

Gordon Webster

Born 1908.

Life story by his son Robin.

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Contents

1. Gordon's Family
2. Daily Routine
3. Gordon Webster's Windows
4. Living with Stained Glass
5. Making Stained Glass
6. Descendants

The following life story is a transcript of a talk about Gordon Webster given by his son Robin at the Glasgow City Heritage Trust on March 18th 2019. The talk was part of a seminar recognising the centenary of the death of Gordon Webster's father Alf. The last chapter (Descendants) has been added by Robin Webster.

Both Alf and Gordon Webster were distinguished Scottish stained glass artists. Alf served with the Gordon Highlanders in the First World War and tragically died of his wounds, aged 32, in August 1915.

Robin Webster, an architect, was Professor of Architecture at the Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.

1. Gordon's Family

I am very glad to see so many people here to recognise the centenary of my grandfather's death. I know my father would have been very very pleased that he is being recognised in this way. I am going to talk about my father's work, because I think he was somewhat overshadowed by my grandfather Alf Webster, although he produced a lot of stained glass windows - more than 200 windows. Some of them are quite enormous, like the south transept in Glasgow Cathedral. Of course if Alf had lived, he would have produced an awful lot of windows too, at the rate he was going. But my father was rather different from Alf, and I will discuss that a little.

My uncle Comyn, Alf's youngest son, once told me a story. He had been approached by an elderly woman, who said with some astonishment 'You're Alf's son? But Alf was such a handsome man!'..... I have to say my uncle was perfectly good looking, and was a very funny man. It was typical of him that he would tell a story against himself like that, but Alf was certainly handsome.



This is Alf's grave. Which is in a huge military cemetery near Etaples.



Here (above) you have the family. My grandfather is in the middle with the sporran. Behind him is his brother Edward. On his right is his father George, who was in shipping, looking a little bit disgruntled. Perhaps he was aware that his son wasn't going to follow him into shipping, (although he did for a very brief period). Then on the left is his mother Anne.



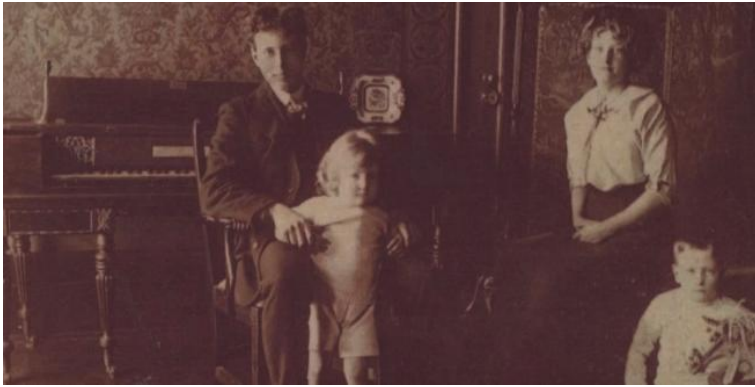
This is Maude, Alf's wife and my grandmother. It looks like they got married when she was already pregnant with Martyn. She was quite a strong character and ran the practice after Alf was killed until my father took over in about 1928.



This is Alf, with his eldest son Martyn on his shoulder.



And this is Maude with Gordon, who had long hair in his early youth.



And this is a slide of them in, I think, 168 Bath Street, in the studio there. Alf is sitting in a chair with Gordon between his knees, and Maude sitting beside him with Martyn on the floor.



And this is after Alf's death, living in Hallside. Martyn is on the left, Maude in the middle, Comyn at the bottom and Gordon, (my father), with his hands in his pockets.



Next come a few little sketches from the only sketch book we have of Alf's.



This is his mother Anne (above), who lived until 1945. I never met her, and I should of course make it clear that I never met my grandfather either. As he died twenty four years before my twin brother and I were born.



Above is a rather beautiful sketch by Alf of my father Gordon, which featured in a stained glass window.



There are a couple of sketches of this lady. I don't recognise my grandmother from this sketch, but when I knew my grandmother it was thirty or forty years after this was drawn, so it might be her. This face is used in a number of the angels. The sketch book is full of other studies of figures and hands and twigs and blossom that appear in his stained glass. I believe some of Alf's sketches were traced over and continued to be used in the studio in the years after his death until my father took over.



This is 168 Bath Street in Glasgow , which was Alf's studio, now occupied by a firm of lawyers. It must have been rather fine with sketches displayed in the white painted bays. The family lived above. I never knew that as a family house.



One of the things we have in my house is this little panel of gold mosaic. I show this to explain that my grandfather was very experimental. He was not just interested in stained glass windows. He was experimenting with other forms of art, using not just square mosaics but other shapes.



One of the things that Alf did was to produce eight rather large murals for a Smoking Room in the Byzantine Chambers in Argyll Street, which is now a completely different building. The building was demolished and it is now where the Debenhams department store is. They were really brightly coloured, using jesso and all sorts of other materials to enrich the texture. These are the sketches for the murals.



And this is a little postcard of what the room was like with the big murals. The murals are still knocking around. There is one in the Scottish Museum in Edinburgh. We had one, but I don't know what my mother did with it.

When my parents had to downsize in the 1970's mother was confronted with a huge roomful of paper cartoons. I am sorry to tell you that she burned them. She didn't consult us, and I find it difficult to forgive her for that!



This is the Cowan window in what was Landsdowne church (now called "Webster's") which in my view is undoubtedly my grandfather's masterpiece. I think it is the last window that he actually did.

2. Daily Routine

I am now going to talk more about my domestic experience of living with in a house which was also my father's studio, which was integral to our life. He had a pattern of working: he got up quite early, walked the dog, and then would go and work either in the studio producing sketches or cartoons, or in the glass room where he chose the glass and also did the painting on the glass. He would break off at 10.30 for a cup of coffee, with the rest of the family joining him, for about a quarter of an hour. He would then break off again for lunch, and again for tea at 4 o'clock for about a quarter of an hour. Dinner was at a quarter to seven sharp: it was a quite strict Victorian sort of regime. Sometimes he would work later at night doing sketches and things if there was pressure on.

Smells are very evocative of memory, and I remember the house being filled with the smell of beeswax. He used to melt down beeswax in a little saucepan. I wish I had a photograph of the saucepan, which took on quite a distinctive appearance after some time, because the beeswax was continually recycled. The whole house filled with the smell of beeswax, which was really quite a nice smell.

There were a load of other smells. I think my mother would be rather horrified if I described her house as “smelly”, but it is something that brings back memories. I will go through this chronologically, describing how the windows were produced, rather than concentrating on the smells, but I will describe one or two of them.

3. Gordon Webster's Windows



I am going to show a little of my father's work, because I don't think it's fair to talk about his studio without showing some, which was quite different from his father's. He felt compelled to treat the glass as a transparent window, rather than as a painting. His windows had a much more even texture, almost like a weaving, with the diagonal quarries behind having almost the same weight as the figures themselves.

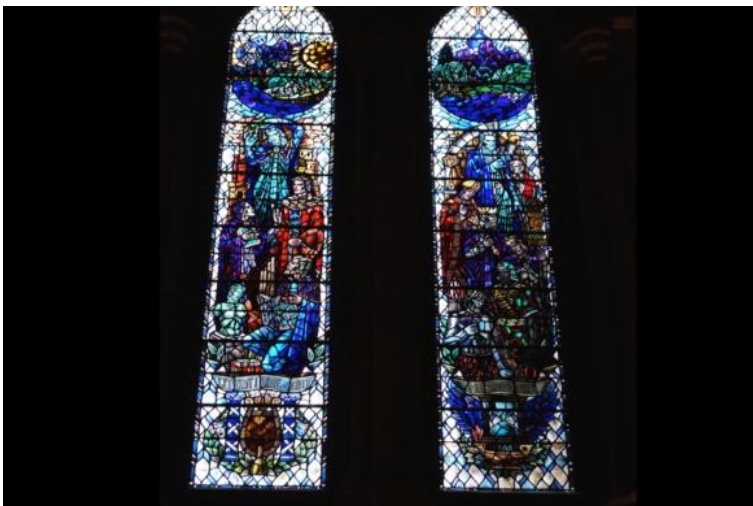


This is what I think is one of his very best windows, which is in Dornoch Cathedral. It has a brilliance of its own. It sparkles. He is using Norman slab glass and antique

glass. Norman slab glass can sometimes be up to an inch thick in the middle, and very thin at the edge, so it refracts the light in a lovely sort of way.

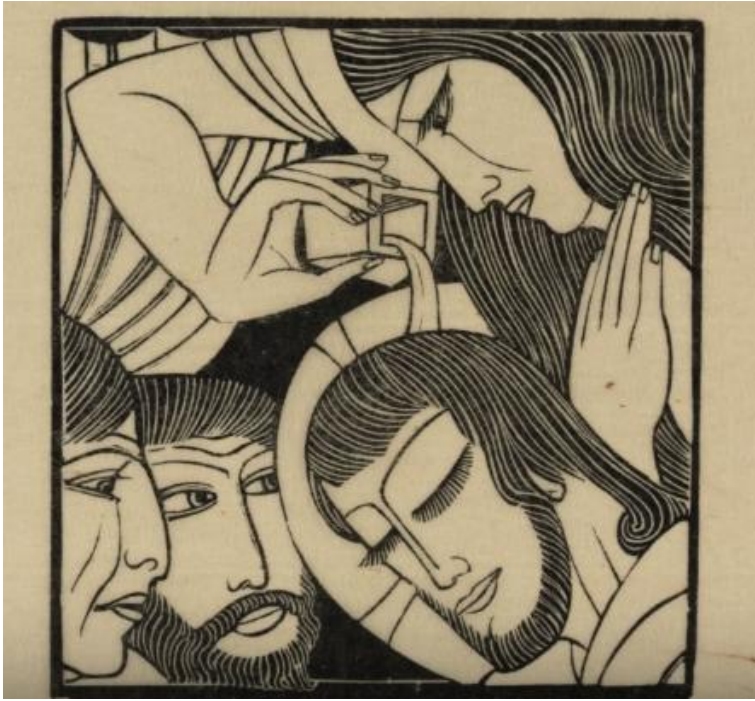


You can see here his windows are full of detail and all sorts of unexpected things, such as serpents.



And here is a window that Gordon did in Glasgow University Chapel. It is next to the four Strachan windows. Douglas Strachan, (who was eight years older than my grandfather) had a very distinguished career in stained glass. Both my grandfather and my father were very much influenced by him. My father used the same composition in his windows in the University chapel that Strachan had used. It was a tribute to Douglas Strachan, who was certainly one of the most brilliant stained glass artists in Scotland.

My father's way of dealing with faces was very different from Alf's. Alf developed a three dimensional way of dealing with them, using stippling to model them. They are almost photographic in some ways. Alf was also interested in producing very different sort of characters, not bland pre-Raphaelite saints, but people with distinctive human characters. My father had a more stylised approach.



This is a wood cut by Eric Gill; I think father was influenced by him.

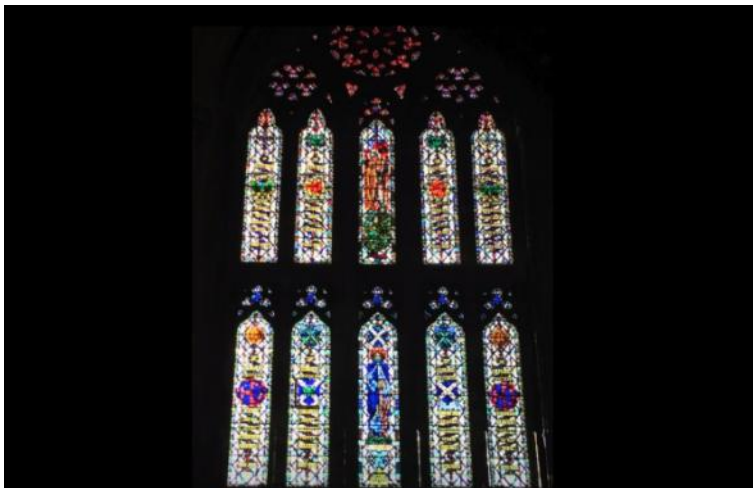


He also admired Eric Fraser; this is one of his wood cuts.



Another stained glass artist who was influenced in the same way was Willie Wilson, a contemporary of my father. This is a little window of his which came from Hindland Church, and is now in Trinity Church. A lot of people will not see this

window, because it is in the gentlemen's lavatory. I discovered it with some surprise!



This is my father's window in the South Transept of Glasgow Cathedral. It is absolutely enormous, and is practically impossible to photograph. Father was very interested in heraldry, and he did a lot of heraldic windows, also in Bute Hall in Glasgow University. There's a huge amount of detail in the windows. Albert Richardson, who was on the commissioning committee of the cathedral, insisted that the tiny little borders should represent the tartans of all the Scottish regiments. That involved three layers of glass, carefully etched to produce the tartan.



Lastly, a couple of little windows in the crypt at Glasgow Cathedral, above. These are the sketches for them, with a detail from the actual window below. They show my father moving towards a slightly more abstract style. They are highly coloured, with very rich blues and reds. You can see the stylised angels at the top.

Those are just a few examples of my father's work. His more than 200 windows are to be found all over Scotland and in the world. He's got windows in Chile, South Africa and Singapore. But he was reluctant to work overseas, because he felt he didn't have the same knowledge of the context.

4. Living with Stained Glass



This is 5 Newton Terrace. You can see the leaded glass, which is still there and was presumably put there by my family.



This is a little sketch diagram of how we lived in this house. You would come up the front steps and would be introduced into the studio if you were a client, where father did the sketches and cartoons. And on the front was the room where the glass was actually painted. Down below, in the basement, was very much the workshop. At the front was the Lead Room where Mr. Waddle and Mr. Ingram worked, and at the back the Choosing Room, facing south, where father would choose the glass. Out at the back was the kiln.



In 1952 they moved to 10 Clevedon Crescent - a wonderful crescent (above) designed by JJ Burnet, and No 10 was later refurbished by Sir Robert Lorimer.

When they moved there it was not in terribly good shape, and I think they managed to buy it for £12,000, although that was quite a lot of money at the time.



Anyway it was a much bigger house. Here the studio was distributed around the house. At the front was the main drawing room, where father had his “elevenses” and tea. Behind that the glass room. Granny Webster's bedroom up on the first floor, along with my parents' bedroom and the studio. On top attic floor were the bedrooms for me and my brother Martyn, and a store for the cartoons – (which mother later unfortunately burned).



This is a plan of the ground floor. The family rooms are shown brown, and the studio rooms are shown yellow. Because it is a crescent, the plan is slightly wedge shaped. The Lead Room was next to the wash room, so you got the smell of washing and soap along with the smell of molten lead, as well as the smell of my mother's soup...which was always on the stove.

5. Making Stained Glass

There were fourteen stages in the manufacture of stained glass:

1. The Enquiry and Commission.
2. Survey and measure; trace templates.
3. The sketch.
4. The full size Cartoon.
5. The Cutline and glass Templates.
6. Choosing the Glass.
7. Cutting the Glass and Etching.
8. Painting Stage 1.
9. First Firing.
10. Painting Stage 2.
11. Second Firing.
12. Leading, Soldering and Smudging.
13. Fitting the Window.
14. Unveiling and Dedication.



Here is my father at his desk in the first floor studio at Cleveden Crescent, with a fine view of Glasgow looking south.

The enquiry, asking whether my father could consider making a window, would come by phone call or letter. An enquiry was always a red letter day in the house, which called for a wee drink in the evening. When the price was agreed and the subject was agreed, father would go to visit the church. He took a lot of trouble to find out which way the window was facing, (for example if it had a southern aspect it would get more sun) and what the architecture of the church was like. He would make templates of the stone tracery, and would then produce a sketch to scale.

The sketch had to be approved not only by the donor, the minister and the congregation, but also by the commission for artistic matters in the Church of Scotland. Also it had to have Listed Building approval. So all that could take quite a long time, before he was able to start on the full size cartoon, which was done in charcoal. Father had a special set of steps made, so that he could work at the top and bottom of the cartoon. In the case of Glasgow Cathedral the cartoon was so big that bits of it had to be rolled up. My niece Emma-Jo Webster still has that timber

scaffold, which she uses for her tapestries. Then came the cutlines, where the shapes of the glass that would be joined by the H-section lead were put together. Then he chose the glass, cut the glass, and etched it. There were then two stages of painting, with a kiln firing between them. It was leaded, soldered and “smudged”. (“Smudge” was a mixture of whiting and lindseed oil, with some coal dust added to darken it..smudging was quite a messy process.) Then it was fitted, unveiled, and dedicated.



This is a full size charcoal cartoon. This introduced another smell. My father made up a little mixture of shellac and methylated spirits, and he used to spray it over the charcoal to fix it. It was a rather sharp smell, which didn't last very long.



This is the cutline. What happens is that a thin card is put on the table. Carbon paper is put on top of that, and the cartoon is put on top of that. Then a linen tracing paper is put on top of that. On this linen tracing paper father designed the cutlines. You don't want a bit of lead going through somebody's face. Also the design of the lead lines themselves has a separate important quality in the appearance of the window..

Next the card beneath, (which has now become marked with all the shapes of glass) is cut with a rather special pair of scissors which cut a little strip around the edge of each shape. This accommodates the thickness of the H-section lead cams. So a

tolerance was automatically introduced. Father got the glass from Hetleys in London, who were agents for glass, or directly from Hartley Wood in Sunderland.



The special scissors



This is a photograph (sorry about the fuzziness) taken about in the Choosing Room. It shows some of the enormous amount of glass he had all around him. Some was Antique Glass which was blown like a long sausage and then flattened out.

Norman Slab glass was blown into a little wooden box and the sides were then broken out. The varying thickness reflects the light and adds a sparkle to the window.



This is a piece of Norman Slab where the sides have not yet been broken out.

Grandfather introduced the use of little pieces of cast glass, known as jewels (below). My father also used them occasionally. When we were infants we were given them to play with.

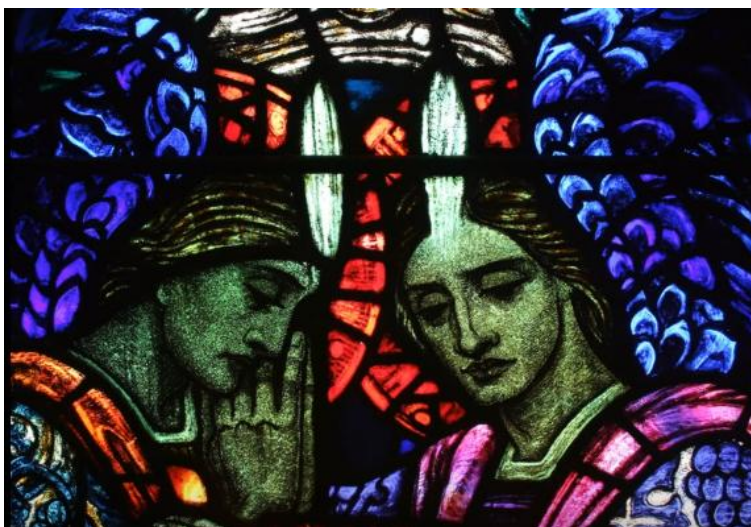


This is father in the Choosing Room. What you can see here is flat “antique” glass, about 4mm thick. Father would take each card and mark it on chalk on the piece of glass he wanted to use. Because sometimes he would want a particular part of the class sheet. Hugh Ingram, who worked with father for many years, would then cut out the glass. Each template would be numbered, and each piece of glass would be numbered. And then there was a sort of jigsaw, with each piece of coloured glass being laid on a large plate glass sheet, about 12mm thick, on which the leadlines had been painted in lamp black. The entire family used to come and do this, because it was a very tedious procedure. Consequently I am now quite good at jigsaw puzzles.

The cut pieces of glass were then stuck with beeswax onto the plate glass sheet, the rich smell of which filled the house.

My grandfather and father were both very much interested in the etching process. This (below) is a little sketch by my grandfather. You can see at the top it says “Ruby Slab Bitten”. “Bitten” means it has been etched away by hydrochloric acid. It

was red “Flashed” Glass. “Flashed” Glass has a thin skin of colour on top of plain glass, all fused together. They would paint with wax (another smell!) the areas where they did not want the colour to be removed. The piece of glass would then go into a little basin of hydrofluoric acid, in which it would sit for a day or two. (Next to my mother's soup).



This is an example of my grandfather using etching on his Cowen window. Here you can see a piece of what was blue flash glass, and they've etched away the blue to make the patterns.

The first thing that father would do after the coloured glass had been stuck down onto the plate glass is that he would take the main features, such as faces and main bits of drapery, and he would trace them over the cartoon. Then those would be separately fired. After they had been fired they would come back, and then he would do the stippling to bring out the three dimensional qualities of the glass. The amount of stippling would be varied depending on whether the window was facing north or south.

For firing, each piece of glass was put on a small railway carriage filled with dry plaster of Paris. This was out in the back yard. Then the railway carriage would be trundled into this big oven which had a huge steel door which was then closed. And down each side of it there were three or four valves for the gas fired kiln. Father would squeeze past, because it was a very tight space, between the outside wall and the kiln itself and turn on the valves on one side. Then he would rush round and turn on the valves on the other side. By this time the kiln had filled with gas, and he would open a little slot in the door and push in a bit of burning newspaper. At which point there was a considerable explosion. A huge thump - we could hear it all through the house. And father would emerge in the kitchen with slightly singed eyebrows and say 'The kiln is on'.



The next stage was leading and soldering. This is Hugh Ingram. He was my father's only assistant after Mr. Waddle (who had also worked for my grandfather) had died. Neil Hutchinson also worked in the studio for a few years, but unfortunately died rather young.



This is Hugh soldering the glass together, putting tallow on the lead to help it stick. The tallow also mingled with the kitchen smells.

Smudging was quite something. It was made up from whiting, coal dust, and a bit of putty, and sawdust, all mixed together. This made traditional mastic, which was scrubbed onto the window. The windows are formed into panels about two feet tall,

supported by iron rods, to which it was fixed with copper wire soldered to the lead cams.. Every two panels would be supported by aluminium rods, which are built into the stone mullions of the window. Once the smudging and everything had been completed, the panels of the window were loaded into the boot of my father's car and were driven off to Aberdeen or wherever he had to go fit it. It was fitted by Hugh Ingram, my father, and Willie McPhee, who was a lovely joiner - a great friend of my father.

And then the window would be unveiled. We had a lot of blue cloth which father would fix up over the window (if it wasn't too large). The donor would then pull a cord to drop the cloth and reveal the window. Sometimes these donors, who were perhaps giving a window in memory of their late husband, were quite elderly. I remember one occasion when a very frail old lady, whom my father and mother had picked up in their car to take to the church for the unveiling, said 'I feel very uncomfortable this morning' and my mother had to discreetly remove the coat hanger entangled in the fur coat she was wearing



This is my father's small signature on one of his windows.

6. Descendants

Gordon Webster married Sheila MacLennan, and they had twin boys, Robin and Martyn.

Robin became an architect, and first formed a partnership with Robin Spence (Spence and Webster) in London, then was the Professor of Architecture at Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen for twenty years, and finally a founder partner in cameronwebster architects in Glasgow in 2005 with his daughter Miranda and son-in-law Stuart Cameron. He was elected President of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland from 2018 -2020, and Treasurer of the Royal Scottish Academy from 2016.

His brother Martyn was a plastic surgeon based in Glasgow, and also chairman of “Resurge Africa” a charity that worked in Ghana and Sierra Leone.

Robin has three children, the eldest Miranda (also an architect), Tom a cameraman and photographer, and Lucy an evolutionary biologist.

Martyn has four children, Amanda (who sadly died aged seven), Emma-Jo, who is a tapestry artist, Toby, who is an artist and runs The Modern Institute in Glasgow, and Timothy, a lawyer.

Robin has four grandchildren: Katie, Isabel and Alistair Cameron, and Finlay Webster.

Martyn has seven grandchildren: Honey, Lyle, Vita, Brodie, Nancy and Lachlan Webster, and Emily Husi.
