Margaret Stokes by David Trowt

Introduction:

Celtic Art has been an inspiration for artists, engravers, storytellers and many more for generations. From stone heads carved and left on walls in Yorkshire, unknown photographer (figure 3 next page),[1] to album covers giving their own, albeit beautifully ornate interpretation by Jim Fitzpatrick (figure 1)[2] and symbol inspired jewellery found on Etsy by Regina Tierney (figure 2 on next page),[3] modern day artists are inspired to recreate the work of the Celts.

Figure 1

[1] Lloyd and Jennifer Laing, *Art Of The Celts*, (London: Thomas And Hudson Ltd, 1992), p. 207-208.
[2] Jim Fitzpatrick, 'Johnny The Fox Album Cover', *Jim Fitzpatrick Gallery*, 2025. https://jimfitzpatrick.com/product/johnny-the-fox-album-cover/ [accessed 22 April 2025].

[3] Regina Tierney, 'Celtic Knotwork Bracelet', *Celtic Fusion Design*, 21 April 2025. https://www.etsy.com/uk/listing/610967043/celtic-knotwork-bracelet-celtic-bracelet?ref=search2_top_narrowing_intent_modules_etsys_pick-3&sts=1&logging_key=0ebe4615978c887bd02c34b334f1a1f7c5617c07%3A610967043 [accessed 22 April 2025].

Figure 2

Figure 3

Whilst the above pieces are created to mimic a Celtic theme, the jewellery to make money based on that theme,[4] the album cover to create a feeling of Celticness,[5] and heads to 'ward off evil',[6] there are artists that go to considerable effort to intricately recreate and replicate the artwork of the Celts. One such artist was Margaret McNair Stokes (1832-1900) born in Dublin, Ireland. She was a skilled illustrator, artist, photographer, antiquarian and writer, publishing several books about her travels in Europe as well as on Irish Art. This essay will focus on her works and how she reinterpreted Celtic artwork in her own pieces of art.

<u>An artist and her work</u>:

Margaret Stokes grew up in a family of keen antiquarians and Celtic scholars, her father Dr William Stokes (1804-1878) was a heart surgeon and a renowned antiquarian and brother Whitley Stokes (1830-1909) was a legal administrator and Celtic scholar.[7] Her father was friends with artist and antiquarian George Petrie (1790-1866), poet and archivist Sir Samuel Ferguson (1820-1886) and antiquarian Edwin Wyndham-Quin, 3rd Earl of Dunraven (1812-1871), all were members of the Royal Irish Academy.[8] Stokes attended the family gatherings which included her father's friends and learned from them and her father through them teaching her and on visits to sites of antiquarian interest.[9] 'Petrie mentored Margaret and taught her painting,'[10] and over time she developed a talent for illustration, a talent recognised by Ferguson when he invited her to illustrate his poem *The Cromlech on Howth* in 1861.[11] Within

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[4] As evidenced by it being for sale on the Etsy page for £23.73.
[5] The artist Jim Fitzpatrick states that he used just enough Celtic knotwork to create something Irish and Celtic without any twee 'diddley-oi' connotations.
[6] Laing, *Art of The Celts*, p. 207.
[7] Sinéad Sturgeon and Georgina Clinton, 'Whitley Stokes', *Dictionary Of Irish Biography*, October 2009. https://www.dib.ie/biography/stokes-whitley-a8335 [accessed 24 April 2025].
[8] Founded in 1785 the Royal Irish Academy was established to give scholars a place to discuss and investigate the sciences, antiquities and literature.
[9] Marie Bourke, 'Margaret Stokes: An Enterprising And Pioneering Scholar', *Archaeology Ireland*, Summer 2020. https://reader-exacteditions-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/issues/88465/page/35 [accessed 25 April 2025] pp. 35-38, p. 35-36.
[10] Ibid., p. 36.
[11] A cromlech is a megalithic construction of stone made to enclose a mound or dolmen.

this book 'she created minutely observed initials and coloured interlace executed in a facsimile of early medieval script copied from the *Book of Kells*'[12] Quoting Frederick Burton (1816-1900), Maria Bourke says 'The initial letters are exquisite,'[13] clearly showing the intricate level of detail that she displayed. Stokes also provided watercolour paintings depicting the scenery of Howth. She continued her work and during excursions with her father began photographing and drawing architecture. After her father's death in 1878 Stokes travelled extensively throughout Ireland and Europe, writing several books about early Christian Art and Architecture in Ireland and on the Continent, showing how Irish Art was used in the design of crosses and buildings. Stokes was not just providing information though, to quote her words, her aim was:

> not to present a guide to the antiquities of Ireland, but rather to indicate how these antiquities should be approached, so as to draw forth whatever elements of instruction may lie hidden in them for workers in the present day.[14]

Stokes was passionate about Ireland and saw her work as furthering Ireland's place in the world of historical significance. 'No country stands more in need of clothing of honour, and of that food by which the soul is fed than does our own beloved Ireland.'[15] She also saw the role of women as not one of waiting to be told, but to be telling, 'we women need not fear stepping outside our sphere'.[16] This passion, and with influence undoubtedly of her privileged upbringing, enabled her to create hundreds of illustrations, woodcuts, paintings and photographs and to write several books. It also enabled her to become an Honorary Member of the Royal Irish Academy in 1876, the first woman to do so, which was especially rare given that women were not eligible for full membership. Two pieces of her work will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

<u>The Cromlech on Howth</u>:

The poem, *Aideen's Grave*, telling the story of Aideen learning of her husband's death and then her own grief-stricken ending, was written in 1858 by Sir Samuel Ferguson but, after initially failing to get it published, asked Stokes to illustrate it for him.[17] The illustrated work, with water colours, illumination and additional notes by Petrie was published as *The Cromlech on Howth* in London, 1861. The work was very well received[18] and became Stokes' first published piece of artwork.

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[12] Bourke, 'Margaret Stokes: An Enterprising And Pioneering Scholar', *Archaeology Ireland,* p. 36.
[13] Ibid., p. 36.
[14] Margaret Stokes, *Early Christian Art In Ireland Part I*, (London: Committee Of Council On Education, 1887, Reprinted by Forgotten Books, 2012), p. 6.
[15] Margaret Stokes, *Early Christian Architecture In Ireland*, (London: George Bell And Sons, 1878, Reprinted by Legare Street Press, 2022), p. iv.
[16] Stokes, *Early Christian Architecture In Ireland*, p. iii.
[17] Voices From The Dawn, *Howth Dolmen*, (unknown date), https://voicesfromthedawn.com/howth-dolmen/ [accessed 2nd May 2025].
[18] Ibid.

For the illumination she took inspiration from the *Book of Kells* and the *Book of Durrow*[19] and the watercolours are 'depicting scenes from Howth and Clontarf on the north Dublin coast'.[20] The below picture (figure 4) shows *The Cromlech on Howth*, as painted by Margaret Stokes in 1861.[21]

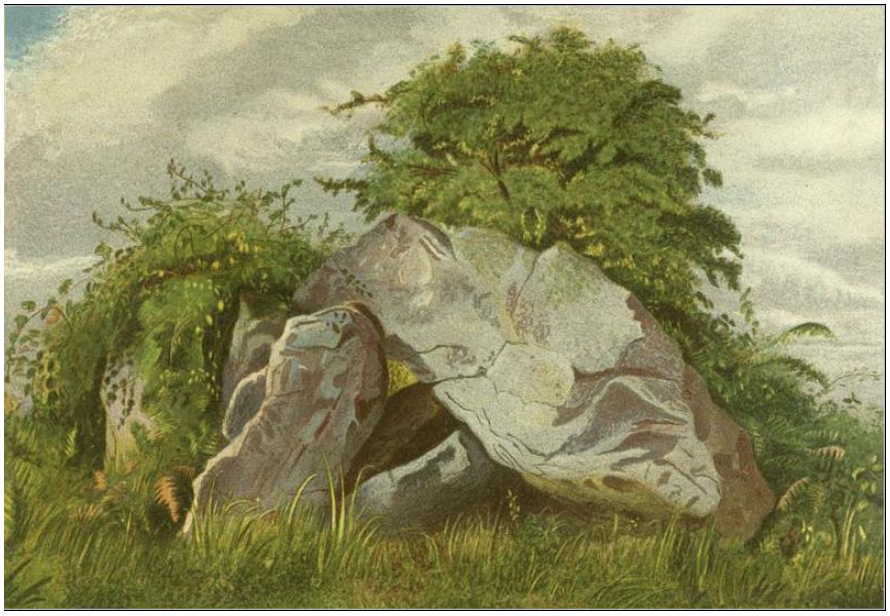

Figure 4

Whilst the paintings give some context to the area and its surroundings, the main attraction of the work must be the illumination. Stokes, in the writing of *Early Christian Art in Ireland*, expresses a wish that designers or architects may 'find the salient points in works of ancient Irish Art'[22] and describes how Irish monks instructed their apprentices in how to hold a pen, prepare the ink and the techniques of writing. She describes this art form as having been perfected over many years and the work in the *Book of Kells* as 'the very perfection of the writing and elaborate detail of the art that adorns its pages'.[23] She also describes the lettering style used in the *Book of Kells*, that of the 'miniscule' or 'round hand'.[24] This style uses rounded, unjoined letters which, in the words of Ferdinand Keller (1842-1922), as quoted by Stokes, 'The character of the uncial writing, from the roundness and graceful curve of the lines, acquires a softness very pleasing to the eye'.[25] This writing style and Stokes attention to minute detail is clearly represented in her work on the poem. The below picture (figure 5, next page) shows an original picture from the *Book of Kells*, as taken by Trinity College Dublin.[26]

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[19] Voices From The Dawn, *The Cromlech On Howth*, https://voicesfromthedawn.com/wp-content/sites/howthDolmen/citations/TheCromlechOnHowth.pdf [accessed 2 May 2025].
[20] Bernadette Cunningham, 'Margaret Stokes: Antiquarian Scholar With An Artist's Eye', *Royal Irish Academy*, 20 September 2018. https://www.ria.ie/blog/margaret-stokes-antiquarian-scholar-with-an-artists-eye/ [accessed 24 April 2025].
[21] Voices From The Dawn, *The Cromlech On Howth,* [accessed 2 May 2025].
[22] Stokes, *Early Christian Art In Ireland Part I*, p. 7.
[23] Ibid., p. 12.
[24] Ibid., p. 9-10.
[25] Ibid., p. 10.
[26] Trinity College Dublin, *Animal Symbolism In The Book Of Kells*, (2025) https://www.visittrinity.ie/blog/animal-symbolism-in-the-book-of-kells/ [accessed 2 May 2025].

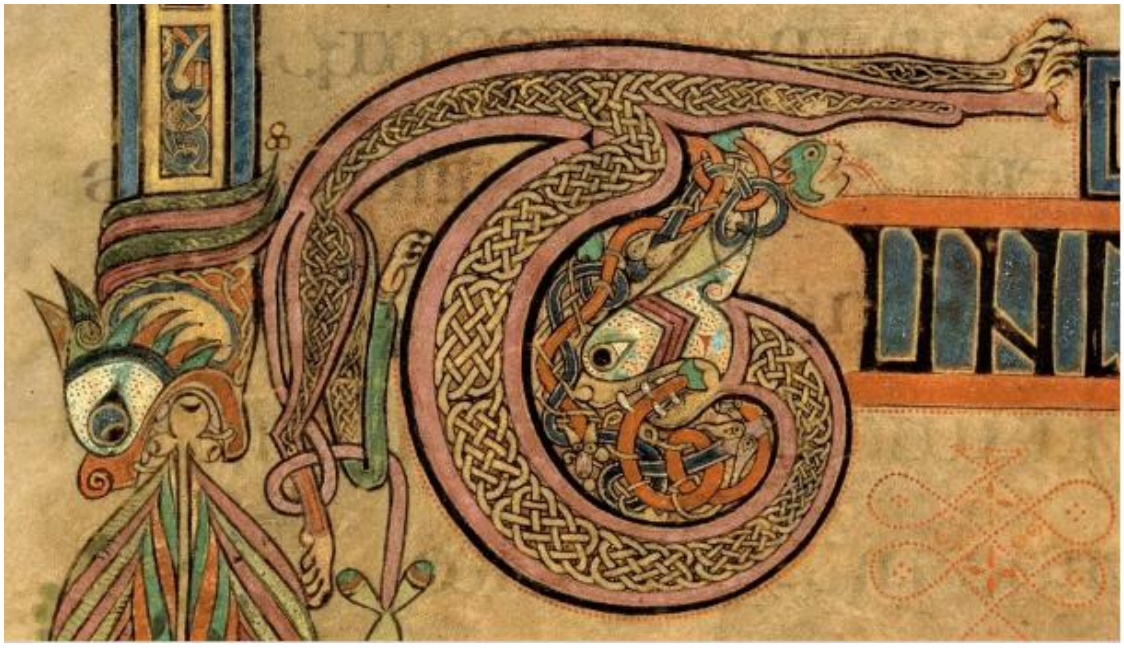

Figure 5

This is a letter 't' and, likely by design, is the letter Stokes uses when talking about how Irish scribes wrote resembling that of Latin manuscripts of the fifth and sixth centuries CE, 'such letters occur in the oldest Lombardic and Gallic manuscripts.'[27] Stokes copied this letter into her work on the Cromlech poem and using her in-depth knowledge of Irish Art, created a beautiful replication, as shown in the below picture (figure 6).

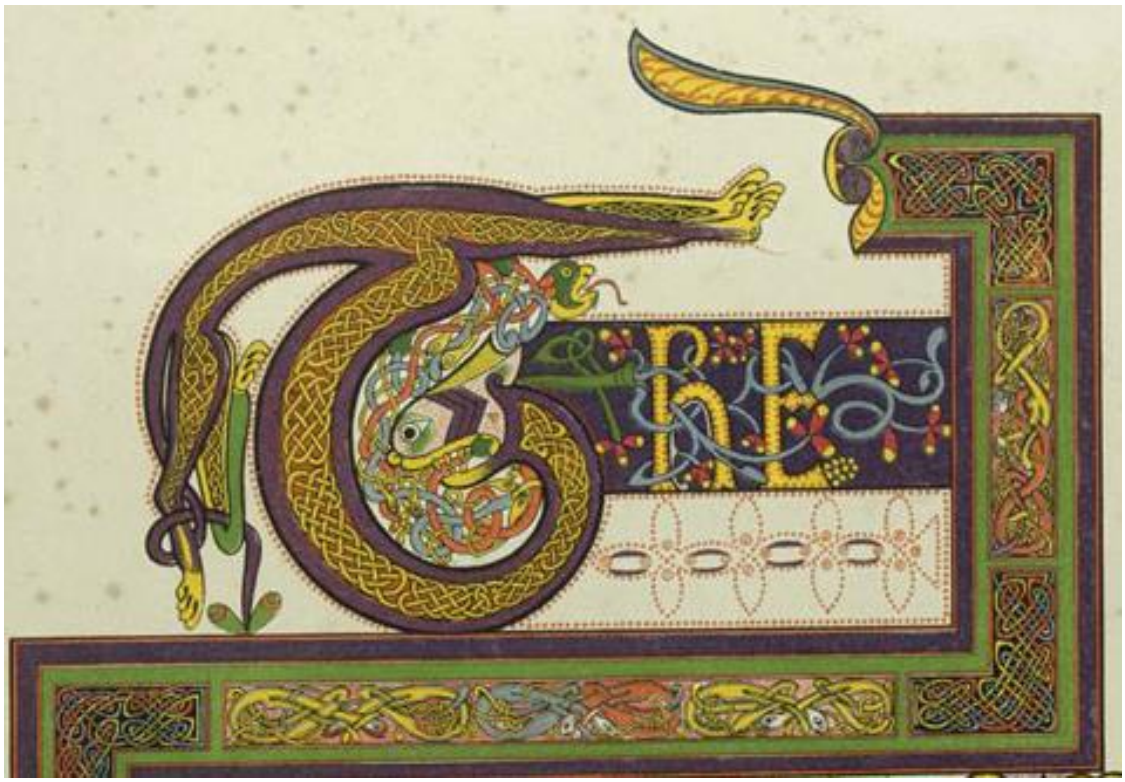

Figure 6

[27] Stokes, *Early Christian Art In Ireland Part I*, p. 9.

Whilst Stokes has copied this artwork, she has also put her own mark on it too, this being seen in the colours she chose. The original work has a pinkish-lilac hue[28] to the outer edge of the letter 't', Stokes, however, chose a deep purple which really accentuates and emboldens it. The gold and yellow that she uses are brighter than the original, whilst the blue is lighter giving the overall image a subjectively 'improved' look, as the outer edge is brought more to the fore. The reason for this change is not known to this author but could be as simple as Stokes having access to better inks than the original artists, such as the synthetic creations of the time,[29] original artists using plant-based ink.[30] A more persuasive and artful reason maybe, are the colours seen around the cliffs and hillside of Howth which were described by R.P. Carlton thus:

> these cliffs from base to summit are all ablaze with the purple, and rose, and flame colour, and yellow and white blooms of myriads of rhododendrons, while along the right, beyond and among the ferns, is spread a great blue carpet of wild hyacinths.[31]

This use of colour to represent the location itself portrays Stokes' ability to not only copy the original artwork intricately and faithfully, but also to introduce her own interpretation of Celtic Art into the newer piece giving it an authentic but vibrant look.

<u>High Crosses</u>:

Amongst her considerable catalogue of work, the High Crosses of Ireland, which Stokes considered to be of Irish origin,[32] were featured late in her career. Important nonetheless, she considered that, 'effort should be made for the publication of a complete series of faithful illustrations of these ancient monuments, which are inscribed with the mystic language of early Christian Art.'[33] Like in her work above, it is her attention to detail in the recreation of this art for others to reference, that is most discernible.

In order to recreate the crosses as representative of their original artform as possible Stokes took photographs from each of the four sides, patiently waiting for the light to illuminate each one before picture-taking.[34] Once printed, these pictures were mounted and returned to the site and rubbings made over the photo itself to get more detail. Where patterns have worn away, Stokes utilised sunlight, rubbings and the touch of the finger to 'catch and fix these fleeting gleams and perpetuate all the detail that they reveal.'[35] This is also important, in her words, 'to

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[28] Trinity College Dublin, *The Book Of Kells' Colourful Past: Whites, Pinks And Purples*, (2025), https://www.visittrinity.ie/blog/the-book-of-kells-colourful-past-whites-pinks-and-purples/ [accessed 6 May 2025].
[29] Leonor-Jo Barnard, *The Evolution Of Colour In 19th Century Visual Arts And Literature, 24 June 2023*, https://mcr.seh.ox.ac.uk/2023/06/24/title-the-evolution-of-colour-in-19th-century-visual-arts-and-literature/ [accessed 7 May 2025].
[30] Trinity College Dublin, *The Book Of Kells' Colourful Past: Whites, Pinks And Purples* [accessed 6 May 2025].
[31] R. P. Carlton, 'The Associations Of Scenery. Part II', *The Irish Monthly 23.263*, (1895), pp 234-5, https://voicesfromthedawn.com/wp-content/sites/howthDolmen/citations/howthCitations.html [accessed 7 May 2025].
[32] Margaret Stokes, *The High Crosses Of Castledermot And Durrow*, (Dublin: The Academy Trust, 1898), p. i.
[33] Ibid., p. i.
[34] Ibid., p. ii.
[35] Ibid., p. iii.

avoid being misled by lichens and the blemishes'[36] which often covered these crosses. With all of this done she would then draw the cross in a representation of its original form.

The below photograph taken by Stokes (figure 7)[37] shows some detail, but detailing is lessened due to shadowing and some lichen on the base.

(WEST FACE)

Figure 7

[36] Ibid., p. iii.
[37] Ibid., p. 13.

However, the drawing below by Stokes of this cross (figure 8),[38] based on her detailing described above, shows each carving in clear form allowing the viewer to see the extent of the original artwork.

THE CASTLEDERMOT SOUTH CROSS.
(WEST FACE.)

Figure 8

With such detail now established, Stokes was able to provide a full breakdown of these depictions. These include the base showing Noah entering the Ark and the Crucifixion in the

[38] Ibid., p. 16.

centre of the upper cross,[39] detailing, one can see when comparing the pictures, is obscured in the original photograph.

Another example of her intricate knowledge of Celtic Art and her ability to recreate it with her own interpretation, is in the Cross of St Mullins. The picture below taken by Jim Dempsey/Deb Snelson[40] (figure 9), shows the cross as it stands at St Mullins Abbey, County Carlow, Ireland.

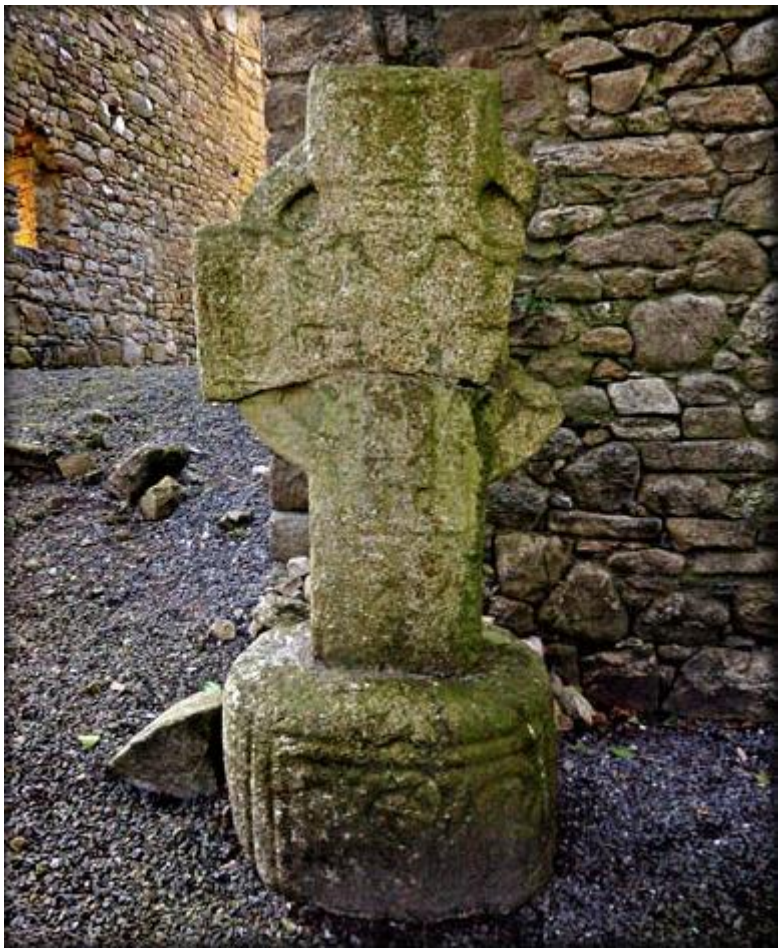

Figure 9

The cross is broken, only the top, base and partial shaft remaining but appears in the position marked on an original ground plan of the Abbey.[41] Using a similar example from the South Cross at Castledermot (not pictured) Stokes has recreated, in detail the missing portion of the shaft, pictured in her drawing below (figure 10). Oddly, she has chosen to recreate the missing portion of shaft, but not the missing section of cross. She offers no explanation for this so we can only speculate that as she states 'allowing for one figure in the right and left arm panels'[42] she assumes the missing piece is a direct replication of the remaining piece.

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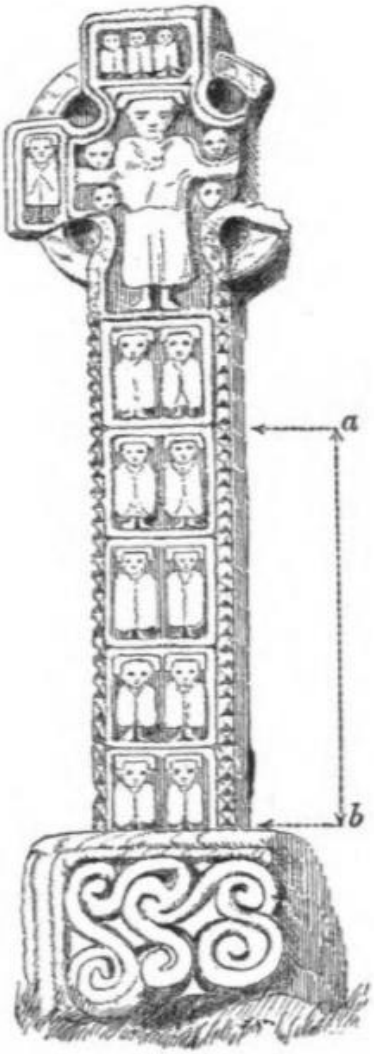
[39] Ibid., p. 5.
[40] Megalithic Ireland, *Irish High Crosses*, Unknown Date. https://www.megalithicireland.com/High%20Cross%20St%20Mullins.html [accessed 7 May 2025].
[41] Stokes, *The High Crosses Of Castledermot And Durrow,* p. xiii.
[42] Ibid., p. xiii.



Cross of Christ with the Apostles, St. Mulling's.

Figure 10

The missing piece aside, the reinterpretation of the missing shaft (represented by the line a-b),[43] fits perfectly with the rest of the cross, giving the viewer a more informed picture of what the cross originally looked like. She further states that the spirals at the base adhere to a more archaic style, likely dating to, 'the period when pagan Art was passing into Christian'.[44] This makes the cross important as a heritage piece and her interpretation of it all the more illuminating in design.

[43] Ibid., p. xiii.
[44] Ibid., p. xiii.

Conclusion:

Margaret Stokes was, as described above, a very accomplished and respected artist and historian. To learn as she did from such scholars as her father, Petrie and Ferguson she clearly displayed a great talent early on in not only artistry but also commitment to her work. This is something that is proven in her later life, in the characteristic of her work illustrating *The Cromlech on Howth* in such intricacy or bringing old and faded High Crosses back to life so as to exemplify the work of the original artists. Stokes, in this author's opinion, is a perfect example of an artist who melds history with art with the express wish to educate others and honour the heritage of her country's culture. This sentiment is all the more important when comparing her with modern day depictions of Celtic Art like that shown at the beginning of this essay. Margaret Stokes represents those scholars who not only preserved as much art as possible from the Celtic period, but authenticated it, ensuring its continuance as an art style for future generations.

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