

A TOUCH OF GLASS

Author **Lucy Costigan** on the life and times of one of Ireland's greatest master craftsmen

The Dominican Convent chapel on the Falls Road, Belfast, is the location for one of Harry Clarke's most marvellous works. The magnificent rose window is positioned high above the beautiful chapel, its wonderful blue, purple, ruby, gold-yellow and emerald glittering in the sunlight. The Belfast window is the only rose window in existence to have been designed and completed by world-renowned Irish stained-glass artist Harry Clarke.

During his short life, Clarke (1889 to 1931) created more than 160 windows for churches and private patrons throughout Ireland, Britain, the USA and Australia. Harry's father, Joshua, emigrated from Leeds to Dublin in 1877, where he established a church-decorating business and stained-glass studio at 33 North Frederick Street.

The Protestant Joshua convert-

Clarke began to use decadent and obscene imagery in his bookwork

ed to Catholicism and added an 'e' to his surname. Harry grew up with the stained-glass studios, J Clarke & Sons, at the back of his home. Even as a young child, Harry showed an aptitude for drawing and design. He later studied stained glass at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art. His brilliance as an artist and colourist was recognised when he was awarded three consecutive gold medals from 1911 to 1913, for stained glass work at the Board of Education's National Competition at South Kensington, London.

After graduation, Clarke was awarded a scholarship to visit French medieval cathedrals. At Chartres Cathedral, immortalised in a famous sequence of paintings by Monet, Clarke was transfixed by the spectacular reds and blues that flowed from the medieval windows.



Portrait of an artist

- Clarke, who was born in Dublin in 1889, learnt his craft from his father, also a stained glass man
- In 1907 he encountered the striking illustration of Aubrey Beardsley at the Irish International Exhibition
- Won Gold Medal at the Board of Education National Competition in 1910

● Illustrated Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* but the book never saw the light of day as the drawings and blocks were largely destroyed in the Easter Rising

● Clarke's *The Baptism of St Patrick* was exhibited at the Louvre in 1914

● With his brother Walter, Clarke tried to keep his father's stained glass and decorating studio going in the 1930s but his brother died in July 1930 and he died aged 41 in 1931



Glass art: above left, Bewley's Cafe in Grafton Street, Dublin, and (right) details from the Rose Window (below) in the Dominican Convent Chapel, Falls Road, Belfast

The Belfast rose window has over a thousand feet of leaded glass

On his return to Dublin, Clarke developed techniques using flashed glass, acidizing and plating to achieve rich, jewel-like colours. His use of deep ruby and blue became his hallmark.

Clarke also developed his talents as a graphic artist, illustrating several books for the London publishers, Harrap & Co. His fabulous illustrations for Hans Christian Andersen's *Fairy Tales* was his first published work.

Clarke began experimenting with small, exquisite stained-glass panels that were inspired by literary themes. The beauty and mas-

tery of his unique illustrative style is evident in all Clarke's stained-glass work: exquisite angels and saints gaze out at the viewer, with large, luminous eyes and long, tapering fingers.

In June 1927, Clarke submitted a proposal for the rose window for the Dominican Convent chapel in Belfast. In mid-June he visited the Falls Road to view the proposed location of the window. Clarke was in competition with a German firm to win this important commission. By the end of June he had secured the job, his first in Northern Ireland. The commission required more than 1,000 feet of leaded glass.

The window contains 12 decorative panels set within a further 12 panels, denoting the apostles. The central panel depicts a red cross on a white background. The intricate detail of the decorative work can be closely observed from the gallery platform. The background colour is cream; the main motifs are flowers and leaves in

purple, red, pink, blue, yellow and green. Clarke's superb skill is evident in the delightful band of purple and maroon that connects each of the panels, giving the effect of soft velvet. The rest of the window is covered in tiny floral designs outlined in black.

In the last few years of Clarke's life he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. He also began experimenting with sexually decadent and obscene imagery in his book illustrations of *Faust* (1925) and *Selected Poems of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (1928). Much of Clarke's stained-glass work, however, continued to depict the angelic beauty of saints and cherubs.

This dual-personality baffled many but may have been caused by the heavy medication that Clarke was given to combat his failing health.

Another factor may have been Clarke's early religious education at Belvedere College. This school was typical of its time in preach-

ing that hell and damnation awaited unrepentant sinners while salvation in the next life was only guaranteed for those who lived a life of penance and piety.

A few years earlier James Joyce (1882-1941) had attended Belvedere and it became the setting for his book, *A Portrait Of The Artist As A Young Man*.

The effect on the sensitive young Clarke of this zealous doctrine may have contributed to a fascination with the macabre.

A certain amount of obscurity was also present in medieval art and had become fashionable in European literature, cinema and art of the 1920s. Coupled with all of these factors, Clarke's artistic nature demanded free expression to create according to his own wishes.

Clarke's contemporary, the poet George Russell, known as AE, described him thus: "He might have incarnated here from the dark side of the moon... Harry Clarke is one of the strangest geniuses of his time."

Fine examples of Clarke's work can be found in various Catholic, Church of Ireland and Presbyterian churches at home and round the world.

Some of his best work includes the nine windows at the Honan Chapel at University College Cork, two windows at St Joseph's Church, Terenure, in Dublin, the Life of Christ windows at Discart Institute of Education and Celtic Culture, Dingle, Co Kerry, The Eve of St Agnes at the Hugh Lane, Dublin City Gallery, the Geneva Window, now at the Wolfsonian in Miami, Florida, and The Ascension window at St Stephen's Cathedral, Brisbane.

Perhaps his most seen work is the windows of Bewley's Cafe in Dublin's Grafton Street.



Strangest Genius: The Stained Glass of Harry Clarke by Lucy Costigan and Michael Cullen, History Press, £45

TOMORROW

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