

Stuart Evans and Jean Liddiard, *Arts and Crafts Pioneers: The Hobby Horse Men and their Century Guild* (London: Lund Humphries, 2021), 224 pp. incl. 55 colour and 95 b&w ills, ISBN 9781848224513, £35  
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Reviewed by ANDREW SAINT

The first illustration in this elegant book is appropriately enigmatic. It shows the youthful A. H. Mackmurdo, cup of tea in hand, standing outside the garden door of Halcyon House, Enfield — ‘my first house’, as he later wrote on a contract drawing. Seated at a table in front are his scowling widowed mother, and Mackmurdo’s assistant Herbert Horne, looking not a day older than fifteen. The two young men do not appear at ease, while what one can see of the house differs markedly from the drawings. The date given is around 1882, the year in which Horne joined Mackmurdo, but must surely be earlier.

Though always something of a misfit, Mackmurdo (1851–1942) was not without connections. His father, a chemical engineer, left money enough for the family to buy property in Enfield where they built several houses. His mother was aunt to the impresario Richard D’Oyly Carte, so there was music in the family. Mackmurdo was articulated to the architect Thomas Chatefield Clarke, then worked for James Brooks before going to Italy for a spell in the mid-1870s, allegedly ‘with Ruskin’, whatever that means. Peyton Skipwith in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* discerns in Mackmurdo ‘a strong vein of the mountebank [...] many of his claims seem to have little basis in fact’. Stuart Evans and Jean Liddiard are kinder.

Undeniably he was an original. John Ruskin and William Morris were soon overlaid in his early thinking by Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. Late in life, when he had withdrawn into isolation and economic theory, Mackmurdo wrote about his own development: ‘he then, as a Craftsman, saw that the conception of life which his early Masters had formulated, was too incomplete to satisfy the Great Craftsman of the universe, who had so perfectly fashioned that organism we call the Human Body’. Work that out if you can.

In truth, Mackmurdo was never a craftsman, nor indeed a first-rank architect. But he has justly attained fame as a designer of blazing originality and as the initiator of the Century Guild of Artists, founded in 1883 and the earliest of the Arts and Crafts groupings of designers and makers. Furthermore, as this book lucidly sets out, the Guild went well beyond the usual Arts and Crafts ragbag of furniture, stained glass, metalwork and so forth to take in the world of magazines, prints and poetry. These became central to its undertakings, mainly through the vehicle of its esoteric *Hobby Horse* magazine.

Much of the early craftwork was designed by Mackmurdo. The furniture, often first shown at exhibitions, is architect’s furniture, striking but not very well made or practical. Sometimes it shows Georgian influence (tapered legs, and so on), but there are completely novel features such as the square thin pillars with flat caps that were cribbed by C. F. A. Voysey and Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Proto-art-nouveau patterns also creep in, of the kind that excited Nikolaus Pevsner and appear also on the cover

of Mackmurdo's unreadable little *Wren's City Churches* (1883). There were also some pretty wallpapers and designs for sconces and fireplaces.

Associated with Mackmurdo in creating the Century Guild were Herbert Horne and Selwyn Image, while the engraver Arthur Burgess and the carver Benjamin Creswick, a talented Ruskin protégé, helped out practically. Horne and Image dominate the later chapters of *Arts and Crafts Pioneers* — the former the nervous driving force, the latter a genial figure who designed pleasant but derivative stained glass. Lacking the social aspirations of Mackmurdo or the Art Workers Guild, let alone Morris and his disciples, they were aesthetes of a nineties flavour with literary tastes (Horne wrote second-rate poetry).

So when, in 1889, the Guild moved from Mackmurdo's office off the Strand to a house in Fitzroy Street which they christened *Whiteladies*, its tone turned more literary. W. B. Yeats would drop in, Oscar Wilde occasionally also, the Rhymers' Club sometimes met there and Lionel Johnson slept off his hangovers in one of the rooms. Ernest Dowson's great poem 'Non Sum Qualis Eram Bonae Sub Regno Cynarae' was first published in the *Hobby Horse* of April 1891. It was a cut above the other verse in the magazine.

A great strength of this book is the care and attention lavished by Evans and Liddiard on the *Hobby Horse*, which was the pioneer art magazine of the 1890s, influencing the *Yellow Book*, as well as other titles and eventually the *Burlington Magazine*. It is Horne's best claim to fame. The page layouts, typography and paper tone and quality (with deckled edges) are all beautifully reproduced, making the journal something of an artwork in itself. It went through various incarnations, all carefully explained. Its print run was always small, so that almost from the start it was a collector's item.

What about architecture? Mackmurdo kept up a smallish practice which the authors think supported the Guild. It had its striking moments, such as the roughcast and flat-roofed house for a brother in the Mackmurdos' Enfield enclave (1887) and the studio-house for Mortimer Menpes just behind the Peter Jones store in Chelsea (late 1890s). Both show the unsatisfactory originality that is a constant in Mackmurdo's work. There is an instructive juxtaposition in Hans Road, Brompton. Here Voysey had overspent on a group of three speculative houses for a magazine proprietor and was supplanted by Mackmurdo for the third. The verdict must be in Voysey's favour. When he retired, Mackmurdo built himself a large semi-communal 'cottage' with a tower, which is one of the eccentricities of Essex.

Horne also went in for a little architecture. In due course he became smitten by the early Italian Renaissance — a passion that led him to end his days as a collector and art historian in Florence. That was the manner he chose for a 'chapel of meditation' on the Bayswater Road for the 'activist' Mrs Russell Gurney, with an interior painted by Frederic Shields. A correct but bloodless performance, admired mainly by aesthetic scholars, it fell victim to a second world war bomb.

The core of this handsome and illuminating book derives from long years of study by the late Stuart Evans. The preface does not say which portions are due to Jean Liddiard, but the literary parts may mostly be hers. At any rate, it is greatly to her credit that she has brought the whole to completion.

*Andrew Saint's books include Richard Norman Shaw and The Image of the Architect*