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Charles Rennie Mackintosh
James Macaulay
with colour photographs by Mark Fiennes
W.W. Norton & Co., New York and London
304pp, 246 illustrations
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Pevsner described Charles Rennie Mackintosh as ‘one of the most imaginative and brilliant of all young European architects’ but he also categorised him as a modernist, a practitioner of the new ‘International Style’ in architecture. James Macaulay’s recent book on Mackintosh is in many ways a response to Pevsner, in that it re-examines the architect’s major building projects in terms of stylistic influence. The book is the result of the author’s collaboration with the architectural and landscape photographer, now the late Mark Fiennes, whose exceptional images can almost be enjoyed for their own sake. Nevertheless, the book does much more than merely illustrate Mackintosh’s visionary designs.

Both text and an impressive selection of comparative images place Scotland’s leading architect in the wider cultural and socio-historical context of Glasgow, and indeed Europe, at the turn of the century. Glasgow at this date was second city of the empire, having expanded on the back of industries such as tobacco, textiles, chemicals and shipbuilding. New buildings were commissioned for the city and Glasgow’s rich merchants and industrialists demanded architect-designed homes. Mackintosh was fortunate to be born at a time of prosperity, but also at a time when British designers were looking towards the continent where his new ‘modern’ vision would be well received.

Macaulay’s lively text draws on a wide range of sources, from Mackintosh’s own writings to contemporary architectural and design journals, and recreates the atmosphere of nineteenth-century Glasgow through quotations from periodicals such as the *Bailie and Quiz*. The author’s interest in detail is evident throughout, not only in his highly technical architectural descriptions, but also in more personal observations and anecdotes. We learn, for example, that the architect James Sellars died of blood poisoning after standing on a nail at the Glasgow International Exhibition of 1888, and that Glasgow School of Art Club was recommended for keeping male art students ‘out of public-houses and music-halls, and away from football matches’. More seriously, we learn that in 1893-4 women prizewinners at Glasgow School of Art outnumbered the men by two to one.

In the first part of the book Mackintosh is almost invisible, waiting in the wings behind architectural giants such as Alexander ‘Greek’ Thomson; behind his employers, Honeyman & Keppie; and even behind his more confident and arguably more inventive contemporary, Herbert McNair. Macaulay goes on to discuss Mackintosh in the context of ‘The Four’ and an emerging symbolist aesthetic, but he challenges Timothy Neat’s theory that Mackintosh saw himself as a symbolist artist, suggesting that at least some of his earlier watercolours were intended as ‘leg-pulls’ rather than serious statements. This may explain the absence of any analytical discussion of works such as *Part Seen*,

Imagined Part, Harvest Moon or his mixed-media panel *The Wassail*. None of these works merits illustration and Macaulay is less comfortable when discussing Mackintosh in the context of contemporary artists such as Aubrey Beardsley - whose *The Climax* is inexplicably confused with *Madame Réjane*.

Nevertheless, although he rejects the idea of Mackintosh as a symbolist painter, Macaulay positively endorses Lethaby's symbolist interpretation of the library and museum at Glasgow School of Art in terms of Egyptian art and Celtic tree imagery, and applies the same 'symbolist' interpretation to the imagery in the Buchanan street tea rooms. Indeed, he is clearly at home when discussing the architectural context for Mackintosh's development, especially his participation in early designs for Honeyman & Keppie. He also suggests some interesting sources for the later building projects, demonstrating convincingly that the Scotland Street School, for example, combines elements drawn from an early sketch of Falkland Palace and from an 1897 design for Paisley Technical School – and that Mackintosh's design for Glasgow School of Art was influenced by trips to Maybole Castle in Ayrshire and Montacute House in Somerset as early as 1895.

The later chapters focus on Mackintosh's major design projects, including Glasgow School of Art, Miss Cranston's Tearooms, the Blackies' Helensburgh home, Hill House, and projects leading up to and including the Vienna Secession of 1901 and the Turin International of 1902. Since stylistic influence is Macaulay's main concern, he discusses the designs for Hill House, for example, in the context of Honeyman & Keppie's earlier commissions for domestic architecture. As a result there is a general tendency throughout the book for the narrative to dot backwards and forwards in time.

In the final chapter Macaulay lingers only briefly on Mackintosh's later watercolours in which he sees 'the architect's training – not the artist's emotive response to the waywardness of nature'. He presents an image of Mackintosh as the 'rational' architect-designer, rather than an 'emotional' painter. Nevertheless he ultimately resists Pevsner's modernist definition, categorising Mackintosh as a Symbolist, albeit one who 'does not sit comfortably among his Arts and Crafts peers'.

Frances Fowle