

Private lives

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Abstract

MacDonald Gill was a complex and private man, who rarely confided his feelings. The artwork he left behind revealed little more than a sense of humour, meticulous craftsmanship and a fascination for technology. If it were not for his second marriage to Priscilla Johnston he would have remained an elusive personality. Priscilla was a natural writer and observer of the human condition. After her death she left her own diaries, memoirs and letters, in addition to a huge archive of Max's work and other documents. This paper uses Priscilla's diaries in particular, in all their intimacy and honesty, to build up a picture of Max's character, his relationship with her and his family. By marrying Priscilla Johnston, his goddaughter and 26 years his junior, he flew in the face of both conventional morality and family hostility. Behind the bald facts of their affair and later marriage lay an enduring love and mutual support. The first ever retrospective exhibition of MacDonald Gill's work, held at the University of Brighton in summer 2011, was a fitting memorial to them both.



Max in his studio at Hare Court, around 1930, aged about 46.

When somebody has died, and most of the people who knew them have died too, their memory lives on in what they leave behind. Max left his artwork. Priscilla left her diaries. Max's artwork does reveal a good deal: his humour, his love of technology, his meticulous attention to detail. But none of this tells us very much about his private personality – and for this we have to turn to

the diaries of his second wife, Priscilla Johnston, who was also his goddaughter.

Priscilla always meant her diaries to be read. She left a list for her nephew Andrew of “Things of interest in my possession”, which included “My Diaries – Don’t throw them away unless you have to, they cover the whole of my grown-up life and might be interesting, in parts, to somebody, someday.” They certainly were – because of course they cover her life with Max, from 1931 to his death in 1947.

There was a 26-year age gap between them and not surprisingly by the 1930s they had rather lost touch. Max had a wife and young family and a blossoming career, and Priscilla was immersed in school and family life at Ditchling before moving on to the excitements of life in a shared flat in London.

In 1931 Priscilla and her flatmate, on holiday in West Wittering, paid a surprise visit on Max at his family home. Priscilla, now an attractive and confident young woman of 21, became fascinated by Max’s work and his elusive personality. After an evening with him looking at his artwork she wrote “After all that time alone I didn’t know him one scrap better” (Johnston 1931). Max could hardly fail to be attracted by her youthful energy and her response to his work. His own marriage had settled into a placid rhythm that masked an increasing sense of estrangement and isolation. His wife Muriel had little interest in his work and he spent more and more time at his studio in London, which is where his relationship with Priscilla really began. Priscilla, unlike his wife, came from an artistic background of life with her father, the calligrapher Edward Johnston, long-term friend of the Gill family. Priscilla had an instinctive understanding of the demands of the creative life, reinforced by her own experience – she had by 1933 already written three modestly successful novels.



Priscilla in 1930, aged 20. This publicity photograph was taken to mark the publication of her first novel "The Narrow World".

After the meeting at West Wittering, Max and Priscilla began to meet in London, at first by chance but soon by intention. By 1933 they were deeply involved. At this time Priscilla was finding life in London less than fulfilling in terms of a career. In her diaries there is a sense of restlessness, of looking for a direction. When Max asked her to work for him, she was glad to give up her work for the Rural Industries Bureau, where she was a spectacularly incompetent secretary. She began to work alongside Max's main assistant, Billy Kingswell, helping with the more repetitive drawing and painting, scaling work up or down, tracing designs. She helped in other ways too: handling his finances, managing appointments and deliveries of materials. She sometimes took her place at his side at formal presentations of his work. Max's life was transformed, and she became his constant companion. With their shared interests and sense of humour, life became a social whirl of theatres, parties and dining out. Max needed her interest in his work and she needed someone to look after – she had found a purpose in life and he had found the companionship he craved.



Max (right) working with Billy Kingswell (centre) and Priscilla (left) on the panel for the "Queen Mary" (1935). Most of the work was done in the huge timber warehouse of Waring & Gillow in Hammersmith before the panel was installed in the ship's First Class Dining Room at the dockyard in Glasgow.

But Max had one particularly difficult characteristic: he shied away from emotional confrontation, and rarely talked about feelings, his or anyone else's. For Priscilla, on the other hand, emotional intrigue was the stuff of life and often provided material for her novels. Max's refusal to discuss his feelings was to cause considerable difficulty with Priscilla, and in the end contributed to the failure of his first marriage. In 1938, his wish to separate came as a complete shock to Muriel, who refused to divorce him until 1945.



Priscilla with her newly bought cottage in Sussex. She paid £210 for the house. Electricity and mains water and drainage were not installed until the Fifties.

In 1939 Priscilla used a legacy from an aunt to buy a derelict cottage in Sussex. Here Max and Priscilla were at their happiest and it was to be her home until her death in 1984. During the war years at the cottage, with no electricity, drains or running water, they came to love the country life, rearing hens, ducks and rabbits, and growing fruit and vegetables. It provided a welcome respite from the bombing raids in London.



In order to spend the war years at the cottage Priscilla and Max turned it into a smallholding. Max joined her for weekends and they are shown here in the Forties with some of their livestock.

But life wasn't always a bed of roses. The age difference meant Priscilla was sometimes attracted to other men – she was certainly very beautiful. They were a liberated couple and their relationship was one of unusual honesty and trust. Her love for him was never in doubt, but it was sometimes hard for him to listen to her accounts of her entanglements. He would become cold and aloof and harsh words were exchanged. In addition Priscilla's engagement with life and friends left little time for housework, and Max had been used to a more traditional division of labour. But she was having none of it: if he wanted the place tidier, he could do something about it. She was a match for him in every way. But their disagreements were always followed by loving reconciliations, and their future looked rosy.



Studio portrait of Priscilla in 1945.

However, their happiness was to be short-lived. Max was diagnosed with terminal cancer less than a year after their marriage in 1946. In those last months she rarely left his side. She wrote in her diary “When he was sick I sat behind him and held him in my arms and he said ‘It’s all right because you’re there.’ I would have been there for ever if it could have made it all right.” (Johnston 1947) He died six days later.

Priscilla rarely talked at any length about the past. In a way there was no need to: it is all there, in her diaries – and through Priscilla’s diaries Max lives again: a complex, endearing man who never quite grew up. A touching little quote from Priscilla’s 1946 diary encapsulates him and his relationship with her: “When I got into bed with him at night I sighed and relaxed and curled up against him contentedly and I said ‘Being in bed with you is my favourite thing.’ He said ‘My favourite thing is custard.’” (Johnston 1946).

References

- Johnston, Priscilla. 1931 Diary (unpublished), 10 July.
- Johnston, Priscilla. 1946 Diary (unpublished), 9 March.
- Johnston, Priscilla, 1947 Diary (unpublished), 8 January.