



# Sacred lights and secular ground

**Finola Finlay** visits a number of churches enriched by stained-glass artist George Walsh and asks why this medium is not used more widely in secular architecture

**G**eorge Walsh is a living link with the great tradition of stained glass of the first half of the 20th century, while remaining grounded in his own practice of modernist sacred and secular art.

George's father, George Stephen Walsh (GS Walsh), was apprenticed to Harry Clarke and worked in his studio for several years. One of GS Walsh's apprentice pieces shows how thoroughly he was trained to faithfully reproduce the Clarke style, which was vital as Clarke's health deteriorated and the demand for his work increased. GS Walsh eventually moved to Clokey of Belfast, a busy studio in need of a designer with a more contemporary style. Here George served his apprenticeship under his father, attending the Belfast College of Art concurrently.

In 1962 GS Walsh moved the family to Wisconsin, and father and son worked in the Conrad Pickel Studio for the next few years. It was the first of several transfers across the Atlantic for the Walsh family. A period in the Conrad Schmitt Studios in Milwaukee proved important in mastering *dalle de verre*, a technique of embedding chunks of faceted glass in resin that enabled the construction of expansive glass walls.

Frank Ryan of the Abbey Stained Glass Studios called George home permanently in the 1960s to become, with William Earley, their lead designer. For Abbey Studios George developed *dalle de verre* and traditional leaded-glass pieces, such as the enormous windows for Tullamore Catholic Church (Fig 6) and the Church of the Guardian Angels in Blackrock. Although executed in stained glass, these windows clearly show the influence of Gabriel Loire (1904-96), the French *dalle de verre* master, in their size and swathes of swirling colour.

In the 1960s and 1970s, George was one of a group of artists that included his father, George Campbell, Arthur Armstrong, Gerard Dillon and Manus Walsh, all of whom exhibited with Breda Smyth of the Kilcock Gallery, Co Kildare. Smyth saw George Campbell – who was genial, inspirational and supportive – as the core figure. Indeed, George Walsh cites Campbell as a major influence, although it was he who tutored Campbell when Frank Ryan asked Campbell to design for Abbey Studios.

George ventured solo in the 1980s; all the while his distinctive style was evolving. In the Pugin-designed St Mary's Church in Tagoat, Wexford, his energetic work contrasts compellingly with older depictions of haloed saints in long robes. One window is devoted to Pugin himself and includes one of Pugin's (and George's) favourite quotes: 'There is nothing worth living for but Christian Architecture and a boat'. In another window fish swarm and swim in a glorious amber sea (Fig 8). In each, the complex glass-leading accommodates an expansive colour palette



1 GEORGE WALSH  
Kilcummin Church,  
Kerry, Window detail

2 Sandford Parish  
Church, Ranelagh,  
St Francis Window



in which flashes of brilliant blues and reds are toned by soft butter yellows, aquas and ochres.

In the remote Beara Peninsula in West Cork, the plain facade of St Kentigern's Catholic Church in the town of Eyeries shrouds the blaze of colour within. In this set of windows, completed in the late 1990s, George depicts not just sacred subjects, but elements addressing a sense of place and time and the everyday lives of the congregation, a pattern that was to remain constant from then on. Here blues seem to predominate, but he is fully committed to the palette that will become his hallmark; the colours read as bold and primary but in fact range over the spectrum, with rose, plum, mint and emerald green, sky and ice-blue, gold and violet leavening the strong blue, red and yellow hues.

The windows tell the story of Eyeries interwoven with religious themes. The first depicts evolution (possibly a first for an Irish church) with seismic upheavals, dinosaurs and cosmic storms, while the second window concentrates on ancient Ireland, with solar and stellar images and shapes reminiscent of Passage Grave art. Throughout, themes of emigration, communication, farming and fishing intermingle with the staples of the Resurrection and the Nativity (Fig 5).

By the 1990s, George had formed a creative partnership with Eamon Hedderman, founding architect of Holly Park Studio. They met at the Institute for Pastoral Liturgy, mutually inspired by Fr Seán Swane who was driving architects and builders to consider the spirit of Vatican II and its directives for congregational involvement in the liturgy. While they worked together on some striking re-orderings (Fieries and Kilcummin in Kerry both reward viewing), their opportunity to collaborate on an original design came with the Church of the Irish Martyrs in Ballycane, Naas. This church demonstrates vividly what stained glass can do when it is part of a holistic approach to building design. Stepping inside, one immediately questions why we have allowed churches to monopolise stained glass rather than incorporating it into everyday architecture. The body of the church is a mandorla shape, with the altar in a central position. The walls are cleverly designed to appear as if the stained glass and the enormous modern Stations (by Michael Burke)

3 Church of the Irish Martyrs, Naas Window detail

4 SPIRIT OF THE HARVEST

5 St Kentigern's Catholic Church, Cork, Eyeries Window

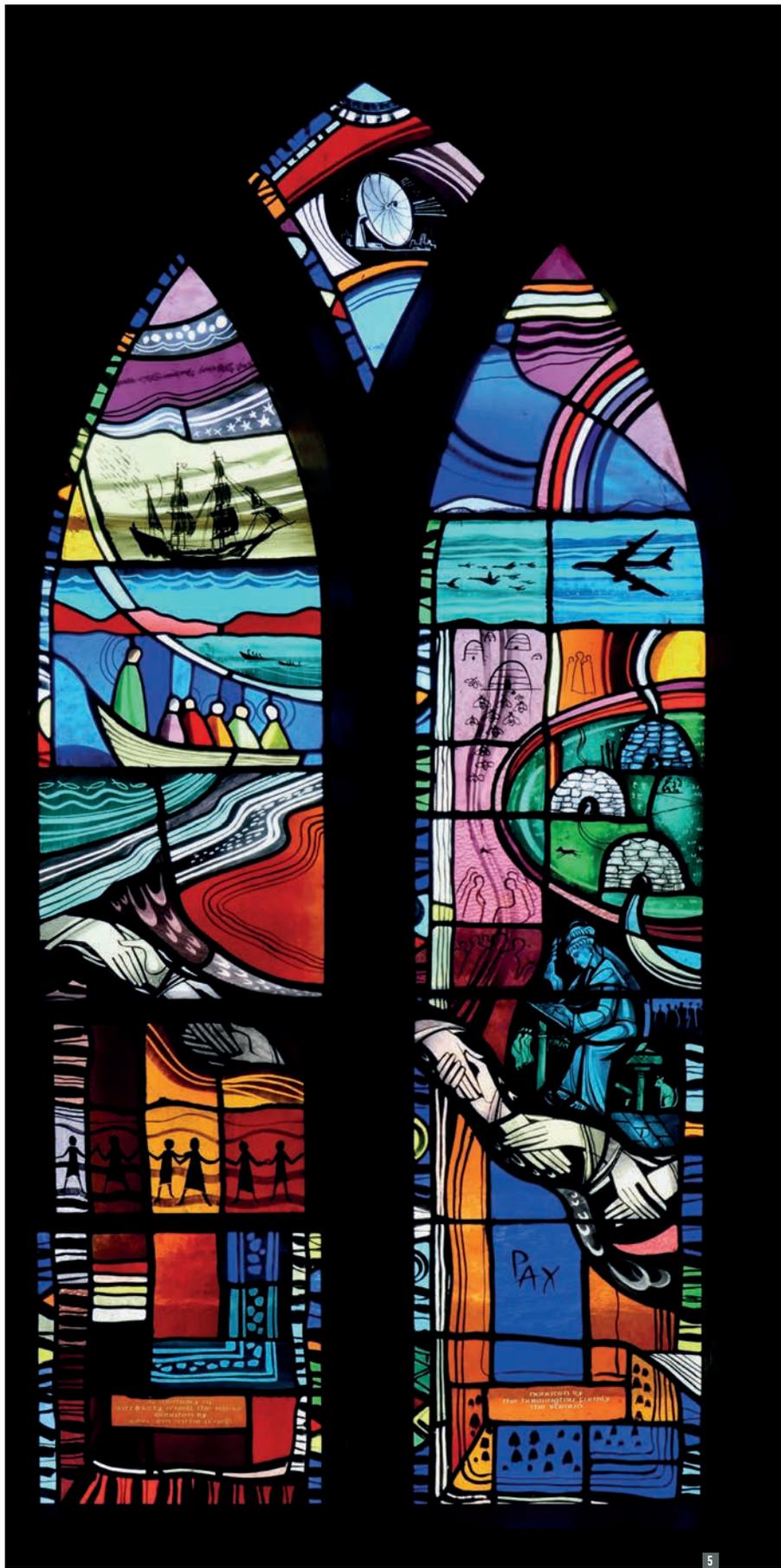
are holding up the roof; rather than punctuating or hanging on the walls, they are the walls. George's windows sweep around the church, changing from dark to light, abstract patterns interlacing with sacred, historical, mythological and everyday themes.

Motifs repeat in Naas: water undulates around the space; hands clasp in friendship and reconciliation; sun and wind reference great elemental forces; beehive huts, monks and pilgrims in boats conjure up the past; and animals, fish, birds (often extinct types) and insects leap, swim and fly by (Fig 3). Knights ride horses into battle. As the congregation must be involved in the liturgy, so too George wants them to see their own lives reflected in the windows. In Kilcummin a man digs turf, the postman delivers letters on his bicycle and boys play hurling (Fig 1); in Eyeries a satellite dish helps keep remote communities in touch, a man fly fishes on the river. A cheeky scruff of a dog appears in several churches. This mixture of the sacred and the secular, the devotional and the quotidian, embedded in richly coloured, abstract and sophisticatedly-leaded glass has become his hallmark.

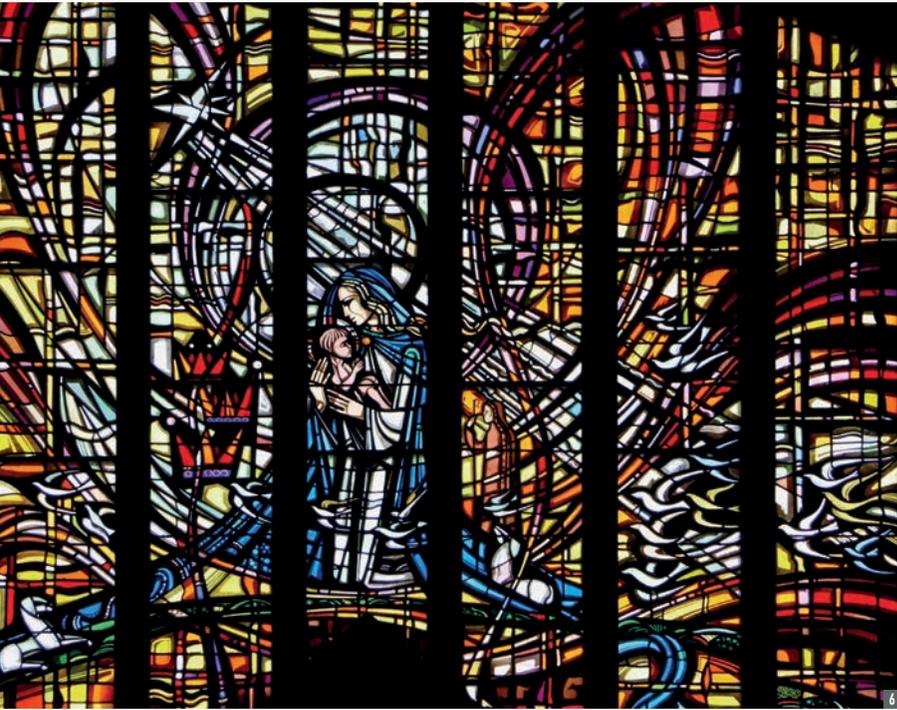
**THROUGHOUT, THEMES OF EMIGRATION, COMMUNICATION, FARMING AND FISHING INTERMINGLE WITH THE STAPLES OF THE RESURRECTION AND THE NATIVITY**



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6 Tullamore Catholic Church, Offaly, Nativity Window

7 Church of the Holy Family, Belfast, Tabernacle

8 St Mary's Church, Taggart, Wexford, Fish detail

9 St Kentigern's Catholic Church, Cork, Eyeries Scribe with Pangur Bawn in window detail

The award-winning Church of the Holy Family in Belfast is a further imagining of how the building shell, the furniture and the decoration can seamlessly create a fully integrated experience. Here, George contributed the design and execution of the windows and bronze tabernacle and, in collaboration with Laura O'Hagan the ceramic artist (responsible for the

mosaics), the design of the Stations of the Cross (Fig 7). The site context, on the intersection of Catholic and Protestant streets, is the framework for a set of extraordinary statements: the Crucifixion Station uses an automatic weapon to shoot nails into Jesus' hands and feet; a nearby window shows two faces separated by barbed wire, while through the glass the reality of razor wire on an outside wall is visible.

Civic commissions have come readily; one can view George's windows in Dublinia and in the College of Surgeons. For an immersive experience go to the Naas and Belfast churches or the Dominican Church in Tallaght. To spend time with a particular piece, visit the Sandford Road Church of Ireland in Ranelagh for his sumptuous St Francis (Fig 2), or Ballycumber, Offaly (home of St Manchan's shrine and George's St Manchan window), Marley Grange in Rathfarnham, Galway Cathedral or Tullow Church of the Most Holy Rosary, Carlow.

In between commissions, George has focused on his personal art practice. Surrounded by a lifetime's accumulation of paintings and sculptures by other artists and by his own and his father's extensive archive, he works in a sunny studio in his back garden, producing from this compact space large windows, small scale display pieces in both



leaded and fused glass, such as *Spirit of the Harvest* (Fig 4), paintings in oils and watercolours, and collages. His painting is strongly informed by the aesthetic of stained glass, colourful and layered. Venice is a favourite subject, as is ancient Rome, Irish mythology, the natural world – even occasionally the sacred.

He has exhibited widely, for example at Sculpture in Context, the Kenny Gallery in Galway and the Kilcock Gallery in Kildare. Although stained glass can be a challenge to show properly, his pieces are popular with discerning buyers. Tom Kenny attributes this to quality: 'George,' he says 'has complete technical mastery of his materials, an outstanding colour sense and a marvelous imagination, elevating his chosen medium to the level of high art.' Breda Smyth suggests a possibility of a publication on the Walshes, father and son, as we better understand the place that stained glass holds as a complex but brilliant medium for artistic expression.

Loretto Meagher and Imelda Collins of the Trinity Gallery in Dublin who represent George note that, despite the connotations of stained glass as 'religious', viewers are immediately attracted to George's pieces. ■

On show, the Trinity Gallery 7 – 14 March.

Finola Finlay writes about history, archaeology and culture for *Roaringwater Journal*.

