

Muddle on Mackintosh

**John McKean looks below the shiny surface of the latest handsome tome on
C R Mackintosh to find confusion and shake scholarly integrity**

16.07.2010

An astonishing number of books have the title 'Charles Rennie Mackintosh'. A glance at Amazon quickly shows readers' understandable confusions between them. Can publishers really not accept more creative titles to distinguish very different volumes? As James Macaulay's handsome and beautifully produced addition (*Charles Rennie Mackintosh, WW Norton, 275 pages, hardback, £42*) now tops the pile, the potential reader deserves some help in relating the meat to what it says on the tin.

A first clue is offered by his 246 illustrations. Nearly a third show Mackintosh architecture. A quarter are in his hand - mostly in architectural drawings; but just 20 others cover all his huge range of flower drawings, graphic and decorative work and his paintings. Just under half of the book's images, however, show the work of others. Many of these illustrate the Glasgow of Mackintosh's youth, some show the Glasgow going up around him, while others illustrate non-architectural the work of those close to him during his years in Glasgow.

But one soon senses a 'little Glaswegian' mentality developing. Mackintosh, we are told "would have been shocked" on seeing Raimondo D'Aronco fine building for the Turin 1902 exhibition. But, as it was not in Glasgow, we are not shown it nor is the architect even named. Nor are we shown anything by James MacLaren, surely an important influence on Mackintosh; not being Glaswegian this architect is never even mentioned. There is, remarkably, no illustration of any Viennese work, of Olbricht, Moser or Hoffman, though at least we read of their mutual influence with Mackintosh. In fact, apart from one Suffolk landscape, we are not shown any context for CRM in the last 22 years of his life. There is not a glimpse, for example, of the work of Mackintosh's good friend J D Fergusson, despite earlier pages being filled with older paintings by the 'Glasgow Boys'.

This view of the illustrations, unfortunately, offers a fair clue to the shape of Macaulay's take on Mackintosh and its lacunae.

Mackintosh's work in fact begins in the 1890s and ends with his death at only 60 in 1928. In this book of 275 pages, before page 52 the ostensible subject is barely mentioned, and until page 90 Mackintosh has only a minor walk-on role. Much archival and antiquarian burrowings fill out the book's heart (a fair amount of it peripheral to Mackintosh himself, even if producing interesting titbits). Less than 30 pages from the end Macaulay still has not reached the last 22 years of his subject's life. Here the penultimate chapter begins: "In 1906, Charles and Margaret Mackintosh removed from their tenement flat ... to the leafy suburb of Hillhead." But even now, before reaching this famous house, the reader has long columns of preamble about haute bourgeois late Victorian west Glasgow. At last we hear: "The home of Mr and Mrs Mackintosh was like many another, described by one local resident as '...' and a four-paragraph descriptive quotation, clear and simple, follows. (As there are almost no contemporary descriptions of the Mackintosh house, this should be a real find by Macaulay. But we will come back to this.)

Thereafter the last decades of CRM's life are rushed into a few pages. Of his London years a different, gossipy voice joins in; of his life in France there is next to nothing. Suddenly endnotes change from obsessive pedantry to "the fullest account ... is in Billcliffe..." or "For accounts of the Mackintoshs' time in France see..." And there he just stops.

Such is the shape of the text. It meanders around Mackintosh from the ages of 24 to nearly 40 in only a vaguely chronological form. Dates are never signposted, building dates never appear on captions. Typically, while reading Chapter 8, I was writing dates in the margin to keep track as the tale wandered between quotations from others and projects by Mackintosh - from 1900 to 1894 and 1890, to 1899 then 1892 and 1890, thence to 'post 1905', briefly 1911 and then 1898, 1901, 1897, 1902 and so on. The order makes no obvious point, there are no dates in the text, and it will wildly confuse an innocent reader.

Foggy chronology too often intertwines with muddled grammar - here is but one example: "The Willow Tea Room is Mackintosh's first complete symbolic creation before which the Vienna and Turin exhibits had been compromises, the House for an Art Lover a paper exercise, and the later library of the Art School a somber [*it has US spelling throughout*] crescendo, whereas the Room de Luxe [...] is effervescent with a life force." This sentence, its meaning as much as its anachronicity almost impossible to translate, also typifies the prose style of a decidedly odd book which almost seems intended to confuse.

One must presume the author knows his trees so well he might forget the reader needs guidance through the wood. Occasionally we are told things a second time as if for the first. More frequently characters suddenly appear without introduction as if we knew them already. On page 147, from an aside about "his status as a partner", we learn of Mackintosh's partnership in the practice of Honeyman & Keppie. But we have not yet even met the Glasgow School of Art, the Mackintosh job in the office which was the engine of that offered partnership.

I take one other example only: we learn that the senior partner, John Keppie, has a "sister Jessie [...] One can only speculate about her influence on Mackintosh as a flower painter." (page 63) No more is said. Typically, Macaulay does not speculate. But we have not even been told if Mackintosh and this Jessie Keppie ever knew of each other. Then, "Keppie and his sister" would visit a painter together at New Year (page 78). We are not told when this was or why this is of interest. But next, suddenly, the news that "Mackintosh had jilted Keppie's sister, Jessie" blurts out of the blue, as an aside (page 105). Six pages later, confusion is compounded when we twice meet a "Helen Keppie". Her art school career is discussed without explanation, and she vanishes, never to appear again. Then on the next page Jessie's student career is discussed, but the only link a reader can make to Mackintosh is by inference from a group photograph, shown opposite, in which both appear. Next, apropos of nothing but to confuse us, we learn of "Keppie's three sisters" (page 115) and 20 pages later "Elizabeth and Jane Keppie are mentioned." We have no idea who these are, why they appear, or what if any is their relevance to the Mackintosh story. They, like Helen, will never reappear - and we never learn which are Keppie's three sisters. We do learn that his last pair, though, were medical students, and that "it would have been of interest to one of the firm's partners that the first intake of students in 1884 had included [them]." Is he talking about Mackintosh (who became a partner much later)? Whether or not, what does the author mean by this odd little nudge and wink?

Macaulay has had fun in dusty archives, and sometimes, it seems, to effect - as he unearthed that unique description of the Mackintosh house mentioned earlier. But the paragraphs presented as being of "the home of Mr and Mrs Mackintosh" turn out to be nothing of the sort. They are just reminiscences of a Glaswegian which have absolutely no relation to Mackintosh at all. This highlights issues of scholarly behaviour which keep recurring throughout this large, heavy volume purporting to become a standard work. There is, repeatedly, an extraordinarily cavalier use of quotations as if to describe Mackintosh's work; and only a close reading of the footnotes avoids the

erroneous inferences which any innocent reader might be expected to make. Reaching the Glasgow School of Art library, Macaulay opens with "Walter Crane sums up Mackintosh's achievement: '..." which prefaces a long quotation (page 174). Was Crane an extraordinary psychic? For his text predates the building by a decade. For one other example, "in Hill House the drawing room, as Baillie Scott put it, was 'for tea and music [...].'" If that was true at the Hill House then why not at Ingram Street?" (page 251). But Baillie Scott is here quoted from *The Studio* in 1900, some years before Mackintosh's house was even commissioned. Then, on the same page, a design detail by Baillie Scott is itself described using words quoted from a 1970s text, once more without any clue being given in Macaulay's narrative. He offers a quotation from Eastlake as appropriate to Mackintosh furniture, his footnote only referencing "1986". He doesn't tell us that these Eastlake thoughts were published the year Mackintosh was born.

For the Hill House, Macaulay's text is largely a string of oddly assorted quotation which pre-date Mackintosh's building. Yet it is odd that we hear nothing at all about the actual building's space or the experience of its occupation. Well almost nothing; for he does say "Save for glimpses of a distant yacht no concession is made to location or topography." What an extraordinary statement! The topographic planning has a Japanese precision, as the breath-taking view is revealed when the grey, north-lit hall door to the drawing room is opened and the glazed window-room directly opposite sparkles with the distant view to the south. Having recently spent a winter week living on the top floor, with its most wonderful bay-window seat controlling views across the room to the western mountains, north to the adjoining wood, Helensburgh to the east and the ever-changing light on the Firth of Clyde way below to the south, I simply gasp; and wonder what concession Macaulay wants.

Dresser, Crane, Baillie Scott, and especially Ruskin and Lethaby are extensively quoted, often as if to show that Mackintosh was just constructing their ideas. But simply having found parallels between their writings and his works does not of itself offer insight. While also raised here is a parallel issue of scholarly integrity. The nine columns of bibliography range quite absurdly wide, yet they don't even mention Robert McLeod's book (1968), the crucial, first revisionist history which linked Mackintosh to sources such as these. That Macaulay also doesn't mention David Brett's volume on Mackintosh (1992), one of the quite small handful of original and insightful Mackintosh studies, reveals much about where this book locates itself.

Three fifths of my way through the text, I thought to reiterate the comment of Robert Burns on Professor Hugh Blair, that it is "merely an astonishing proof of what industry and application can do." But, suddenly, Macaulay's language then takes off. Though he never deigns to describe the architectural works in clear prose, now occasional flights of poesy know no restraint: In the art school: "Ahead is the staircase, washed by a cascade of light, its balusters crowding the perimeters with others in the center crowded like thickets of sedge pushing through still waters, imagery redolent of *The Pond* by Frances Macdonald." And then entering a studio: "To pass between the dark, rose empaneled doors was to enter a grove of apple green wood and of grey heaped stones bleached by the sky and be confronted by ferrous skeins of thistledown, their stalks bent by the north winds against then pleached glass of the great windows."

Brave attempts these, perhaps, but generally the writing lacks any strong clarity, is self-consciously musty and too often grammatically confused. Misplaced pronouns abound throughout. (Endless sentences start with a "he" or "they" which does not refer to the previous subject.) But perhaps what drives a patient reader closest to screaming are the interminable questions, almost never used to develop an insight or even to attempt an answer at all. After one string of unanswered questions (a bunch on page 68, five in a row on page 76, on the following pages until a group on

pages 82 to 83) ended with "Or was it James Herbert McNair?" - I wrote in my copy WHAT DO YOU THINK, Mr Macaulay?

It is a most peculiar conceit for an author to hide in this way behind unanswered questions. Some long sentences end miles from where they began, and occasional questions even forget they started out as such and omit the interrogation mark. An 8-line sentence at the end of page 140 got so completely diverted it never seemed to reach a subject or verb. Such tangles sadly undermine the reciprocal commitment every author needs from the reader. And, frustratingly, many of Macaulay's questions are good ones.

Minor points are fastidiously referenced at times; yet when we first hear of Mackintosh's 19th Century "travelling to and contacts in London" (page 229) there is no footnote, and that reference would be fascinating. The old tale of the Mackintoshes being pulled through the Viennese streets in a carriage by students is also repeated (page 191) without any reference (I was ticked off for quoting this myth unauthenticated in my own book a decade ago). In the next sentence Mrs Mackintosh's attracting Viennese admiration for her hair and dress is referenced to a work not in the bibliography (in fact many other endnotes are cryptic and thus untraceable).

Strange sentences jump out: "Glasgow became a byword for the development of retailing" stands opposite "Although the *palme d'or* goes to Mackintosh the pace of change of office building may have been set by Salmon's elevations." But Mackintosh didn't design retail or office spaces. Certainly Macaulay much earlier had led innocent readers to believe that Mackintosh's Herald printing and distribution annexe was an office building - even though his plan shows the road for delivery vehicles through the ground floor, clearly named - as are the warehousing, distribution and sales points - though the words are in German on the drawing.

And there are occasional strange views: The Daily Record is "curiously overlooked" by previous authors and "if the facades had been studied and assessed [it] would put the building in the first rank of modernism and ahead of the later library wing of the Glasgow School of Art." Let's get its previous omission out of the way: that is nonsense. Most straight commentators - like James Steele (1994) - give it due space, while Alan Crawford's standard text (1995) has a page of text and three illustrations - the appropriate space within his 'World of Art' format and proportionally more than Macaulay gives. But why this curiously passive linguistic construction? What is he actually meaning by "ahead of"? What, in fact, does Macaulay think?

For a balanced an overview of Mackintosh - as the title surely advertises - much of the later life and work is marginalised while a very wide early context is rehearsed at vast length. Macaulay enthuses greatly over Mackintosh's 'prentice interior for the Glasgow Art Club - a location which clearly is a key focus in the author's own life. He has virtually nothing to say about Mackintosh's last interior (in Northampton) beyond a tired "jazz age" phrase, and no images at all of it in the wonderful full colour to which John McAslan & Partners have recently returned it. Of the work in-between (and the Mackintosh of this book is really only about architecture and interiors), he is fair, if rarely clear.

Strongly negative adjectives stand out bizarrely. Hill House "falters in the certainties of scale," Windyhill has "many gaucheries", But such comments are neither explained nor argued for. Mackintosh's one church is called "careful of colour, texture, surface, and enthusiastic in decorative detail," adding that while this "just about sums up the achievement... in larger respects Mackintosh fails." But look again at this brief critique. The first half - the positive adjectives - is not Macaulay's own words at all, but a quotation from a 1920s book on English architecture and nothing at all to do with Mackintosh. Once again Macaulay hides passively behind others rather

than telling us what he thinks. Yet the second half, the blank condemnation: "Mackintosh fails", is indeed his. I cannot believe Macaulay has really looked at this remarkable, dynamic, subtly asymmetrical space at all.

Perhaps the book's most intriguing thought is that "a side of [Mackintosh's] character that has not been sufficiently commented upon was his theatricality". It's a typically Macaulay roundabout form of words: if only he were braver in commenting on it! Just as I long for him to try to answer some of his interminable, and often fascinating, questions. That *would* give us a book worth reading.

After one tedious list of snippet quotations from very standard late 19th Century writing on house planning, he says "The matrices listed above may be no more than a hen's farmyard peckings." Here is one of the more memorable images in the book, a few images like this which just hint at a civilized raconteur in his Art Club leather chair gaining an audience for his lively, dry tone.

Is his book, however, to be recommended for a general reader or student? In a word, too confusing. Has it scholarly rigour? No. Does it give us what it says on the tin? Not at all - this is a book located in the culture of late Victorian Glasgow architecture and art and centred round Mackintosh and those he knew there at that time. Mackintosh escaped from it, if tragically. Macaulay has not done.

The opening two sentences are: "Given the quantity of published material relating to Charles Rennie Mackintosh and his circle one may fairly ask about the need for yet another text. Yet for this author the urge to do just that was perhaps preordained." Typically, the language limps; its grammar is - as ever - strange. It seems to be saying: Macaulay feels that his urge to ask about the need for yet another Mackintosh text was preordained. It is not clear if he interpreted accurately the response from on high to his question.

Works referred to in this essay:

Alan Crawford, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh*, Thames & Hudson 1995

David Brett, *C. R. Mackintosh, Poetics of Workmanship*, Reaktion, 1992

John McKean, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh: Architect, Artist, Icon*, Lomond, (2nd ed) 2001

Robert McLeod, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Architect and Artist*, Collins, (revised ed) 1983

James Steele, *Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Synthesis in Form*, Wiley, 1994

Review written for Building Design. Charles Rennie Mackintosh, by James Macaulay, is published by WW Norton, 275 pages, hardback, £42. 2010

The editor of Building Design decided to publish the first draft of this text in full in BDOonline (rather than edit it to fit the paper) <http://www.bdonline.co.uk/culture/charles-rennie-mackintosh-by-james-macaulay/5002927.article>
