A Fortunate Past: Stained Glass Artists and Firms of the 19th and Early 20th Centuries

Beverley Sherry

Dr Beverley Sherry graduated BA (Hons) and MA from the University of Queensland and was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to study at the University of Pennsylvania and Bryn Mawr where she became committed to cross-disciplinary work, especially the historical study of literature and the visual arts. Since completing her PhD in 1965, she has established an academic career encompassing lecturing, research and writing. She was senior lecturer in English at the University of Queensland, worked at the Huntington Library in California and the Australian National University’s Humanities Research Centre, before taking up an appointment at the University of Sydney where she is currently a senior fellow and part-time lecturer. Her extensive research led to the publication in 1991 of the seminal book on the subject, Australia’s Historic Stained Glass, illustrated with photographs by Douglass Baglin.

I would like to introduce some ‘lights of our past’ from around Australia. It is a very fortunate past. From the period of the 19th and early 20th centuries Australia has a wealth of stained glass and there are quite distinct reasons for this.

We owe our heritage of stained glass to a fortunate combination of historical factors. First, the major revival of stained glass in Europe in the 19th century was particularly strong in England and Scotland, and the influence of that revival spread to the Antipodes. This happened via the actual exporting of windows as well as through emigrating architects and stained-glass artists. Luckily it happened in the second half of the 19th century when the Australian colonies were enjoying unprecedented prosperity, a direct result of the gold rushes of the 1850s and continuing pastoral prosperity. So things came together luckily for Australia. It is true to say, for example, that gold gave Adelaide one of the highest proportions of Morris windows in the world. This was due to the efforts of Adelaide’s Sir George Brookman, who had made a fortune from the Kalgoorlie goldfields and was a consistent patron of the English firm Morris & Co. Similarly with ‘Marvellous Melbourne’ and its merchant princes of the late 19th century. Wealth from gold, wool, transport, beer and other businesses gave a splendid legacy of stained glass to this city, notably in the work of William Montgomery.

With the revival of stained glass in Europe, the flow of imported windows into Australia began in the 1840s and continued strongly into the 1920s. Firms like William Wailes of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the London firms Clayton & Bell and Morris & Co, Hardman & Co of Birmingham, and Harry Clarke of Dublin sent some of their prize works to Australia. There is a stunning example in Melbourne, the Ascension window of St Patrick’s Cathedral sent out by Hardman in 1867. By the 1880s moreover, with the emigration of stained glass artists to the colonies, especially from Scotland, local artists and firms became well established in the major Australian cities; Ferguson & Urie (Scotsmen) were leaders in Melbourne, Lyon & Cottier (Scotsmen) in Sydney, and Exton & Gough in Brisbane, and in the 1890s E. F. Troy, another Scottish emigrant, established a stained glass studio in Adelaide. William Montgomery (1850-1927), who trained in England with Clayton & Bell, is typical. He emigrated to Melbourne at the height of the economic boom in 1887. Within a year he was established as a designer of stained glass for both ecclesiastic and secular buildings, and in the 1890s opened branches in Adelaide and Perth. Montgomery was also an eloquent evangelist for stained glass, frequently addressing groups of people, communicating his love for and knowledge of the art. He remains an example to us today.

The economic wealth of the Australian colonies in the second half of the 19th century, together with increased population, produced a major building boom. In the state of Victoria alone, churches were erected at the rate of three or four per week in the 1860s and 1870s. Buildings of every other kind were going up as well: ‘Everywhere’ writes James Inglis of Sydney in 1886, ‘the sound of the workman’s tools is heard’. Stained glass became part of this building boom and
part of the general fabric of architecture. That is why, in researching Australia’s historic stained glass, I discovered that it is by no means restricted to windows in churches. It exists in banks, town halls, parliament houses, theatres, hotels, hospitals, railway stations, schools, universities, libraries, as well as in a wide range of residences. It is to be found in every state of the country, and in both rural and urban areas.

The economic climate was clearly fundamental to this flowering of stained glass in 19th century Australia. Connected with it, the architectural environment was also favourable. There was a genuine rapport between architects and stained glass artists. Architects like Edmund Blacket (1817-1883), William Wardell (1823-1899), Joseph Reed (1823-1890), and Horbury Hunt (1838-1904) were knowledgeable about stained glass and collaborated with stained glass artists and firms. In addition, the social environment was favourable. The churches regularly drew full houses, but so too did the industrial exhibitions, where stained glass was also displayed. People began to want stained glass in their homes and in their public and institutional buildings. It was popular, it was fashionable.

It was also a fantastic way of saying something, even if it was just to say how rich you were. On a more serious level, it could express personal identity, moral ideals or cultural allegiances (either for the old country or for the new). Used to its full potential as an expressive architectural art, it could transform a building and imbue it with meaning. To understand this, you have only to imagine this building where we are gathered today without its stained glass, without the brilliant kaleidoscope of colour which tells a story in the sanctuary.

One of the best examples I know, of this transforming of a building, is the Great Hall of the University of Sydney, which was designed by the architect Edmund Blacket, a known enthusiast for stained glass. Windows made by Clayton & Bell of London in 1856-58 are arranged in a unified scheme around the hall. This was in fact the first completely designed program of stained glass to come out of the 19th century revival and it received much publicity at the time. The windows portray writers, philosophers, explorers, scientists, founders of Oxford and Cambridge, and monarchs of Britain, all arranged chronologically and according to an elaborate plan. Drawn with freshness and verve, the figures are enriched with iconographical details and form a unique expression of the foundations and ideals of the University of Sydney. Without these windows the Great Hall would be strangely mute.

We owe our stained-glass heritage to favourable architectural and social factors, but especially to that initial lucky coinciding of the European revival of stained glass with a time of exceptional prosperity in Australia.

We are doubly lucky because our historic stained glass has largely survived. Elsewhere in the world stained glass windows have frequently been lost or damaged through wartime bombing, such as in Europe, or by wholesale demolition, such as in New York city. If you want to see windows designed by
Endnotes

1 For a detailed account of Montgomery and other early artists and firms, see Beverley Sherry, Australia’s Historic Stained Glass, (Photographs by Douglass Baglin), Murray Child, Sydney, 1991.

Louis Comfort Tiffany (1844-1933) or John La Farge (1835-1910), you will find some survivors, but sadly they mainly exist in museums; the Metropolitan and the Brooklyn Museums in New York and the Morse Gallery of Art in Winter Park, Florida. We are fortunate in Australia to have had no bomb damage and a relatively low rate of demolition of historic buildings.

Figure 2 The wool industry: detail of vaulted ceiling. Commonwealth Bank, Martin Place, Sydney. Designed by John Kadecki, made by John Ashwin & Co, Sydney, 1928. (Photograph: Douglass Baglin)

Today, our stained glass heritage is valuable for its artistic legacy, its unusual number of secular windows, and more broadly, for its rich historical significance. Indeed, much of Australia’s story may be read in the ‘lights of our past’.

Undeniably it has been a fortunate past. The question is: will it be a fortunate future? Our historic stained glass has to be looked after. Much of it is well over 100 years old, deteriorating, and requires the care of experts. Where are the schools to train people in the skills of preserving and conserving stained glass? We have no such schools. Where is the complete illustrated and fully documented inventory, state by state, of Australia’s stained glass windows? There is no such inventory.

(This address was followed by 49 slides with commentary by Beverley Sherry.)