

Dr Nicola Gordon Bowe Hon FMGP (1948-2018)

PLATE VI
(overleaf):
Colin Stokes,
cloister of
Archbank concert
hall, Moffat.

The sudden and unexpected death of Nicola Gordon Bowe on 4 January 2018 was an incalculable loss to the world of art history, particularly in the fields of post-medieval stained glass and the arts and crafts revival of her adopted country, Ireland. An Honorary Fellow of the BSMGP (to whose members she frequently lectured over the years) and a member of the Editorial Advisory Committee of the *Journal of Stained Glass*, Nikki made a resplendent and lasting contribution to her chosen areas of research.

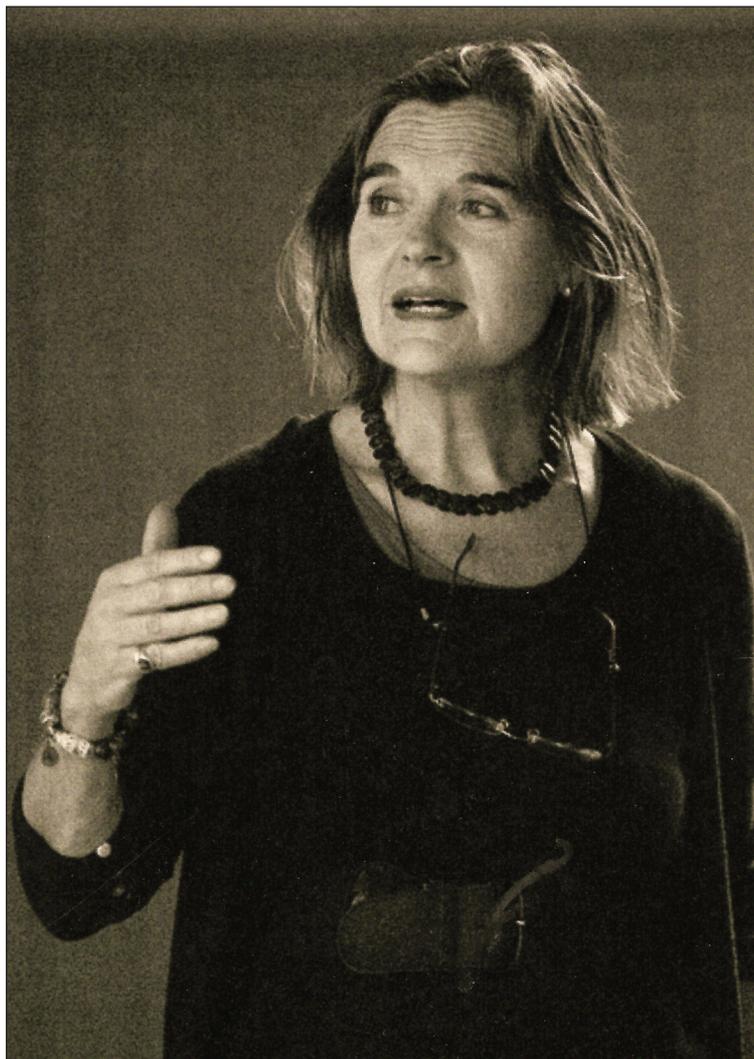
Nikki was born in Stafford and was educated at St Albans High School for Girls, followed by A-levels at the English School in Rome. Her undergraduate and graduate studies were undertaken at Trinity College, Dublin, where she studied for her doctorate (completed in 1982) under the distinguished art historian Anne Crookshank, who encouraged her interest in Ireland's 20th-century stained glass revival. One of her earliest publications was the catalogue of an exhibition (1979) of Harry Clarke's work that she curated at Trinity College's Douglas Hyde Gallery. This and subsequent research in the field rapidly established her as the pre-eminent authority on Irish stained glass and, indeed, the Irish Arts & Crafts Movement as a whole. Keenly aware of the wider milieu of the Celtic Revival in literature, theatre, etc., Nikki brought to her writing and lectures her own deep cultural knowledge and experience, which was truly global in its scope. Dublin's National College of Art and Design (the successor to the Metropolitan College of Art, where almost all the artists she studied had been taught in the 1900s) recognised her special gifts and in 1979 she was appointed to a teaching post. She later set up a prestigious MA course in design history, which attracted many talented young scholars. On her retirement from the NCAD, she was made an Associate Fellow. In later years she was also a Visiting Professor at the University of Ulster and an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Wales. A delightfully enthusiastic and charismatic communicator, Nikki's lectures would enthral her audiences even though – as not infrequently happened – she took a somewhat relaxed view of any stipulated limit to her speaking time.

Having settled permanently in Dublin during her student days, Nikki collected a huge number of friends both in Ireland and abroad. In 1974 she married the renowned garden historian Patrick (Paddy) Bowe. Their daughter Venetia, now a professional actor, was born in 1991. The family shared their home in a suburb of Dublin with a number of beloved pugs and cats, who were given absolute freedom to roam over every domestic space.

In 1988, with co-authors David Caron (a former PhD student at NCAD and then Trinity College) and Michael Wynne, Nikki produced the invaluable *Gazetteer of Irish Stained Glass*, with its comprehensive listings of windows by Harry Clarke and the artists of An Túr Gloine (the Tower of Glass), accompanied by biographical essays and her authoritative Introduction on 'Early Twentieth-Century Irish Stained Glass in Context'. The book was published by Irish Academic Press, who in the following year went on to publish her rather more lavishly illustrated *The Life and Work of Harry Clarke*, a much-expanded version of her doctoral dissertation. Even before its publication, Nikki's text had been awarded the distinguished 'Prix de la Confédération Internationale des Négociants en Oeuvres d'Art' in 1984. Full of insights into Clarke's idiosyncratic imagery and intricate craftsmanship, her book on Clarke was the first scholarly monograph in English on a post-medieval stained glass artist and had an extraordinarily significant impact on the appreciation of both Irish modern art and Arts & Crafts-inspired glass-painting. Henceforth Nikki became the *de facto* spokesman, although always in her impeccably and uncompromisingly English

accent, for Ireland's visual culture of the first half of the twentieth century. As a regular recipient of research and conference grants, which enabled her to travel all over Europe and across the Atlantic, she took her quasi-ambassadorial role very seriously. Few academics can have done more to raise awareness of the cultural heritage of the nation that she had made her home.

To coincide with the 1985 Edinburgh Festival, Nikki collaborated with Dr Elizabeth Cumming on a major exhibition that juxtaposed the achievements of Arts & Crafts designers and makers in the host city and in Dublin. Some years later, an expanded version of the exhibition catalogue was published as *The Arts & Crafts Movements in Dublin and Edinburgh 1885-1925* (Irish Academic Press, 1998). It was another pioneering work in which both its authors presented the fruits of their detailed



research into many notable but hitherto neglected creative figures. Interest in the cross-fertilisation of visual themes and issues of national identity across Europe (and elsewhere) at the turn of the twentieth century led Nikki to investigate the phenomenon of 'National Romanticism', especially in Central and Eastern Europe. She made study trips to Hungary, Romania and Poland and produced a number of conference papers and articles about the 1900s handicraft revivals in these countries. In 1990, as part of the Association of Art Historians international conference held in Dublin, she organised a session on 'Regionalism: Challenging the Canon', which led to her editing and contributing to the volume *Art and the National Dream: the Search for Vernacular Expression in Turn-of-the Century Design* (Irish Academic Press, 1993). This was one of the first English-language publications to examine diverse perspectives – from Hungary to Japan and the USA – on more or less consciously nationalist themes discernible in art and architecture of the period.

Alongside Nikki's wide-ranging interests in all sorts of artistic and cultural manifestations, stained glass always remained a field of perpetual fascination to her. From the 1980s onwards she had written and lectured about (and curated exhibitions

FIG. 1:
Nicola Gordon
Bowe. Photograph
by Kate Horgan.

of) the work of Wilhelmina Geddes (1887-1955), the Ulster-born and Dublin-trained artist whom many would now regard – not least through Nikki’s efforts – as the most talented and interesting of all Irish stained glass workers. Geddes was a complex and powerful personality and, when Nikki eventually embarked on a major monograph about her, she faced a number of challenges, especially in dealing with the biographical dimension. With unflinching energy, however, she threw herself into the task of exploring Geddes’s psychiatric history and its impact on her artistic output, with the result that the beautifully written and richly illustrated *Wilhelmina Geddes: Life and Work* (Four Courts Press, 2015) was very widely acclaimed on its publication, being short-listed for the Berger Prize for British Art History, amongst other distinctions. Like her *Harry Clarke* monograph (which had been reprinted in a revised and updated edition in 2012), the Geddes book broke new ground in its detailed analysis of the artist’s working methods and its understanding of the visual, intellectual and personal sources of her powerful Expressionism. Tragically, Nikki’s next project, a study of Evie Hone and her work, was not to reach fruition in her own hands. It would surely have been yet another definitive account of one of Ireland’s most interesting modern stained glass artists. However it is fortunate that her former student Joseph McBrinn has been given her archive material and plans to complete the project.

Nicola Gordon Bowe’s scholarly legacy is a magnificent record of publications and teaching. Those who knew her, or just attended one of her lectures, will surely retain a vivid and lasting memory of a dynamic, joyful personality whose passion for her work was powerfully engaging. In the artists that she chose to study and write about, she invariably found the same deeply vocational commitment to their work as she always brought to her own prolific endeavours.

Peter Cormack

On 20 October 2018 a special memorial event in honour of Nicola Gordon Bowe was held at the National Gallery of Ireland. Most of the following tributes from the British Society of Master Glass Painters were read out in full by Róisín de Buitléar, Artist in Residence 2018:

Nikki’s lectures given to the BSMGP at the Art Workers Guild in London were always delivered to packed houses with members attracted from across the country and not just because of her subjects, Harry Clarke and Wilhelmina Geddes – she was an equal attraction. On one occasion I was concerned to see that Nikki had decided to present with two slide projectors, which in pre-laptop days was like deciding to play Russian roulette with two bullets in the barrel instead of one, the chances of projector mishap having doubled. The inevitable happened and before the applause greeting her introduction had faded, the Guild projector followed by the guest projector went into meltdown and chaos ensued. I would need therapy before being able to remember exactly what followed, but all that comes to mind is how understanding everyone in the hall was, and above all how Nikki in her wonderfully eccentric manner rose above the chaos and managed to provide us with a wonderful talk.

BSMGP Chairman Caroline Benyon FMGP

I first met Nikki in the late 1970s – we became very good friends from that time onwards and shared many common interests, such as stained glass, the Arts & Crafts Movement and a love of animals. Whenever Nikki came to London, we would try to meet and I remember one occasion as being absolutely typical of her charm and irrepressible vivacity.

Nikki was keen to explore the early 1900s buildings of Hampstead Garden Suburb, so we set forth from the nearest tube station. Soon, she was wandering into people's front gardens 'to have a proper look at the architecture' while I, rather hesitantly, followed. Eventually we arrived at St Jude's church, a masterpiece by Sir Edwin Lutyens. As we looked around, Nikki was her usual voluble and enthusiastic self and it wasn't long before the Vicar came over to meet us. He was instantly charmed by Nikki's fascination with his church and its works of art. Within minutes we had been spontaneously invited to an excellent dinner in the Vicarage next door, where Nikki continued to entrance not only the Vicar but also his wife (who happened to be an art historian) and their American guests.

This incident, like her remarkable, erudite and often funny lectures, will always be a vivid memory. Nikki was a force of Nature who brought joy and excitement to all who loved her – and were sometimes delightfully bemused by her.

Peter Cormack Hon FMGP

Nikki had an inherent talent for making people do anything for her, even if reluctantly and sometimes complaining under their breath. One morning during a trip to London, she visited the studio to ask Glass House, Geddes and other general questions about stained glass – most of which had been previously been answered several times – but she was a force of nature and impossible to resist. Anyway, it was my birthday, something Nikki knew nothing about and something I never celebrate but an American sculptress friend over from Italy had decided to buy an ironic overstated birthday cake which she brought unannounced and what was due to be a brief visit expanded into a hugely enjoyable tea party sitting around Geddes's cutting bench in the studio and lasting into the early evening. It was jam-packed seamless transatlantic and pan-European chatter about art and life sliding between the profound and the very, very silly, inducing tears of laughter. Nikki left insisting that we should make it an annual event which we all knew would never happen and a month later she inevitably emailed several questions that she'd asked that afternoon. She was brilliant and fun in equal measure. Enjoy your friends while you can, we've lost both ours who shared the birthday cake.

Tony Benyon



FIG. 2:
Nikki with
Maurice Broady at
the BSMGP Cork
Conference in
2000. Photograph
by Ginger Ferrell.

We all know what a lovely person Nikki was in all ways but I have a memory of a curious personal trait. I had invited her to Edinburgh College of Art to give a talk to my students and interested others. A Kodak Carousel 2000 was the quality stock-in-trade of lecturers back in the day, usually reliable and almost indestructible. But very occasionally the mechanism would take down two slides together and these could either catch fire or get crushed. Very difficult to put right on the spur of the moment!

Bad for the flow. Nicola had her own way of avoiding this circumstance: she totally did away with the carousel tray. Retrieving one slide, then feeding in the next accurately and exactly on time on a continuing basis, became something I could not take my gaze from. Her process was not just a technical accomplishment perfectly timed; the choreography was balletic! Her whole body moved/danced so elegantly – like a bird – in achieving the purpose. I was so struck by this perfect action that it remains a very clear memory of her. She was always a marvellous house-guest and travelling companion. We got through a lot as I drove her to Kellie Castle in Fife, Robert Lorimer being much in her focus at the time.

Douglas Hogg FMGP

My wife and I were in Dublin in 1991, hunting down Harry Clarke stained glass, using Nicola's *Gazeteer of Irish Stained Glass*. She graciously entertained us to tea at home while breastfeeding Venetia. Years later, after her Harry Clarke lecture at the Art Workers' Guild in London, she asked me to help hunt down some missing Michael Healy panels, thought to have disappeared in Chicago. I engaged my Chicago sister in the search but we failed to find the panels. I was flattered to have been asked. I saw her last at her brilliant Wilhelmina Geddes talk to the BSMGP at the Art Workers Guild.

Stephen Eisenstein

Nicola was a tonic to the stained glass world. Her research pushed the boundaries of scholarship. She brought two great Irish artists to the attention of the world. Her enthusiasm for stained glass was infectious and hugely useful to all us practitioners. She is greatly missed.

Caroline Swash FMGP

From the first moment I met Nikki, I could see what a whirlwind of delight she was. It was at a conference in Toronto in the late 1990s and she was shortly to give a paper. Suddenly there she was in the Ladies, asking me, a total stranger, if she could borrow my hairbrush. Dumbfounded I handed it over and watched as she stuck it in her huge halo of hair and promptly broke the brush in two pieces. The paroxysms of fervent apology were pure Nikki! Of course we would be friends. Later in the UK when I took over *The Journal of Stained Glass*, she kindly wrote a brilliant guest editorial on the state of stained glass research in Ireland and Europe. Over the years she eagerly promoted the work of her students and was a regular contributor herself, furnishing the stained glass world with her lively insight and wide experience. She was always a joy to edit, to work with, and to know and I still can't believe she's gone. This 1905 quote from G. Lowes Dickinson prefaced that guest editorial:

*Life like a dome of many-coloured glass
Stains the white radiance of eternity*

Sandra Coley Hon FMGP