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WILHELMINA GEDDES' OTTAWA WINDOW

Shirley Anne Brown
discusses Wilhelmina Geddes'
sole North American
commission, a First World War
memorial window in Canada,
commissioned by the
Duke of Connaught and
produced at *An Túr Gloine*.

In the past several years, there has been renewed interest in the life and works of Wilhelmina Geddes, the admittedly eccentric, but remarkably talented Irish-woman who, for fifteen years before she moved to London in 1925, was an active member of *An Túr Gloine*.¹ The majority of Geddes' surviving stained glass windows are in Great Britain and Ireland, with one window in Ypres, Belgium, and two in Wellington, New Zealand. Her sole North American work is the First World War Memorial Window commissioned by the Duke of Connaught for St Bartholomew's Church in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada.²

St Bartholomew's sits unobtrusively on the corner of Victoria and McKay Streets in Ottawa.³ This small Anglican church was begun in 1867, the year of Canadian Confederation, as the parish church for Rideau Hall, the official residence of the Governor-General. It was built on the model of a Victorian country parish church. Today, passers-by are few, and almost no one realizes that this neo-Gothic structure possesses a most remarkable stained glass window.⁴

On Sunday morning, 9 November, 1919, St Bartholomew's was filled to overflowing. At the appointed time, the Governor-General of Canada, the Duke of Devonshire, escorted the Prince of Wales into the church, accompanied by representatives of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. The future Edward VIII had come from England specifically to unveil the new East Window, a memorial to lives lost during the war which had ended only a year before.

The next day's report in the *Ottawa Citizen* described how an audible gasp swept through the congregation when the Prince pulled the cord and the drapery covering the window fell away. It does not opine whether it was a gasp of appreciation or astonishment at what they saw before them. Instead of the usual Late Victorian sentimentality common in Canadian stained glass of the day, this unassuming little church now housed the most expressive tribute to human heroism and sacrifice that Ottawa, perhaps even Canada, had seen.

The subject of the three-light window is the welcoming of a slain warrior into the eternal company of soldier-saints, champions, and angels. The warrior, who personifies all the memorialized men, strides in from the left, wrapped in a crimson cloak, carrying a broken spear. He is conducted

by Raphael, the Angel of Healing, and by Gabriel, the Angel of the Annunciation. Behind them, the Angel of Death, in dark clothing, bears a cup in his hand; the Angel of Peace hovers above. In the middle window, they are met by three Roman soldier-saints – Longinus, Sebastian, and Martin – while above them looms Michael, the militant Archangel, carrying a sceptre and a sword. To the right are English and French national saints – Edmund, Joan of Arc, and Louis, with Saint George above on horseback. A close look at the background reveals the knights of the legendary King Arthur. The acts and martyrdoms of the saints are shown on their banners while the knights carry pennons painted with their exploits or emblems. Almost all the figures are accompanied by identifying inscriptions. In the tracery Angels of War and Peace descend from the crenellated towers of the heavenly citadel.

The base panels contain the memorial inscription, an effigy of the recumbent soldier, and mourners. The inscription reads:

This window was erected by Arthur, Duke of Connaught, Governor-General of Canada, to the Glory of God and in affectionate memory of the members of his staff who fell in the Great War 1914-1918. May their names live forever more.

But the Duke of Connaught was not in Ottawa on that chill November day. At the age of 69, his health required that he spend the winter months in the relative warmth of the south of France. Born in 1850, the third son of Queen Victoria, Prince Arthur had accepted the post of Governor-General of Canada in 1911, returning to England in 1916. It was he who presented the window to St Bartholomew's Church where he and his family had worshipped regularly during their five-year stay in Ottawa.⁵

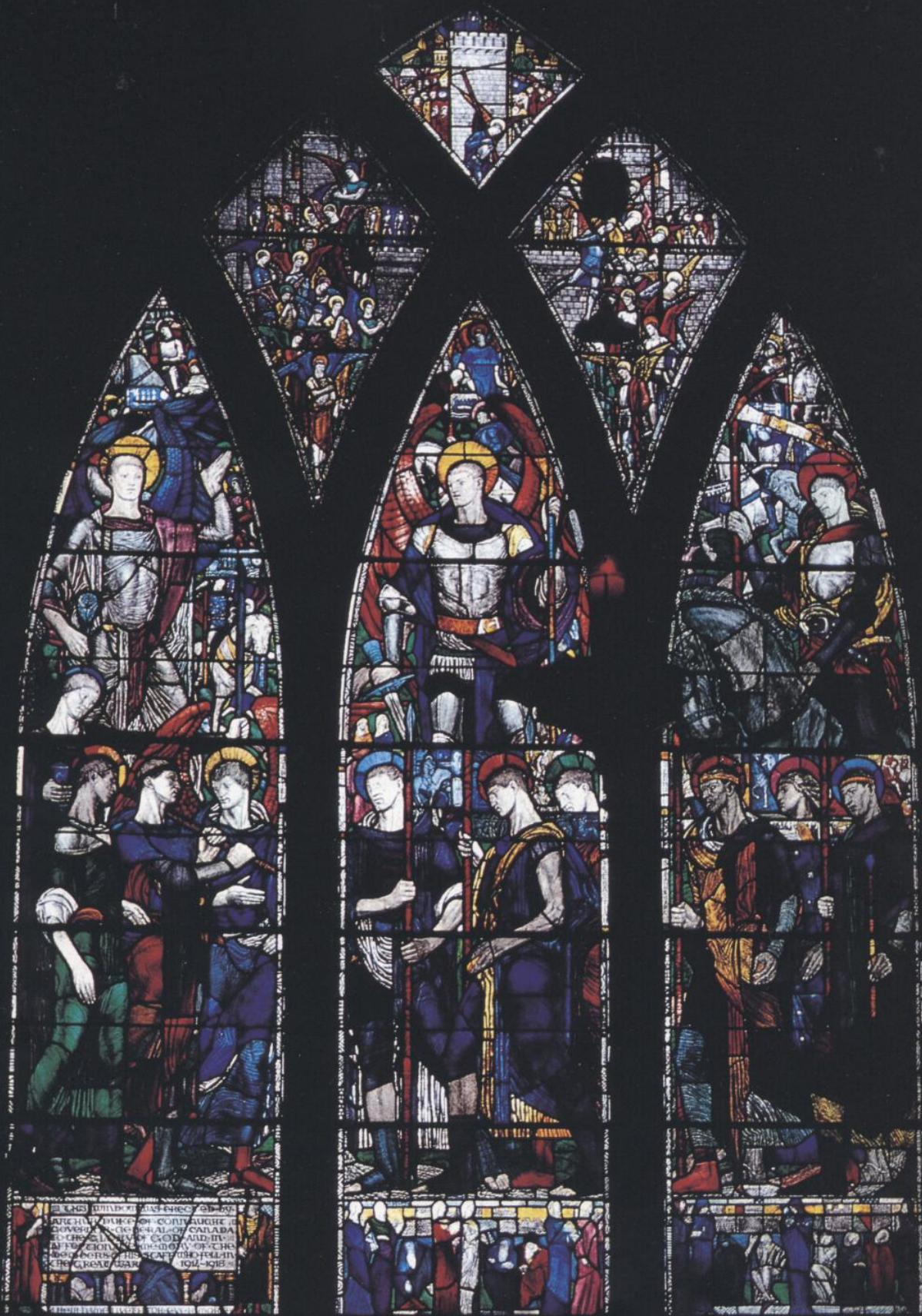
The Great War had broken out during the Duke's term in Canada and soon took sad toll of his household. Since most of his

personal staff were experienced professional military men, they went off to assume various active commands, including that of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. A bronze plaque on the wall indicates that the memorial commemorates ten men from the Duke's personal staff who were killed during the war, three of whom had been with the 'Princess Pats', as the regiment had quickly become known.⁶

When she received the commission, Wilhelmina Geddes was a relatively unknown thirty-two year-old Irish woman from Belfast. The Ottawa window was her first large stained glass commission and was produced in the Dublin studios of *An Túr Gloine*, the Tower of Glass. It is not known exactly why the Duke of Connaught gave the commission for the Canadian memorial window to this progressive artists' cooperative which was very much involved in the Irish Celtic Revival and the Arts and Crafts Movement.⁷

As Prince Arthur, the Duke had visited Ireland many times and had served as Commander-in-Chief of the British Forces there from 1901 to 1904. During his period of residence in Dublin, his family had naturally become involved in Anglo-Irish society, making friends and contacts with the literati and the aristocratic women who were the main patrons of the revival of the arts in Ireland. It is probable that the commission was directed through one of them. Geddes' letters indicate that the most likely contact was Lady Leslie, an American woman living in Ireland who was a confidante of the Duke and his wife, and also very close to Sarah Purser, who headed the Tower of Glass.⁸

Purser gave the commission to Wilhelmina Geddes who had been invited to join the group in 1910. Prior to her coming to Dublin from Belfast, Geddes had not been trained as a stained glass artist, but she learned the techniques from the other artists in the cooperative. Her remarkable talent developed rapidly and the series of windows which she created during the late 'teens heralds the arrival of her fully-developed style. The memorial window in St Anne's Church on Dawson Street in Dublin, installed in 1918, shows St Michael flanked by smaller figures of warrior saints and angels, and nine exquisitely-painted, dramatic interludes from their lives. Three windows were completed in 1920 for All Saints Church in Blackrock, County Dublin, although only two now



Wilhemina Geddes, Soldiers' Memorial Window, St Bartholomew's Church, Ottawa, Canada. 1919. Complete view.



Detail: Raphael; Slain warrior; Gabriel

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exist: St Michael and St Raphael. There also, the central figures are surrounded by smaller figures, evoking a complexity of both iconography and surface design. The Ottawa window shares a close kinship with these examples, in particular with the Dawson Street work.

According to the order books of the Tower of Glass, the Ottawa window was confirmed in May 1917, and it has always been assumed that it took two years to complete. But a recent look through Geddes' remaining correspondence, now in the National Library in Dublin, indicates that she had started work on the design before the end of 1915.⁹

The records of the Princess Patricia Infantry yield the information that the first of the Duke's household staff to fall during the war had been Captain DOC Newton. Deployed near St-Omer, on the second night of trench warfare for the regiment, 9 January, 1915, Newton got lost between the lines, was mistaken for the enemy and was shot by one of his own nervous sentries.¹⁰

But it was the death of Lieutenant-Colonel Farquhar, the Duke's Aide-de-Camp and a personal friend, which brought the realities of the war home to Ottawa. Farquhar had been chosen as commander of the Canadian regiment and he died in action on 20 March, 1915, at Voormezele, behind the trench lines at St-Eloi.¹¹ Notification of his death caused a shockwave to pass through the Governor-General's household in Ottawa and a memorial service was held for him at St Bartholomew's. It was his death which must have provided the impetus for the commissioning of the memorial window, even though it was not confirmed for another year and a half. The third household staff member assigned to the Princess Pats to lose his life was Captain Herbert Buller who replaced Farquhar as commanding officer and died on 2 June, 1916, in Sanctuary Wood during the Battle of Mount Sorrel.¹²

Geddes knew that her designs adopted a different aesthetic from the stained glass produced by the large commercial houses. The human figure always dominates Geddes' compositions, and she created a new male prototype for stained glass – modern-looking figures, close-shaven, classically-derived young men, serious and thoughtful – very different from the vacuous Late Victorian model. Their sinewy bodies are covered with wet-fold drapery,

reflecting her consummate skill in life-drawing. Her incorporation of handwritten names and small poignant figurative details was to remain a hallmark of her style.

Geddes' stained glass designs have a strongly graphic quality, reflecting her lifelong commitment to printmaking, water-colour, and drawing. She painted her glass heavily with the traditional brown-black paint and wash, creating strong outlines, linear drapery patterns, and sensitive facial nuances.

With its intense colouration, the Ottawa window conveys a deeply spiritual, solemn intensity. Geddes saw herself as part of the centuries-old tradition of artists who worked with coloured glass. After her first visit to France in 1914, she said: 'I believe that strength of design and intensity of colour are the qualities to be aimed at in stained glass. I go back to the thirteenth century, where the figures are not only more impressive but more modern than anything that has been done since in the medium.'¹³

In order to achieve the results that she wanted, Geddes adhered to the Arts and Crafts philosophy that each window is the work of one artist who makes the sketch and prepares the cartoon, then selects and paints every piece of glass him or herself. Only the cutting and leading could be handled by someone else. Because of her intense involvement in both the design and production of her windows, Geddes required a lengthy period of time for her commissions.

In a letter, written at Christmastime 1915 from Belfast to Sarah Purser in Dublin, Geddes admitted she knew nothing about the taste of the Canadian public and expressed her anxiety and uncertainty:

Do you think Canadians are too stupid to like my little picture? I sometimes think it is stupidity complicated with conceit, not pure stupidity, that makes people like the worst best (as most resembling what they'd do themselves I suppose). Would Canadians be worse than Belfast people? I don't know much about them, except that they have a passion for telling the history of their lives at infinite length to strangers in boarding houses where they come to stay. Australians do it too.¹⁴

In spite of her reservations, she continued with the work on the Ottawa sketches. They caused her no end of frustration and it was almost two years before she pro-

duced a sketch which she considered satisfactory. From her letters and the five preliminary sketches which still exist, we get a reflection of Geddes' artistic struggles with this window. Always in fairly fragile health, she would work in spurts, spending consecutive days and nights dithering over her designs, and then doing nothing for weeks. This may very well have caused the delay in the confirmation of the order.

One of the two sketches in the National Gallery in Dublin is either an early or an alternative version.¹⁵ Here the composition is conservative and straight-forward. The core of the final iconography is in place already with the inclusion of St George, St Michael, and the Angel of Peace as dominant figures, the battalion of tiny angels in the upper background, and the effigy and mourners at the base.

The rudimentary pencil sketch¹⁶ shows Geddes moving in the direction of the final design with an increased number of main protagonists placed in two rows, and with the introduction of the mounted figures. Geddes complained endlessly about the design of the horses and her feeling that their white colour would dominate the colour scheme.

The new disposition of figures was retained through subsequent alterations, as can be seen in the second sketch in Dublin.¹⁷ The main procession of warrior saints, companion angels, and the 'deader' (as Geddes called him) are set into their final locations, as are St George and the Angel of Peace; St Michael impinges rather awkwardly into the lower range; the small angels are more evenly distributed through the traceries. It is a surprise to see the lion in the lower left light. It seems to have been suggested by someone other than Geddes, for she complained about it to Sarah Purser, saying it made no sense, and several times requested permission to remove it.

The crayon sketch¹⁸ indicates the next stage where she in fact has eliminated the bothersome lion and moved St Michael into the upper tier of figures, creating a definite division in the composition. This was to be the final version which was then refined into the cartoon.¹⁹ This latest surviving design is very close, but not identical, to the actual window. The predella panels are blank in all the sketches, possibly because of the uncertainty over the length of the inscription. No sketches exist for the predella figures which were to appear in the actual window.

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There is considerable, but fragmented, discussion of the iconography of the Ottawa window in the Geddes correspondence with Sarah Purser, but no clear indication emerges as to who might have dictated the subject-matter. It does seem that the general idea was set by the patron or his agent but that considerable leeway was given to the studio. Geddes was worried very early on that, with St Michael so prominently displayed, the window would take on the character of a *Last Judgement*, an idea she did not like particularly. At one point after the rejection of her suggestion that the deceased be shown ascending to heaven on winged horses, she sarcastically commented that, if a welcoming committee of saints was to comprise the main design, the deceased warrior might as well be shown shaking hands with them.

The Arthurian material in the background does not appear in any of the existing sketches before the cartoon stage, although it was first discussed in 1917. Geddes herself suggested the division of the Grail knights from the warrior knights and from King Arthur.²⁰ She mentioned the figure she would rather not include, such as the lion, the large horse, and Joan of Arc, who she felt was 'unwarlike' because of her gender. The details of the iconography, like the design itself, seem to have evolved through trial and error, over a lengthy period of time and through the daily mail between Belfast and Dublin.

Geddes' work is deeply religious, with a strong expression of emotion and sentiment, but not usually theological or liturgical. Perhaps this was an expression arising out of her strict Methodist upbringing. The prominent warrior saints were chosen to represent heroic kings of England and France and warriors of both sexes, although Geddes personally felt that a female warrior was out of place. Each hero is identified by name and the exploits of each one are depicted in the background. Near Longinus' head, he can be seen as the mounted Roman soldier present at Christ's crucifixion. On either side of Sebastian's massive neck the banner carries a row of kneeling archers, a reference to his martyrdom. To the left of Martin's head, the mounted soldier is dividing his cloak to share with the beggar. The funeral of St Edmund is seen near the English king's shoulder, while above that, a tiny Joan of Arc appears in full armour. At the right edge of the right light, the crusading



Sketch A for Memorial Window. Saint George, Gideon's Angel and Saint Michael. NGL cat.no. 18,433

St Louis of France is shown in the thick of battle. Astride a magnificent white steed, St George in purple armour dominates the upper part of the right window; his banner shows him as a knight at full tilt, undoubtedly a reference to the legend of his rescuing a maiden from a dragon. As the patron saint of England, he was a natural choice for the window, and was placed on the second tier of main figures, along with the Angel of Peace and Michael the Archangel.

Wilhelmina Geddes was a well-educated woman, and often made literary references in her work, often in the choice of the subsidiary figures. In the Ottawa window, the inclusion of several characters from the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table should not be seen merely as a rather obvious play on the patron's name, Arthur. Popularized during the nineteenth century through the revitalization of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*,²¹ the legendary heroes were widely interpreted as reflections of heroism and warrior ideals, models for all that was worthy in British culture and history.²²

Geddes seems to have relied on Malory's version rather than Tennyson's epic-length poem for her source. Above St George, the model of English military prowess, Geddes included the knights Tristram, Lancelot, and Palomides, embodiments of the tireless fighting man. In the upper part of the left window section, around the figure of the Angel of Peace,

the Quest for the Holy Grail is featured, with the three successful knights: Percival, Galahad, and Bors. The ship with the angel-guide carrying the three knights towards the vision of the Holy Grail appears three times, on a small scale. With the attainment of their Quest, these men reached their own inner peace, a peace also reached by the memorialized soldiers.

In the centre window, the background concentrates on the death of King Arthur. Between the sweep of St Michael's great crimson wings, Arthur rides in full armour. His banner carries the scene of the women mourning around his body as it is borne away in a boat to Avalon, with Sir Bedevere and an angel as solemn witnesses. There is a row of female half-figures just above the haloes of the lower tier of saints with the inscription: 'These are they that I fought for in righteous combat'. They are accompanied by Sir Gawain on a white horse. This refers to the vision and words of Sir Gawain which came to King Arthur the night before he was mortally wounded in combat against his son Mordred.

Along the base of the windows, a procession of singers and mourners accompanies the recumbent figure of a dead soldier – men too old to fight join the poignant procession of grief. The list of the commemorated deceased was not inserted into the window, but was placed instead on a separate plaque. When the commission for the window was finalised in 1917, and actual work could begin, the war was still raging and there was no way of knowing how long the list was going to be. Geddes was relieved by the decision to separate the dedicatory and memorial inscriptions, since there was a danger that it would take up too much space and destroy the design of her predella panels.²³

Geddes' familiarity with historical art is revealed by her occasional quotes from famous paintings or sculpture. In the Ottawa window, the row of archers near St Sebastian are variations on the kneeling archers from the pediment of the archaic Greek Temple of Aphaia at Aegina. The figures of the old men sitting so dejectedly in the base panels are not unlike some of the seated figures in the spandrels of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling. As far as we know, Geddes visited neither Munich, where the statues are, nor Rome, but reproductions of famous works of art were plentifully available.

The St Bartholomew's parishioners seem



Detail: Longinus ; Sebastian ; Martin



Detail : Edmund ; Joan of Arc ; Louis

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not to have been consulted about the details of the memorial window ordered by the Governor-General and the gasp uttered when they first saw it must remain enigmatic. It may be telling that there were no more Canadian commissions for Wilhelmina Geddes. Years later, there is a hint that Geddes felt a certain ambivalence about the tendering of the Ottawa commission and the publicity that had surrounded it. When she was working on the War Memorial window for Ypres Cathedral, she wrote that she had been recommended by 'people who liked my work - no Duke and no Duke's windows had anything to do with it. At present there won't be any newspaper Splosh about me ...'²⁴

Nevertheless, Geddes' window did have a lasting and dramatic effect upon what could be accepted in stained glass windows in Canada. The Ottawa window was hailed as a 'courageous adventure in the medium' by Charles Connick, an influen-

tial stained glass artist from Boston. Aesthetic doors were opened enabling other artists trained in the Arts and Crafts tradition to gain commissions. Examples include the memorial windows by Frank Hollister and Gladys Allen installed in 1928 in the Peace Tower Chapel in the Canadian Houses of Parliament. The English Bromsgrove Guild headed by A J Davies received commissions in the 1920s and 30s in Toronto and Montreal. In the 1930s, the Canadian Yvonne Williams could succeed with her strong new ideas. But none of these have the revolutionary strength and directness of the Geddes vision. It is time that the window placed in the little-known St Bartholomew's Church on a quiet Ottawa Street was given its due not only as a war memorial, but as a turning point in the history of stained glass in Canada. It is also time that the influence of Wilhelmina Geddes on other stained glass artists was reassessed.

Shirley Ann Brown

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- Recent works on Geddes include: Nicola Gordon Bowe, 'Wilhelmina Geddes: Ireland's Extraordinary Artist', *Stained Glass*, vol 76 no 1, (1981) pp 41-43; *Centenary Exhibition of Wilhelmina Geddes (1887-1955)*, Belfast, 1987. (Exhibition catalogue); 'Wilhelmina Geddes', *Irish Arts Review*, vol.4 no.3, (1987) pp.53-59; 'Wilhelmina Geddes 1887-1955. Her Life and Work - A Reappraisal', *The Journal of Stained Glass*, vol.XVIII, no.3, (1988) pp.275-301.
- See the window locations list in Nicola Gordon Bowe, David Caron and Michael Wynne, *Gazetteer of Irish Stained Glass*, Dublin, 1988, pp.31-87.
- This church is often mislocated in references. It is not to be confused with the Peace Tower Chapel in the Parliament Buildings, which is the official war memorial for the country.
- After a flurry of publicity when it was installed, the window seems to have been generally ignored by the North American press. It is referred to fairly often in Irish and English references to Geddes' work but has not before received a detailed study.
- For a biography of the Duke of Connaught see George Aston, *HRH the Duke of Connaught and Strathearn*, London, 1929.
- The complete list is as follows:
Lt-Colonel FD Farquhar, DSO, Coldstream Guards. Commanding Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.
Captain T Rivers Bulkeley, CMG, MVO, Scots Guards.
Captain Herbert Buller, DSO, Rifle Brigade. Lt-Colonel Commanding Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.
Captain Lord John Hamilton, Irish Guards.
Captain Lord Spencer Compton, Royal Horse Guards.
Captain Newton, Middlesex Regiment. Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry.
Major the Hon J Campbell, Coldstream Guards.
Major and Brevet Colonel Walter Long, CMG DSO, Scots Greys. Temporary Brig.-General Commanding 56th Brigade.
Major the Hon G Boscawen, DSO, Royal Field Artillery.
Captain Angus Mackintosh, Royal Horse Guards.
- See Nicola Gordon Bowe, 'The Irish Arts and Crafts Movement (1886-1925)', *Irish Arts Review*, (1990-91) pp.172-85.
- Lady Leslie was born Leonie Jerome. She was the sister of Jenny Jerome, who married Lord Randolph Churchill and became the mother of Winston Churchill. The close relationship between Lady Leslie and the Duke and Duchess of Connaught has been attested to by the Leslie family. Her name appears in a letter written by Geddes on 19 September, 1917 from Belfast in which she wonders whether Lady Leslie will be in Dublin to vet the cartoons for the window before the glass is cut. Another reference occurs in a note of 8 October, 1917 which discusses 'Lady L's' letter which relays the decision that the names of the deceased will be placed on a plaque rather than painted on the window.
- The first reference to the Ottawa commission is in a letter from Geddes to Sarah Purser, written at Portrush on 4 August, 1915, in which it is compared to the St Peter window in Christchurch Presbyterian in Rathgar. This was drawn to my attention by Nicola Gordon Bowe.
- Ralph Hodder-Williams, *Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry 1914-1919*. London & Toronto, 1912, p.24.
- Hodder-Williams, pp.43-44.
- Hodder-Williams, pp.124, 136.
- From Bowe, 'A Reappraisal ...', 1988, p.280 and notes.25,26.
- My thanks go to Mrs Elizabeth Kerr, Geddes' niece, for help in dating the Geddes' letters.
- Catalogue no. 18.433. 44 x 29.8cms. Ink, pencil and watercolour on board.
- In the collection of Mrs Elizabeth Kerr in London.
- Catalogue no.18.434. 38 x 30.5cms. Ink, pencil and watercolour on board.
- From Mrs Kerr's collection.
- The cartoon itself has disappeared, but the photograph is in Mrs Kerr's collection.
- Letter of 12 June, 1917 in a discussion of a sketch.
- An example of the longevity of the interest in Arthurian legends is the beautiful edition of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, with initials by Graily Hewitt, printed at the Ashendene Press in 1910-13.
- See Debra Mancoff, *The Arthurian Revival in Victorian Art*. New York & London, 1990.
- Letter of October 8, 1917 to Sarah Purser.
- Letter to Sarah Purser, 1 November, 1934, as quoted in Bowe, 'A Reappraisal ...', 1988, p.287.