

Discovering MacDonald Gill

MacDonald Gill: A Brief Biography

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Abstract

When the author started researching the life and work of her great-uncle MacDonald 'Max' Gill some years ago, she was surprised at the lack of biographical information available. In late 2007 she was fortunate to come into contact with Andrew and Angela Johnston, who had inherited a collection of material from Max's second wife Priscilla Johnston, which included artwork, diaries and letters. The wealth of documentation has contributed greatly to the knowledge and understanding of Max's life, particularly his boyhood and early career, and his later life with Priscilla Johnston. This paper gives a summary of the author's main research sources and a brief account of Max Gill's life and work.

Part One: A Personal Quest

MacDonald 'Max' Gill was one of the foremost graphic designers of his day. Although he was skilled in many areas, he became particularly known for his pictorial maps. He was also my great-uncle, but I never knew him as he died some years before I was born.



1. Max Gill, 1920.

As a child I was fascinated by a book, entitled *Coricancha*, (by A.F. Tschiffely), about the Spanish conquest of South America. Inside the cover was a fold-out pictorial map by Max of Peru depicting galleons, llamas and jungle, with place names written in elegant lettering. It sparked in me a powerful desire, eventually realised, to visit this far-off land.



2. Map of *Peru* (detail) from *Coricancha* , 1943.

The ability both to captivate and inform are central to the success of Max Gill's work, from his *Wonderground Map of London Town* with its cartoon people to the *Cable and Wireless Great Circle Map* with its transmitter stations.



3. *Wonderground Map of London Town* (detail), 1914.

In late 2006 I was creating a booklet of photos of his maps and wanted some biographical detail. However, I knew virtually nothing, and there was little information in the public domain, in contrast to the mass of literature about Max's older brother Eric Gill, the sculptor, typographer and engraver. And so I embarked on a quest to discover more.

My grandmother had adored Max, a Bohemian figure in his long black cloak and wide-brimmed black hat. But their generation was long dead, and even my mother had no memories of him. A scrap book compiled by one of Max's brothers surfaced, and its letters, photos and cuttings provided the first insights into his life. And Max's daughter Mary Corell has painted a vivid portrait of Max as a father through her recollections and anecdotes.

Then through the Ditchling Museum, I came into contact with Andrew Johnston, the nephew of Max's second wife Priscilla (youngest daughter of the calligrapher Edward Johnston). He and his wife Angela had inherited his aunt's remote Sussex cottage together with its treasure-trove of artwork, posters, letters and diaries. The Johnstons have generously allowed me full access to this archive, which has been absolutely invaluable to my understanding of Max and his art. Apart from writing a biography, I am also creating a photographic record of Max's work and life.

Part Two: Family and Boyhood 1884 - 1902

Leslie MacDonald Gill was born on 6th November 1884 in Prestonville Road, Brighton, and became known as Max to friends and family. His father was Arthur Tidman Gill, a non-conformist minister from a family with a missionary tradition, while his mother, Cecily Rose (née King), had been a singer with an American touring harmony group



4. Max's parents - Arthur and Rose Gill, West Wittering, c.1925.

Max was the second son and fourth of thirteen children - seven girls (two died in childhood) and six boys of whom Eric was the eldest. The household was run on typically Victorian lines with an emphasis on duty and devotion to God, but humour,

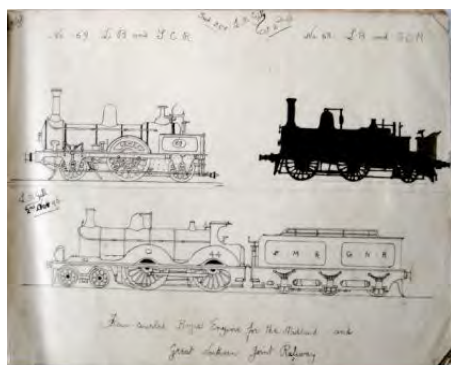
music and art were also part of everyday life. Max was a favourite of their much-loved but strong-willed mother, who ran the household with a firm hand, allocating each child a household duty, such as polishing the boots or laying the table.



5. Gill family at Bognor, c.1898, l. to r. back row: Evan (my grandfather), Max, Gladys, Eric, Madeline, Romney, middle row: Vernon, Enid, Arthur (father), Rose (mother), Kenneth, front: Angela, Cecil.

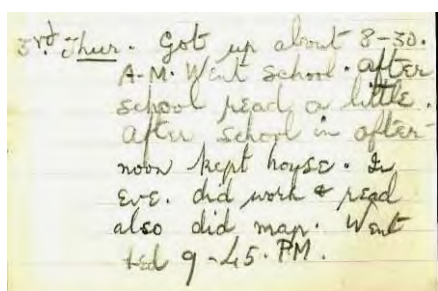
As a boy he had numerous passions. A keen cricketer and footballer, Max was also an avid collector of stamps, coins, and birds' eggs, and an enthusiastic photographer and conjurer. His impish sense of humour and ability to amuse the family with puns and story-telling endeared him to all. His siblings were often the victims of his ingenious practical jokes. One such prank involved the mysterious disappearance one night of Eric's blankets, pulled off by Max and Romney by means of hidden threads.

The children were encouraged to draw and paint by their father, a keen amateur artist. Both Eric and Max filled sketchbooks with drawings of locomotives, which ran past the end of their garden.



6. Page from Max's sketch book of locomotives, 1896.

Six months after the family moved to Chichester, twelve-year old Max drew and painted a map for a school project – it was the first map recorded in his detailed boyhood diaries. By the following year he was entering maps and winning prizes in competitions in boys' magazines such as *Chums*.



7. Max's diary, February 2nd 1898

In 1899 Max's father was appointed curate of St John's in the seaside resort of Bognor. Here Max completed his education and at sixteen was articled to a local architect. Although he had many friends, the family was still the focal point of life. His diaries record idyllic summer days on the beach and in the Sussex countryside – the family cricket match in the *Country Bus Services Map* seems to echo his nostalgia for those times.



8. *Country Bus Services* map (detail), 1928.

Part Three: The Early London Years 1903 - 1913

In 1903 eighteen-year old Max became assistant to church architects Nicholson and Corlette in London, where he shared lodgings with his brother Eric in Lincoln's Inn.



9. 16 Old Buildings, Lincoln's Inn, Max's home and studio from 1903 to 1912.

He also enrolled in Architecture and Writing classes at the Central School of Arts & Crafts. The calligrapher and teacher Edward Johnston was a great friend of both the Gill brothers, and introduced Max to the Art Workers' Guild, the hub of the Arts and Crafts world in London.

Max supplemented his income by painting lettering for Eric and writing inscriptions and manuscripts for various private clients. Relations between the brothers, however, were often strained. Max's Anglo-Catholic views were often attacked by Eric who had embraced agnosticism. Hating confrontation, Max would retreat into silence or make a joke, tactics which infuriated his brother, who relished a heated discussion. Max was far closer to his younger brother Romney, who shared his more sensitive nature and beliefs.



10. Romney on the roof of 16 Old Buildings, Lincoln's Inn, c.1905/6.

In 1908 Max set up his own practice specialising in lettering, architecture and decorative painting. His first professional map was commissioned the following year

by the architect Edwin Lutyens for Nashdom, a newly-built mansion near Maidenhead. Painted on a mahogany panel, it consisted of a bird's-eye view of the house and its neighbourhood, encircled by the points of the compass; a metal indicator, connected to a weather vane, showed the wind direction. Many commissions for panel maps followed, both for private houses and institutions, including Trinity College, Cambridge.



11. Wind-dial map at *Nashdom*, 1909.

Max's close links to printers such as Emery Walker, Harold Curwen and the Meynells, led to illustration and graphic work. In 1913 Gerard Meynell commissioned a poster map for the London Underground - the humorous *By Paying Us Your Pennies*, later marketed as *The Wonderground Map of London Town*. Frank Pick, head of London Underground publicity, commissioned many more maps over the following two decades.



12. *The Wonderground Map of London Town* (detail) showing Max in the Temple, 1914.

Part Four: The Family Years 1914 - 1933

In 1912 Max moved into No 1 Hare Court in the Temple, where he kept a studio until the end of his life. However, he spent most of World War One designing and building a model farm and village on Ernest Debenham's Dorset estate, in collaboration with the architect Halsey Ricardo.



13. Silos designed by Max, Briantspuddle, Dorset.

In August 1915 after a failed romance, he married an old flame Muriel Bennett, with whom he had three children - John, Mary and Anne. She was a kind, motherly woman, but she took little interest in Max's work, and their relationship was often strained.



14. Max and Muriel Gill at Tonerspuddle, Dorset, shortly after their marriage.

After moving to Chichester in 1919, Max threw himself into local life and work. Overwhelmed with commissions for architecture, memorials and maps, he took on an assistant, William Kingswell, a skilled sign-writer, who '*was a joy...he responded almost instinctively to Max's quips*' (Johnston).

Pick commissioned more pictorial maps, including the enchanting *Peter Pan Map of Kensington Gardens* (1922). Max also designed the Underground system maps from 1920 to 1924, the first to eliminate background detail.



15. *Peter Pan Map of Kensington Gardens* (detail), 1923.

Now at the peak of his career, Max was approached to do work by many other organisations, including the newly-formed Empire Marketing Board, which commissioned *Highways of Empire* (1927). Much work was done in his home studio, but mural painting necessitated lengthy periods away: in 1927 he spent several weeks in Roker, painting *The Creation* in the chancel of St Andrews church.



16. *The Creation* mural at St Andrew's, Roker, 1927.

The family now lived in West Wittering, in a house designed and built by Max. His daughter recalled that he rarely emerged from his studio, but when he did, he threw himself wholeheartedly into games with his children – they all thought him great fun. Max, however, also had a critical side to his nature. Muriel and his son perhaps bore the brunt of this. Although much loved, John failed to live up to his father's expectations and drew closer to his mother.



17. South Nore, West Wittering. Max's studio is on the far left.

Part Five: Love and Death 1933 – 1947

In the early thirties Max was beset by money troubles, which exacerbated the tensions at home and he consequently spent longer periods in London. At a talk there in early 1933 he met his twenty-three year old goddaughter Priscilla Johnston, whom he had rarely seen since her childhood. Within weeks they had begun an affair and by September that year she was acting as his secretary at the Temple studio. Watching him work on a new map was a joy to her:

'...one had the sense of something bubbling up spontaneously, an outpouring of that vitality that constantly expressed itself in some unexpected way... he was complicated and simple at the same time & child-like in his irresistible desire to topple the solemn conventions of life and make them absurd.' (ibid.)



18. Priscilla Johnston, c. 1933.

There were numerous prestigious commissions in the thirties, amongst them a painted map for W.H.Smith, a large tapestry map for South Africa House, and circular maps of the Arctic and Antarctic for the Scott Polar Institute in Cambridge.



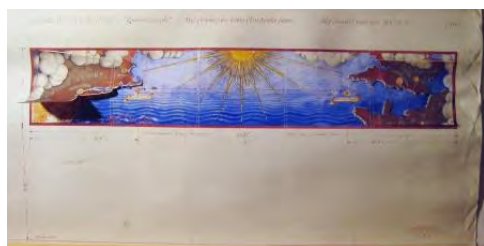
19. South Africa House tapestry map, 1934.

Max's maps and private sketches reveal his love of drawing ships, intricate technology and buildings. However, except for the '*strange little gnome-like creatures*' (ibid.) of the Underground maps, he generally avoided drawing people, in contrast to his brother Eric.



20. *Map of the North Atlantic* (detail showing London) on the RMS Queen Mary, 1936.

Max finally separated from Muriel in 1938, allowing him to live openly with Priscilla at their flat in Chelsea and their cottage in Sussex. His final years were relatively contented, if sometimes impecunious in the early years of World War Two, when a number of commissions were cancelled or postponed. In May 1946 he and Priscilla were at last able to marry, but their happiness was short-lived. Days after completing a painting of the North Atlantic for the liner Queen Elizabeth, he was diagnosed with cancer. He died a few months later in January 1947.



21. Original artwork for RMS Queen Elizabeth map, 1946.

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Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks go to Andrew and Angela Johnston for allowing me unfettered access to Max Gill material in their possession.