

# THE ÒRAN MÓR BUILDING

## BY ALASDAIR GRAY

The building was planned in the 1850's when Britain was the world's only nation exporting industrial machines, and Glasgow its chief maker of steam-powered engines. Glasgow was then a cluster of burghs, each with its own town council. Govan on the Clyde's south bank was nearly the richest, having shipyards with docks on both banks, some in Partick. Hillhead, between Partick and Maryhill, was still mostly covered by the hedged fields of dairy farms, but had two thoroughfares: Byres Road, with a pub, curling ponds, cattle sheds where the cows were milked, and Great Western Road, a boulevard recently built over the pipes bringing in the city's water supply from Milngavie reservoir. Terraces of houses for the wealthy had begun to be built along Great Western Road, and in Kew Terrace lived John Blackie, head of the Scottish publishing dynasty, Blackie & Son. His firm published Burns, Hogg, other popular literature, the Scottish Guardian newspaper and (*he was sincerely religious*) the Bible. He knew Hillhead would soon be a burgh run by Glasgow's richest citizens, for like most West Ends it was upwind of the smoky forges, factories and reeking slums that financed them. In 1857 he called a meeting to ensure that Hillhead had its own free Church of Scotland – Free to distinguish it from the Established Church of Scotland that it had broken from in 1943. This disruption created nearly 500 new Scottish churches supported by crofters and rural workers outside the big towns and by Liberal industrialism within them – the Auld Kirk was then controlled by the Tory landlords.

Blackie's initiative led to the building of Kelvingrove Botanic Churches in the corner of Byres Road and Great Western Road. This church, in a style called Norman-Gothic, caused much astonishment because, though still surrounded by open spaces, it was spectacularly tall, almost as high as long, the interior having the loftiest ceiling in Glasgow. Like many Hillhead buildings it was undermined by 18th century coalmines, so the huge weight of the bell tower and pyramidal steeple is supported by cast iron pillars on a coalmine's granite floor 60 feet below. The steeple is most western of the three splendid spires on Great Western Road, the others belonging to the Scottish Episcopalian Cathedral a mile to the east, and Lansdowne Free Church of Scotland between them. (*Ruskin thought the Lansdowne spire more splendid in proportion to its height than any other in Europe: it brought tears to his eyes*).

Kelvingrove Botanic Church opened in 1862. Charles Rennie Mackintosh's firm designed a manse with offices added to the eastern gable in 1909. For 116 years a succession of only four ministers conducted services there, but in 1978 the congregation had grown too few for the building so joined the Hillhead Church of Scotland on Observatory Road. This union was east because Tory Landlords no longer controlled the Established Kirk. In 1980 the abandoned building was leased by the Bible Training Institute that moved there from Boswell Street. Eighteen years later the Institute merged with another from northern England and moved to new premises. For four years the building stood derelict. Despite a Historic Scotland preservation order it might have stood until decay led to its demolition as a safety hazard, as has sometimes happened, but two groups offered to buy. One wished to keep the building's outer shell and turn the inside into luxury flats with basement garage. The Hillhead streets are badly choked by motor vehicles, which perhaps moved Glasgow District Council to prefer the group led by Colin Beattie, who turned it into an arts and leisure centre called Oran Mór.

Oran Mór is Gaelic for the Great Music which simply means pibroch of highland bagpipe music, and at a higher level, the music of mankind and universal nature.

### OWNER, NEW ARCHITECT AND DESIGNERS

Colin Beattie owns many pubs and likes converting them to the needs of their neighbourhoods by employing local architects, tradesmen and artists. His former pub and headquarters, the Lismore, have the best recently designed Scottish stained glass windows. His mother's family is from Tیره, which explains the Gaelic connection giving the building its new name.

Peter McGurn, architect, was commissioned by Colin to make plans that lessened the formidable height of the interior by building a new floor at the old gallery level, thus leaving room for a big pub on the ground floor below it, and an auditorium above for concerts, conferences, weddings and private parties. A new, smaller gallery was designed under the auditorium's west end. A spiral stair from the entrance porch on Byres Road rises to the gallery by way of the auditorium which also has a second entrance stair from the porch, a third from a door in the bell tower on great Western Road, and a lift for the disabled from the pub.

To the south side of the pub, room for a restaurant was added. Manse and offices at the back were redesigned to hold a smaller restaurant, kitchens, private dining room and performer's dressing room. The basement (*formerly a crypt or undercroft*) was adapted for use as a popular nightclub and the lunchtime 'A Play A Pie and a Pint' theatre. Claire Kinna and Ian McArthur of surface Ltd designed new wall surfaces, floors, ventilators, lights and furnishings for the Oran Mór interiors.

### MURALIST AND HELPERS

*Alasdair Gray (me) was commissioned to paint mural decorations.*

Since receiving a degree in design and mural decoration from Glasgow Art School in 1957 I had painted ten large murals. Eight were in public buildings, four of which survive. In 1999 Colin paid me to design stained glass windows for a building he failed to acquire, but this had shown I was as open to his ideas as he to mine. We planned a scheme of decorations so big that no date could be given for its completion. We agreed that he pay me and my helpers a qualified tradesman's hourly rate for our work on the Friday of each week. This agreement has worked well, allowing us time off the big Oran Mór job when other jobs or bad health require that.

Robert Salmon has been my assistant since 1995 when we painted the long gallery in Abbot's House local history museum, Dunfermline. In Glasgow we have restored the Ubiquitous Chip backstairs mural, Story of Jonah mural in Ms Shan Holding's West Princes Street flat, and near Cumbernauld a Scottish ecology scheme (in memory of the naturalist David Stevens) in Palacerigg Nature Reserve.

Richard Todd, graduate of Newcastle College Art, joined our team when we began painting the Oran Mór. He is excellent at fine detail, especially architectural detail.

Nichol Wheatley and his chief employee, Stefan Gardiner, run Perfect Circle, a firm that restores old interior decorations and paints new ones in churches, hotels and private houses. Since 2003, with masons and joiners, plumbers and electricians, plasterers and glaziers remaking everything under our scaffolding, we painted the auditorium ceiling and completed it in time for Oran Mór's official opening on 5th June 2004. The décor of the Byres Road entrance porch was also mostly finished for the opening, and being seen first by visitors will be first described.

### BYRES ROAD ENTRANCE PORCH

On entering this you face the foot of the spiral stair with a door to the pub on each side. The floor is a chequered pattern of light and dark grey marbled tiles, a foot square, framing white marble tiles, 2 x 1 foot square, arranged in couples. A national word for Welcome is carved into the white tiles nearest the inner doors. Left of the stair the rows or languages are –

- 1) Gaelic, Glaswegian
- 2) Scandinavian, French, German
- 3) Portuguese, Spanish, Quechua, Cherokee, Inuit (American languages)
- 4) Urdu, Hebrew, Arabic, Kurdish
- 5) Chinese, Tibetan

The rows of language on the right are –

- 1) English, Welsh
- 2) Russian, Italian, Greek
- 3) Hungarian, Czech, Polish, Serbian, Croation
- 4) Afrikaans, Yoruba, Swahili, Xhosa (African language)
- 5) Japanese, Korean

For monumental masons who carved the tiles I designed a script tapered Roman capitals. It is a compromise between pure Roman (*whose serifs I think are unnecessary on a big scale*) and Gill sans-serif (*which I think looks too mechanical*). The non-Roman scripts are mostly redrawn from letters sent me by Beth McKillop in the Oriental Department of the British Library.

### PORCH WALLS

Since Oran Mór is the Gaelic for Nature's great bagpipe, I painted the walls with a rampant Scottish lions, made unthreatening by the pipes they blow.

Note: The wall behind the lions covers a fine marble wall memorial to those of the Kelvinside Botanic Church who died in the two World Wars. I hope a day comes when my jocular porch mural has served its purpose and this fine memorial can decorate the entrance to a place of public enjoyment without causing scandal.

### SPIRAL STAIR

This goes to the auditorium and its gallery. The walls are painted with an ascending pattern of clouds. An ascending flight of trumpet-blowing cherubs will one day be added to these...

### AUDITORIUM CEILING: THE STARS

This is painted with a heaven of stars and clouds, a scheme of decoration used in several Christian churches and Jewish synagogues. Arched beams divide the ceiling into six spaces on each side of the long centre beam, making twelve spaces cut in two by a crossbeam. Below the crossbeams are a repeat pattern of could and moons. Each crossbeam is lettered in gold with the name of the month. I tool these galaxies from a child's guide to the zodiac written by a modern astronomer. They have the fabulous shapes Greek and Roman astrologers imagined in them, but are all three months earlier than in horoscopes calendars. This is because the starry heavens, in relation to our earth, have slipped steadily backward since astrology was invented. The guidebook (published by Ladybird) also gave the Great Bear instead of Taurus the Bull for April, which I have also done.

I made a mistake with Orion the Hunter. The stars defining his dagger on hip and sword on the other should be the other way round. His face and figure are based on Richard Todd. The head of Sagittarius the Archer is drawn from Robert Salmon. The scaffolding was removed, and I saw the head was too small. These faults remain to avoid the cost of mending them.

### CEILING: PLANETS AND MOONS

The long central roof beam running from east to west is covered with many tiny stars suggesting the Milky Way, and five planets are equally spaced along it. From east to west these are the biggest – Saturn and Jupiter – dwindling to Mars, Venus and (smallest above the gallery at the western Byres Road end) Mercury. Their colours have been copied from astronomical colour photographs. Between dark blue, black and silver clouds in each panel of the lower ceiling 6 moons appear, waning from full to crescent on one side, waxing from crescent to full on the other.

### GALLERY CEILING

At the Byres road end this ceiling is a vault divide by the huge curving beams into three triangular spaces, each cut into three panels by silver crossbeams. Figures in these were suggested by a great picture of Gauguin painted shortly before his death, showing folk of all ages pondering birth, life and death in a jungle clearing. It is called Who Are We? Where Do We Come From? Where Are We Going? Questions we ask when able to talk, and which religions, philosophies and sciences are made to answer. The background of every panel is the dark blue, star-sprinkled, night sky universe with a frieze of silver clouds at the foot.

**LEFT PANEL:** This has 'Where Do We Come From?' On the upper cross beam and a reply, 'Life is Rooted in Death's Republic', on the lower. The dark space under the low beam has the roots of life surrounding fossilised life-forms with a pair of happy skeletons embracing among them. The roots meet under the centre of the beam, emerging above as the umbilical cord of a baby being lifted by a midwife from between its mother's legs. On each side, as if resting on the beam is a skull cracked open from within a winged child climbing out. Behind the baby a tree with springtime leaves and blossoms grows straight up with young mothers and children on the branches. In the top panel the tree supports a phoenix, symbol of eternal life, with its head among stars spiralling out of an explosion suggesting the Big Bang of 'Let there be light' which some think started the universe.

**MIDDLE PANEL:** 'What Are We?' Is on the upper beam, and on the lower, 'Animals Who Want More Than We Need.' Between them Mother Nature appears as a vast, calm woman sitting on the globe of the earth with Adam and Eve embracing between her feet. Behind them and between Nature's knees are civilisation most uselessly splendid structures – Egyptian pyramid, Roman Colosseum, Taj Mahal, Eiffel Tower and American Space Shuttle. On the globe under her feet are whales, hippos, lobsters and frogs making love, other creatures caring for their young between atomic power stations, tanker, exploding oil rig, a Trident submarine firing missiles destroying an inland town. There is a volcano because the earth too sometimes explodes. Inside the curved beams framing these panels are steel capitals spelling out a saying of Lao Tzu: NAMING ONE UNNAMEABLE ETERNAL CAUSE, CALL IT THE MOTHER OF ALL THINGS. This advises us not to seek a name for God, but chose a female on if we must. Her head at the top of this panel nearly touches the long central beam down the auditorium ceiling on which the Milky Way and five planets appear.

**RIGHT PANEL:** 'Where Are We Going?' Is answered, on the lowest beam, by Our Seed Returns to Death's Republic. Death is shown in the middle, a Valkyrie on a winged black horse, She thrusts a spear entwined with worms through a man and a woman lying prone beneath her. From the spear sticking out under them grows a network of roots surrounding big seeds shaped like skulls containing winged embryos. The top of the spear grows up into a tree with fruit, autumnal leaves and a nest where a phoenix sinks into flames – an old symbol of death and resurrection. Above the phoenix, stars and silver rays converge on a Black Hole into which some physicist think matter finally collapses, perhaps pouring out into another universe.

### GALLERY WALLS

The walls of the gallery are painted with views from Kelvinway, a boulevard between University Avenue and Sauchiehall Street. When facing Byres Road the right wall shows the westward view from Kelvinbridge. In the foreground is a bronze statuary group on the parapet – an old man with a book, skull and laurels representing Science, a young woman with lute, scroll and roses representing Art. Beyond them Glasgow university is divided by the River Kelvin from the Art Gallery and Museum. (*These buildings were drawn and painted by Richard Todd*).

The left shows the eastward view with Park Circus and the former

Trinity Church (*now luxury flats*) as the highest points, with Kelvingrove Park beneath. The architecture here is also Richard Todd's work. The foreground statue of the woman with spinning wheel and sleeping baby represents Peace; the bare-chested, yelling Kiltie with bandaged head who clutches a broken spear in one hand, helmet full of looted necklaces in the other, is War.

The bridge and its statuary were built as a memorial after the World War of 1914-18. During a German air-raid on Glasgow in 1941, a bomb fell killing nobody but damaging the Warrior and breaking off the arm and hand clutching the spear. These vanished. In an unknown year someone equally unknown had found and removed them from the bed of the Kelvin River. After World War II the statue was replaced but the sculptor, Benno Schotz. In the late1990s Colin Beattie visited a scrap-yard where he saw and bought the broken off arm and hand with broken spear. In 2008 it was fixed by brackets in the black panel on the sandstone pedestal painted under the Peace and War statues. This surprising little story is now lettered in gold upon the corresponding panel in the wall opposite.

### AUDITORIUM ARCHITECTURE

The eastern gable has two big stone arches at the foot. The church organ was once behind here, but fire regulations have walled them up. Three stained glass lancet windows are in the high wall above them.

The north and south walls have a row of four similar stone arches, upheld by cast iron pillars, each with a side-aisle behind. Above the arches are pointed windows arranged in pairs. The side-aisles have four circular windows in their north wall, five in the south. The west end of the auditorium has a semi-circular bar with marble floor sections three steps up from the dance floor. Above the bar is a large blank panel under the auditorium gallery.

**PILLARS:** For over a century these pillars with their Corinthian capital were tall, graceful parts of the Kelvingrove Botanic Church. Since the Oran Mór Auditorium cut the church interior horizontally, only the top half of the pillars are in the auditorium, the rest being in the main bar downstairs. This gave them a stumpy look. I have tried to restore their elegance by having them painted white and a pattern of slender gold and dark green lines.

Above each pillar and between the arches is a carved portrait-head of someone famed for his part in the Protestant Reformation. Eleven heads range from 14th century Wycliff, through founders of German, Swiss and Scottish churches, ending in 19th century Scottish chambers, hero of the Disruption, between the two false arches in the eastern gable. When part of Kelvingrove Botanic Church few people noticed or recognised these heads. They are now thrown into relief by dark blue backgrounds, gold bordered, their names and dates in gold beside them.

**EASTERN GABLE:** Health and safety regulations forced the installation of ugly ventilators, a yard across and two feet deep, high on each side of the windows. Surface Limited suggested I design a cover for them. Each is now behind a bit of fake architecture joined in a semi-circular arch painted with a rainbow. Clouds above blend it with the night sky in the ceiling.

Since rainbows spring from rain and sunlight, the wall below is patterned with clouds and showers of a stormy dawn. Under the windows a sun rises between the two curtained arches. A second, smaller rainbow above the sun has struck some viewers as a rainbow too many, but is needed to harmonise the lower wall with the high fake wall hiding the ventilators. Double rainbows happen and I like them.

Above the point of the tall middle window a black athletic silhouette zooms through the clouds like Superman, his arms spread like Christ on the cross. Viewers can decide whether he is zooming away or toward them. He is immediately opposite the head of Mother Nature at the auditorium Western end. He may be an emblem of Hebrew Jehovah, Greek Zeus, Roman Jupiter, all associated with thunder, lightening and rain. A lightening Trapeze springs from his hands, parts of it flash rain-showers framing the middle window. Six showers are poured from the clouds by angels who may be Mother Nature's daughters. Folk who believe E-MC2 may like to think the Daddy God represents energy, the Big Mother Mass, or that He is Time and She is Space.

This described the work completed by November 2006.

### WORK IN PROGRESS

A sun will rise between the curtained arches of the gable and on each side under it will be elements of a landscape that will be continued above the arches of the north and south walls. But on the eastern gable streams will pour down granite rocks, mingling in a waterfall up which a salmon leaps. A leafy hawthorn will bend over the fall with a bell swinging from a low branch and a robin singing on a high one. Fish, bell, bird and tree are in Glasgow coat of arms. The tree will echo a medallion in the stained-glass window above showing the Church of Scotland emblem or logo: a burning bush, not scorched by its flames, another emblem of eternal life.

### INSCRIPTIONS

Glasgow's ancient motto was, Let Glasgow Flourish by Preaching the Word, meaning God's word in the bible. When the city became the commercial capital of the British Empire in the 19th century the town council cut the holy bit of the motto. I mean to restore it as Let Glasgow Flourish by Telling the Truth. The mural has already several inscriptions but I will say no more about them until they are complete.

### SIDE AISLE WALLS

The red wall under the wooden dado rail has a gold pattern of thistles, leeks, harps and roses, emblems of Britain's main nations. The walls above are being painted to look like marble. The top of each wall have a long, frieze, a pattern of golden horns from which coiling thistles grow around white mice and birds. The frieze will be punctuated by panels above the round windows where mice and birds are playfully entertained by white cats. This grouping is copied from an ancient Celtic carving, said to be an Irish version of Isaiah's prophecy of a day when "The wolf and the lamb shall feed together."

Between the windows will be fixed mirrors with arched frames, mostly in couples, with five heads in the lowest part of each: portraits of those who made the building from its times as a church to its present as an arts and leisure centre. When complete the scheme will start at the western Byres Road end beside the bar, with portraits of the Blackies and some supporters, who raised money for the church, show the minister and some of the congregation who supported it. The opposite wall will have heads of the tradesmen who rebuilt in 2003. Colin Beattie will appear on the eastern gable with partners, staff and artists who now run and use the place. The modern portraits will be fixed up first.

### APOLOGY

At no time has Oran Mor been helped by grants from local government, heritage trust or other public body and charity. It was made with the money Colin Beattie borrowed from the banks and prospers because many like hiring it for concerts and other functions, so painting the walls must be done between these or (*in the case of the portrait mirrors and frieze*) be done elsewhere then fixed in place. So over the next few years visitors will see more and more decoration, and maybe enjoy it, but will ask the question Pope Julius put the decorators of his private chapel, "When will it be finished?" Of course he was given the answer artists have used since the Stone Age: "When it is done!"

*Alasdair Gray, 21 November 2006*