

legislative work of the Christian Emperors was born of this fertile union of human knowledge and divine wisdom, of which there remain traces so indelible that they demonstrate to the modern world how, between the true juridical science and the teaching of the Christian faith, there is no opposition but concord, because Faith cannot but stamp with its seal the truth which the human mind discovers and considers and systematizes.'

I shall conclude with the interesting passage in which Dr Wu sums up his personal attitude to the Common and Roman laws: 'With the common law, which I have called a "cradle Christian", natural wisdom and the Christian influence grew hand in hand in the course of the centuries. With the Continental law, on the other hand, natural wisdom had reached a high degree of maturity before grace began to work upon it. This is perhaps why the common law is instinctively Christian, while the Continental law is rationally Christian. Both have their great qualities. One possesses classical beauty, the other romantic charm. But I, being a convert like the Continental law, am especially attracted by the enviable qualities of the cradle Christian who has Christianity running, as it were, in the blood.'

## OBITER

ERIC GILL IN EDINBURGH. It is nearly twenty years since he died, and the assessment of his work is still a matter of argument. The inevitable post-mortem decline in reputation is passing; the facets in the character of this extraordinary man—draughtsman, illustrator, sculptor, typographer, conversationalist and writer—jump into notice like digits on a computer, and the total sum is not yet on record. Sporadic publication of his writings and a few essays on him have appeared in the interim. Probably the most important collection of his drawings and records was that presented by Mary Gill to the Monotype Corporation in 1954; it formed the nucleus of the exhibition of lettering and type designs held in London in 1958.

This exhibition has now found its way to Edinburgh and, in the lonely spaces of the College of Art's sculpture court, has been making a quiet contribution to the revived interest in Eric Gill's work. It is, of course, severely limited in scope. Some thirty panels of type designs, printed examples and rubbings of stone tablets, and a few cases of blocks and books, do not make a spectacular showing. The rubbings, especially, are of limited value, losing inevitably the three-dimensional quality of stone-cut letters and that characteristic sharpness and clarity of carving that distinguishes Gill's work from that of most of his followers. A full-scale exhibition devoted to him would still be valu-

able; but there remains something provocative in the content of this show, in keeping with the provocative thrill of Gill's own declarations.

The special issue of the *Monotype Recorder* (Vol. 41, No. 3, 1958) commemorating the exhibition makes great point of this thrill through personal acquaintance. Those of us too young to have known it properly can only view dispassionately his executed work and read him, sometimes with growing surprise at the very pre-war and rather dated context of his sayings. A master of slogans for the encouragement of his party, he seems to have made little significant contribution to the study of aesthetics in these days; and much of his wider commentary was tied so firmly to the dead horse of distributism that it now reads as part of a distant and unfamiliar world. It is becoming fashionable to find his pre-eminence in the field of lettering and typography; and it may be that his finest creative output was for the purpose of industrial production—printing—by the machines against which he railed in vivid protest.

The exhibition displays surprisingly many of the initial weaknesses in his abilities which he apparently overcame by the sheer force of his immense will. A revealing panel showing an example (1901) of his lettering before coming into contact with Edward Johnston at the Central Schools is not merely poor by the standard he subsequently set but thoroughly bad by any standards. The amazing development from 1903 to the quite exquisite memorials of the 1930's, with tight, elegant, distinctive lettering of incomparable precision, is a major technical and artistic achievement. Yet it is surprising how little joy there seems to be in the point of his pencil; even the well-known self-portrait in a paper hat (the frontispiece to the publication) is more of a brilliant technical feat than a felt investigation of form and personality. His lettering never became personal and evocative in the way in which Mr David Jones occasionally delights us nowadays. Gill was, after all, the superb craftsman and the designer of the mechanistic letter.

The main types among others shown in the exhibition are Perpetua, Sans-Serif and Joanna, each brilliant in its own way. Each is a derivation from Roman lettering, Perpetua the most direct and Sans-Serif the most extreme; he did not need to go beyond this source of inspiration. What is particularly fascinating to the non-specialist is the light these designs throw, not only on the procedure itself, but upon Gill's development as an artist or craftsman (to him the same thing) in an increasingly industrialized society.

Perpetua type was frankly based upon his stone lettering, and there are valuable records of the procedure of translating this—through the hand-cut punches made by Malin in Paris in 1926, through subsequent drawings and amendments—to the machine-cut mass-produced letters

that have become so popular in text printing and in titling. He learned rapidly the lessons in design which the machine-minders could teach him; and as the story unfolds there accumulates evidence of the liveliness with which he adapted himself as a designer to the needs of large-scale production. Gill Sans, the type for its times, had tentative beginnings in directional signs at Capel-y-ffin, his Black Mountain monastery, in 1925; there remain also the comparative drawings of roman and block-letter types which Gill made for Douglas Cleverdon while convalescing at Bristol. After its stormy reception and its quick popularity, the demand for variations of the Sans-Serif type kept him busy on the 'family' of the type. That he himself made the geometrical drawings which would enable remote employees of the railways to copy the letters without any danger of their spoiling it by the use of any intelligence or freedom in execution, is the sort of thing that has shocked many admirers of Gill's social theory. How does one equate this designer with the man who denounced gloriously the state of intellectual irresponsibility into which the workman was forced by modern society? The resolution is never quite clear. Nor is his equivocal remark about the genesis of the Joanna type, designed for mechanized production. 'Machines can do practically anything. The question is not what they *can* but what they *should*.' Perhaps his creative abilities far outreached the scope of his theories (not an uncommon thing among artists). In any case, Joanna was obviously something that a machine should do, and he produced what is surely one of the most beautiful and practical types that has ever added to the high standards of print in these countries.

Perhaps in this activity, in which he was compelled by the nature of the task to throw himself fully into the enjoyment of the techniques of industry, he was least at war with the society in which he found himself; and because of that produced his most lasting contribution to that society. He was essentially a twentieth-century figure; and it may be the real irony of his career that the prophet of mass-produced disaster, the opponent of the machine and of industrial development and of the intellectual irresponsibility of the workman, was in the end one of the outstanding industrial designers of our time.

As far as typography was concerned, he could find (in his *Essay on Typography*) that 'the two worlds can exist side by side, Industrialism becoming more strictly and nobly utilitarian as it recognizes its inherent limitations, and the world of human labour, ceasing any longer to compete with it, becoming more strictly and soberly humane'. He probably did us and industry a service in clarifying its limitations by his own work for it—and deepened as he did so the essential humanity in his own immensely humane and memorable personality. P.J.B.