

Wilhelmina Geddes – A talk by Dr Nicola Gordon Bowe



Early this year a sumptuously illustrated and sharply written book was published, celebrating the life of a female artist who is more famous abroad than in her native Ireland. Admirers such as John Piper noted that she was a master of colour who should be compared to Braque, Rouault, Kandinsky and Matisse. She is so highly regarded by the international community that when names of great artists were given to craters discovered on the planet Mercury, she was honoured alongside Shakespeare, Beethoven and Picasso.

The artist was Belfast-born Wilhelmina Geddes and she was one of the greatest practitioners, anywhere, in the currently underrated art of stained glass, in the first half of the Twentieth Century.

The newly-published book has been written by the greatest authority on stained glass in Ireland, Nicola Gordon Bowe, who very kindly agreed to come and talk to us in front of the two examples of Geddes' work which we are blessed to have in Fermanagh. We began at Inishmacsaint Parish Church (Derrygonnelly) to study her *Angel of Resurrection* and then drove to Devenish Parish Church (Monea) to see her *Innocence Walking in the Fields of Paradise*.

These are early works, and give little indication of the strength and verve of her later work, but both were covered in Dr Gordon Bowe's slide presentation. In both churches William McBride, organ, and Stephen Magee, trumpet, kindly agreed to heighten our enjoyment with well-chosen music.

After being trusted, as an unknown artist, with the two commissions in Fermanagh, Geddes went on to have a worldwide practice. Probably her largest commission was in Ottawa, Canada, where she created the three-light, heroic Duke of Connaught Memorial Window, *The Welcoming of a Slain Warrior by Soldier Saints, Champions and Angels* (from which the top image is a detail). In St Luke's, Wallsend-on-Tyne, Northumberland, there is the 1922, tragic yet dramatic five-light *War Memorial Window*, showing the Crucifixion bedecked with sparkling colour.

But it is, of course, much more interesting to see any great art work "in the flesh" and the only other set of Geddes' windows that I have seen, apart from the two in Fermanagh, are those portraying St Patrick and St Colomba in the Church of Ireland, Larne.

They are the subjects of the two photos below. You can see how strongly and unsentimentally she portrays, in these later works, the faces of the two great men of the early church in Ireland. I was bowled over. There's also a small window in Our Lady of the Universe Church in Curran, Achill Island, if you happen to be there on holiday.



Wilhelmina Geddes was a complex character. She suffered a mental breakdown in her late thirties and spent six months in a mental hospital. She had fears of contact with comets or dead stars. Indeed, she began to include coloured shooting stars in her windows from 1914.

She was defensive and vulnerable. But she was honest and could see herself for exactly what she was and her personal diaries, expounded in Dr Gordon Bowe's book, give a telling insight into the mind of this extraordinary artist. We are very privileged to have part of her story on our doorstep in Fermanagh.

Richard Pierce is a retired architect who has exhibited his watercolours, has written a novel, climbed Kilimanjaro, swims a mile a day and spends half the year in Finland with his partner.

Book Reviews: Times Higher Education Irish Times