

Artists see the light in stained glass

Two artists have joined forces to continue the proud tradition of stained glass windows, writes **Lucinda O'Sullivan**



WE HAVE had some wonderful stained glass artists in Ireland from Harry Clarke — whom many will know from his glorious windows in Bewley's Cafe — to Evie Hone, whose *Four Green Fields* is now located in Government Buildings.

Evie was related to Nathaniel Hone, the 18th Century portrait and miniature painter, and Nathaniel Hone the Younger, his great-grand nephew in the 19th Century.

Artistic talent is in the genes of Evan Connon too. Evan's grandfather, who died young, was a stained glass artist who worked for Harry Clarke. Evan was always drawing as a child. When he was 15, his father brought him to the Earley Studios in Dundrum where he met William Earley of Earley & Company, one of the largest and most prestigious ecclesiastical decorators in Ireland and the UK.

The company operated out of Camden Street in Dublin from 1852 to 1974, when it moved to Dundrum. The archive of Earley & Company, consisting of 337 design drawings and 30 bound volumes of supporting documentation, was donated by the Earley family to the National Irish Visual Arts Library at the National College of Art and Design and is available on the library's website.

It was explained to Evan that he would have to be prepared to train properly in the traditional way, as an apprentice to the trade, which would

take eight years and like any student, apprentices were not paid. He decided that this was what he wanted and signed up to the apprenticeship at 16. Every day he would return from school to the studio and draw for four or five hours. Mr Earley would look at his work and encourage him saying, "you're improving, you're improving, one day it will just come to you".

After the four years, he progressed to the next stage, which was two years of painting on stained glass. "In stained glass you have to be able to extend the drawing because the windows are larger at the top, they may be 40ft tall, and you have to be able to show the depicted scene at the top, and that is what Willie Earley was teaching me as an ecclesiastical cartoonist."

Looking around at the beautiful drawings in the studio, Connon explained "they have the unique Irish ecclesiastical style of my training, the influence of Harry Clarke and of the Earley Studios".

When the Earley Studios closed in Dundrum, Connon set up his own studio. "I started knocking on priests' doors. They, of course, weren't going to let me pull out a €40,000 window to restore it just because I said I could do it, but I started getting small jobs around the country, things like door panels in churches and so on. A priest in Croghan in Co Roscommon gave me my first opportunity.

"I was on the dole with £80 a week but I had a Fiat Uno and I flew around the country. My sister lived in Cork, I had

friends in Kerry, and I would turn up on their doorsteps.

"I met Monsignor Dan O'Riordan in Kerry and it was he who gave me a big break in St John the Baptist Church, Tralee, by allowing me to restore the church window and then do my first window which is of St Brendan."

From there it got busy and in 2006 Connon started approaching architects.

"I met Paul Arnold, of Paul Arnold Architects, in Portobello and he asked me to restore a window at the Star of the Sea Church in Sandymount." Arnold then asked

would he be interested in restoring in Christ Church Cathedral — the jewel of restoration; the finest stained glass windows in Ireland.

Connon says, "the problem with stained glass restoration and conservation in Ireland was that there was no one trained to do stained glass painting. People would do door panels and so on, but a lot of them were not doing good restoration.

"We explained to people what we were going to do with conservation, it hadn't been done before, and from then on we started restoring some of

the biggest churches in Ireland, from Castlebar church, which has the biggest window in Connaught to Valentia Island, to all the Ring of Kerry."

Taking out the windows, they would bring them back to the studio in Dublin, where they would make a rubbing of the window and then dismantle it completely. The process involves washing them in cold water with no acid. "Previously people were cleaning them with wire wool and damaging the glass because the paints of years ago were very delicate, the kilns weren't hot enough then to bake it in."

A project in Lixnaw, outside Tralee, was Evan's "first opportunity to really blossom as an artist, designing a big rose window".

Then the slowdown came. Still only 33, Connon says he talked to his old mentor Willie Earley. "He advised keep costs as low as possible and keep the studio going so I decided then it would be a good idea to join forces with another studio.

"I knew of Enda Hannon, Stained Glass, who had a fantastic premises on one of the best streets in Dublin, Francis Street, so I thought if we had the two studios in one we would have all areas of the business covered."

Enda Hannon is 44 and is originally from Whitehall in Dublin. He has been in Francis Street for 10 years with a striking stained glass shopfront where he has been working with Ron O'Connor who takes care of the business end.

Hannon was originally working with a sign company and this involved doing work

in a lot of pubs which had lead light windows and it was from there that he got the start in stained glass.

"When I started working for myself, I bought the kiln and learned a lot from various stained glass artists over the years, including Evan, and we did some work together.

"That was the secret of the old studios, in the likes of the Clarke studios, there were great glass painters, cartoonists and craftsmen. You might want to be the best stained glass studios but you have to bring people together, have the right people around you," says Enda.

"You have to realise that you can't do everything and that was the key that I learned in this recession," added Evan.

"We realised we could do more together by putting the two studios side by side. By doing that, we each have our strengths and can produce even better stained glass. That's what we are hoping to achieve here. With the traditional training that I have, and with the training that Enda has in stained glass, we believe it will be one of the finest stained glass studios in Ireland."

They are currently working on the University Church on St Stephen's Green where the windows are 140 years old.

So, here's to Messrs Connon and Hannon who between them create so much light and beauty for us to behold.

Evan Connon Studio



LIGHT AND COLOUR: Enda Hannon and Evan Connon with the Harry Clarke window in the Church of St Nicolas of Myra on Francis Street, Dublin. Photo: Gerry Mooney



STRIKING IMAGE: 'Angel of Love' by Evan Connon