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Title	The World Fabric
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Type	Article
Publication title	AA Files
Publisher	AA Publications
ISSN/ISBN	0261-6823
Date	24 July 2026
Version	
DOI	
Repository link	https://ube.repository.guildhe.ac.uk/id/eprint/296/
Link to publication	https://www.aaschool.ac.uk/public/publications
Notes	This publication version may differ from the final version

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The World Fabric

Hugh Strange

On its publication in 1891, William Lethaby’s first book, *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*¹ was heralded by his contemporaries, many of whom were eager for a renewed basis of decoration in symbolism. Architects such as C H Townsend and R W Schultz readily utilised it as sourcebook of symbolic forms.² Others, however, including the reviewer in The Times who described it as ‘simply unintelligible’, viewed the text as clumsily written and unscholarly. Indeed, even Lethaby himself recognised and commented upon its weaknesses later in life, describing it as ‘the most ignorant book ever published’. It is certainly a difficult read. On the face of it, the book is clearly structured, with 12 chapters (obviously) that describe different forms and families of symbols. But despite being the written work with which he is most closely associated, the writing itself lacks the precision of his later texts; rather than any coherently constructed argument, half-conclusions are instead dotted throughout, and it reads as a relentless cataloguing of example after example, the reader bombarded by an overabundance of erratically presented ‘evidence’. And yet, though something of an oddity, his ‘Cosmos’³ as he and colleagues referred to it, perhaps for its idiosyncratic verve alone, is impossible to dismiss. How then might we understand this book, that in many respects runs so contrary to the general themes of Lethaby’s working life; that appears so at odds with the utilitarian matter-of-factness for which he is known; and that was thought of so poorly by the author himself?⁴

ARCHITECTURE, MYSTICISM AND MYTH

Lethaby had left full-time employment as chief assistant to Norman Shaw in 1889 to establish his own practice, but continued working with Shaw on a part-time basis for two years. During this time, he developed the designs for his first major project, Avon Tyrell: a house for Lord and Lady Manners, in Hampshire. Alongside design work, much of this transitional period was spent researching and writing at the British Museum, and his first book was subsequently published in 1891. The text references a broad range of varied historical and geographical cultures, seeking common underlying principles that might inform a novel, universal foundation for architectural understanding: the mythical origins of architecture. Rather than focusing on what differentiates styles, Lethaby instead highlights similarities across centuries and continents in order to evoke the universality of a common language of symbolism borne of man’s experience of nature. After the so-called ‘battle of the styles’ that had played out over the preceding decades, his intention was to establish a firmer basis for an architecture of the present.

In chapter one, ‘The World Fabric’, Lethaby suggests that in earlier eras, the unknown world was comprehended in terms of known elements. As such, concepts as divergent as the ‘earth mountain’, the ‘world tree’ and the ‘universe-as-tent’, within which man dwelt, developed. There was, he notes, ‘a relation and reaction between such a world structure and the buildings of man’ in antiquity.⁵ The second chapter, ‘The Microcosmos’, then progresses this theme, stressing the ideas of likeness and imitation. Architecture, Lethaby here conjectures, did not directly imitate nature. Rather, it mediated the depiction of it. Myth, conversely, emerged as a way to explain nature itself. For example, the mountain, experienced as a landscape feature, was employed as an image of how the whole world might be understood: the ‘earth mountain’, a single landmass that ended at the seas. In turn, the image of the earth mountain was emulated by early temples such as the Mesopotamian Ziggurat of Ur, from two millennia BCE. The pyramid form, Lethaby therefore argues, does not copy the physical form of a mountain itself, but is a representation of the world as understood. It is, he proposes, a localisation of the ‘great prototype’.⁶

The following chapters go on to discuss various families of symbolic form. Concepts of the perfect square are examined in relation to orientation: the earth, understood as square in form (a world with four corners) becomes a model for the layout of the perfect temple, for the foursquare enclosed garden as representative of paradise and for the ideal form of a walled city. Ideas of the World Tree are explored using the Great Tree of the Heavens and the Golden Trees of Paradise as examples: here the tree, sometimes made of gold or silver but in Norse cultures of Ash and in Japan of Pine, had branches that spread across the world, with fruits of glass, fire or precious gems. The pervasion of the number seven, drawn from the ‘dynamic planets’ (the Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn) is also acknowledged: there were, Lethaby notes, seven days of the week, seven ages of man, seven holy sites of India, seven hills of Rome and Seven Lamps of Architecture.⁷

From the prison house of the minotaur in Greek mythology through to Osiris and the Egyptian Book of the Dead, and Dante, the ‘topographer of medieval hell’, he catalogues depictions of the underworld as both the city and the labyrinth of the dead: its representation as a labyrinth

- ¹ W R Lethaby, *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* (London Architectural Press, 1891).
- ² See Julian Holder, ‘Architecture, Mysticism and Myth and its influence’, in Sylvia Backemeyer and Theresa Gronberg (eds), *W R Lethaby, 1857–1931* (Lund Humphries, 1984), pp 58–60.
- ³ This was how Lethaby and his colleagues referred to it. In his monograph on Lethaby, Godfrey Rubens suggests that the con-tradictions inherent within the text are only understandable once one acknowledges paradox as an essential part of his character. See Godfrey Rubens, *William Richard Lethaby, His Life and Work 1857–1931* (The Architectural Press, 1986), p 82.
- ⁴ Peter Blundell Jones, ‘All Saints Brockhampton’, in *The Architects’ Journal*, no 122, 1990, p 28.
- ⁵ W R Lethaby, op cit, p 12.
- ⁶ See Trevor Garnham, *Melsetter House* (Phaidon Press Ltd, 1993), p 40.
- ⁷ Ruskin purportedly worked very hard to avoid having eight or nine lamps in his extended essay. Ibid, p 123.



- 8 Ibid, p 222.
9 Ibid, p 269.
10 Lethaby later described such revivalist tendencies as ‘designing ‘whim-works in... sham styles, not even child’s play but the grimaces of grown-ups’. W R Lethaby, *Architecture, Nature and Magic* (Gerald Duckworth, 1956), p 39.
11 Ibid, p 3.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid, p 10.
14 See Deborah van der Plaats, ‘Seeking a ‘Symbolism Comprehensible’ to ‘the Great Majority of Spectators’’, in *Architectural History*, no 45, 2002, p 367.
15 See Joanna Merwood, ‘Architecture, Mysticism, and Myth’, in Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Stephen Parcell (eds), *Chora Four* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), p 187.
16 W R Lethaby, *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, op cit, p 202. This is all a very long way from Reyner Banham’s broadly representative characterisation of Lethaby as a particularly earnest architect whose practical concerns formed a bridge between the Arts and Crafts and modernism. See Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (The Architectural Press, 1962), p 46.
17 See Vaughan Hart, ‘William Richard Lethaby and the ‘Holy Spirit’’, in *Architectural History*, no 36, 1993, p 149.

in the mosaic inlays in church floors, planted mazes and the plan forms of the ideal tomb is recurrent. Gates and doorways are addressed: their association with the sun’s passage from East to West resulting in temples and churches oriented to receive the morning light. A chapter titled ‘Pavements like the Sea’ looks downwards, recording the watery floors of marble and mosaic, while the following chapter, ‘Ceilings like the Sky’, looks upwards, charting the development of celestial representations within the earliest flat soffits through to vaulted ceilings and hemispherical domes, noting that ‘at great periods of architecture ceilings were always skies’.⁸ This is followed by an examination of numerology in relation to time: the course of the sun and the phases of the moon being seen to determine the relevance of key numerical figures across cultures that were, in turn, transposed onto to architecture.

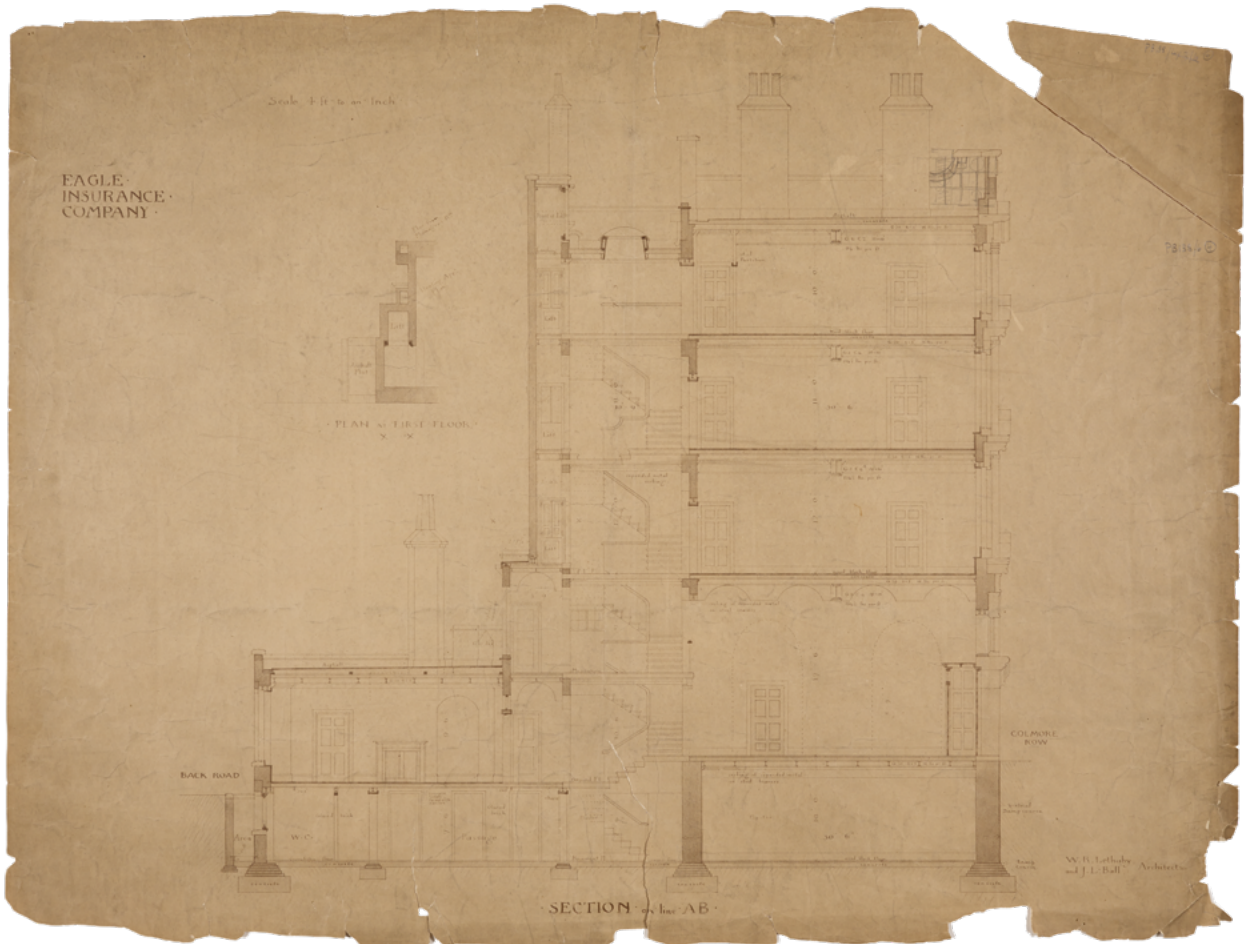
Lethaby’s concluding chapter records the egg as symbol of creation: the origin of life and, he suggests, the origin of the world. ‘It is sufficient for us that the egg was used as an architectural symbol of the origin of the world...record of a genesis, an emblem of the mystery of life, and a hope of resurrection.’⁹ It is surely telling that he concludes with this specific myth, given that the primary objective of the book was to search for the origins of architecture; for an underlying truth that could be found in its genesis. After a century that he saw as having been characterised by the dead hand of historicism, he now hoped instead that architecture might find an opportunity for revitalisation. As such, the work might be read not only as a record of his deep love for the history of architecture, but also as a statement of his abhorrence of stylistic revivalism.¹⁰ The text grapples with this dichotomy in an attempt to find a profounder relevance for history in architectural design by connecting it to the origins of civilisation.

Tellingly, in the book’s introduction Lethaby states his lofty objective thus: ‘What then, I want to ask, are the ultimate facts behind all architecture which has given it form?’¹¹ He then offers three categories of fact: needs and desires; structures, materials and their combinations; and nature, which he defines as the focus of the text. ‘It is of this last that I propose to write; the influence of the known and imagined facts of the universe on architecture, the connection between the world as a structure and the building, not of the mere details of nature and ornaments of architecture, but of the whole – the Heavenly Temple and the Earthly Tabernacle.’¹² To do so was to grasp beyond the known realm and interpret the unknown within the universe.¹³ Contained within this aspiration was the inference that in the ages before science humans relied on ‘imagined facts’.¹⁴ Indeed, Lethaby goes further in his efforts and reaches for the imagery of folklore and legend: interwoven with his dense lists of real historical precedents throughout the text lie several that are unequivocally fictional, not ‘imagined facts’ but fully make-believe.¹⁵ ‘It is only in story’, he observes, ‘that we can find ideal architecture – the pure thought unrelated to cost and utility.’¹⁶

EAGLE INSURANCE BUILDINGS

At Avon Tyrell, Lethaby incorporated various mythical elements into the house. Following his studies in numerology, it is remarkable yet not altogether unsurprising that the building, which was designed and drawn while writing *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, conformed to the logic of the Calendar House, with 365 windows, four wings, seven external doors, 12 chimneys and 52 rooms. In the same building, the bellcote, located atop a lowered section of the entrance facade, is clearly reminiscent of the ideal temple forms that illustrated his text. Constructed in stone, its four corner columns define a cubic volume, with a stepped roof above that in turn supports a perfectly carved sphere; square, triangle, circle. The Eagle Insurance Buildings in Birmingham, however, presents a more revealing example of Lethaby’s thinking about how myth might relate to new forms of built architecture, within which the mythical elements are more central to the design.¹⁷ The office building is sited in the central commercial area of the city, sandwiched between fairly mundane neighbours on Colmore Row, a narrow shopping street that generally affords only oblique views of the front facade. Completed in 1900, the building was his only commercial design and his only urban project. It was also the only work that he carried out in partnership, in this case with a local architect called Joseph Ball, who went on to head the Birmingham School of Architecture.

The building comprises four floors to the front, the ground floor taller, while a small step in its section allows for five floors of equal height to the rear. Behind the front room, dedicated to customer service, the manager’s office sits in the centre of the ground floor, with a substantial glazed lantern providing light from above. Two symmetrical entrances are placed on either side of the frontage, one providing access to private offices in the basement and upper floors, and the





other a public entrance to the ground floor. Despite their different uses, the entrances are treated identically, in each case the doors seemingly set within a portal frame, rather than a doorway. The substantial verticals of the two openings are built using fossil laden marble slabs as an exotic evocation of the Babylonian, Egyptian and Buddhist gateways dedicated to the sun that Lethaby records in the eighth chapter of *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, ‘The Golden Gate of the Sun’. In this section, he documents the occurrence of sun symbols set within the lintels above doorways and lists the many examples of doors themselves that in some way came to represent the sun. From Babylon through to the Christian Middle Ages, these doors were lined with a shining metal, often silver, bronze or brass, to best reflect the sun’s light. Accordingly, Lethaby’s entrance doors are embossed with a circular relief, each having a solar figure set within a riveted sheet of metal. Positioned at either side of the primary elevation, the gateway-like frames and the lustrous gold-en doors within therefore recall the Gates of the East and the Gates of the West of earlier civilisations, with the sun entering through one and leaving through the other. Yet while it acknowledges numerous different myths, the design of the two doorways also appears distinctly original, not overly referential to any single cultural lineage.

At the top of the building, above the third-floor windows, are a series of pitched and arched pediments on top of which sits a decorative frieze. The window heads are redolent of simplified architectures of the Gothic and Romanesque eras, their alternating character perhaps seeming a little whimsical in relation to the rest of the composition. They are deeply profiled and can be read as the building’s summit, a finale of its vertical composition, in a reading mirrored by the deep pencil shading of the feature seen in Lethaby’s sketches of the elevation. However, these motifs seem to imply not just the top of the building but a termination of a more expansive urban skyline, their variation and rhythm echoing that of the wider city. Tellingly, the frieze above these window heads introduces brickwork to the otherwise stone facade of the building, indicating a degree of otherness; a background of sorts to the figurative city below.¹⁸

The frieze itself is modelled in low relief, presenting a simple chequerboard of the two materials. An earlier iteration of its design shows an expansive stretch of decorative stonework of Saxon influence, seemingly woven and possibly expressing the branches of the ‘Tree of the World’, spanning across the earth and up to the sky.¹⁹ As built, however, it has a sparse and abstract quality, and is composed of the pure forms of the square and circle so central to many of the myths identified in Lethaby’s text. But the patterning also calls to mind his descriptions of the chequerboard walls that enclosed Paradise.²⁰ In the very centre of the frieze, a sculpted eagle crowns the building, not only signifying the emblem of the insurance company but also evoking both notions of protection and the sun god. To either side, in a staggered pattern, several of the stone squares are modelled in circular relief, in total describing a rhythm of 12 orbs across the masonry. While the interplay of the square and circle spans multiple symbolic readings, in this case the circles are primarily representative of the heavenly bodies within the firmament.²¹

Yet the multiple symbolisms of the building’s base and top only tell a part of the story of the frontage. For while the rear facade appears to be free of architectural ideas or composition-al conceits (all five floors are treated equally with regular windows, and each aperture is formed of a brick arch set within an entirely brick elevation), the front facade is something else altogether. One of Lethaby’s early sketches for it, from 1898, shows a nine-bay front-age, which perhaps integrates the neighbouring site into the works. But the final, five-bay design as constructed is relatively narrow, resulting in a building with significantly more of a vertical emphasis than first envisaged. In contrast to the rear elevation, the central area of the ground floor and the five window bays over the three floors above it are all clad in lime-stone, with steel lintels forming heads over the sash windows. Rather than wall, the stone-work here reads as frame, with the vertical masonry between apertures appearing as pilasters and exaggerated horizontal sills as floor slabs.

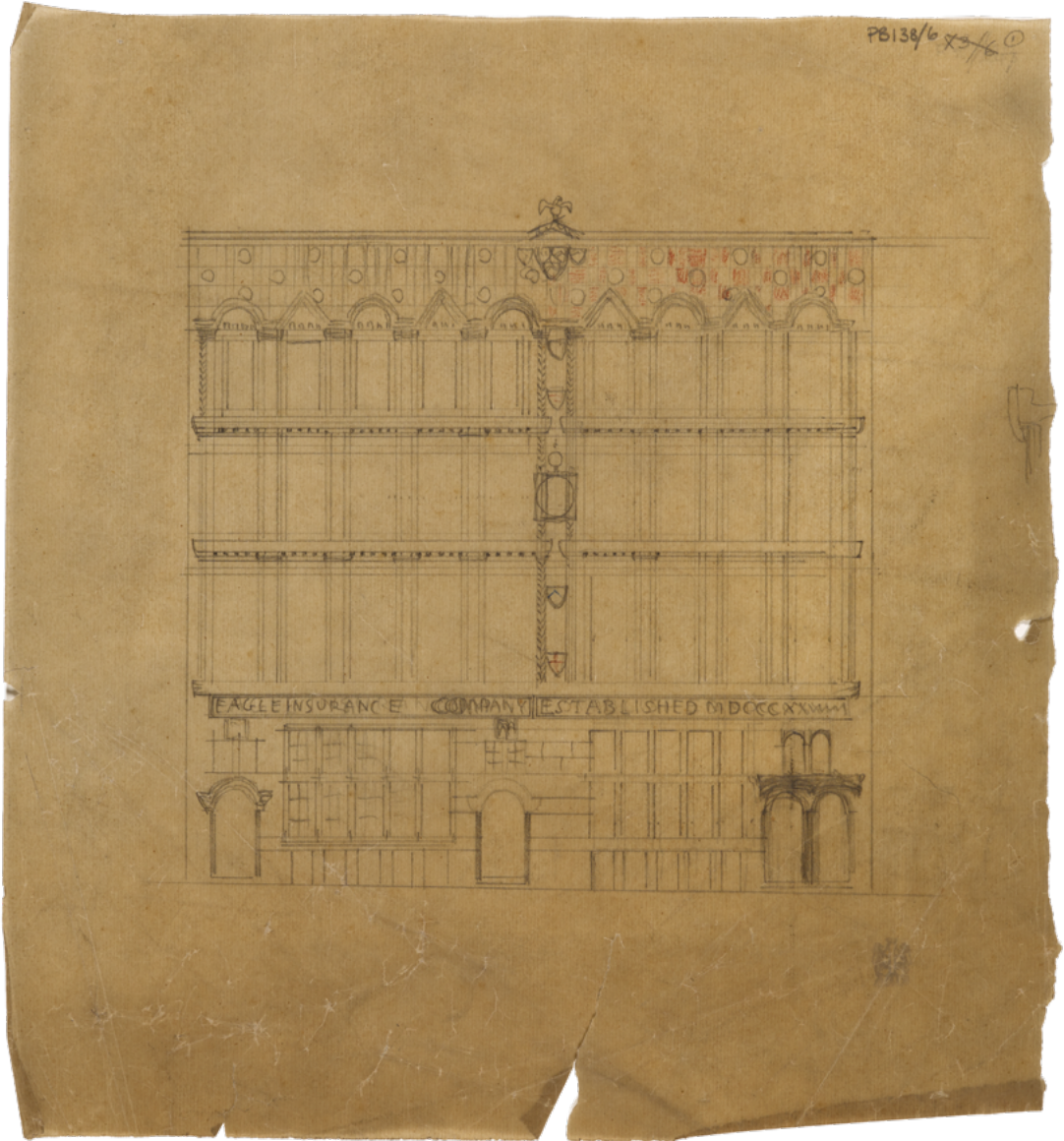
The detailing of much of the elevation is almost entirely stripped of ornamentation, the profiles themselves retaining the barest remnant of connection with any received language, a residual classicism. Lethaby’s intention here is clear: grid-like, the composition of the central facade represents the stripping away of decoration, the clear expression of a structural system and, most importantly, the rejection of the inherited historical styles of architecture. The building’s construction also reflects the development of hybrid technologies at the turn of the century: masonry loadbearing walls support the floors and a roof of steel beams beneath thin concrete slabs. Other architects at the time were similarly exploring how to integrate modern construction methods into commercial buildings. Yet with the exception of a few notable examples, by and large they tended to utilise either elements of the Gothic or Classical styles

¹⁸ Ibid, p 150.

¹⁹ W R Lethaby, *Architecture, Nature and Magic*, op cit, p 109.

²⁰ W.R. Lethaby, *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, op cit, p 48.

²¹ Ibid, p 21.





- 22 See Robert Macleod, *Style and Society* (RIBA Publications Ltd, 1971), p 59.
- 23 Eagle Insurance Company offices, part-elevation sketch, PB138/6/2 RIBA Drawings Collection, Victoria and Albert Museum.
- 24 W R Lethaby, *Architecture* (Williams and Norgate, 1911), p 249.
- 25 W R Lethaby, *Architecture, Nature and Magic*, op cit, p 15.

as mere dressings. Here, though, Lethaby’s abhorrence of historicism is fully manifested. The facade’s latticework of verticals and horizontals must surely have been startling when it was first revealed in 1900, and it stands today as the primary built evidence for the claim that Lethaby can be considered a Protomodernist. Robert Macleod, describing Lethaby’s elimination of the irrelevant in his design of the Eagle Insurance Buildings, goes so far as to note of the elevation: ‘It marks, perhaps, the quietest revolution in architectural history.’²²

ARCHITECTURE, NATURE AND MAGIC

At the Eagle Insurance Buildings, then, Lethaby managed to compose an elevation that with extraordinary succinctness combines two ways of rejecting historicist revivalism: the base and top reaching back to an architecture that pre-dates stylistic characterisations, in-formed by the symbolic practices identified in *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, while the middle section looks forward to a future freed of allusion. In his collaboration with Joseph Ball for the project, it appears that he produced the design drawings before sending them on for revision. Intriguingly, on one elevation study he makes a handwritten note of apology, stating: ‘My dear Ball. Sorry to send such a scrappy lot. It may be because I am going away, but I feel perfectly used up.’²³ It is tempting to read the note as part of an ongoing struggle to find a singular resolution of the facade, a synthesis of its divergent parts, or per-haps even as indicative of a broader malaise. Indeed, after two decades of work, firstly as chief assistant to architect Norman Shaw then leading his own practice, Lethaby went on to depart the profession for good just a few years later.

He spent the following decades productively, writing and teaching as he searched for alternative forms of common values – ‘no art that is only one man deep is worth much; it should be a thousand men deep’²⁴ – and he eventually had the opportunity to reconsider the subject and revisit his first book, which was republished as a series of papers in *The Builder* journal in 1928 before his death in 1931. These were then brought together and posthumously published under the title *Architecture, Nature and Magic*, in 1956. His own fiercest critic, Lethaby writes of *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* that ‘my little book was very insufficient and, in many ways, feeble; second rate and second-hand authorities were mixed up with true sources, and the whole was uncritical and inexpert...[it] went out of print, and I was pleased that it should be unobtainable.’²⁵ Yet his ultimate decision to revisit it suggests that, despite everything, it was by no means a peripheral work in his life and career; no thematic anomaly within his overall output. While the thesis remains the same – that building practices reflect ideas of the world – the text itself reads very differently. Gone are the barrages of quotes, replaced by a succinct bibliography. Gone too are the grand, emphatic statements, replaced by sentences full of careful qualification: ‘It seems probable’, ‘from the facts now in evidence...’²⁶

By this point in his career, Lethaby had established himself as a well-respected architectural historian. Informed by his time in practice as an architect, as well as by an evident passion for his subjects, the books that followed *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, such as *The Church of Sancta Sophia* (1894) and *Medieval Art* (1904), are characterised by a clarity and breadth of concern. This decades-long honing of scholarly craft accounts for one of the core distinctions between the earlier and later texts. Similarly, the inclusion of a series of photographic plates of key architectural sites cements the new work’s association with a scholarship of fact, while the omission of the literary quotes and storied references signifies its move away from fiction. The difference in bibliographic sources between the two books is also notable. In both, Lethaby’s references are largely drawn from the decade preceding their publication, but their subject matter varies significantly.

The first text was published in 1891, soon after James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (1890) and Andrew Lang’s *Myth, Ritual and Religion* (1887), from which Lethaby acknowledged that his own title had been derived. As with these contemporary works, *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* closely relates to a 19th-century interest in anthropology but also can’t be entirely disassociated from the late-Victorian taste for oriental-ism and spiritualism. Other notable sources for it include James Ferguson’s *Tree and Serpent Worship* (1868) and Richard Folkard’s *Plant Lore, Legends and Lyrics* (1884). In the later book, however, there is a new emphasis on archaeology, perhaps most conspicuously in the abundant references made to recent Egyptian scholarship, including *Ancient Egyptians* (1925) by Sir William Petrie. The time between Lethaby’s two books, notably, spanned from the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 to the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb in 1922, as well as its subsequent recreation for the 1924 British Empire exhibition in Wembley.

The shift in emphasis between Architecture, Mysticism and Myth and Architecture, Nature and Magic, from the anthropological to the archaeological, from fable to fact, accompanied Lethaby’s recognition of a growing cultural discontinuity within the present. In looking be-hind the historical styles of the 19th century, he had sought out underlying truths in the origins of architecture that might help to form the basis of a new one. Implicit within this delve was a belief in architecture’s capacity to surpass the fulfilment of functional use and in the necessity of symbolic meaning. ‘Modern architecture’, he stated, ‘to be real, must not be a mere envelope without contents.’²⁷ In parallel, he considered it as a requirement that these new symbolic forms be widely accessible: ‘we must have a symbolism immediately comprehensible to the great majority of spectators.’²⁸ But in 1928, Lethaby appears to have seen only rupture: ‘The passing of the old ages of magic into the ages of science has opened a widening abyss between them and us, and a great gulf is thus set between ancient magic architecture and modern scientific building.’²⁹ In the re-written text, he concedes that the present could no longer mine the past, as its mythological meanings were no longer commonly understood. Any sense of a shared, commonly legible symbolic order had disappeared,³⁰ and the dispelling of an earlier magical world by science had created a new reality. In a society shorn of symbolic values, he now saw that story may no longer be of value in identifying an ideal architecture, and the continuum he had believed in was abruptly halted.³¹

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Lethaby’s belief that the any future architecture would be distinct from that of the past clear-ly left him deeply frustrated. His love of history, after all, had left him ill-equipped for neither the challenges ahead, nor the new forms of practice that he ultimately believed were, in fact, necessary: ‘In saying that the old ways are closed to us, please do not think I would have it so if it might be otherwise; my own mind rests with the poetries of ancient art and I am altogether inadequate for the methods of science.’³²

If Architecture, Mysticism and Myth had sought to express a meaningful continuum with the symbolisms of earlier belief structures, then Lethaby’s impulse towards the end of his life to return to it indicates a clear desire to reposition himself. It was a readjustment that followed his own development as a mature scholar and served as his personal response to a world utterly transformed between the early 1880s and the late 1920s. In contrast to Lethaby’s first text, his revision of it records the parting of his social impulse and his deeply felt passion for history. Yet the two books nevertheless share a desire to encapsulate the world within a unified vision, their polemical character framing each version of it with unbending singularity. The Eagle Insurance Buildings, by contrast, can be seen to have grappled with the implications of the first book and what they might mean in a practical sense. Yet rather than enacting the text as mere instruction, it instead embodies a design that simultaneously affirms and questions symbolic continuities. In this light, its facade might not just offer a fin-de-siècle question mark, a dialectic lacking resolution, but a realised alternative to the absolutist tendencies of both books. In building, rather than writing, Lethaby was able to express nuance and complexity in defining a paradoxical architecture that was oriented towards modernity while also accommodating the idiosyncratic and an intensely personal sense of the poetic. Sadly, this tension between theoretical and built output that appears so critical to an overview of Lethaby’s work was lost with his early retirement from practice.

²⁶ Ibid, p 147.

²⁷ W R Lethaby, Architecture, Mysticism and Myth, op cit, p 7.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ W R Lethaby, Architecture, Nature and Magic, op cit, p 147.

³⁰ See Peter Fuller, ‘William Lethaby, Keeping Art Shipshape’, in Sylvia Backemeyer and Theresa Gronberg (eds), op cit, p 41.

³¹ W R Lethaby, Architecture, Mysticism and Myth, op cit, p 202.

³² W R Lethaby, Architecture, Nature and Magic, op cit, p 16.