Building with Wit

The Architecture of Sir Edwin Lutyens

I have been unfortunate in my first impressions of the work of Lutyens. When I came to England in 1930, I was full of unquestioning faith in the new style in architecture—my wife's father had just moved into a house built for him with a flat roof and horizontal windows, and I was working on a course of lectures on the Development of Architecture from the nineteenth into the twentieth century, a subject wholly unconsidered then amongst art historians in the German universities. The first two buildings by Lutyens which I saw were Grovesnor House in Park Lane and No. 68, Pall Mall, the one big, red and utilitarian, with unjustifiable bits of classical decoration round a few windows and classical stone-faced hats on the corners, high above the ninth floor, where nobody could see their details; the other tactlessly tall next to St. James's Palace and the Marlborough House Chapel, with segment-headed and segment-footed windows suddenly breaking out on the second upper storey, in a rhythm different from all the other storeys, and with silly tricks in the detailing of the pilasters on the ground floor. I remember, these disappearing pilasters irritated me particularly, even more than the fact that an architect should still use pilasters and columns and pediments at all in a building of 1929.

In the meantime, thanks to the twenty intervening years, I do not find them silly any longer, and I know that there is more to Lutyens than belated classical revivalism. What is there to him? This is the moment to try and assess his qualities and his position in British architecture; for the long announced Lutyens Memorial has appeared, three folio volumes on his work and one quarto volume on his life, published by Country Life and Scribner's with a biography of 606 pages by Christopher Hussey, 115 pages of analyses written by A. S. G. Butler, 888 pages of working drawings and 1,000 photographs. No English architect other than Wren has ever been recorded like this. Does Lutyens deserve such a magnificent display? Everyone knows the danger of the fame of a painter of too comprehensive a commemorative exhibition.