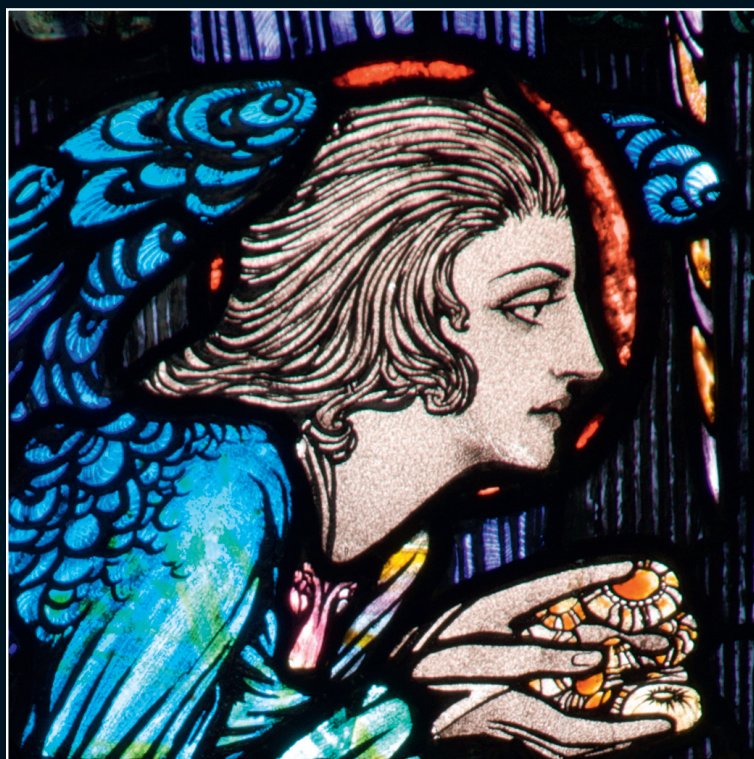






Interpreting the Bible
through Painted Glass:
The Harry Clarke Studios
and Wilhelmina Geddes
(1887-1955)

Nicola Gordon Bowe



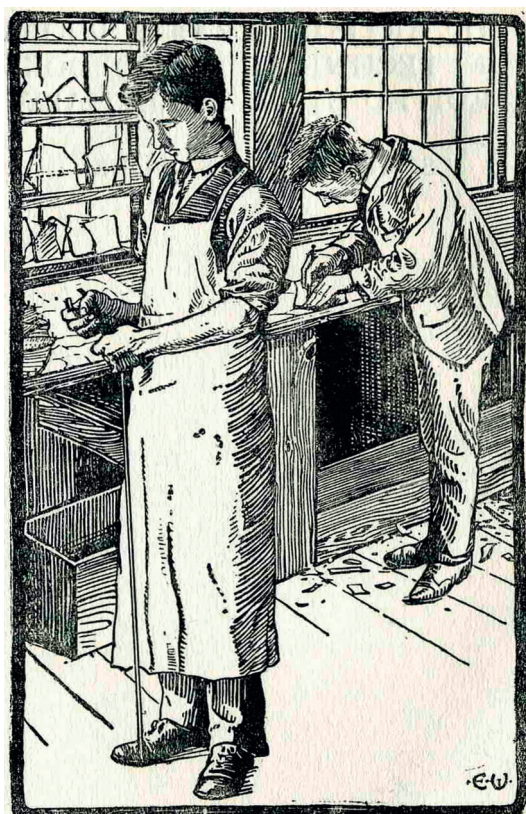
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252. Wilhelmina Geddes,
*Preparatory Design for
Window of St Peter's
Church, Lampeter, 1937*,
pencil and watercolour.



253. Edward Woore, *Cutting
and Glazing*, Joseph Fricker
cutting glass. Frontispiece
to Christopher Whall,
Stained Glass Work (1905).
Printed from an original
line drawing.



Despite the geographical proximity of Ireland to Wales, and the strong cultural links between the two countries as they sought to reassert the importance of their native linguistic and literary traditions during the late-nineteenth-century Celtic Revival, there are few surviving expressions of twentieth-century Irish stained glass in Wales. This is particularly surprising given the number and quality of windows designed and made by a handful of exceptionally imaginative and skilled Irish craftsmen and women who grew up during the Revival. Trained in Dublin they found individual formal and technical expression through a shared Arts and Crafts ideology, as formulated by Christopher Whall in his influential book, *Stained Glass Work* (London: John Hogg, 1905).

The best known are Harry Clarke (1889-1931), who inherited J. Clarke & Sons, the ecclesiastical decorating firm his father had set up in Dublin in 1886, and the artists of An Túr Gloine (The Tower of Glass), a small stained glass cooperative. This workshop had been set up by the eminent Dublin painter Sarah Purser in 1903 to encourage a native school of artists to work in an art form too long dominated by commercial and imported foreign windows. An Túr artists included A.E. Child (1875-1939), a former assistant of Whall, who set up stained glass classes at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art and was appointed the manager of the cooperative, Michael

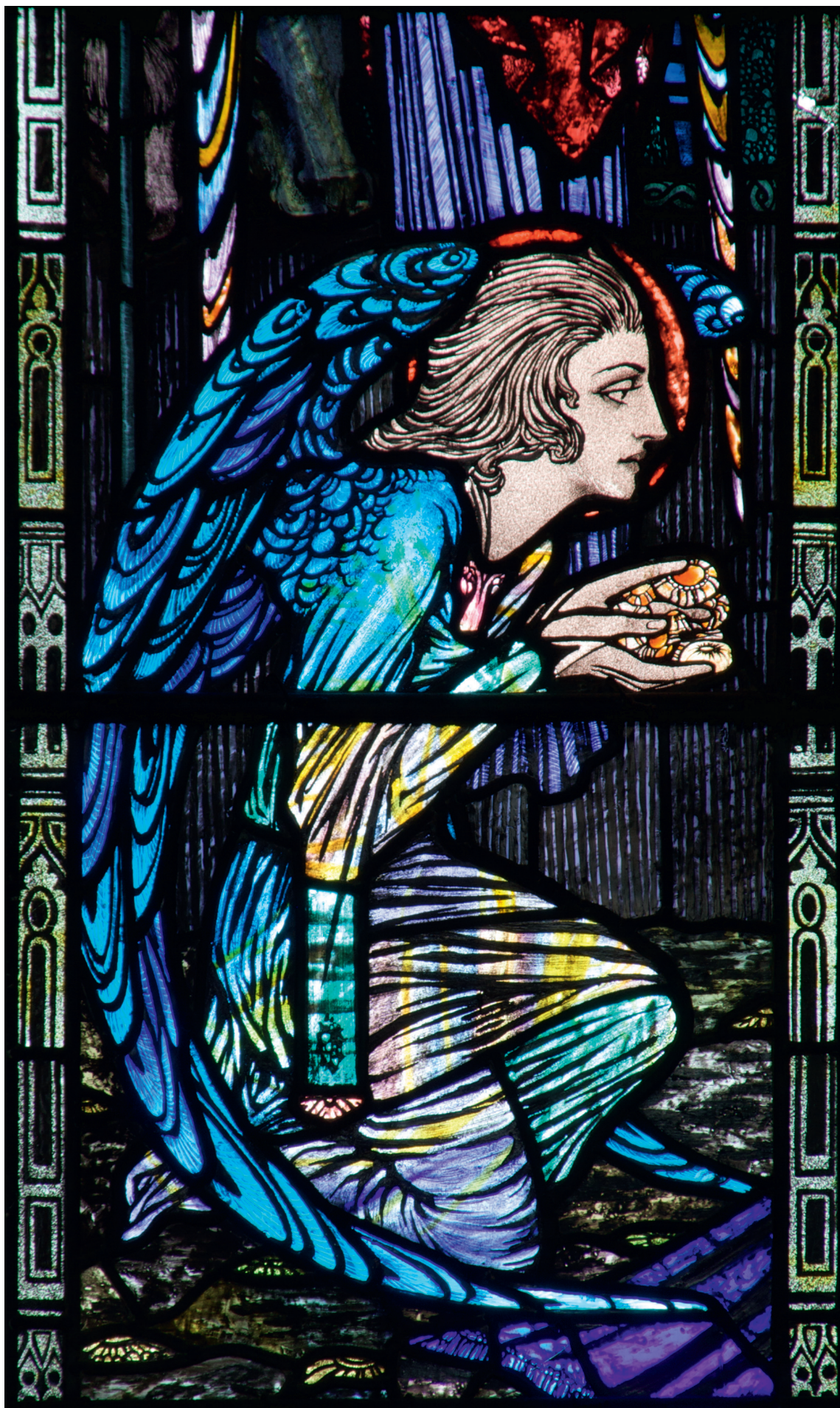


Healy (1873-1941), Wilhelmina Geddes (1887-1955) and Evie Hone (1894-1955), who was trained in London by Geddes. What Wales may lack in quantity of Irish stained glass, it makes up for in quality: with Child's *Angel of Peace* (1929-30) in Emmanuel Church at Bistre, near Buckley in Flintshire; Geddes's *Christ with St Peter and St Andrew* (1939-43) window in St Peter's Church, Lampeter; and the Clarke Studios' *Nativity*, *Presentation in the Temple* and *The Holy Family in Joseph's Carpentry Shop*, three chancel windows for the Oblate Fathers in St Joseph's Church, Colwyn Bay, Denbighshire. Although made by Harry Clarke Stained Glass, the studios formally set up in 1930 during Clarke's premature final illness, these Colwyn Bay windows are closely based on cartoons he had drawn earlier. Details of the figures show that they are adapted from his series of windows depicting exotically costumed *Scenes from the Life our Lady with Emblems from her Litany* (1925) for the Chapel of Our Lady at the Convent of Notre Dame, Ashdown Park, East Grinstead in Sussex.

It is particularly sad that the two windows Harry Clarke did design for a Welsh setting, All Saints' Church, Penarth, near Cardiff in 1928, have been destroyed. They were commissioned by the congregation and the family of the Reverend A.W. Flux Dundas, who had died the year after the church of which he had been vicar for eight years was burnt out in 1926. Dundas had admired the Irish artist's work so much that Clarke took over the design of the commission himself, rather than entrusting it entirely to his thriving Studios – which was the case in the Colwyn Bay windows. In 1927, Clarke sent the detailed pencil drawing to the vicar for the first window, *The Aged Simeon holding the Infant Christ*, which was to be a single-light memorial to the late Mr and Mrs Roland J. Payne for the church baptistery. This design was subsequently photographically enlarged for use as a cartoon when the

254. Alfred Ernest Child,
Angel of Peace, 1930,
Emmanuel Church,
Bistre, Flintshire,
stained glass.





256. Harry Clarke,
*Suggested Design for the Aged
Simeon Holding the Infant Christ*,
All Saints' Church, Penarth,
Glamorgan, 1927 (now
destroyed), pencil drawing.



255. The Clarke Studios
Angel with gift, St Joseph's Church,
Colwyn Bay, Denbighshire,
c.1925, stained glass.



window was being made; it was completed under Clarke's supervision by October 1928 and fixed in the baptistery in early November of that year. During the previous March, Clarke was asked by the Dundas family and church parishioners to design a memorial window to the late vicar, in view of his liking for the artist's work. By August, they had decided on a two-light trefoil-headed window, *The Archangel Saints Michael and Gabriel*. Gabriel was depicted as a robed prince, with a dove and a flame, and the Annunciation was depicted in a predella panel beneath. Michael was shown as a heroic Celtic warrior, his long, fair hair bound with a jewelled crown, holding his sword and scales aloft and conquering what Clarke described as 'the great dragon that deceived the world'.¹ His predella panel showed him handing the tablets of the law to Moses, while the tracery above was resplendent with a large shining star, flanked by the sun and moon set in a dark night sky, a probable reference to Rev. 12.1. Clarke had to complete his designs in March 1929 in Davos, after tuberculosis had forced his departure from Ireland to a Swiss sanatorium. His studios then translated these from detailed small-scale pencil studies and richly coloured, loose watercolour and ink sketches into glass, so that the windows were ready by January 1930, and erected in Penarth two months later. Tragically, the church was blitzed in 1941, so that nothing now remains of these windows.

¹ In traditional iconography, Michael fights the rebel angels and the dragon of Revelation (Rev. 12.7). He was also the patron of knights and of all trades allied to the production of weapons and scales. When he weighs the souls of the deceased, he often holds the scales himself and he can play an essential role in representations of the Last Judgment. See G. Duchet-Suchaux, and M. Pastoureau, *The Bible and the Saints* (Flammarion Iconographic Guides; Paris: Flammarion, 1994), p. 243.

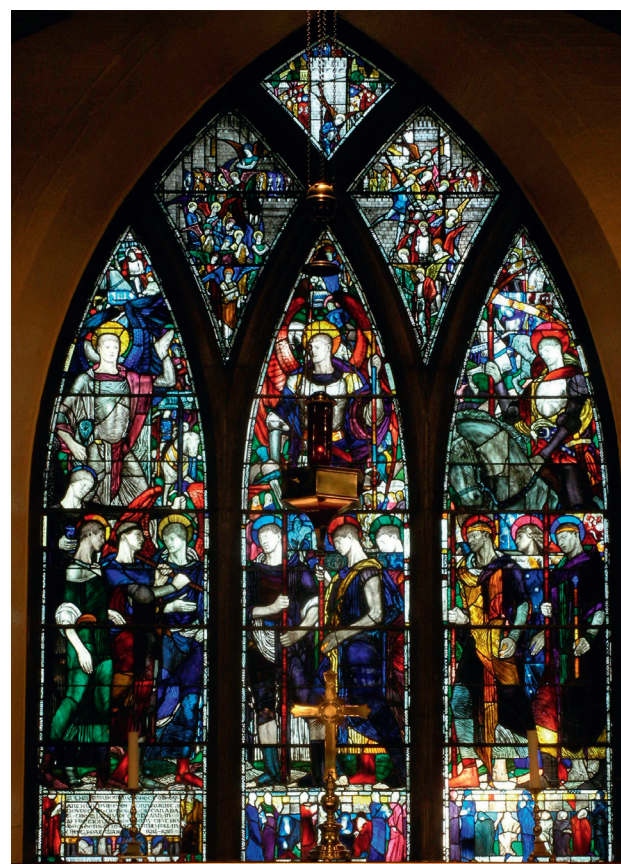
² W.M. Geddes, 'Making Stained Glass Windows', *The Belfast News-Letter*, 25 September 1930.

³ Bernard Rackham, 'Stained Glass Windows by Miss W.M. Geddes', *The Studio*, 98, (1929), p. 682.

⁴ Thomas McGreevy, 'Women Artists in Ireland: Position here and in England', *The Irish Independent*, 4 December 1922.

One of the most important and intriguing artists from this period was Wilhelmina Geddes (1887-1955). By 1938, Geddes had made a succession of strikingly original masterpieces in stained glass, translating her artistic and intellectual powers into windows with 'an intensity of colour and a vigour of design'² which one of her many admiring critics 'commended as a welcome relief from the correct, aesthetically neutral glass painting so easily procurable in compliance with the timid requirements of so many church committees'.³ Shortly before she left Ireland for good in 1925, and settled in London, she was described as 'one of the very few artists who can interpret art as the profound expression of spirit', and as 'producing the finest, the most sincerely, passionately religious stained glass of our time'.⁴ The same eminent critic wrote that 'most people

257. Wilhelmina Geddes, *The Welcoming of a Slain Warrior by Soldier-Saints, Champions and Angels*, HRH The Duke of Connaught's War Memorial Window to his Canadian Staff, 1919, St Bartholomew's Church, Ottawa, stained glass.



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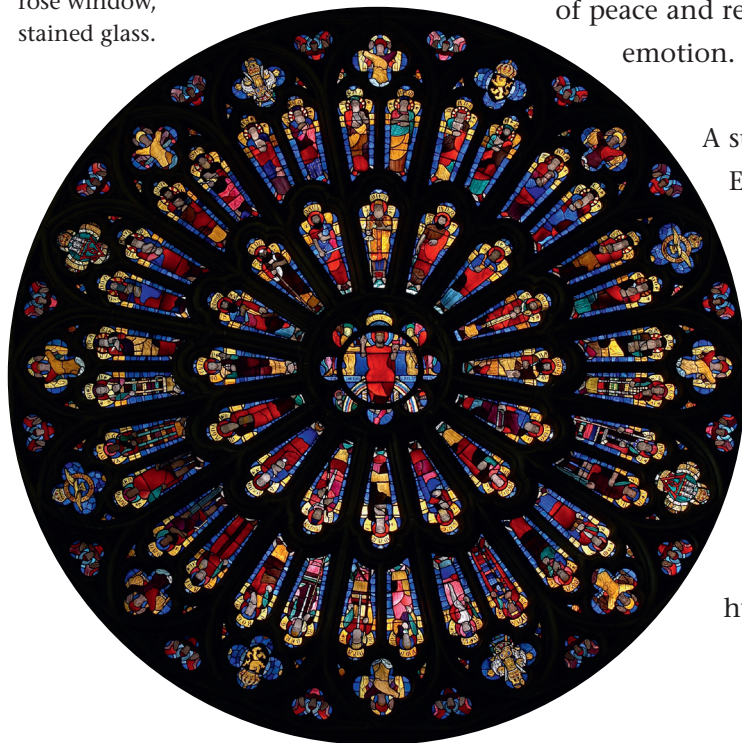
⁵ Thomas McGreevy, 'Religious Art and Modern Ireland', *The Gaelic Churchman*, Vol. 3, no. 2, April 1922, p. 128.

⁶ C.J. Connick, 'Modern Glass – A Review', *International Studio*, Vol. LXXX, October 1924, p. 46.

⁷ Bruyere, 'Some Irish Artists, XVI – Miss W.M. Geddes', *The Irish Times*, 14 July 1923.

⁸ Geddes, 'Making Stained Glass Windows', *The Belfast News-Letter*, 25 September, 1930.

258. Wilhelmina Geddes, *Te Deum*, St Martin's Cathedral, Ypres, 1934-38, rose window, stained glass.



cannot appreciate Bellini and Cézanne and Miss Geddes any more than they can live up to the New Testament'!⁵ Charles Connick, the distinguished American stained glass artist and writer, marvelled at her Ottawa War Memorial window (1919), commissioned by HRH the Duke of Connaught when he was Governor-General of Canada. Connick wrote of her 'technical skill ... used in a fresh and vivid manner ... Nowhere in modern glass is there a more striking example of a courageous adventure in the medium'.⁶ Her smouldering five-light Wallsend *Crucifixion* of 1922, about the same size as her window in St Peter's Church, Lampeter, was variously described as 'one of the noblest works of religious and decorative art of our times', 'a daring monumental scheme', realized with 'vigorous artistic expression' and 'pure, primitive colour'.

Her upbringing in Belfast in a strict Methodist household had resulted in her thorough knowledge of the Bible, as well as her love of literature, compounded by her lifelong study of anatomy and Classical Greek and mediaeval sculpture. Her art was centred on the expressive power of her figures, consummately modelled with a sculptor's eye and a painter's brush, and endowed with 'fine, bold drawing, afraid of nothing, even brutal at times'.⁷ The same writer wrote of her glowing *Saints Patrick and Columba* window (1923) in Larne, Co. Antrim: 'Looking at Miss Geddes' glass, the first thing that usually strikes the observer is its force. There is in [her figures] virile, almost alarming strength. Her glass is quite unlike that of most other stained glass workers; the religion which it reflects is the religion of power and fighting, not the religion of peace and restfulness. In Miss Geddes' drawing there is great emotion. One can feel the tragedy in some of her figures'.

A succession of increasingly monumental windows in England and Ireland revealed Geddes's unique ability to sustain the 'dignity ... of large simple gesture' in her figures that she so admired in the 'archaic [thirteenth-century] figures of the tremendous prophets and saints at Chartres Cathedral';⁸ she did this regardless of scale, interweaving large symbolic figures with small narrative details. In 1934, she had embarked on her most ambitious undertaking, a huge 250 square-foot 'Te Deum' Rose window (1934-8), illustrating the fourth-century Ambrosian hymn for the reconstructed St Martin's Cathedral at



Ypres. Her deeply glowing window, in luminous shades of rich, primary colours, incorporated eighty-nine loosely painted tracery lights radiating out from the central figure of Christ, who is depicted seated on the Rainbow of Peace with Earth at his feet and attended by worshipping soldier saints, Apostles, Prophets and Martyrs.⁹

In 1937, a faculty was granted for the erection of a new three-light stained glass window at the west end of St Peter's Church, Lampeter, and the commission was granted to Geddes. The coloured design, description and estimate for this, which had been submitted by Wilhelmina Geddes, had anticipated a window which would cost approximately £960, and was to commemorate the late Sir John Charles Harford, 1st Baronet of Falcondale (1860-1934).¹⁰ The artist's niece records that 'in actuality [Geddes] got nothing for the extra costs due to the war and the consequent delays', which resulted in the glass not being completed until February 1944; even then, it was 'damaged in transit to Lampeter', resulting in 'replacement glass' having to be made between November 1943 and January 1944. The last sizable consignment was noted as having been sent on 5 January 1944, although the final 'setting up of lights in Wales' seems not to have occurred until 24 January 1946, with a 'gladsome' dedication on 1 May 1946, once the War was safely over.¹¹

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⁹ This prestigious commission was a tribute from the RAF, the British Army and the British Legion to HRH King Albert I of the Belgians.

¹⁰ Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MSS 914 Con, F, P & R; SD/F/914. Sir Arthur Harford had to fully explain the artist's design to the members of the Church Council before they would approve it. Two years later the estimate for a single lancet window in St Peter's from Sir Ninian Comper was

£80 – presumably the cost of the design only. I am grateful to Malcolm Jefferies, former Churchwarden at St Peter's Church, for sending me photocopies of the relevant manuscript material from the National Library of Wales as well as other important church documents.

¹¹ Letter to the author from Elizabeth Kerr, 9 February 2003.



Geddes proposed to illustrate Mt. 4.12-20 in her commanding window, which is 20ft 4ins (6.1m) high and 11ft 6ins (3.5m) wide. As her principal subjects are *The Prophecy of Esaias* (vv. 14-16) and *The Calling of Peter and Andrew* (vv.18-20), she filled the three main lancets with the heroic, golden-haloed

259. Wilhelmina Geddes, *West Window*, St Peter's Church, Lampeter, Cardiganshire, installed 1947, stained glass.

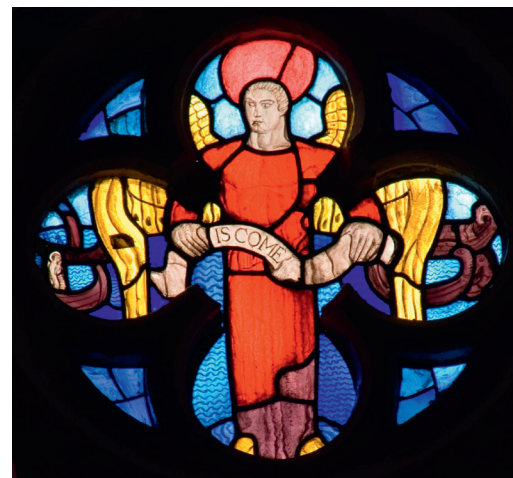


260. *Sir Arthur Harford*, 2nd Baronet of Falcondale, who commissioned the window.



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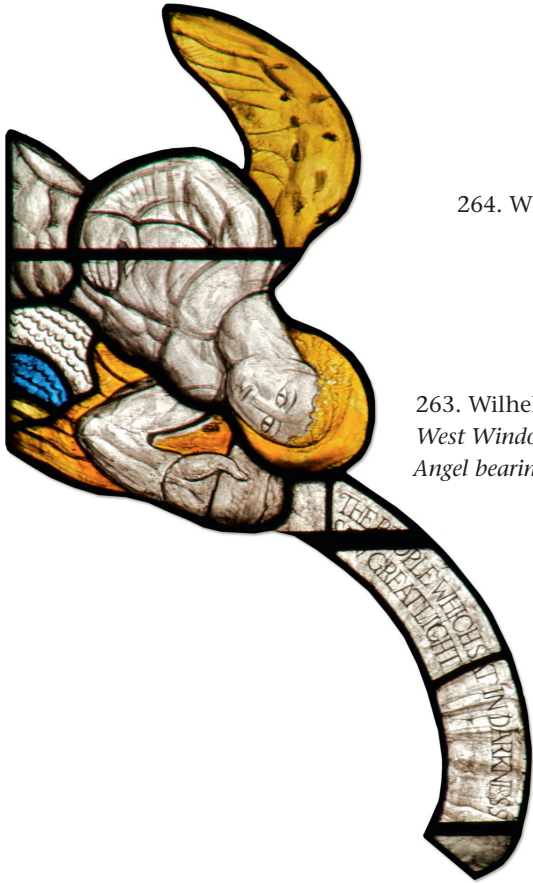
261. Wilhelmina Geddes,
West Window, detail,
Isaiah (left) and *Angel*
with Scroll (right).

figures of Christ, with Peter on the left and Andrew on the right, the latter two being named in the cloudy auras surrounding their haloes. The top circular tracery panel above them depicts the smaller patriarchal figure of Isaiah (named in the clouds that encircle him). He represents the Spirit of Prophecy (vv. 14-16) as he hurtles through the brilliant blue sky strewn with comets, coloured in deep glowing pink like his robe, bearing a scroll inscribed in unadorned sans-serif capitals, 'ARISE SHINE FOR'. His words from the book of Isaiah (Isa. 60.1) are completed on the scrolls borne by the two golden-winged, pink-clad angels who each occupy the two tracery quatrefoil lights below the figure of Isaiah, inscribed respectively 'THY LIGHT' and 'IS COME'. Seemingly stunned at the realization of this momentous prophecy, they hover over Lake Galilee, which is dotted with wooden fishing boats whose prows are carved with mythical beasts. The central figure of Christ is identified by his distracted, yet compassionate expression, as he reflects on his fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. He cradles protectively the model of a Byzantine church. Guarded by a tiny mitred bishop (Peter) and set on a rock, its portal is inscribed 'THIS ROCK ...', symbolizing Christ's words to Peter (here Geddes referred to Mt. 16.18 in her design notes and wrote: 'And I say also unto thee, that thou art Petros, and upon this rock I will build my church'). The choice of subject is explained by the fact that the church at Lampeter is called St Peter's. The presence of the symbolic model church evidently reflected Sir John Harford's active and zealous churchmanship as churchwarden and church councillor at St Peter's. In radiant shades of coral, the scene above depicts Christ's preaching from a boat on the waters of Galilee to six attentive

262. Wilhelmina Geddes,
West Window, detail,
Christ with Model of
a Byzantine Church.



¹² The classically toga-robed, rock-hewn figures of Peter and Andrew, flanking their beloved master, Christ, display in their resolutely determined expressions the 'strong will and independent character' recorded by Sir John's obituarist, as well as 'his tall, stately figure'.



264. Wilhelmina Geddes,
West Window, detail,
Peter.

263. Wilhelmina Geddes,
West Window, detail,
Angel bearing a Scroll.



265. Wilhelmina Geddes,
West Window, detail,
Andrew.

disciples, as recorded in the scroll around his nimbus:
'HE SAITH UNTO THEM FOLLOW ME' (Mt. 4.19); below, a golden-haired angel, as white as the scroll he bears, which is inscribed 'THE PEOPLE WHICH SAT IN DARKNESS SAW A GREAT LIGHT' (Mt. 4.16), resembles a falling stone effigy. The angel provides a visual link with the striking depiction below of Christ's mystical calling of the brawny fishermen, Peter and Andrew, beside Lake Galilee.¹² The artist noted that Peter holds a key, referring to Mt. 16.19: 'And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven', and Andrew a large fish, denoting his occupation before his calling to discipleship and reflecting Sir John's fondness for fishing salmon and trout in the legendary waters of the nearby River Aeron. Both disciples also carry a martyr's green palm. Beneath the small grassy islands depicting the sinewy bare feet of each herculean figure, the lower panels contain inscriptions and illustrate the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy. Below Peter, Matthew is portrayed huddled in a purple cloak, writing the text of his Gospel (4. 18-20):

AND JESUS, WALKING BY THE SEA OF GALILEE, SAW TWO
BRETHREN, SIMON CALLED PETER,
AND ANDREW, HIS BROTHER, CASTING A NET INTO THE SEA: FOR
THEY WERE FISHERS.
AND HE SAID UNTO THEM, 'FOLLOW ME, AND I WILL MAKE YOU
FISHERS OF MEN'.
AND THEY STRAIGHTWAY LEFT THEIR NETS, AND FOLLOWED HIM.

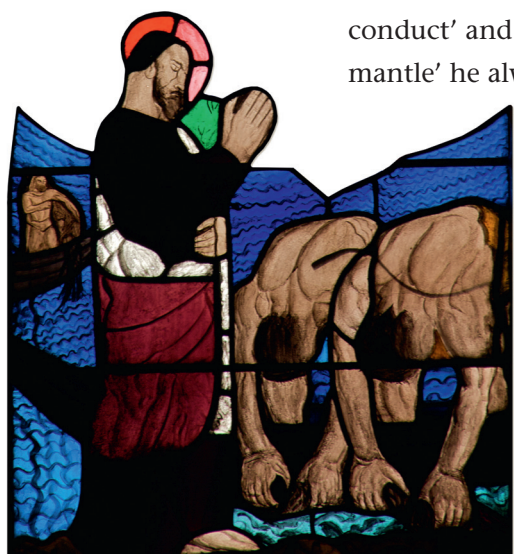
266. Wilhelmina Geddes,
West Window, detail,
Matthew.





267. Wilhelmina Geddes,
West Window, detail,
Memorial Inscription
to Sir John Harford.

268. Wilhelmina Geddes,
West Window, detail,
Fishermen.



269. Raphael,
The Miraculous Draught of Fishes,
1515, tapestry cartoon.

Below Andrew, a golden-winged angel, wearing a salmon-coloured tabard and holding a small gold and silver casket, bows his head as he illuminates Sir John's memorial inscription with a radiant candle (Mt. 4.16: 'THE PEOPLE WHICH SAT IN DARKNESS SAW GREAT LIGHT; AND TO THEM WHICH SAT IN THE REGION AND SHADOW OF DEATH LIGHT IS SPRUNG UP').

The iconography of Geddes's windows is always inventive, yet meticulously constructed, revealing her knowledgeable attention to both biblical and complementary historical allusions. Thus, her heroic portrayals of Peter and Andrew refer not only to the Bible but to Jacobus de Voragine's thirteenth-century *Golden Legend*. In this, Peter is 'he who obeys, or he who mourns', 'the chief of the disciples, a rock in the constancy of his suffering', 'the knowing one, or one who takes off his shoes', who 'loosens the fetters of our sins with the keys which he received from the Lord'. His 'adornment of good conduct' and 'gifts of virtue' relate directly to Sir John Harford, while the 'tunic and mantle' he always wore recall his stoic dignity.¹³ Similarly, his brother Andrew, whose

name means 'valorous', 'was beautiful in his life, responsive in his wise teaching, virile in suffering, and esteemed by all for his manly virtues'.¹⁴

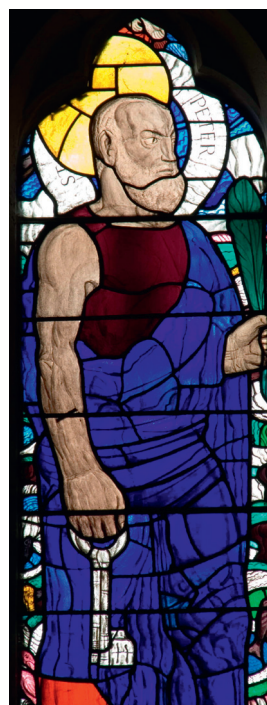
From her earliest full-scale window, made in 1912, Geddes also synthesized a range of sometimes unexpected art-historical influences, both sculpted and painted, to produce hard-won images of inimitably dramatic and solemn beauty – which are never repeated. For example, the dramatic image of the two fishermen hauling in their nets is taken from one of Raphael's tapestry cartoons, *The Miraculous Draught of Fishes* (1515), which she knew from the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum;¹⁵ the stance, emblem-bearing hands of Peter and Andrew, and Peter's rippling muscled bare arms are taken from the ninth-century BCE Assyrian stele from Nimrud in the British Museum's collection; the 'falling angel' can be traced to the north doorway of Chartres Cathedral's west portal; Christ's black-bearded face is based on that of her admired friend, the economist Professor H.O. Meredith, while the models for the cranes and flamingos included in the borders lived in London Zoo. Other influences include paintings by William Blake and Michelangelo and sculpture by Aristide Maillol. Above all, her fundamentally mediaeval approach led her to emulate her Gothic predecessors, who 'did not believe that choice of subject was a matter



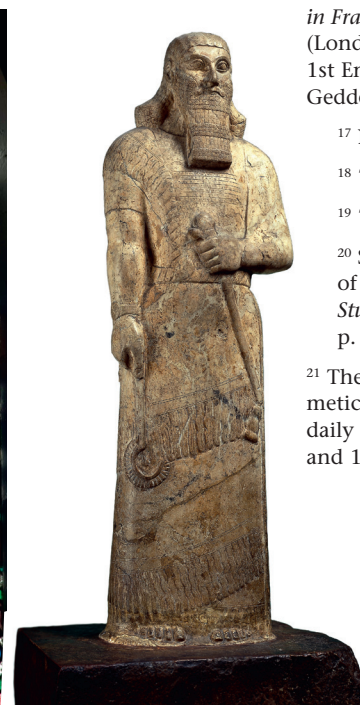
of indifference. In mediaeval art every form clothes a thought. The form cannot be separated from the idea which creates and animates it. All that was laid down as essential by the theologian, the encyclopaedist, the interpreter of the Bible, was expressed in sculpture or in painted glass.¹⁶

One of the reasons Geddes agonized for so long over selecting exactly the right colour, tone, texture and depth of each piece of glass before she even painted, stained or plated it was because she was instinctively aware of the 'mystic consonance between ... colours and things of the spirit'.¹⁷ Her materials were an integral part of her unrelenting artistic vision. This was, above all, one of deep spiritual significance and the revelation of how extraordinarily beautiful such materials as her beloved gold-pink glass can be when magically coaxed into life through her unmitigatedly masterful brushwork, enlivened leading and subtle balance of luminescent colours. Thus, each painstakingly chosen piece of glass becomes a vessel for the ever-changing passage of sunlight.

Although she was described as 'the finest stained glass artist of our time',¹⁸ recognition of her work was largely 'confined to a very few discriminating patrons and some fellow artists';¹⁹ and, because her art is principally expressed through architecturally fixed stained glass, 'she is hard to appraise justly because a representative exhibition of her work is impossible'.²⁰ Wales is indeed fortunate that Sir Arthur Harford was so patient and supportive during the six or so years that it took Geddes to complete a window that was made during the Blitz, during the great physical and psychological hardships imposed by the War. The resultant displacements, insecurities and shortages of materials and manpower, the breakages and transit problems that inevitably ensued, and the extra insurance costs involved compounded its delay.²¹ This was to be the artist's last large window before ill-health irrevocably undermined her creative output and led to her death ten years later.



270. Wilhelmina Geddes, *West Window*, detail, *Peter*.



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¹³ See 'The Life of S. Peter the Apostle', in F.S. Ellis (ed.), *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints as Englished by William Caxton* (London: Gollancz, trans. Dora Nussey; 1900), iv, p. 12, a book Geddes valued.

¹⁴ 'The Life of S. Andrew the Apostle', in Ellis, *The Golden Legend*, ii, p. 94.

¹⁵ This image was also controversially adapted by the French Impressionist painter, Gustave Caillebotte, in his oil on canvas, *The Floor Planers* (1875).

¹⁶ Emile Mâle, *Religious Art in France of the XIII Century* (London: J.M. Dent, 1913, 1st English edn.), pp. viii, 22. Geddes knew this book well.

¹⁷ Mâle, *Religious Art*, p. 30.

¹⁸ *The Times*, 16 August 1955.

¹⁹ *The Times*, 16 August 1955.

²⁰ Stephen Gwynn, 'The Art of Miss W.M. Geddes', *The Studio*, 84, no. 352 (1922), p. 208.

²¹ These are recorded in meticulous detail in the artist's daily diaries between 1939 and 1944 (private collection).

271. Assyrian stele from Nimrud, ninth century BCE, stone.