

Review: Harry Clarke lecture by Dr Nicola Gordon Bowe

The lecture was introduced by Peter Cormack, who has known Dr Bowe for 35 years. Dr Bowe began by taking the audience on a journey through Clarke's short life (he died when he was just 41, and had stopped painting glass when he was 39). Clarke used to say that his aim in glass was to 'make it miraculous, as though the hand of man has never touched it' ... this was one of many paradoxes about him and his work – he was devoted to skill and craftsmanship but also wanted his windows to 'fly'.

Clarke was born in 1889 in Dublin, to where his father Joshua had moved in 1877 from Leeds after the family printing business had failed. Setting up as a church decorator and maker of art objects, he employed a stained glass worker named Pope, and later a William Nagle. In the firm's front door were two panels, of Dante and Beatrice, made by Nagle in a deep-coloured modern style fashionable in Glasgow, demonstrating to visitors the firm's inventive abilities. (These panels have, sadly, since been removed and sold to a dealer in England.) Nagle also taught Harry the basics of the craft. Joshua Clarke put his sons on his calling card while Harry was still very young – he probably did some stained glass work for the firm before leaving school.

The time was a tremendous period of church building and decoration, and because the growing nationalist movement aimed to use homegrown talent Joshua became very 'Irish', converting to Roman Catholicism to attract patronage. The designs then were not exciting, and were commissioned in England, so the firm was largely getting by doing run-of-the-mill ecclesiastical work. Also no glass was then being made in Ireland, but Clarke could post a tiny bit of glass to Hetleys, which would arrive next day.

After school, Harry attended night classes in life drawing at Dublin School of Art for 3 years before gaining a scholarship there, which enabled him to study during the day and enter exhibitions. The teacher, Alfred Child, had been recommended by Christopher Whall. Child knew how to paint; he was not liked, but knew his stuff. In 1905 Harry spent a 3-month trial period in London and studied at the South Kensington School of Design, but failed to secure an apprenticeship and returned to Dublin.

Whilst still attending Child's classes, Harry also began to show the panels he had made at the Art School at Dublin exhibitions, including 'The Meeting of St Brendan with the Unhappy Judas', and these he later entered into the South Kensington National Competition, for which he sent 4 cartoons, and 2 panel sections, and in 1911 his designs won the overall Gold Medal for Ireland, which made both art school and patrons take notice, as he focused on Irish subjects, and by this time could really paint. 'St Brendan' was a dramatic composition with a wild, staring Judas enveloped in rich flame colours. Harry was fascinated by the subject and returned to it several times. The second panel, 'The Godhead', though more conventional had original acid etching on blue, and recalled early illuminated manuscripts.

In 1912, Harry's entries for the competition won again, as did his final 2013 entries, including a long thin cartoon of Judas, with noose around his neck, this section worked up in glass with leading round each of the 30 pieces of silver. The judges loved the workmanship, remarking that he had coaxed the colour to life, and that the sense of rhythm of leading was 'very ingenious'.

While waiting to hear if his scholarship was renewed, in 1913 Harry made a piece for the porch of father's house, as well as self-portraits, watercolours, and pen-and-ink drawings much influenced by Beardley: for instance the 1914 'Mephisto' holding a glass of absinthe, in dress looking like slab of green toothpaste. Three early B & W drawings were illustrations of a Yeats poem 'The Song of Wandering Aengus'. Harry always kept his book illustrations going at same time as his stained glass; he had studied graphics at art school and was a good graphic designer.

After college, Clarke went to Paris to look at glass in the Trocadero rescued from the French Revolution, and also visited Chartres, where he was allowed to climb up scaffolding to see the glass up close. He used its rich blues in his subsequent work.

His first commission after the French trip was a calendar for an insurance company. At the same time, he was working at his

father's studio and on his illustrations for Hans Christian Anderson's *Fairy Tales*. In 1914 he was asked to send designs for windows of the Honan Chapel, University of Cork, a gem of the Celtic Revival; in 1915 he received an order for 5 windows there. His designs are like rich tapestries. They depict five saints each in a dominant colour (he was aware of the colour symbolism dictating early Gothic colour schemes): in St Patrick (green), Clarke's love of the macabre is evident; St Brigid is in blue slab, studded with details like medieval glass, a kaleidoscope of colour.

In all, Clarke did 11 panels in the Honan chapel. St Finn Barr, patron saint of travellers, has a wonderful headdress, and a hand of dazzling light. In St Declan, the dominant colour is a mustard yellow, counterbalanced by points of red, blue and green. St Ita, like Brigid, uses much blue slab glass 1/4" thick. Her face is based on Theodora, the wife of Roman Emperor Justinian. The face of St Gobnait, patron saint of beekeepers, in strong profile and very pale against her red hair and deep blue dress made up of painted honeycombs, was inspired by Donatello faces in the V&A. Her dress notably has a high-necked collar – which was to become a feature in Clarke's later work. St Brendan, the seafarer, is in commanding pose reminiscent of Klimt and sporting fishnet gloves, with below a Judas, his bottom half turned into a goat, whom Brendan had found suffering. Two final windows are smaller, and more delicately painted. 'Our Lady of Sorrows' contains sheet music inscribed with a lullaby in Irish and English.

Clarke had married Margaret Quincey 1914, and moved into a tiny cottage; she had babies and painted, and he worked in a shed in the garden. He would wrap the glass, and take the tram to his father's studio, where he fired the glass. During the Irish armed rebellion of 1916, he had to walk through the area most affected by the troubles to get there, causing much anguish.

Around this time he also did some textile and handkerchief designs. For an A & C exhibition in Ireland, he designed the catalogue cover. There were also small panels including one based on Heinrich Heine's ballad 'A Meeting', about a mermaid and merman who enchanted villagers (Clarke had a lifelong fascination with mermaids). Another was 'The Song of the Mad Prince' from de la Mare, in which he etched a single piece of red glass plated with a blue flash. This is now in the National Gallery.

Other large commissions followed. In 1917 the Somerville family commissioned him for the E window at Castletownshend, Co.

Cork. In 1919 came a commission for a war memorial in Wexford; the figure of St Aidan is in white and ruby ... just like his book illustrations. A further memorial in Killiney, 'The Angel of Peace and Hope', has white glass with deep stain to make red hair; her ivory complexion was achieved with a fine wash.

In 1919 also his most famous book illustrations were published: *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* by Edgar Allen Poe, with ghoulish images, and other scenes of great beauty, ethereal beings. Other similar illustration commissions followed. He also continued to make small panels; the last, a tiny panel framed in a cabinet, was the 'Beguiling of Bottom by Titania', which sold at Sotheby's and disappeared thereafter. Others were Beauty and the Macabre, in 1922 and 1923, and Adam and Eve, taken from Paul Klee.

In 1924 came the last large window he made alone, of Keats' poem 'The Eve of St Agnes' – a staircase window arranged like a strip cartoon in eight scenes, in gold-pinks, blue and ruby; it won him a gold trophy. This is now in the Hugh Lane gallery. A self-portrait done that year shows him looking feverish (he was then battling daily with TB) ... at this time felt he was cursed, and in 1925 drew his illustrations for Faust, depicting himself as Faust.

For a last window, for the League of Nations building in Geneva, he depicted scenes from Anglo-Irish literature, including two banned authors: Joyce and O'Flaherty. He was then surprised to find these rejected as too shocking to represent the new Ireland. (The Temptress for *Mr Gilhooley* drawn from a photo of a Ballet Russes dancer was dressed only in a translucent veil.)

His health growing steadily worse, Clarke stayed at an Alpine sanatorium in the Alps; in 1931 he died in his sleep whilst still trying to return to Ireland, but as his grave was subsequently dug up, unfortunately there now is no trace of his remains.

Chris Wyard (from notes by Sue Wagstaff)