

The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift: Intellectual Barbarians. Annabella Pollen, Donlon Books, 2016.

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This is a beautiful and intriguing book that tells a fascinating story about a little-known form of alternative modernist design and craft practice. Published by the independent Donlon Books and written by Annabella Pollen as part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded Fellowship, it draws on numerous archival sources from public and private collections, and includes over a hundred largely unseen images in black and white, and colour. The book charts the origins, structure, philosophies and legacy of the short-lived but influential Kibbo Kift (K.K.) group, an 'all-ages, co-educational and pacifist society for the promotion of camping and handicraft' whose ambitions, as Pollen's beautifully written, erudite, insightful and often witty text informs us, went well beyond the simple pleasures of backwoodsmanship and open air bathing to encompass the serious task of preparing 'body, mind and spirit' for the transformation of society and the world (p. 23-24).

This is the first full-length work to explore the Kift's innovative and diverse cultural production, which includes decorated tents, campaign banners, protest graphics, costumes and ceremonial attire, illuminated manuscripts, carved totems, photographs and more, all fashioned in a distinctive 'Hybrid medieval-modernist style' (p. 12). Introducing each of the four chapters: Movement, Culture, Spirit, and Resurrection with a relevant photo-essay, Pollen foregrounds the central role that visual and material culture played in Kift identity as it was performed through such diverse activities as hiking, dance, and ceremony. The reader not only encounters but also experiences the group: an eccentric tribe running amuck in the Sussex countryside, unmediated but through their own 'propaganda' of black and white photographs, brightly coloured motifs, crudely carved artefacts, and bizarre costumes.

Kibbo Kift – an antiquarian, colloquial Cheshire term meaning ‘proof of strength’ - was founded in 1920 by the charismatic but autocratic John Hargrave (K.K. designated name White Fox) and the book focuses on the period from 1920 to 1932 when he changed it from a cultural to a political movement. A novelist, journalist and advertising designer, Hargrave was well informed about modern art and design, yet despised it as a symptom of the degraded nature of modern life. He was, nevertheless, not above adapting advertising’s powers of persuasion to implement the ‘Great Work’: the transformation of society according to K.K. ideas. Hargrave gained a deep understanding of the power of the brand doing layouts for such household names as Lux and Sunlight soap for the cutting-edge Carlton Studios agency. Handicraft, in contrast, was central to Kift practice and ethos being a means to encourage self-control, self-expression and self-reliance. The group had initially emerged as a woodcraft lore-inspired splinter group from the Boy Scouts. Baden-Powell, distrusting Hargrave’s anti-imperialistic and anti-militaristic beliefs, dubbed him a ‘dangerous man’ and had him excommunicated, something Hargrave revelled in.

With his dramatic looks, impressive oratory, and seriousness of purpose, Hargrave shaped every aspect of K.K. lore and activities. Members were instilled with a crusading sense of their importance and expected to conform to every diktat, even in personal relations. ‘Lolling about, slouching and touchy-feely “splarming” over one another’, for instance, was strictly forbidden (p 34). Those who criticised, and many did including a significant breakaway group of co-operative socialists who set up the rival Woodcraft Folk, were issued with a ‘black spot’ and ejected. Numbers, unsurprisingly, were relatively low never rising above a thousand in total and not more than a few hundred at any one time. For those who committed - principally middle-class, white-collar workers: socialists, pacifists, ex-Scouts, former suffragettes, and teachers interested in the group’s experimental approach to education - the K.K.’s promise to restore spiritual values to a material world, all while participating in the pleasure of outdoor pursuits, was compelling. This much is evident from the photographs of hiking kinsmen, women, and children enthusiastically shouldering rucksacks with K.K. insignia or

garbed in specially designed attire, their 1920s appearance touchingly at odds with their idiosyncratic ceremonial dress [1].

Dress and appearance was fundamental, signifying and actualising core values of 'dissent, distinction, reform and rebellion'; every member was 'a living piece of propaganda' (p. 108; 99). Pollen argues that Kift creative products were their most significant output. Hargrave continually issued proclamations on dress, but the essential credo was that it should be loose, healthy, handmade, useful, and picturesque, celebrating the 'pleasures and powers of nakedness and of dressing up' (p. 107). The most exotic garments include a brass exercise brassier and brief skirt embroidered with abstract patterns, which evoke Sonja Delauney's costumes for Ballet Russe, and the stiffened, square, wide-sleeved tunics worn by men that recall Bauhaus and Constructivist costumes. Dress, however, was strictly gendered. While women were expected to undertake outdoor activities alongside men they had to appear feminine at all times, and never 'mannish' (p.111).

One striking element is the number of Kinswomen who made important contributions despite the male-dominated, top down organisation of the group. Many had artistic backgrounds. Former suffragette Winifred Tuckfield, who with her sister Denise founded the Knox Guild of Design after leaving Kingston School of Art in protest about their tutor Archibald Knox's treatment, was a key figure organising the K.K. Education Exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1929. Kathleen M. Milne (Blue Falcon), whose parents studied at the Royal College of Art and herself attended Coventry School of Art, was a long standing member and 'Kin Scriptor'; she was one of several women who publicly criticised the gender imbalance of power in the Kindred. The group clearly offered such educated, liberated, artistic women an experimental space outside mainstream culture in which to imagine and enact different ways of living, new kinds of freedoms and responsibilities. This seems a fertile area for future research.

The mystical, spiritual, symbolic elements at the heart of Kin ritual are explored in depth in the final chapters of the book, which include new material pertaining to hitherto hidden occult activities. Above all, perhaps it is the curious combination of ancient mysticism with modernist aesthetics that is so arresting about Kibbo Kift culture, signposting the magical in the everyday. ‘The Mark’ or ‘K’ symbol - part mystical insignia, part brand logo – is indicative [2]. Drawing on the ritualistic Kin greeting: an upright figure with one hand raised to the sky and one to the earth, it is prominent in the modernist photographs by ‘Kift photographer’ and theatrical designer Angus McBean that open the book. Communing with ancient stone circles, these mysterious figures align the group with an alternative rural, mystical modernism whose legacy is alive today in the cultural preoccupations of the folk revival and the English eerie (1) and the direct action protests of political radicals. A attractive artefact in itself, this book will be of interest to all those alive to the wider social, political, cultural, and spiritual ramifications of design and craft, including scholars, students, artists, designers and the wider public.

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1. Macfarlane, Robert. (2015: 10 April) The Eeriness of the English Countryside. *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardain.com/books/2015>