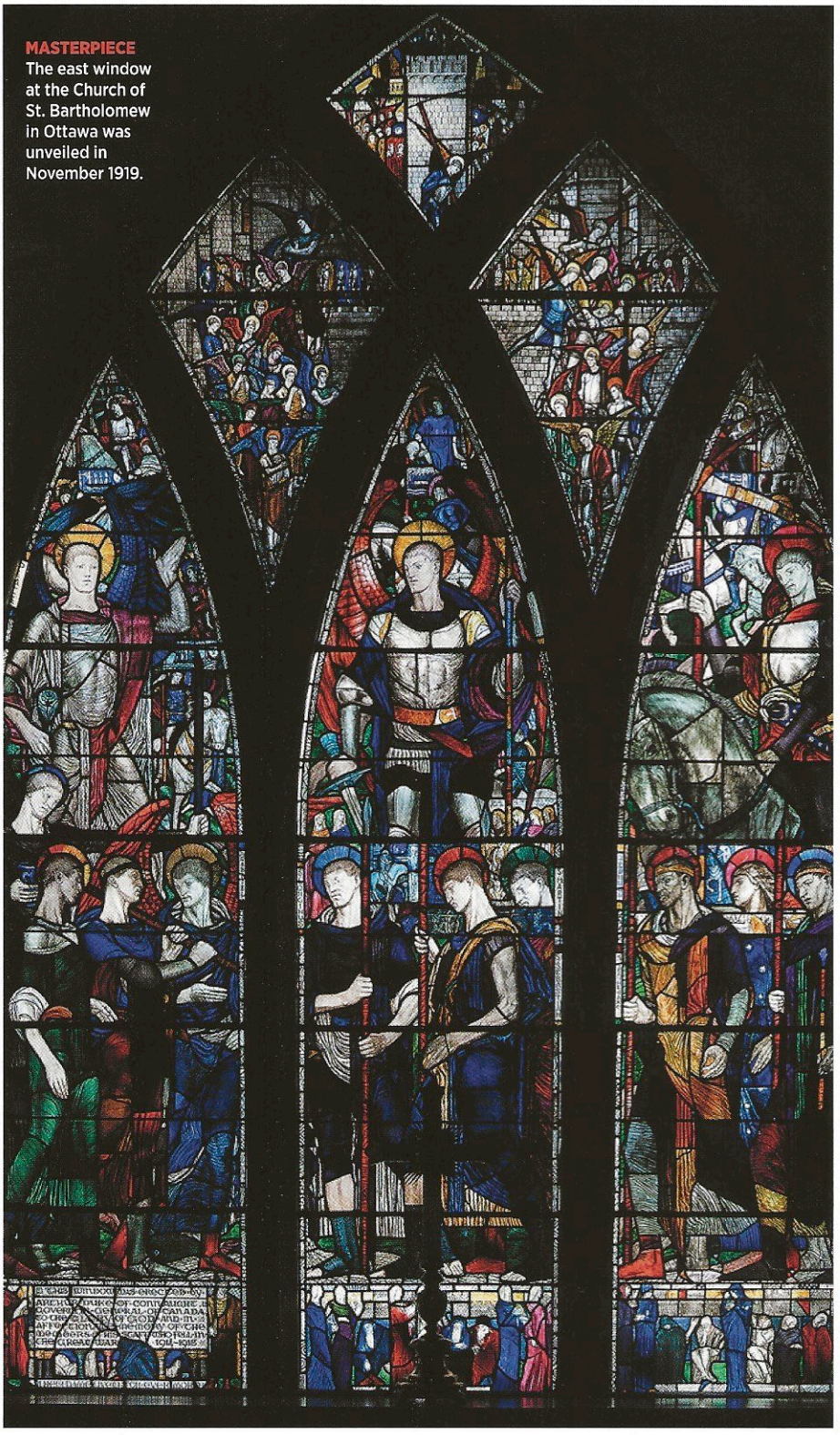
Spotlight



MASTERPIECE The east window at the Church of St. Bartholomew in Ottawa was unveiled in November 1919.

WINDOW

Precious Glass

One hundred years ago, a stained glass masterpiece was unveiled in an Ottawa church. It's been challenging viewers ever since.

THE CHURCH OF St. Bartholomew sits on a corner lot in the quiet residential neighbourhood of New Edinburgh in Ottawa. The well-kept grounds of Rideau Hall are across the street, and the governors general who live there have traditionally crossed over for worship. The prime minister lives five blocks down the road.

But despite the Anglican church's proximity to government and the parish's connections with monarchy and military, the building itself is modest. It resembles a small English country church in its architecture and blends in with the surrounding houses. It would be easy to stroll by without an inkling of the audacious artistry inside, where an imposing stained glass window casts

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PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID CLENDENNING

the sanctuary in bold colours, broodily depicting the arrival in heaven of a slain soldier.

Designed and manufactured in Dublin during the First World War, the Ottawa Window, as it is now known, was unveiled at St. Bartholomew's in November 1919 to commemorate soldiers killed in the war. In Europe, it had already been praised as a masterpiece. "Nowhere in modern glass is there a more striking example of a courageous adventure in the medium," one critic wrote. Its creator, the Belfast-born Wilhelmina Geddes, then 32 years old, was beginning to earn her reputation as one of the greatest stained glass artists of the era.

In Ottawa, the reception was reportedly more ambivalent, perhaps because the window was such a departure from the accepted, mostly decorative, aesthetics of the time. "Instead of the usual Late Victorian sentimentality common in Canadian stained glass of the day, this unassuming little church now housed the most expressive tribute to human heroism and sacrifice that Ottawa, and perhaps even Canada, had seen," wrote Shirley Ann Brown, now professor emerita of art history and humanities at York University, in a 1994 paper.

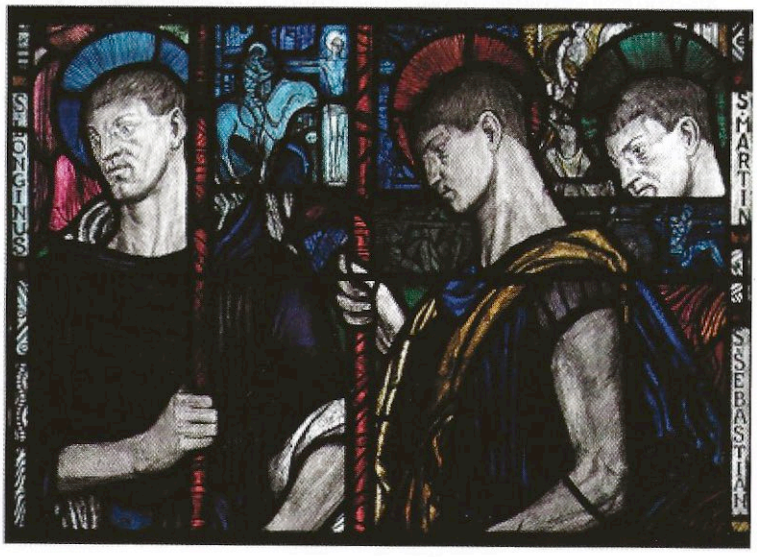
ABOVE A fallen soldier (centre) is led to heaven by archangels Raphael (left) and Gabriel (right).

As Nicola Gordon Bowe, Geddes's only biographer, has documented, the artist's contemporaries were also impressed by the forcefulness and passion of her designs, praising their "virile, almost alarming strength," and the "religion of power and fighting" they conveyed.

In the Ottawa Window, Geddes marshals a company of over 100 figures — soldier saints, mythical martyrs, holy archangels, Arthurian knights and mourning women — into a tableau that memorializes the soldiers as successors in a long line of Christian military heroes. Geddes "has avoided depicting the reality of what [the soldiers] endured," Bowe writes, "instead representing the morality and physical nobility of those portrayed."

It is, one could argue, an awkward artwork for the altar of a church, considering the privileged place in heaven it affords to participants of war. "It's not the kind of window that a church committee would ever have put in," admits David Clunie, who currently presides on Sundays in front of the Ottawa Window as the rector at St. Bartholomew's. "So people were, I think, kind of shocked by it."

The only depiction of Jesus, Clunie notes, is a relatively miniscule crucifix near the centre of the composition, hovering in a blue glow between the heads of two life-sized Roman soldiers. But for Clunie, this crucifix is an inter-



RIGHT The window's only depiction of Jesus is a small crucifix bathed in a blue glow.

OPPOSITE Three saints approach to welcome the recently deceased soldier.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID CLENDENNING

pretive key that unlocks the meaning of the window. The soldiers, the heroes, the knights — they represent the ways of this world. The crucifix, on the other hand, represents the peaceful power of God that will overcome them.

On Remembrance Day, Clunie preaches this interpretation of the window, urging his congregation not to buy into the myth of heroic violence the window appears to affirm. Instead, he encourages viewers to train themselves upon the Christ figure. And the congregation, Clunie says, has become more proud of the window. They no longer see it as "warmongering propaganda," he says. "My position is that it's not that. It's really got something profound to say, and it's going to keep saying it."

It's not only the congregation who appreciates the window. Students of art history — dozens a year, according to the parish administrator — regularly visit to see this important work firsthand. Beginning in the late-19th century, a revolution occurred in the production of stained glass, spurred on by the anti-commercial and artisanal values of the Arts and Crafts movement. Supporters believed stained glass creators ought to be craftspeople as well as artists, intimately connected to their raw materials, leaders in the manufacturing process and free to pursue their creative instincts. Geddes lived up to this vision, spending much of her adult life designing and assembling windows in workshops in Dublin and London before she died in 1955 at the age of 68. Her Ottawa Window remains a high point of Arts and Crafts glass.

But despite her genius, Geddes's windows are relatively uncommon. The artist's output was slowed by mental and physical health struggles as well as financial hardship. Her story, as Bowe notes, is not only one of artistic talent, but also of "a single, city-based woman forging out an independent career in a traditionally male world in early-20th-century war-torn Britain." This makes her work all the more remarkable — and St. Bartholomew's all the more fortunate to be the custodian of the only window by Wilhelmina Geddes in North America. ●

Will Pearson is Broadview*'s managing editor, print.*

WILHELMINA GEDDES was born in Belfast, Ireland, in 1887, and became one of the most renowned stained glass artists of the 20th century.

BOOK

Indigenous Justice

A Cree lawyer's manifesto for transforming the courts

HAROLD R. JOHNSON'S new book, *Peace and Good Order: The Case for Indigenous Justice in Canada*, is a short, intense and far-reaching treatise about the ways Canada's criminal justice system has failed Indigenous people. Johnson is a member of the Montreal Lake Cree Nation and a Harvard-trained lawyer who has worked as both a Crown prosecutor and defence counsel in Saskatchewan. Johnson leads the reader through the structural frustrations he's witnessed in the legal system and the shortcomings of justice as it's currently applied, while also laying out a different vision for the future.

Johnson describes his time as defence counsel as "a failure," and he now views incarceration — which he previously supported as a

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