

GRACE HENRY

Among the last exhibitions celebrating Dublin as Cultural Capital of Europe 1991, the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery (HLMG) showed paintings by Paul and Grace Henry in November and December¹. It was a revival, as we approach the end of the century, of what was at least an annual event, in some years both in Belfast and Dublin, between 1904 and 1926 when Paul and Grace Henry held joint exhibitions, in addition to showing with the Society of Dublin Painters and the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA). The 1991 exhibition was immensely popular, if measured by public attendance and media reviews, and most of the paintings discussed in this article are to be found and described in the exhibition catalogue¹. However, the exhibition once again emphasised the imbalance in public recognition between the two Henrys. Paul Henry's work has been available to a wide public through prints, posters and books, and through his two autobiographies², in which he omits any reference to his wife Grace. Also Paul is the subject of a substantial article³ and continuing research by Dr S Brian Kennedy of the Ulster Museum in Belfast.

In contrast, no major article or book has been devoted to the life and work of Grace Henry. It is very difficult to find any source material as Paul Henry made a conscious effort to exclude her from his writings and to destroy any material referring to her. There were no children and surviving relatives have not been found. Grace is still unknown in Scotland, or even in her home region around Aberdeen. It is the intention here to look closely at the scant information available on her life and evolving painting style, and to attempt to produce an assessment of Grace Henry the artist. She was born Emily Grace Mitchell on 10 February 1868 near Peterhead, Scotland, and died Grace Henry, artist, HRHA, on 11 August 1953 in Dublin. She had a long life involving many spectacular changes of personal experience and opportunity as an artist. Born a Scot, she lived and worked mainly in her adopted country, and is buried in Mount Jerome Cemetery in Dublin.

There are four clear periods of development in Grace Henry's painting as a landscape artist, from the time of her marriage to Paul in 1903 and her death in 1953. Before these are examined in detail, it seems appropriate to reflect on her early

James G Cruickshank outlines the four stages in the development of Grace Henry's painting career.

life in Scotland. Emily Grace Mitchell spent a significant period of thirty-two years in her parents' home or in Aberdeen, a period marked by its settled, domestic character, and in which there was very little sign of a future career as a professional artist. She had been born into the family of a Church of Scotland minister, the second youngest of ten children. For all of her early life up to the age of twenty-seven in 1895, the manse at Kirktown St Fergus, five miles north of Peterhead, Aberdeenshire, Scotland, was home to Grace Mitchell. The house was a large, traditional two-storey building of classical appearance. It was large enough for a household of about fifteen, including servants. It would have been a centre of social activity and the site of the private education of the children. Grace Mitchell's parents both came from aristocratic families of considerable wealth. Her minister father was known to be a controversial character, a politician in the Church of Scotland, someone almost of the status of a celebrity.⁴ For Grace, her early life was one of comfort, security and continuous company. She was educated by a governess at home, but also probably attended a finishing school in London. Through her mother, Jane Garden of Piccadilly, she had many relatives in the city. A relative of her mother was later to pay for her training in painting after she left the Aberdeen area.

All this came to an end in 1895. Father, Reverend John Mitchell, retired that year after forty years in the parish of St Fergus. At the age of seventy, he moved into the city of Aberdeen and died later in the same year. Grace Mitchell was on her own for the first time, and was at the start of the wholly unsettled, almost itinerant, period of her life. After having one abode for twenty-seven years Grace spent the years from 1895 to her death in 1953 moving almost every year, with no fixed abode. Initially, she can be located at two addresses in Aberdeen,⁵ when she exhibited with the Aberdeen Artists' Society in 1896 and 1898. These are her first recorded exhibits. There were around four hundred exhibitors in the exhibition on each occasion. Grace Mitchell's paint-

ings were *Portrait, Primrose* and *Italian Boy*, all three priced at the bottom of the range at three guineas only. None of Grace Mitchell's Scottish paintings can be located now. Almost certainly, Grace left Aberdeen in 1899, and it is remarkable that no image or symbol from her Scottish years appears in her later painting. The door to the past seemed to close when in 1899, she went travelling through Holland, Belgium and northern France on her way to Paris. She exhibited for a third and last time in the Aberdeen Artists' Society exhibition of November 1900 from the address 16 Rue Boissonade, Paris. This time there are four paintings, landscapes from Holland, Belgium and Picardy, now priced at five guineas.⁵ On the way to Paris, there had been some reason for an increase in her artistic confidence and she has been reported for a few months at the Blanc Garrins Academy in Brussels. It is probable that it was well into the year 1900 before Grace arrived in Paris, and it is thought that Paul Henry left there in the same year or early in 1901.³ She had arrived only just in time for the most significant rendezvous of her life, the meeting with and subsequent marriage to Paul Henry.

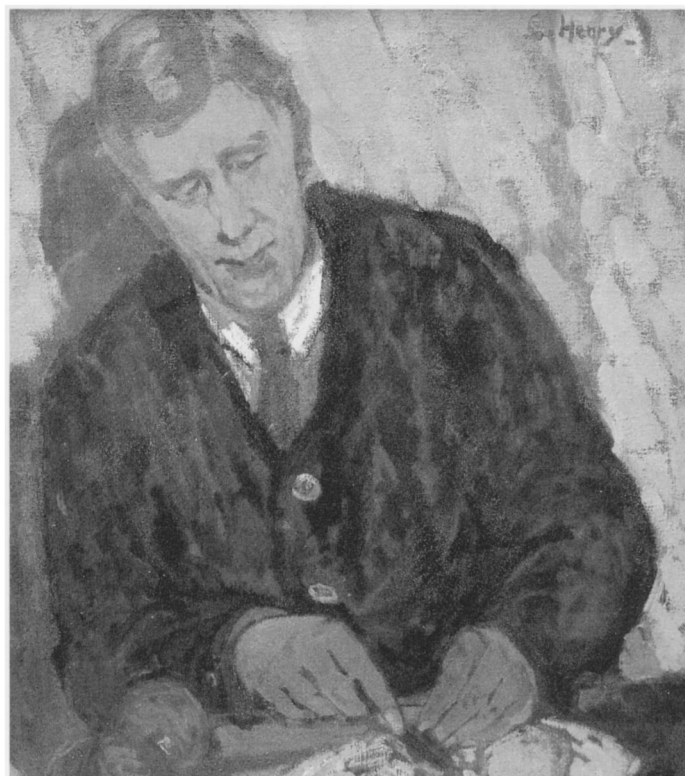
When they met in 1900 Grace Mitchell and Paul Henry were 'birds of a feather', at least socially, if not also in their artistic achievement. They were far from home, if either had anywhere to call home. Lonely, poor, apprentice artists, they came from similar Protestant church families, on the northern edge of the British Isles. Their family backgrounds were very similar, as was their situation in Paris. Paul Henry was quite established, even holding a small job in Whistler's Académie Carmen, and his interest in the painting style of James McNeill Whistler has been frequently discussed.³ It now seems that the influence of Whistler, in modulated colour, simplified composition, and nocturnal subjects, was adopted very early by Grace Mitchell through her Paris connection with Paul Henry, and used by her in most of her painting in the first decade, 1905-15, of her life as a professional painter.

Grace became Mrs Paul Henry when they married at St Peter's Church, Bayswater, London on 17 September 1903. For the following seven years, the Henrys lived in or near London. They had various homes, all for short periods and often living with friends. Guildford and

GRACE HENRY



Grace Henry, *The Long Grey Road of Destiny*, (1913–14),
Oil on canvas, 25 x 19 cm. Private collection, Belfast.



Grace Henry, *Stephen Gwynn or The Orange Man*, (1918–19).
Oil on linen, 60 x 50 cm. Limerick City Gallery of Art.

Southampton have been recorded as places where they lived just outside London, and while Paul Henry found employment drawing black and white illustrations for publications, Grace started her career in oil painting. Possibly three paintings of hers from the period in England, 1903–10, are known. One is a very simple Whistler-like composition, a nocturnal scene of the moon's reflection in a lake, framed by Wiseman's of 54 Above Bar Street, Southampton, a company in business at that address from 1898. The second is what is likely to be a self-portrait in a blue artist's smock, possibly her only self-portrait, painted on a canvas bought in St Ives and showing a woman in her late thirties with blue eyes and fair hair.⁶ The third painting is *The Girl in White*, now at the HLMG, which was first exhibited from an address in London, and whose subject is the same girl as in the putative self-portrait.

All three paintings, though very different in subject, are similar in style and carry identifications of English origin. In all three, the mood is quiet and controlled, composition is simple and almost

geometric. Colour range is limited and muted. Paint is not used thickly, nor required to work on its own. The Whistler influence is very strong in the nocturnal landscape. If any other paintings from this early London period are discovered, it is likely that they will be in a similar style, this being the first of the four phases of Grace Henry's painting, which continued after 1910 when the Henrys moved to Ireland and to Achill. That major move of home and lifestyle is well documented, as are the eventual different reactions of Grace and Paul to their life on Achill.³ Initially, both seemed to adapt quickly and successfully to this new environment, one in such stark contrast to London, Surrey, Paris, Aberdeen or Belfast. The important point about Grace Henry's painting on arrival in Achill is that most of her work was done by moonlight, and the nocturnal or evening scenes continue the mood, muted colour and simple composition of Whistler. Grace Henry is still remembered in Achill for painting outdoors at night, often at the old bridge at Dooagh, in painter's smock and easel set up under the moonlit sky.⁷ In a joint

exhibition held in Belfast in the spring of 1916 and entitled, *Pictures of the West of Ireland*, seven of the ten Grace Henry paintings discussed in a newspaper report are described as evening or moonlit subjects.⁸ Included was the painting *The Long Grey Road of Disting* ('Disting' now thought to be a much-repeated error for 'Destiny') which was subject of an article on 'Nationality in Art – the work of Paul and Grace Henry', published in the *Colour* magazine of London in April 1918.⁹ The author remarks with surprise that both painters have caught the personality of the west of Ireland, despite their alien backgrounds in Belfast and Scotland, but notices that each is individual and different in approach. Grace Henry is again noted for her attempts to simplify her subjects and to use subdued colour, lilac, grey, purple, Prussian blue and underlying black. This phase of dark painting and sombre moods comes to an end about 1915–1916. It had been a period of landscape painting, sometimes with figures in the landscape.

In the same volume of *Colour*, (Vol. 8 1918), the second period of the evolution

GRACE HENRY

of Grace Henry's painting is marked by a print of *The Black Shawl* (present whereabouts unknown). It is very similar in subject, composition and colour range to the well-known painting *Top of the Hill* in Limerick Art Gallery, and both must date from about 1915. Suddenly everything has changed. Colour, composition and form become strong. There is broadening of subject matter to include figurative subjects, single figures and groups. Groups of local people with their donkeys returning from the fields, sometimes in arrangements that suggest the Holy Family. Professional groups are also included. Portraits are painted seriously, with great sensitivity and skill, particularly in the case of *Stephen Gwynn* or *The Orange Man*. The sad and beautiful girl figure in a colourful landscape, *Mallaranny*, appeals to a whole range of emotions.¹⁰ Landscapes such as *Country of Amethyst* are notable for their harmony of colour, colour that is realistic and descriptive. Often in other paintings it depicts Paisley shawls of peasant clothing. Paint is applied more thickly and starts to work on its own, giving texture to the paintings. There is a new sense of freedom in the paintings, seagulls being used as an image of that freedom. The early, tightly-written signatures of *E G Henry* and *E Grace Henry* of the first period are now replaced by a casual *G Henry* with a following dash, a style which persists for the rest of her career. The signature *Grace Henry* over-rides both the first and second periods, but is probably not used much after 1925.

There are relatively few paintings known from this second period, and, since none of Grace Henry's paintings are dated, it is a matter of conjecture and using related dates that allows us to assume that we are dealing with paintings from the late Achill period from 1915 to 1920. The paintings from this period previously discussed are all reproduced in *Colour* magazine between 1918 and 1921, so it is fair to assume that they were painted one or two years prior to these dates. They include some of the most ambitious and most acclaimed paintings of Grace Henry's career. She is now painting the people of Achill, not working or returning from work, but dressed in their traditional clothes, the colourful Paisley shawls. Subjects are now well-lit and include both interior and outdoor scenes. Colour, composition and subject are all



Grace Henry, *Spring in winter*, (1922–23).
Oil on canvas, 51 x 61 cm.
Private collection, Belfast.

equally strong. Her painting style is breaking free, becoming more expressive and establishes a fluidity in the use of paint that continues for the remainder of her career, allowing us always to identify a Grace Henry painting by that means. Her painting technique in brushwork is consistently the same from about 1915 until her death in 1953.

Grace Henry had started to loosen the bond with Paul Henry in this period, although her introduction of white cumulus clouds in the backgrounds of her paintings of about 1915 must have been influenced by his work of the same time. The Henrys returned to Dublin in 1919, and continued to work together for a time and were both involved in establishing the Society of Dublin Painters.³ Around 1920, Grace had a romantic association with Stephen Gwynn and shortly after, went travelling with him in France and Italy. This decade of the 1920s coincides with her third period of painting. This is marked by the greatest freedom and looseness in her use of paint, by her use of colour to depict atmosphere and weather, or simply for its own sake, as in a Fauvist style. It was the period of even more experimentation in style and subject matter. Atmosphere and movement enter her paintings. Subjects now include *Spring in Winter* and *The Storm*, where clouds, of unnatural green and reddish brown colours, are sent hurtling across the sky. More and more seagulls are introduced to increase the sense of freedom. Trees are bent in the wind. Water appears to flow out of *Floods at Ennis*, and the *Kerry Sunset* is a blaze of red. Subjects do include very

loosely painted flower-pieces, where flowers mix with background and vases almost flow down on to the table. Commissioned portraits continue, but portraits of her own choice are more often caricatures employing Fauve-like colour. Her landscape subjects are still largely from Ireland, but have moved from Achill to Galway, Clare and Kerry. They are highly colourful, but few people are ever included. In every sense, this was a very disturbed period in her life, in her personal life and in her painting style. Grace Henry parted permanently from Paul Henry in 1927 (see Kennedy³), but they were never divorced. Paul Henry married Mabel Young as his second wife only after Grace had died.

The fourth and final period of her changing style was built around Grace Henry's travelling in France and Italy in the 1930s. She made several visits to the south of France and to the Adriatic coast of Italy, to Venice and to Chioggia. The brilliant light of the Mediterranean is reflected in the intensified colour of her paintings; more red, magenta, alizarin, cobalt, orange and white are introduced in particular. Colour is sought in her choice of subjects which are now mainly of boats, elaborate sails of complex and colourful designs, canal scenes, shorelines and coastal villages. Grace Henry now adopts a more conventional, more realistic approach in the representation of houses, villages, boats and harbours. Much more architectural detail is included in the line of a roof, window, shutters, paths and steps. In the studio, Grace continued to paint flower arrangements, as she did throughout her career. There are few portraits, except commissions, but they are sympathetic, and there are only a very few interiors. France and Italy, where she lived continuously from about 1935 to 1939, inspired some of her most colourful and most decorative canvases. The paintings from the village of Mougins (near Nice), in particular, and sails in Chioggia, are some of the most flamboyant, pleasing and confident of her career. Paintings of this period featured very largely in her London exhibition of 1939,¹¹ and dominated again in the 1991 exhibition at the Hugh Lane Gallery.

Grace Henry returned to Dublin in 1939 at the age of seventy-one. This was effectively the end of her career, although she continued to paint and to exhibit. For her last years, she moved around friends



Grace Henry, *Reflection of the Moon*, (1904–05),
Oil on canvas, 46 x 52 cm. Private collection, Belfast.



Grace Henry, *Top of the Hill*, (1915–16).
Oil on linen, 60 x 50 cm. Limerick City Gallery of Art.

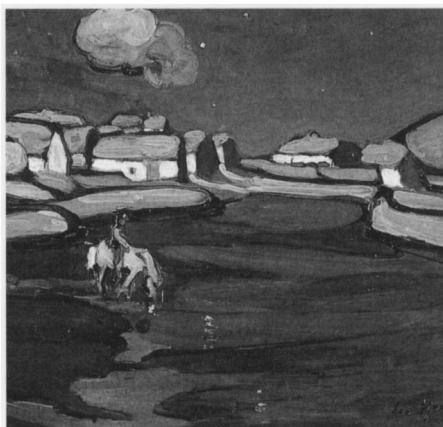


Grace Henry, *The Red House at Mougins*, (1935–36).
Oil on board, 27 x 35 cm. Private collection, Belfast.
Exhibited *Irish Women Artists* (NGI 1986) and *Paul and Grace Henry* (HLMG 1991).

GRACE HENRY

and cheap hotels mainly in the Dublin area. She was a sad and lonely figure, usually found sitting in hotel lounges waiting to talk to anyone passing by. Her work, always of variable quality was now poorer. She was limited to painting from memory or painting still-life.

Despite the very wide range of subjects she tackled and her experimentation with many different techniques, the paintings of all her four periods have a consistency of style, mood and expression. She was more a landscape painter than anything else, and these four periods relate mainly to her landscapes. These paintings were serious, professional works, but they had features which revealed the artist as a passionate, poetic, frivolous, extravagant, emotional and volatile woman. Though her work included some of uneven quality, her career covered a period of over fifty years, and at times, reached levels of artistic ability and creativity close to that of the Scottish Colourists, who were her immediate contemporaries and painted very similar subjects on the continent.⁹ Grace Henry's paintings always demonstrate the artist's special sensitivity with colour, which is used to convey mood, atmosphere, light and movement. After her Achill period,



Grace Henry, Horse drinking at village pond, (1912–13), Oil on wood, 28 x 36 cm. Private collection, Belfast.

she used paint thickly and in sweeping brushstrokes so that her subjects seemed to flow together and sometimes almost seemed to move. She used lines in the same way throughout all her paintings, to draw the eye inward to a focal point. Often there were lanes or roads or paths leading inward, usually with irregular contours converging and diverging, concentrating and releasing energy. Lines along hedges or walls were never straight. Sudden, un-

predictable rises and downward plunges conveyed excitement to the subject. They conveyed also the feelings and personality of the artist.

Grace Henry may not be ranked among the greatest of painters in Ireland, but she had a distinction over a wide range that few can match. She was possibly the first, even before Swanzy, Hone and Jellett, to experiment with 'modernism' in her few early attempts to create abstractions of the landscape. Her Achill paintings include examples moving in the direction of abstraction. In the work of her three later periods, her use of paint and fluid brush work are distinctive. Most of all her paintings carry her particular stamp as a professional artist, able to create a unique style combining brushwork and use of colour to convey mood and an excitement that works powerfully on the emotions of the viewer.

James G Cruickshank

James G Cruickshank, formerly of the Queen's University of Belfast, is the author of books and articles on Irish geography, and as a native of Aberdeen, Scotland, and amateur artist, has become a researcher of Grace Henry and a collector of her works. He gave one of the lectures during the 1991 Paul and Grace Henry exhibition.

NOTES

1. The catalogue of *The Paintings of Paul Henry and Grace Henry*, 26 November–31 December 1991, HLMG, Exhibition Curator and Cataloguer—Antoinette Murphy. Details of most of the paintings discussed here may be found in the catalogue.
2. Paul Henry, *An Irish Portrait*, London, Batsford, 1951 and Paul Henry, *Further Reminiscences*, Belfast. Blackstaff Press, 1973.
3. Brian Kennedy, 'Paul Henry: An Irish Portrait', *Irish Arts Review*, Yearbook 1989–90 pp. 43–54, should be used for further background and quotations from correspondence referring to both Paul and Grace Henry. This should be used as a source of information on the private lives of the two Henrys, as no new material for the period of their marriage will be included here.
4. Church of Scotland records, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, Six Synods of Aberdeen and Moray, Aberdeen, 1926, provides a full family record of births and deaths, and an outline of the career of father John Mitchell.
5. Emily Grace Mitchell lived at 72 Ashley Road, in 1896, and at 50 Stanley Street, Aberdeen in 1898. Her paintings sent from Paris in 1900 to the exhibition of the Aberdeen Artists' Society were *Kirk-Zutfen*, *Holland*, *Canal in Dordrecht*, *Josef and Apple Blossom in Picardy*. The last became a recurrent subject in later years.
6. Mairin Allen, 'Contemporary Irish Artists—Grace Henry', *Father Matthew Record*, November 1942, p.4, provides this physical description of the artist and reviews her painting of the 1930s.
7. Personal communication from John McNamara, Dooagh, Achill, which provided information about the reports of Grace Henry's night-time painting, passed through the two previous generations of his family.
8. Paintings exhibited in *Pictures of the West of Ireland*, Paul and Grace Henry, Underwood Typewriter House, Belfast, 23 March–8 April 1916. Newspaper review is to be found in the *Northern Whig*, 23 March 1916, p.8
9. *Colour* was an art magazine published from 53 Victoria Street, Westminster, London, from 1912 until about 1925 (or later). It gave attention to colourful paintings and printed many of them. Five of Grace Henry's paintings and three of Paul Henry's are included. *Colour* appeared to consider these of similar importance and colour interest to paintings by the Scottish Colourists, and artists like Laura Knight, Augustus John, Orpen, Sickert and Bevan. Paintings by these were all featured about as frequently as those of the two Henrys. *The Long Grey Road*, to *Disting or Destiny* was in Vol. 8, 1918, *The Black Shawl* in Vol. 8, 1918, *Mallaranny* in Vol. 10, 1919, *The Orange Man* (Stephen Gwynn), in Vol. 14, 1921, and *Country of Amethyst* in Vol. 14, 1921.
10. Comment in *Colour*, Vol. 10, 1919, on the painting *Mallaranny* included, 'there is a great deal of Ireland packed into this picture . . . it explains why there is an Irish question? The implication is that the artist was making a political statement.
11. Possibly the most acclaimed exhibition of Grace Henry's work was that at the Calmann Gallery, 42 St James's Place, London, 11–31 July 1939. Of the thirty-four paintings on show, most painted abroad in the 1930s, ten were included in the 1991 exhibition in HLMG.