WILHELMINA GEDDES (1887-1955)

Gerry Brady examines the career of Aughawillan's distinguished Stained Glass Artist

IN JUNE 1919, a three-light stained glass window of marked originality attracted considerable attention and acclaim within the art world when it was exhibited briefly in London in the course of its dispatch from Dublin, (where it had been designed and made), to Ottawa, Canada. It was to form the great east window of St Bartholomew's Anglican Church, and had been commissioned in 1916 by Prince Arthur, Duke of Connaught, the third son of Queen Victoria and then Governor General of Canada, in memory of the ten members of his personal staff who fell in the First World War. Familiar worldwide to connoisseurs of stained glass as the 'Ottawa Window', it was unveiled by the Prince of Wales in 1919 and was the work of Leitrim-born Wilhelmina Geddes, a creative and highly original young designer, who became one of the most accomplished stained glass artists of the twentieth century.

Wilhelmina Geddes, the eldest of four children, was born on 25 May, 1887 on her maternal grandparent's farm in the townland of Drumreilly, Parish of Aughawillan, to William Geddis (the form of the surname which appears on her birth certificate) and Elizabeth Stafford. Her birth was registered on 22 June, but the baptismal names Wilhelmina Margaret were not added until 17 September, 1887. The house in which she was born, Drumreilly Cottage, still stands near the entrance to Drumreilly Church of Ireland, overlooking picturesque Garadice Lake, some four miles east of Ballinamore. Her father, who is ranked on her birth certificate as 'manager public works', was a site engineer on one or both of the railway construction projects which were in progress in County Leitrim during the period 1876-1888 (Her biographer, Dr Nicola Gordon Bowe, states that William Geddis was employed with the Sligo, Leitrim and Northern Counties' Railway, but as this line had been completed by 1882, it is more likely that he was employed on the laying of the Cavan and Leitrim 'Narrow Gauge' which was in the course of construction during the period, 1885-1888).

Shortly after his eldest daughter Wilhelmina's birth, William Geddis moved to Belfast where he became a successful building contractor. Wilhelmina's artistic education began in Scotland where her father took his young family each shooting season. After intermittent attendance at Methodist College, Belfast, she came to Dublin and became a pupil of the great painter, Sir William Orpen. Among the earliest admirers of her work were the art collector, Sir Hugh Lane, and the writer, Stephen Gwynn. Turning her design talents to stained glass, she was invited in 1912 to join An Tur Gloine (The Tower of Glass), a co-operative stained glass studio founded in Dublin in 1903 by the playwright, Edward Martyn, and the painter, Sarah Purser. Almost every significant Irish stained glass artist was associated with this co-operative workshop over the forty years of its existence.

Meanwhile, Wilhelmina's father, a fundamentalist Methodist of morose disposition, became increasingly unstable, and this, combined with severe pleurisy which she contracted during the winter of 1914-15, gravely undermined Wilhelmina's physical and mental health, as a result of which her eyesight was badly affected. However, her health recovered somewhat and as her reputation grew, numerous commissions , including the prestigious Ottawa contract. She also contributed to the British Empire

Wilhelmina Margaret Geddes
(1887-1955)
COURTESY OF ELIZABETH KERR

Exhibition of 1924 and the Paris exhibition planned to mark the founding of the Irish Free State.

Following another protracted period of ill-health she left Ireland for good on 25 May, 1925, her thirty-eighth birthday. However, she retained her shares in An Tur Gloine and kept in touch with her former artistic colleagues in Dublin, in particular with Sarah Purser, until the latter's death in 1943. She contributed to the Aonach Tailteann Art Exhibition of 1932 and completed, among many other projects, the great Te Deum rose window for Ypres Cathedral (1934-8), commissioned by the British Forces as a memorial to King Albert of the Belgians. It was at Geddes's London studio, during this period, that Evie Hone, perhaps Ireland's best known stained glass artist, had begun to convert her designs into glass for the first time.

For Wilhelmina Geddes the war years were dogged by ill health and financial hardships. Her closing years brought depression and anxieties about her abilities and appearance

and she found it increasingly difficult to complete her commissions. Plagued by rheumatism and failing sight, she lived out her final years in her small Kensington bedsitter and was found dead there on 10 August, 1955, just five months after the death of her younger and better known protegé, Evie Hone.

Wilhelmina's windows have had a varied history. Five have been destroyed (some by war and the Northern Ireland Troubles), one is in packing cases, another boarded up and two (in Dublin) obscured by adjacent buildings, while others are in a perilous condition. In Ireland most of her surviving windows are in Belfast and Dublin while several of her works are to be found throughout England, Wales, New Zealand, Canada and Belgium. Nearer home, two splendid examples of her craft may be seen in St Ninnidh's Church, (1912), Inishmacsaint, Derrygonnelly, Co Fermanagh (her first full scale window) and in nearby St Molaise's Church (1913), Monea, NW of Enniskillen.

Wilhelmina Geddes was a highly articulate and well-read woman (Interestingly, she was interviewed on television about her work as early as July, 1938). Of independent mind, she was a keen supporter of the suffragette movement. Her obituary in The Times of London in 1955 described her as 'the greatest stained glass artist of our time', a significant tribute when it is remembered that Harry Clarke and Evie Hone were her contemporaries. Happily, the achievements of Wilhelmina Geddes, one of Ireland's foremost creative artists, for so long shamefully neglected, are now being properly acknowledged and the reputation of this daughter of County Leitrim, until recently eclipsed by her more high profile compatriots, is now, belatedly, receiving the recognition it richly deserves.

Dr Nicola Gordon Bowe, Lecturer, National College of Art and Design, is currently preparing a book on Wilhelmina Geddes.

Wilhelmina Geddes's ***Innocence in the Fields of Paradise****, (1913)*
St Molaise's, Monea, Co Fermanagh.

Wakes...celebratory occasions

Pat Fitzpatrick

WAKES WERE HELD in houses where a death had taken place up until the middle of the 20th century. One would imagine that a wake would be a very solemn and sad occasion but in bygone days it became an occasion for story telling, asking riddles, and playing of games, feats of strength and singing—all of course accompanied by a goodly supply of whiskey and stout.

All the neighbours crowded into the corpse house and after praying and mourning and lamenting the loss of the departed one, the rest of the night had to be passed in as entertaining a manner as possible. This manner of waking the corpse was possibly pagan in origin and may have been a way of saying goodbye to the dead person or a means of helping the remaining family to get over the emotional stress caused by losing a loved member.

Some wakes were known to have lasted several days. People were superstitious about death and signs which heralded a death in the famil—a picture falling from the wall, a bird pecking at the window, a donkey braying, a falling star, a black frog in the house at night, a grey mouse or the wailing of the banshee.

A sighting of the death coach travelling towards the graveyard at the dead of night was of very grave significance to even the not so superstitious. When a person died the clocks in the house were stopped and all the mirrors in the house were covered until after the funeral. It was the custom to supply clay pipes, tobacco and snuff to those attending the wake and provide refreshments both edible and liquid to all comers.

A wake was seen as an occasion to show hospitality and to give a good send off to the deceased. Coffins were made by local carpenters and they were simple plain boxes covered over by black material. The black coffin was preferred to the deal or red coffin which were considered to be the pauper's coffin. All linen used on the bed where the corpse had lain was hand washed by the neighbouring women after the funeral.

From the 20th century onwards the remains was taken to the local church on the second day with the burial taking place on the third day. Offerings were collected after the mass. If the deceased was well known or popular then the offerings were high. Thankfully the collecting of offerings was abolished as the rattle of money being paid did not help in any way the grief of the family. Grave digging was carried out by the neighbours on the instructions of the undertaker—a custom which still lasts to the present day.