but without changing public opinion, for two years later George Scott-Moncrieff wrote 'It is 40 years since the Glasgow School of Art was built. Mackintosh has been neglected and we have an unceasing stream of shoddy, denationalised and uninspired building...The pathetic paralysis of our (building) industry that makes it cheaper to import unsuitable materials than to work our own quarries is only a contributory cause: the main blame

lies with the indifference of the Scottish people' (12).

In 1939 Thomas Howarth was appointed to the School of Architecture in Glasgow School of Art and soon discovered William Davidson's cache of Mackintoshiana, which he began to catalogue. Davidson died in 1945 and his family sold to Glasgow University the former home of the Mackintoshes at 78 Southpark Avenue, in which the original decorations and furniture had been preserved. Howarth completed his catalogue in 1946 and in 1947 witnessed the opening of a collection of Mackintosh furniture at Glasgow School of Art which had been established mainly because of his enthusiasm. He was by then teaching in Manchester University, but continued his researches, wrote several articles on Mackintosh and in 1952, two years after Pevsner's book (13) on Mackintosh appeared in Milan, saw his standard work of reference on Mackintosh published (14).

There were now two important and influential monographs on the architect fifty years after the publication of his drawings for the House of the Art-lover. The Southpark Avenue interiors had been saved, Sylvan MacNair had relinquished his claim to the drawings which were safely housed in Glasgow University. Glasgow School of Art was collecting and preserving Mackintosh items and Glasgow Corporation, according to Howarth 'in response to many appeals in the press and elsewhere', had bought Ingram Street tearooms, complete with furniture. Howarth closed his first edition with the claim 'that the prophet at last has found honour in his own country. It is hoped now that the collections of furniture and drawings described here will be maintained and augmented, and that Mackintosh's architectural work in Glasgow and its environs will be saved from further mutilation.'

Howarth collaborated with Robert Hurd in designing a Mackintosh exhibition for the 1953 Edinburgh Festival at the invitation of the Saltire Society and the Arts Council, and part of the exhibition was shown in London and the provinces. The actor Multrie Kelsall broadcast a programme on Mackintosh in September 1953 from the Festival entitled *Prophet and loss: an estimate of his influence on modern architecture* and from that time Mackintosh has been given significant audio-visual coverage. The great Art Exhibition

of 1960 organised by the Council of Europe in Paris devoted to *Sources of the XXth Century* exhibited the work of Mackintosh and the Macdonald sisters, and the Mackintosh section of the exhibition was displayed in 1961 in Glasgow School of Art before the items were returned to their respective homes. The *Arts in Scotland* team were inspired by these events to broadcast a radio piece, *Who was Charles Rennie Mackintosh?* on Friday Call in November 1960, and a BBC 1 television discussion on Mackintosh between Henry Hellier and A.C. Davis in March 1961. In the same year Glasgow School of Art published an illustrated booklet (15) on Mackintosh and the School. There were no important publications for several years, although in 1966 Educational Films of Scotland produced an 18 minute colour film, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh* and in May 1967 Dr. Patrick Nuttgens presented a programme on Mackintosh in the BBC 2 *Structure* series of the half-dozen great achievements in British architecture.

The highlight of an eventful 1968 was the superb exhibition staged at the Edinburgh Festival by Andrew McLaren Young, Professor of Fine Art, Glasgow University, and accompanied by his excellent catalogue (16), and at the same venue *Mackintosh*, Murray Grigor's prize winning film, was shown daily. The exhibition travelled to the Victoria & Albert Museum, to Darmstadt and to Vienna, and the film was shown around the world. Earlier that year McLaren Young scripted, introduced and linked a programme broadcast on Radio Four as 'a centenary tribute to Scotland's most original architect from friends and critics'. He also selected the Mackintosh sketches published by the Glasgow Institute of Architects to mark their own centenary year (17). Robert McLeod's useful book (18) on the architect and the Glasgow School of Art booklets on the School furniture and metalwork (19,20) appeared in that same year.

Saleroom prices were not noticeably affected by the centenary publicity. A Mackintosh watercolour was sold in a Glasgow saleroom in 1968 for 330 guineas, and in 1970 four chairs designed for the Willow Tearoom fetched £420 for the first pair and £400 for the second at Sotheby's. Three years later, however, Sotheby's sold a pair of chairs designed for Hous'hill for the reported world

record price of £4,200. In 1975 Sotheby's estimated that an exceptionally fine armchair designed for the music room at Hous'hill might sell for £3,000, and Glasgow University raised £5,000 to buy the chair as a memorial to Andrew McLaren Young, who had died earlier that year. The purchasers were Sydney and Frances Lewis from Richmond, Virginia, for the world auction record figure for a 20th century chair of £9,200. In 1977 a watercolour was sold in Glasgow for £1,600. In much the same way there was a growing awareness of the commercial possibilities of reproductions or Mackintosh inspired designs. J. Garth Reynolds manufactured a wooden table, bench seat and two dining chairs in a Mackintosh style in 1973. A group of chairs faithfully reproduced (with the American market in mind) under the direction of Professor Filippo Alison, University of Naples, and author of a useful book on Mackintosh's chairs (21) which served as a catalogue, was exhibited in 1974 in the New York Museum of Modern Art. In 1975 Randak Design, Glasgow, began selling a series of litho prints copied from Mackintosh's original drawings, and later that year A.H. McIntosh & Co. Ltd. displayed their Mackintosh inspired furniture at a symposium in Kirkcaldy. At that symposium the Kirkcaldy firm sponsored firstly the opening performance of *Mackintosh the man*, a dramatised lecture/reading written and presented by John Cairney (based on the letters of Mackintosh to his wife and on a lecture given by him to the Glasgow Art Club), and secondly a 20 minute sound/slide multi-screen presentation on Mackintosh's *Growth and form* devised and produced by Murray Grigor and Graham Metcalf.

Efforts, however, to preserve Mackintosh interiors and buildings met with less enthusiasm and a scarcity of ready cash. In January 1972 Howarth, while researching in Glasgow for a second edition of his monograph, called a press conference to express concern that eight buildings designed by Mackintosh might be threatened, some as a result of traffic improvement plans. His appeal prompted an unsympathetic leader article in the *Glasgow Herald*. In June of that year the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland launched a last ditch appeal to raise sufficient funds to buy Hill House from Mr. T. Campbell Lawson, who had purchased it from the Blackie family, and who had cared for it and its furniture for twenty years.

He had attempted in 1970 to sell the house and furnishings for £25,000 to any organisation prepared to guarantee its preservation, even though a much larger sum would have been realised on the open market. This generous offer had been discussed for almost a year by the National Trust and the Scottish Civic Trust without success. 1973 was significant for much more than the sale price of the Hous'hill chairs. The situation was grave with only one major building, the Glasgow School of Art, seeming to have guaranteed future use and maintenance, and the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society was established to foster interest in his work. Similar bodies had been formed previously and quickly perished, but the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society, sheltered for a time by the New Glasgow Society, was well served by an active committee organising regular meetings and publishing a quarterly *Newsletter* (22). But the major achievement of the year was by the architects of Scotland who raised sufficient funds to buy Hill House and opened it to the public that summer. It is now the only surviving Mackintosh designed house still containing his original furniture and fittings and RIAS hopes to preserve it believing that this building and the Glasgow School of Art have had more influence on the history of world architecture than any other Scottish buildings.

Since then the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society has campaigned steadily and some progress has been made. The destructive motorways have been slightly rerouted to avoid Queen's Cross Church, Scotland Street School and Marty's Public School. Glasgow Art Gallery under new direction opened a permanent Mackintosh exhibition in 1976. The Society negotiated a lease of Queen's Cross Church in 1977 in order to restore and maintain it and is now using it as its headquarters. Although 78 Southpark Avenue has been demolished, Glasgow University is making an exact reconstruction of the interior in the new Mackintosh Museum, which should be open to the public later this year.

Television has been giving good coverage to the cause. Dr. Nuttgens presented a BBC 2 programme on Glasgow School of Art in the *Spirit of the Age* series in 1975, and the film on Hill House in the O.U. course *Modern architecture and design 1890 - 1939* first presented in 1975 is still part of the course. Scottish Tele-

vision have recorded a programme, which will be screened next year, based on John Cairney's lecture/reading and on the audio-visual presentation sponsored by A.H. McIntosh, and BBC Scotland are about to begin filming for a 30 minute programme which has been provisionally titled *The Mackintosh revival*.

The two significant publications of 1977 have been the long awaited but disappointing second edition of Howarth (23) and Roger Billcliffe's work (24) which reproduced more architectural sketches than appeared in the now out of print centenary edition by the Glasgow Institute of Architects as well as colour plates of some of the watercolours. Billcliffe, formerly Assistant Keeper of Glasgow University Art Collections and now Keeper of Fine Art in Glasgow Art Gallery, is currently preparing a catalogue raisonne of all of Mackintosh's furniture for publication in 1978, and a book on Mackintosh's watercolours. Glasgow School of Art may republish the 1968 booklets on furniture and metalwork and the Scottish Arts Council might respond to steady persuasion to reprint the centenary catalogue.

The growing appreciation of the achievement of Mackintosh is in itself insufficient to ensure the preservation of his remaining buildings, and recent bad news is that the RIAS bank loan to maintain Hill House has grown to £33,000; although a local fund-raising committee has been formed in Helensburgh, parts of the property are having to be sold. Art librarians wishing to keep abreast of current developments are recommended to do so through the *Newsletter* of the Charles Rennie Mackintosh Society.

Ian C. Monie

Senior Librarian, Glasgow School of Art

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