

Sir Basil Spence, OM, RA, ARSA, RDI, P/PRIBA

RSA Obituary by Sir William Kininmonth PRSA

Transcribed from the 1976 RSA Annual Report

With the death of Basil Spence at the age of 69 the Academy lost one of its most distinguished, if distant, Members and it is unfortunate that none of his published obituaries do more than touch on his formative years in Edinburgh either as a schoolboy, a student and teacher or as a practising architect.

During much of his time I probably knew him better than most of his contemporaries. We were at the same school, we both trained at the Edinburgh College of Art where our friendship ripened and, from the early 30's till late 1946, we were in practice as partners, first as Kininmonth & Spence, and then as Rowand Anderson, Paul & Partners.

For these reasons, even if because our careers were so inextricably interwoven for so long, it may be difficult for me to be completely objective; yet I gladly accepted the Academy's invitation to write this appreciation and to say something about his early years in Edinburgh. The rest is readily available in public obituaries.

It may be fanciful, but it has often occurred to me that there is a close parallel between the life of Spence and that of Rudyard Kipling. Both were born in India and brought to this country in their early childhood. Each in his different sphere reached outstanding artistic maturity at a very early age and each was driven by an inner compulsion which made him a legend in his own lifetime.

Both were unhesitatingly acclaimed by the public, yet neither received full recognition or more than a begrudging acceptance from contemporary critics. Why this should be so is difficult to assess, unless the reasons lie deep in their common background as potentially brilliant children born into exotic culture and in their subsequent transfer and struggle to acclimatize themselves to a strange new environment very different from that of their earliest years.

How Spence will ultimately rank must be left for posterity to decide but there can be no gainsaying that he was fashioned from the stuff of genius. He had great enthusiasm and unusual creative force which he combined with considerable intelligence, boundless ambition to excel and a unique ability to give imaginative poetical expression to his ideas. *Of course* he was a showman, but on the whole he used his showmanship as a tool to persuade others of his convictions rather than for his own glorification.

Without this combination of qualities, it is an open question whether his controversial design for Coventry Cathedral would have materialized. With it, he drove through all opposition and succeeded in carrying his work to a triumphant conclusion.

Some of his critics have held it against Spence that during his early career he never became involved with movements or groups seeking new ideals in architecture and this may well be true to the extent that very few existed in Scotland or, for that matter, in England at the time.

But though he was nurtured on tradition and was a sincere admirer of Lutyens and Lorimer, at much the same time and from a very early stage he was also keenly aware of the New Architecture, its exponents and teachers. He made an intensive study of the works of Dudok, Mendelsohn, Aalto, Gropius and Corbusier and accepted them with enthusiasm as leaders of architectural thought and expression.

It is more true to say of him that he was by nature a dedicated creative artist, catholic in his tastes and convictions, who drew inspiration from almost any source so long as it touched in him subconscious chords of aesthetic sensitivity.

Himself an artist and draughtsman of quite exceptional power and imagination, possibly one of his greatest gifts was his sympathetic understanding of similar qualities in other artists and craftsmen and his ability to blend their skills with his own.

Apart from the little he confided to me about his early life and background in India, it is an interesting sidelight, in view of his later involvement in Church architecture, that when I knew him he had no religious beliefs or attachments although he came of a Baptist family and, so far as I know, he was completely a-political.

He was about three years younger than myself and at school I knew him principally by his reputation as an artistic phenomenon which meant little to his schoolmates. Artistic excellence and sensibility were not highly regarded qualities at George Watson's

College where the boys boasted of a seemingly endless Roll of Honour from the first world war, innumerable heroes in the Field of Sport and the fabulous careers of five Cabinet Ministers.

On leaving school he attended Professor Baldwin Brown's Fine Art Classes in Edinburgh University and enrolled at the Edinburgh College of Art (not to be confused with the University) in the School of Design where, in the course of his first year, his true bent was spotted and he transferred to the School of Architecture.

In those days, despite his artistic precocity, he was strangely immature; vulnerable characteristics, which he gradually strove to overcome but never quite lost, left him open to attack by others with different standards and values from his own. Our friendship, developed during holiday sketching-tours, strengthened in the year we spent together in London working in Sir Edwin Lutyens' office and sharing rooms in a Bayswater boarding-house. In pursuit of our studies we occasionally put in an appearance at Professor Richardson's evening Atelier and I think it a fair guess that the insight Spence derived from his London experience and from an intensive study of

Lutyens' methods of design, left its indelible mark and may have coloured his thinking for a lifetime.

From the first, Spence's student career followed a predictable pattern. Architecture was still taught as one of the Fine Arts based on historical theories, with examples of design and structure, which were gradually beginning to change under the impact of strange new revolutionary concepts and the hammer blows of Corbusier and others. His evolution was a natural process.

He was a serious student with a compulsion to excel and at the same time was popular and played a considerable part in the social life of the College. But perhaps because of this creative instinct and love of drama, he was not a scholar in the academic or historical sense although he derived great benefit from his curiosity and intensive study of all aspects of building design, construction and planning.

As it did later on, success seemed to follow him automatically during his student days and in succession he won the Rowand Anderson Scholarship of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, the Silver Medal as the best student of his year, the Arthur Cates Prize and the Pugin Scholarship – all three of the Royal Institute of British Architects.

After completing his course he was appointed to the teaching staff of the Architecture School where, for a few years until he left to devote his full time to practise, he was equally successful in inspiring and encouraging his students with his own dedicated enthusiasm.

While he was teaching, he was also helping me as and when he could with our embryo practice which I had started on the strength of one small house and the use of a room generously offered free by Balfour Paul which was small by any standards; but this Spence and I shared along with a drawing-board, a table, a typewriter and a telephone

Perhaps because of the late Sir Rowans Anderson's unseen presence - for he had used the room during the years of his retirement - or maybe because the Great Depression of the 30's was beginning to recede, our practice, if it did not flourish, gradually began to grow. I acquired us a car, an ancient Renault, which, with much prompting, enabled us to extend our activities beyond Edinburgh into Berwickshire and East Lothian.

In the meantime Balfour Paul's firm, which had been badly hit by the national scarcity of work, recovered and I was offered a partnership, an offer which I felt compelled to refuse until it was eventually extended to include Spence. Our firm was absorbed into partnership with Balfour Paul's and practised from then on as Rowand Anderson, Paul & Partners. On the untimely death of our senior partner a few years later, we became the sole partners and continued in business together until November 1946 when we decided by mutual agreement to go our separate ways.

In a very real sense Spence's training and years of practice in Edinburgh were an essential preliminary to his later career - for long before he emerged on the London and International scene, his architectural ideas and his character were in the full flower of their maturity. He was waiting in the wings. All he required was his great opportunity, and when it came with Coventry, he grasped it with both hands as he had invariably done in a lesser way during his student career and his years of practice in Edinburgh.

In the years before the war, Scotland offered only occasional scope for architects with advanced ideas. Clients were rarely ready to accept them and Spence was in practice and had to live. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that after a few early attempts to break through, his main success lay along traditional lines, or that after he built Broughton Place his path followed closely in the footsteps of Lorimer and Lutyens.

It is almost certain that, but for the changing course of events, he would have developed his talents through the older tradition, for he was not by nature a revolutionary prepared to sacrifice his career for a cause. He was an artist architect of outstanding ability, longing for recognition and eager to grasp every opportunity as it arose, even if it came, as it so often did for him, not in the form of permanent building but in the more ephemeral realm of Exhibitions in which he found scope to display his imaginative powers of design to a wide public.

With the advent of the war our practice had to be closed down and Spence, who was a Territorial, spent the next six years in the Royal Artillery and took part in the Normandy landings. I too was in the army and on our return to civilian life, I found his appetite for architecture remained undiminished. By then he had fully accepted that in a changing world the old traditional way of building and the old conception of architecture must be discarded for the new.

We revived our business and continued our partnership through the next two years of frustrating scarcity and building controls and, because real building was hard to come by and he was in demand as a designer of Exhibitions, Spence was in some danger of acquiring a label as a specialist in this type of work – not from any desire on his part but rather because for him opportunities to design in a more permanent way were stifled and restricted.

This frustration probably had its effect on our partnership. At any rate he decided to set up practice in Edinburgh on his own account and some years later he won the competition for Coventry Cathedral against most of the best architectural brains in the country.

Coventry marked more than renewed hope and the aspirations of a recovering Britain. It also marked the beginning of a steady revival of the building industry and architecture in the late 50's and through the booming 60's in which he was to play a part.

He moved south to London and with the fame Coventry brought him, not only for its imaginative design but for the purposeful and efficient way in which it was carried out, he became a celebrity and soon was one of the most sought after architects in the country.

The volume of work which flowed from his London and Edinburgh office was prodigious and highly personal, yet he found time to serve on the Royal Fine Arts Commission, to become an active and vital President of the Royal Institute of British Architects and to act as a Treasurer to the Royal Academy and as a Professor at the Academy School.

Any catalogue or critical assessment of his work would be out of place in this context. It speaks for itself by its volume and quality but it is reasonable to assume that amongst the buildings by which he will be best remembered are his Coventry Cathedral, his British Embassy in Rome and the lovely little Crematorium he built in Edinburgh.

Elected to Associate rank of this Academy in 1952, he became “non-resident” consequent on his move to London.

Honours were showered upon him and, in addition to the Order of the British Empire and his Knighthood, he received the supreme accolade when the Queen awarded him the Order of Merit to place him amongst the small and select band who gain that distinction

Fame is a fickle mistress. She gives with one hand and takes with the other. In his lifetime Basil Spence basked in her favours and suffered many disappointments. But one thing is certain: his work will be remembered when all his critics are forgotten. To those who knew him, he will be remembered best for his generous nature, his enduring loyalty to his friends, his unusual talents and the burning flame of his ardent spirit.

He has left behind his closest colleague - his wife, Joan – and their son and daughter, John and Gill.

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