

A fresh window on Harry Clarke

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William Butler Yeats assisted Harry Clarke in choosing Irish writers from which to inspire one of his finest works, the Geneva Window, only for it to be 'disgracefully' rejected

HARRY CLARKE'S position in Irish art history has never been less than secure. Though he died, in 1931, at the early age of 41, and suffered from ill-health for much of his working life, he was remarkably industrious and productive.

Clarke is generally acknowledged as the country's leading Symbolist artist, and as probably the finest Irish stained-glass artist ever. And there-in lies a problem, as many commentators have pointed out. For the most part stained glass is a site-specific, light-dependent medium. Rather than being held in museums, his works are widely dispersed, installed where they were designed for, or even further afield, seen at their best only at certain times and atmospheric conditions.

George Russell, AE, an enthusiastic critic of his work, said: "Harry Clarke has a genius which manifests itself at its highest in stained glass." His biographer, Nicola Gordon Bowe, put it: "Because Clarke's masterpieces are in the relatively inaccessible medium of glass and have to be tracked down in often remote churches or private collections, or have been lost after colour reproduction had done them little justice, the legacy of his short life has been insufficiently recognised." Her opinion was echoed by American curator Penelope Hunter-Stiebel, "The very nature of stained glass and the difficulty of photographic reproduction has limited the admirers of Clarke's best work to those who visited the architectural sites for which it was commissioned." To make matters worse, Clarke's last masterpiece and one of the outstanding achievements of 20th-century Irish art, the *Geneva Window*, was from the first ill-treated by the State, who originally commissioned it, and is installed in Miami.

Now a new book *Strange Genius: The Stained Glass of Harry Clarke* by Lucy Costigan

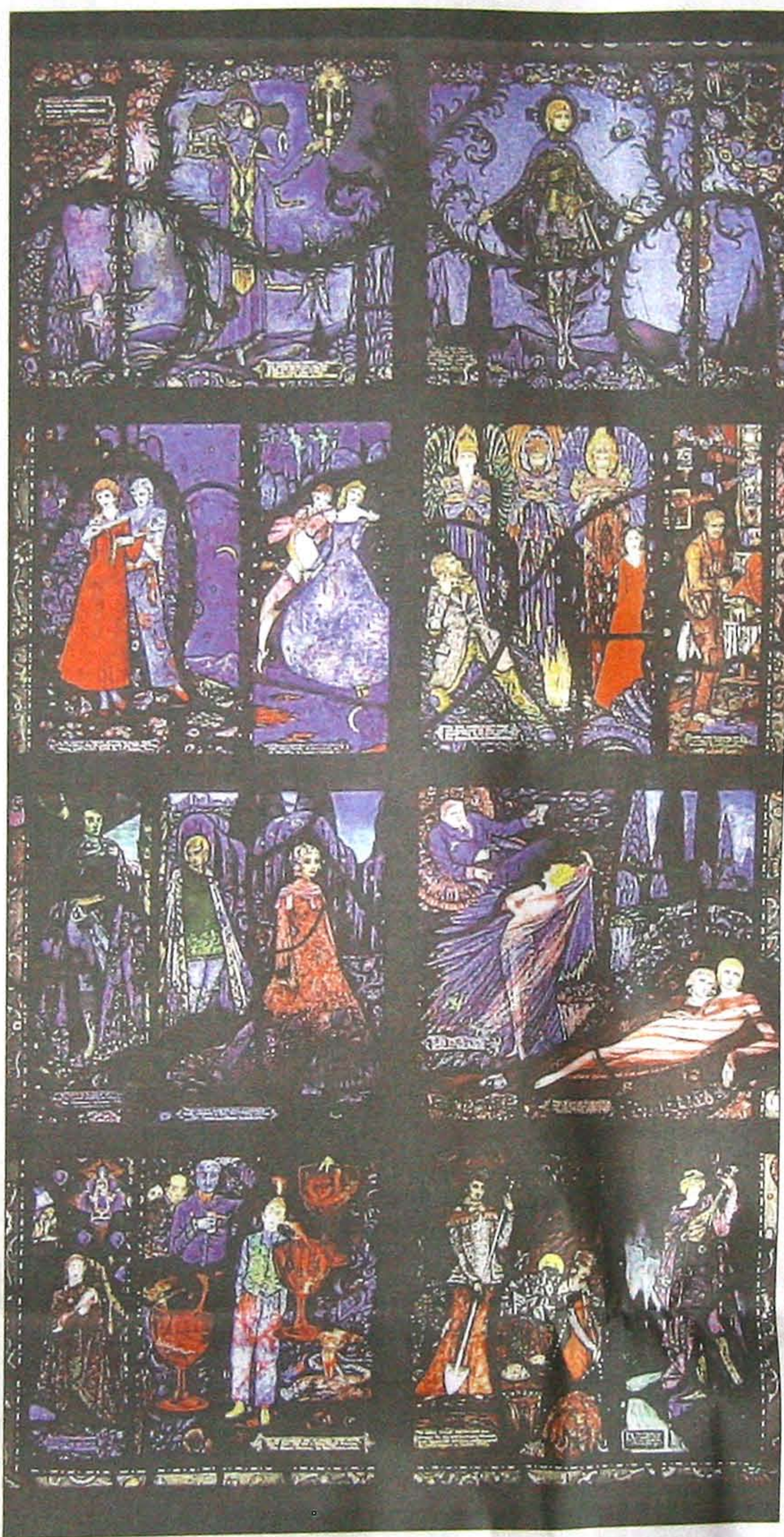
and Michael Cullen, and a related website, makes the full extent of Clarke's achievement accessible as never before. It does nothing less than document Clarke's entire, extant stained glass works, be they in private or public hands. Costigan achieved this remarkable feat with the aid of the 1988 *Gazetteer of Irish Stained Glass*, archival research, and a great deal of leg-work, visiting "churches, art galleries, the homes of private collectors and business establishments". Cullen worked to refine the means of capturing stained glass in photographs. The volume is a worthy, indeed indispensable companion to Gordon Bowe's landmark 1989 biography.

You could say that Harry Clarke was born into the church-decorating business established by his father, Joshua, who had moved to Dublin from Leeds in 1877. Joshua married a Sligo woman, Brigid McGonigal. She was a Catholic and he, a Protestant, converted. Harry, born in 1889, was one of four children. He went to Belvedere College but left when he was 14, in 1904, the year after his mother died. He worked briefly in an architectural firm but was soon in the family firm.

Joshua, a cautious but intelligent businessman, had the wit to employ first-class stained glass makers and draftsmen, and Harry was apprenticed to one of them, William Nagle, a contemporary of the painter William Osborne, who worked with the firm until his death in 1923. Clarke also attended the Metropolitan School of Art in Dublin, where he was taught by AE Child of An Túr Gloine, the stained glass studio established by Sarah Purser in 1903. Among his co-students were Sean Keating and Margaret Crilly, a highly talented artist from Newry.

HE AND MARGARET married in 1914, and moved into a flat in North Frederick St. Harry worked from his father's studios - he paid rent - but usually on his own commissions, which he became adept at winning. He found an influential patron in politician and stockbroker Laurence "Lark" Waldron. He also spent time in London and was engaged by Harrap publishers to illustrate a 1916 edition of Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales*. Those illustrations and a major stained glass commission, 11 windows for the Honan Chapel at University College Cork, completed in 1918, established Clarke's reputation, and commissions flowed in.

The apparent contrast between the sacred and the profane in his work has frequently been noted, from the devout religious subjects that feature in some windows to



Above: *The Geneva Window* (1930) by Harry Clarke. Photograph: Wolfsonian-Florida International University. Right: the Harry Clarke window depicting St Patrick at the Honan Chapel at UCC. Photograph: Mark Kelleher

the swooning sexual imagery of, for example, his illustrations for the *Selected Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne*. It's not clear that there is a real contrast, though. The mood that he most commonly creates, a dreamy, decadent melancholy, leaning towards the fantastic and the macabre, runs through most of his work in both glass and ink. Look closely and his saints and angels could well be languid *fin de siècle* sybarites, lost in an hallucinogenic trance.

What Gordon Bowe terms "the dual nature of his work" is already evident, she says, in the Honan Chapel windows. Certainly Clarke was no conventional church decorator. His highly wrought, elaborately stylised compositions reflect a wealth of influences, literary and visual. The Celtic Twilight, French Symbolist writers and painters, Art Nouveau, Aubrey Beardsley, Gustav Klimt and more, all contribute to a heady stylistic mix that becomes, somehow and emphatically, Clarke's own. His inclination towards the proliferation of detail ran the risk of simply clogging up the compositional space, but in fact allowed him to create rippling, coruscating surfaces that come to life especially, even magically, in his glass work.

The Honan Chapel, the *Eve of St Agnes* window (with preparatory work in the Crawford Gallery in Cork and the piece itself in the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin) and the *Geneva Window* are Clarke's best-known stained glass projects. But there's a lot more, including substantial works in Cloughjordan Catholic Church, Tullamore Catholic Church (windows formerly in Rathfarnham Castle), the Presentation Convent Chapel in Dingle, St Joseph's in Terenure, Dublin, the decorative windows in Bewley's in Grafton St, St Eunan's Cathedral in Letterkenny and the Basilica of St Patrick's Purgatory at Pettigo, Lough Derg.

Abroad, there are significant works in Brisbane, Glasgow, Durham and of course Florida.

Costigan and Cullen come up with a tally of 160 stained-glass works by him, which is amazing given the brief span of his working life, the fact that he was afflicted by ill-health for much of the time (he was finally diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1929), and that, after his father's death in 1921, he took on responsibility for the studios. His brother Walter took over the ecclesiastical decoration side of the business, but he too was prone to health problems, and died suddenly, of pneumonia, in July 1930.

The story of the *Geneva*

CATCH A CLARKE

- 1. The Honan Chapel of St Finbarr, University College Cork** Nine windows each devoted to a saint, with great attention to detail. Made Clarke's reputation.
- 2. Basilica of St Patrick's Purgatory, Pettigo, Lough Derg, Co Donegal** 14 windows feature the apostles, St Paul and the Virgin Mary. A virtuoso achievement.
- 3. Bewley's Oriental Café, Grafton St, Dublin** A Dublin landmark. Four windows in the main café depict Corinthian, Doric,

Ionic and Composite architecture, two windows onto Swan Lane with flora and fauna motifs.

- 4. Dublin City Gallery, The Hugh Lane, Parnell Sq, Dublin** The *Eve of St Agnes* is a masterpiece of intricate design, illustrating Keats' poem of love and yearning.
- 5. St Joseph's Church, Terenure, Dublin** The parish priest chose Clarke's design over his father's for the huge east window, a central crucifixion with Irish saints adoring the cross.

Window is particularly poignant and tragic. It was initially commissioned, in the mid-1920s, by the Government for the International Labour Court in Geneva, and then rejected in shabby circumstances. Clarke proposed celebrating Ireland's writers in the window's eight panels. He enlisted William Butler Yeats to help him come up with 15 suitable candidates, with appropriate passages from their work to inspire the imagery.

Clarke seemed to realise something was amiss with the muted official response to the window's unveiling at his studio in September 1930. A letter from President Cosgrave confirmed his suspicions. The president first expressed concerns about the nudity in one panel, but he later widened his criticisms to include the choice of writers included. He wrote to Clarke, "... the inclusion of scenes from certain authors as representative of Irish literature and culture would give grave offence to many of our people". The upshot was that the window was never sent to Geneva, but was instead ignominiously dispatched to Government Buildings in Merrion Square.

By the time of Clarke's death he still hadn't been paid for what was a huge and expensive project. Several weeks after he died, Margaret received a cheque. "After many, many months of evasions and half-truths," Clark's friend Lennox Robinson wrote a few years later, "Harry's widow was allowed to buy it back for the price the Government had paid for it." The window was for some years in the Hugh Lane Gallery, then at the Fine Art Society in London. In 1988, Clarke's sons sold it to art collector Mitchell Wolfson, and it is now in the Wolfsonian Art Museum in Miami, Florida. That, Brian Fallon wrote at the time was "poetic justice". In managing to ignore and lose such a masterpiece, he went on, "We have, quite simply, disgraced ourselves again." *Strangest Genius* goes some way towards making the *Geneva Window* immediately accessible. Given the scope and detail of the work it documents, the book can only enhance Clarke's reputation.

Strange Genius: The Stained Glass of Harry Clarke by Lucy Costigan and Michael Cullen is published by The History Press Ireland. There is also a related website, harryclarke.net



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www.harryclarke.net