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Wilhelmina Geddes: Life and Work

Nicola Gordon Bowe

Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015, 483 pp, 230 colour and 123 b/w illustrations, chronology of list of work, bibliography, endnotes, and index, €50.00/GBP45.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781846825323

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As I finished reading the chapter the First World War memorials designed and made by the Irish-born artist Wilhelmina Geddes (1887-1955), between 1917 and 1922 for churches in Ireland, Canada and England, in Nicola Gordon Bowe's astonishing new biography, I had to remind myself that, although once widely respected and described as 'the finest stained glass artist of our time' (p. 407), Geddes is today virtually unknown. It was at this point that I began to see the significance of Bowe's book all the more as rather than being a straightforward excavation and recovery project it is a synthesis of life writing, craft theory, social history, art criticism, and feminism – as complex and fascinating as its subject. As I worked my way through the subsequent chapters I was prompted to think of contemporary debates about the nature, and future, of the 'cradle-to-grave' model of biography. Recent experimental life histories of historic figures (as diverse as Dorothy Wordsworth, William Shakespeare, Henry James and Evelyn Waugh) have taken, with interesting results, specific themes, a single date or a unique relationship as a focus or starting point. But it seemed necessary, almost critical, for Bowe to incorporate all aspects and periods of Geddes' life into one all-encompassing narrative – since the even the basic facts of Geddes' life are so little known. Bowe's taut sentences in pithy paragraphs condense years of research, fusing artistic evaluation, technical explanation and wide contextualization, with brilliant clarity.

Emerging from an evangelical background in a middle-class family in Belfast's Methodist community, furnished her with none of the social connections or benefits of many of her female peers in the art world, Geddes nonetheless forged her own way as an artist of remarkable integrity and independence through two world wars, living alone through the Blitz in London, as well as revolution, civil war and partition in Ireland. Unmarried and childless at the time of her death in a post-war world where the trajectory of stained glass as a craft was beginning to be eclipsed by indifference, secularization and a set of new agendas and dilemmas for craft itself, a context that sadly resulted in her reputation suffering inestimably. Unlike many of her male peers in the studio craft world, such as Bernard Leach (born in the

same year as Geddes) she wrote no manuals, trained only one pupil, and had no heir to carry on her memory. Since then Geddes' life and career have largely remained undocumented, critically neglected, and increasingly forgotten.

Where to begin? Bowe's book is so packed with new material and insight that I had to read it twice to make sure I caught everything. Running to just under 500 pages, weighting 386g, filled with over 200 colour and over 100 black-and-white illustrations, the book is incisively, wittily and sympathetically written and illustrated with superb photography (that itself will do much to restore Geddes' reputation). Geddes left an incomplete series of diaries, as well as many letters, which allows Bowe to inject much humour as well as pathos into her narrative. Diaries always envisage a reader but somehow Geddes seems self-reflexive almost lonely to a point where she wrote for herself. Her comments are often brief and terse; when conflicted as to whether dedicate herself to writing or art, 'Stick to drawing, Wilminer' (p. 27); following a lacklustre response in sales and reception to her first, and only, exhibition in 1924, 'No more shows in Belfast for me. I wish God would smite Belfast. He will ultimately. I wish he'd do it now' (p. 199); when realizing Dublin felt the same, 'Nobody loves me. And yet I'm real smart' (p. 200); and finally she opened her 1949 diary with the sanguine 'I am not to be rude' (p. 378). Bowe, although at times forensic, avoids the pitfalls of biography as a kind of autopsy or portrait and allows Geddes to speak to us through her own words. As such we build up a very human picture of her, even when, at times, her frustration pushes her to bad temper or cruelty, such as her response to Evie Hone's dazzling success in stained glass by describing Hone's figure drawings as 'sacks of potatoes' (p. 404). With Hone (who was Geddes' contemporary and only pupil), to whom she is most often measured, she felt a justifiable twinge of resentment: 'I suppose [it's] not reasonable to be in a rage with "dear sweet little Evie" but considering that her modernity is incapacity to draw and the rest cribbed from me' (p. 320).

Whilst many of Geddes' achievements in stained glass, let alone embroidery, linocuts and the pen-and-ink illustration, seem peerless, they remain little recognized. Take for example her war memorials, which may sound traditional, even conservative in terms of imagery and construction but when seen together (which this book allows us to do for the first time) they are as challenging as they are affecting. For instance, her interest in androgynous beauty and focus on the male body is stretched, in her painting as much as in her choice of iconography, almost to the point of abstraction. Whilst reading Bowe's superb analysis and looking again and again at the images, Geddes' audacious originality, superb technical mastery and formal experimentation, in these windows, brought to my mind Virginia Woolf's contemporary novel about the life of a young man who dies in the war, published in 1922 as *Jacob's Room*. Woolf's book, conceived the day after her 38th birthday, as a 'new form' of writing that would allow her to strike free from convention in its dissolving of narrative and portrayal of the public deeds of men through the private thoughts of women – a description that could equally be applied to Geddes' windows. Intriguingly, windows often play a symbolic role in Woolf's fiction. In Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa first sees the "shell-shocked" war veteran Septimus Smith through a shop window and he later takes his own life by jumping from one. And in the last pages of *Jacob's Room* the protagonist's death is evoked by the image of a darkened window. Woolf, much like Geddes, worked in a male dominated world, through debilitating bouts of self-doubt, anxiety, illness and depression, but succeeded in producing work that glowed 'as bright as fire.'

Geddes clearly had prodigious gifts from early on but dedicated her life, her sizeable talents and her great intelligence to what were increasingly seen, even by the early 20th century, as the most anachronistic of the crafts reinvigorating them with an approach that was intellectual, individual, innovative and above all modern. Like many women artists rising to prominence before the First World War, and sustaining careers during the precarious inter-war decades, Geddes' seemed to slip unnoticed into the craft world even though her strengths lay in her archaic, expressionistic, drawing, once called 'brutal' by a contemporary critic, her vigorous use of primary colours and a sharp and intuitive sense of two-dimensional modelling, readily apparent in anything she turned her hand. Rather than the 'namby-pamby' (her words) stained glass style of the Pre-Raphaelite's followers who imitated fourteenth-century glass, Geddes' found inspiration in Classical sculpture, medieval glass and monumental carving (wet-folded drapery became her *leitmotif*), intensely researching Romanesque, Gothic and Byzantine art, to forge a unique style. Her instantly recognizable volumetric figures, often superhuman in scale, of saints, martyrs, apostles, prophets, and soldiers, address the subject of patriarchy in a way not seen before.

Geddes' work is comparable in its use of primitivism, expressionism and Classicism to that of Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky, Fernand Léger, Aristide Maillol and Marc Chagall, and to the raw dynamism found in modern British sculpture, in the work of Eric Gill, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Jacob Epstein, but also in the gentler, more contemplative, work of Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, Frank Dobson, Leon Underwood and Gertrude Hermes. Bowe makes many fresh analogies and repositions Geddes outside the hermetically sealed world of studio craft, even though she was central to two of its major workshops, An Túr Gloine in Dublin and the Glass House in London, connecting her instead to developments in the thick of Europe's avant-garde.

It would have been wonderful to know more of the complex personal relationships that shaped Geddes' life and work. The indomitable Sophia Rosamond Praeger, the North Irish sculptor who was Geddes' first mentor and life-long advocate, apparently had all her correspondence destroyed following her death the year before Geddes and remains too obscure a figure even if her sculpture studio and her interest in Classical and Irish archaeological sources, and her direct carving, can clearly be seen as a significant influence here. Hugh Owen Meredith (H.O.M.), the Cambridge-educated, magnetically charismatic, strikingly handsome, Classics professor at Belfast's Queen's University, who Virginia Woolf complained often turned up late at night and uninvited and to whom E.M. Forster dedicated *A Room with a View*, proudly affected the young Geddes. But even though H.O.M. was interviewed for the first wave of Bloomsbury biographies in the 1950s and 1960s (for R.H. Harrod's Maynard Keynes, M. Holroyd's Lytton Strachey, P.N. Furbank's E.M. Forster) he remains a shadowy figure. Bowe brings both remarkably to life.

As Geddes' grew older and her art faced increasing marginalization, her health became more fragile and deteriorated, her eyes 'full of flies' wings' so she could hardly draw (p. 382). Even in the final chapters of this book there is much so much interesting and compelling material that I could go on. It seems impossible to do it justice in a short review. Suffice to say Bowe's timely and brilliant biography some sixty years after Geddes' death will surely right what is an appalling injustice. Working for over three decades to find, collate and digest her material, this book is a nothing less than a tour-de-force. A perfect

means to explore an artist whose work was, and is, arresting, startling and like nothing else produced then or since.