On Bookbinding.

An interesting lecture was delivered by Mr. T. J. Cobden-Sanderson on this subject in connection with the Arts and Crafts Exhibition, now open in the New Gallery, 121, Regent Street, on Thursday evening, 22nd inst.

Mr. Walter Crane having introduced the lecturer as an instance of a man of culture and refinement devoting himself to the practice of a handicraft and becoming a most able craftsman, well fitted to expound his subject:

Mr. Cobden-Sanderson said bookbinding was in itself a comparatively simple matter and easily described, though it was capable of execution in ways which rendered this work among the most beautiful in human achievement. He would confine himself to a demonstration of how a book was bound, the spirit in which it should be bound, and the aim of binding of the highest kind; previously referring, however, to the higher matters of history, thought, and contributory craftsmanship. This was an ancient craft, and was invented when writing, having first been incised on stone, began to be made on pliable material. Probably the roll was the earliest form of literature to which binding was applied, and this “Egyptian style” continued to be the general form for many ages, the Greek and Roman libraries also consisting of the same form of literature and binding for some centuries after the Christian era. The ancient roll had a spare sheet for cover, with margins cut perfectly even and parallel, the back was rubbed with pumice-stone to make it smooth and polished, and finally the volume was rolled round a wooden, bone, or even golden cylinder. Sometimes two cylinders were used, one at each extremity, and they were carved at the ends or embellished with ivory, silver, gold, or jewels. Strings were employed to keep the whole firm, and to prevent the introduction of dust or insects. Generally the title was inscribed on the outside or the cover; and rolls thus “bound” were sometimes further inclosed in chests of cedar.

The folded form of literature was attributed to Eumenes, King of Pergamus (whence “parchment,” of which he was also said to be the inventor), and contemporaneously with it came the modern binding, the essence of which was the employment of two boards and an endless thread for tying the sheets and boards together. Wood, silk, velvet, leather, silver, gold, and jewels, had all been used in the binding and decoration of the world’s written wealth; but time had given the victory to leather and gold, which came into universal use with the invention of printing. He must refer to the great old binders and the patrons who praised and gave them work. Corvinus, King of Hungary, had in his library 50,000 books and MSS., all in the most costly bindings.* The Medici, Maioli, and Grolier, with many another, might also be mentioned as having given name and fame to many a book still living. Le Gascon, too, the Eves, Nicholai, Clovis, and Robert, and the famous and beautiful women who loved beautiful books in beautiful bindings, which still survived to restore to us for a moment the long vanished past. Mention must also be made of the kindred crafts which produced the materials and tools required for this work. Binders used threads of flax and silk, cord, paper, board, paste, cloth, velvet, parchment, vellum, calf, and morocco; and in the old and happier days they had been presented with the wild deer of the forests, the skins of wild animals being the best that could be had for binding purposes. At the present time morocco was

[* It is said that many of these books are still in the possession of the Sultan, at Constantinople.—Ed.]
made from the skins of goats reared in the mountains of Africa, Switzerland, and Germany, and though not always as good as could be wished, were sometimes good enough. Tools were required for smoothing, pressing, holding, cutting, scraping, paring and striking, and for impressing the leather in decoration. For the production of these materials and tools many different crafts were employed—a fact to be borne in mind if the solidarity of all industries was to be understood and the dignity of each to be appreciated.

Bindings might be divided into two main divisions—those for use merely, and those for beauty's sake, though either of them might possess both characteristics. In the first class came bindings intended for temporary use, such as French paper covers, or paper covers of English magazines. Next came paper or cloth boards, in which most of the English books of to-day were issued to the public; and then bindings intended to last as long as the binder could make them last, comprising half and whole bindings, depending upon whether the strong material covered back and sides alike. All those bindings were variously decorated, from the magazine covers to the beautiful designs in cloth of Day, Rosetti, Webb, and others. Gold decoration was, however, more suitable for half or whole bindings. Such bindings had their ideals of beauty which were within the reach of every craftsman if only the world would give him the opportunity to realize them. To do good work for good ends was to lift one's life out of the vulgar and commonplace, to give it dignity and happiness, to put oneself in harmony with the universal order, to become a part of it, and so to become a part of the highest life itself. Not every book deserved a beautiful binding, and to bind a book in the highest fashion was an act of homage to the genius of the author. Assuming he had some such book in hand, he would proceed to explain how he should bind and decorate it, always seeking to make intelligible and to commend to them the craft life, and all that it might mean in a properly directed existence. As on entering his workshop to bind a book, he would now take off his coat, and put on what he fondly hoped would be the banner of the future, an apron. [The lecturer suited the actions to the words, and arranged his tools and benches for the second part of his lecture.]

First, he gave a description of parts of a bound book, and the main operations of forwarding, finishing, preparing for sewing, backing (including an explanation of the various kinds of backs, flat, convex, and concave), boarding, attaching, holeing, edge-cutting, backing for covering, and covering with preparation of skins. These operations he illustrated upon a press standing on the platform, and by drawing diagrams in chalk on a blackboard. He said the characteristics of a good binding were that it should be firm, elastic, smooth, where smoothness was possible, and sharpness of edges even to the point of crispness. Morocco was the best skin that could be used for the purpose. Vellum could not be got in England for putting on books, and calf wore badly; but good morocco was an excellent material.

Having explained how a book was bound and decorated, it remained only to say something of the conditions under which that binding and decoration might be done, and the aim and spirit of the work and of the qualifications of the great binder—for greatness might be hoped for even in the crafts. Some six or seven classes of workers divided among them the labour of bookbinding at wages varying from 20s. to 60s. a week, the designer especially if an artist, being paid at a higher rate. The employer, in his turn, was subject to the orders of the public, and had to bind to please his master, being conditioned in his work by the price which that master, the public, would pay. Above all things, the public loved what was cheap, seeing only its own side of the bargain, and that not very clearly. Those were not the
conditions of good bookbinding, nor were they the conditions under which binders, either as craftsmen or as men, could exercise and develop their highest qualities. It was from the division of labour and the unremitting pursuit of one restricted object that finish and mere cleverness superseded the artistic fancy and delightful variation of details which constituted the life of the craft, and which subsist only with leisure, liberty, and fulness of purpose. So the versatility of the worker’s power was paralysed, the range of his mental vision depressed, and the purpose of his work enfeebled or withdrawn from his understanding. To the allocation to individuals of portions of work which were esteemed too mechanical or too gross to occupy the time and attention of the artist or man of brains, or too unremunerative, was due that tendency which, when fully developed, constituted the divorce between mind and hand, which eventuated finally in the degradation of manual labour, and with it of the labourer, and in the impoverishment of the artistic fancy and artistic brain. It was in the actual labour of the hands that the imagination saw its opportunity, and leaped forward to give beauty to its toil, as it was precisely in the imaginative treatment of its toil that the labour of the hands, seeing its transfiguration into beauty, saw its benediction. In bookbinding, as in other crafts, for the work’s sake and for the man’s sake, was to be commended the union of the lower and of the higher work—of the mind and of the hand—and the concentration in one craftsman of all the labours which went to the binding and decoration of a book. With regard to the outer world also, the position of the craftsman was not what it should be. He should not in his work be so dependent upon the public—upon its tastes, and upon its desire to have its own way at its own price. The aim of a craftsman worthy of the name was too high to be thus controlled. That aim was not to make money, and he was not to be controlled as if it were by a public whose chief aim was to save it; but to do good work for good ends—to be paid, not that he may work, but to work that he may be paid. He should have more liberty, more scope in which to exercise his gifts to produce things of use and—in his happiest moments—also things of beauty. Things of beauty are beyond all price. Price alone cannot produce them. So a beautiful binding is made not to order—that is impossible—not to gratify the vanity of the public, but as an act of worship to the genius of some great writer whose book it clothes and would perpetuate. The binder should be, to fulfil his high task, besides craftsman and artist, a man educated. He must know, himself, what is beautiful in literature, and be his own master in the choice of the beautiful books which he shall bind. How otherwise can he do just homage to the genius of his author? The happiness, the moral, intellectual, and imaginative greatness of a great people depend upon the union of the highest life of the imagination and of the spirit with the labour of the hands. A dedication of the craftsman’s powers to details each separated from the rest, and made a task for his whole life, is degrading and destructive of life itself; but if made a portion only of a man’s whole life, and practised intelligently as a skilful adaptation of means to an end, develop invention and the imaginative faculties, distract the mind from the vexed question of man’s own destiny, and give it rest and hope that, even as from his own hands here there rise things of beauty and of use, so from his whole life’s work there may arise in the hereafter what may in the spirit be only another form of the present, a something of even greater use and of greater beauty still. (Applause.)

Mr. Walter Crane proposed a vote of thanks to the lecturer, which was accorded with acclamation.