

The Londonist

William Alister Macdonald

Watercolours of Old London and the Thames previous to 1914

In one of the last exhibitions of Scottish watercolourist William Alister Macdonald's (1861-1956) work at London's Guildhall Art Gallery in 2001 his watercolours were exhibited alongside contemporary black and white photographs of the same street view. The City of London then and now in the twenty-first century would be largely unrecognisable to the artist. Even in 1935 when Macdonald had returned from a fourteen year absence in Tahiti and found a portfolio of forgotten paintings in his wife's Earls Court home, there was a surge of sentimentality for the lost buildings and streets of historic London. This prompted Lord Wakefield to buy the entire exhibition at the Arlington Gallery and donate the works to the City. As such the value of Macdonald's watercolours has even greater academic value for anyone interested or studying London's architectural history.

The oldest landmark in the Wakefield Collection is *St Bartholomew and old Cloth Fair* (1908) in Smithfield, 'only a fragment of the once huge monastic establishment founded by Rahere in the reign of Henry I... There are four paintings that have the ancient church and its precincts for their subjects'.ⁱ For over eight hundred years in and around these scenes were medieval murders, the burning of martyrs, and the rowdiness of Cloth Fair.

Macdonald's watercolours provide the only pictorial record of many ancient landmarks that had disappeared by 1935: Old Dick Whittington tavern, established in the 1400s, and *The Little Wonder Eating House, Smithfield* (1907), *Saracen's Head Yard, Bishopsgate* (1912). But he never revelled in capturing the drama and character of the patrons of these social meeting places, unlike a predecessor who also lived by the Thames two centuries before him, William Hogarth (1697–1764), the 'Father of English Painting'ⁱⁱ.

Macdonald painted many of the large City thoroughfares, with St Pauls and the spires of other masterpieces by architect Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723), notable reminders of London's previous upheavals and destruction, and the importance of preserving its historic architecture. But what clearly captured the delight of reviewers of the 1935 exhibition were the many paintings of the lost hidden alleys linking these landmarks, such as *Watling Street* (1910).

Wren's masterpiece, St Paul's Cathedral, is another fascination for Macdonald. Some paintings are made at water-level in *St Paul's from Bankside* (1904), others from the street in *Ludgate Hill, Bank Holiday Morning* (1908), but one of his smallest watercolours, almost a miniature, and most haunting prediction of the Blitz, is of it illuminated by searchlight.

Another important topographical record of a lost landmark is Macdonald's watercolour of *Catherine Court, Trinity Square, looking East* (1912), a little tributary of *Seething Lane* (1912), once the home and haunt of diarist Samuel Pepys (1633–1703). The painting preserves 'the quiet distinction of the domestic architecture...with their matured red brick-work and their decorative over-doorways, and that repose which seems to-day as much as they a thing of the past'.ⁱⁱⁱ

In contrast to this, Macdonald and his wife Lucy lived in the Temple, not far from *Lincoln's Inn Fields* (1912). The artist returned frequently over the years, attracted by the classical grandeur of buildings by Inigo Jones (1573–1652) and other 'splendid houses, many of them still full of the delicate carving and decorative audacities of an earlier time'.^{iv}

Other corners frequented by lawyers are *Field Court, Gray's Inn* (1904), *Staple Inn Courtyard* (1906), *Old Houses in Fetter Lane* (1907), *Clifford's Inn, Fleet Street* (1906), all gone by the time they were exhibited in 1935.

In Westminster, Macdonald found a constant source of inspiration and fascination, buildings ranging from the ancient ecclesiastic to many eras of government reflecting national history. *Abingdon Street* (1907) records the last remains of domestic architecture of previous centuries capturing the sweep of the street and contrast to the Abbey and Whitehall in middle and distant background, while in *Doorway in Great College Street, Westminster* (1907) he deftly records the decorative ironmongery and masonry detail that surround a domestic doorway. The Houses of Parliament are a frequent subject in his paintings, sometimes in the atmospheric background as in *Storey's Gate, Westminster* (1910), or the main attraction, reflected in the Thames in *Westminster Abbey and Houses of Parliament from Lambeth* (1910) where stately grandeur is offset by the humble river boats in the foreground.

From the Pool of London in the East to the upper reaches of the tidal Thames in Richmond, Macdonald spent many years painting from the bankside and sometimes from boats. One of the earliest in the Wakefield Collection is *Hay's Wharf, Tooley Street* (1896) where ships' masts and cranes play counterpoint with ghostly Tower Bridge in the background. *Waterloo Bridge and the River* (1898) is more of an impressionistic study of cloud and water movement, what historian E. Beresford Chancellor (1868–1937) describes as a 'Turneresque treatment of the river',^v compared to the attention to nautical rigging detail in *River Thames at Westminster* (1905) and architectural perspective in *By Westminster Bridge* (1908). Both these attributes are combined in *Off the Tower* (1895).

In *Clearing the Site for the new County Hall, Westminster* (1910) we see a scene of demolition amongst working London that would have been commonplace along the Embankment and the South Bank of the Thames. But aside from the changing landmarks it is the ability to capture

the sunshine through the fogs and mists, that magically transform 'the rotten, often entirely disused, wharves and warehouses, dreary when the tide is up, and unutterably depressing when it is low'.^{vi}

London's bridges are also a fascination, and from 1898 *Old Vauxhall Bridge* to 1914 he captured London, Southwark, Blackfriars, Waterloo, Westminster, Vauxhall, Lambeth, many of which were rebuilt or replaced by 1935. Lambeth Bridge is the subject of five watercolours in the collection taken from various points of view.

These meticulous paintings, and sketches that led to many of his works, remain important topographic records of old pre-mechanised London, that have rarely been seen and have largely been overlooked by historians and art critics. It is hardly surprising as art historians have largely focused on the many Modernist movements of the twentieth century and photographic and digital media have overwhelmed us with images of London.

ⁱ E. Beresford Chancellor, *London Recalled. Being a Topographical Description of the Collection of Water-Colour Drawings by W. Alister Macdonald in the Guildhall Art Gallery*, London 1937, pp. 17–18

ⁱⁱ Jenny Uglow, *William Hogarth: A Life and a World*, London 2011

ⁱⁱⁱ E. Beresford Chancellor, *London Recalled. Being a Topographical Description of the Collection of Water-Colour Drawings by W. Alister Macdonald in the Guildhall Art Gallery*, London 1937, pp. 33–34

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 41

^v *Ibid.*, p. 114

^{vi} *Ibid.*, p. 105