

## Moloney, Helen

by Lawrence William White

Moloney, Helen (1926–2011), artist in stained glass and other media, was born 2 January 1926 in Henry Street, Tipperary town; she and her twin sister Mary (O'Halpin) were the eldest among four daughters and one son of James Moloney (1896–1981) and his wife Katherine (Kathleen) Moloney (née Barry) (1896–1969). Her younger sister Katherine (1928–89) had a long relationship with and eventually married the poet Patrick Kavanagh (qv).

The family on both sides were steeped in the republican movement. Her grandfather Patrick James Moloney (1869–1947) was a prosperous pharmaceutical chemist and Sinn Féin TD for Tipperary constituencies (1919–23), re-elected as an anti-treaty candidate in June 1922. Helen's father was an officer of the 3rd Tipperary Brigade and 2nd Southern Division during the war of independence, and director of communications of the anti-treaty IRA, while his brother Con Moloney (1897/8–1951) was adjutant of the 2nd Southern Division under OC Ernie O'Malley (qv) and adjutant general under Liam Lynch (qv) of the anti-treaty IRA. Helen's mother, an elder sister of the executed revolutionary Kevin Barry (qv), was active in Sinn Féin, the Gaelic League, and on the executive of Cumann na mBan, worked in the Dáil Éireann department of home affairs, and was a judge of the republican courts. She was part of a republican fund-raising and publicity delegation to the USA (1922), and general secretary of the Irish Republican Prisoners' Dependants' Fund, on behalf of which she toured Australia (1924–5). Though James Moloney trained as a chemist, for some years he struggled to secure full and regular employment, till taking a position with Irish Sugar in Carlow in 1934. Katherine Moloney, after the birth of the couple's fifth child, became sales publicity advisor with the ESB (1930–50).

Helen Moloney left school shortly before her fourteenth birthday, and subsequently studied drawing part time with Art O'Murnaghan (qv) at the National College of Art (NCA), Dublin; a series of bursaries and awards allowed her attend the college full time to train as a painter, graduating in 1948. She studied life drawing for nine months in Paris at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, Montparnasse. Moving in 1952 into a studio flat at 5 Waterloo Road, Ballsbridge, Dublin – her home for the rest of her life – she worked as a part-time art teacher at Blackrock Technical School (1952–64). Having been deeply impressed during her Paris studies by the stained glass of Notre Dame cathedral and the Sainte-Chapelle, upon viewing the celebrated memorial exhibition of work by Evie Hone (qv) at UCD, Earlsfort Terrace, in 1958, she resolved to work in the medium. After returning to the NCA (1958–61) to study stained-glass technique under John Murphy (1921–2006), she worked (1960–62) as an assistant to Patrick Pollen (1928–2010) in his studio in the premises of An Túr Gloine. Her work was exhibited at the third Salzburg Biennale of Sacred Art (1962),

and she assisted Pollen in executing the extensive stained glass in St Patrick's church, Lifford, Co. Donegal (1964), designed by architect Liam McCormick (qv).

Receiving an Arts Council grant, Moloney established her own studio in 1964, thereafter working as a full-time stained-glass artist, finding an expression in stained glass that she had failed to discover in painting. She became especially known for the work she accomplished in Roman catholic churches designed by McCormick, the most innovative Irish church architect of the latter part of the twentieth century. Noteworthy for the originality of his designs and the harmonisation of his structures with the natural environment, from the start of his career in the late 1940s McCormick decorated his churches with original, commissioned artworks by Irish artists (over thirty in total), a revolutionary departure from the century-old practice of ordering cheap, mass-produced fittings and furnishings from ecclesiastical warehouses supplied from Britain and Germany. Moloney fulfilled eleven commissions for McCormick, more than any other artist, sharing with him a keen understanding of the symbiotic relationship between a window and its architectural setting, of the capacity of stained glass to manipulate the form and ambience of an interior space. Their collaboration occurred during a period of intensified church construction in the Ireland of the 1960s–70s – occasioned by economic prosperity, numerical increase and geographical expansion of population, and the requirements of the liturgical reforms of the second Vatican council – throughout which McCormick secured numerous contracts for sacred buildings while enjoying the liberty to express radical new concepts of design and decoration, partly to accommodate the new liturgy but primarily reflecting the engagement with modernity that was the ethos of Vatican II. Moloney's simple but bold designs, stylised and often semi-abstract, harmonised with the modernism of McCormick's architecture, and her preference for strong primary colours complemented his customarily white surfaces. She was part of an unofficial team of artists and craftspeople assembled by McCormick, whose collective efforts effected a revival of, and a stylistic revolution within, Irish sacred artwork. McCormick's team also included Imogen Stuart, Ruth Brandt (qv), Oisín Kelly (qv), John Behan, Veronica Rowe, Patrick Pye, Ray Carroll (d. 1994) and Patrick McElroy (d. 2007/8).

Moloney's first commission after setting up independently was on a McCormick church, Star of the Sea (1964), on a site overlooking Lough Swilly in the fishing community of Desertegney, Co. Donegal. Complementing the maritime references of McCormick's design – a boat-shaped building with a detached bell tower referencing a lighthouse – Moloney executed twelve porthole-like windows placed close under the roof, incorporating nautical images, some secular and some with Christian connotations. The most famous building on which she worked was McCormick's church of St Aengus (1967), Burt, Co. Donegal, dubbed by the architect as his 'pagan building'; the stone exterior and circular form evoked a nearby bronze-age hill-fort, the Grianán of Aileach. Bands of continuous clerestory glazing adorned both the outer and inner circular walls; Moloney filled the inner clerestory with a brightly coloured array of abstract shapes and stylised figures (silhouetted fish being

a recurrent motif), subtly graded from lighter hues above the entrance to darker behind the altar, and visible from the exterior through the clear glass of the outer clerestory. In an early example of her creative output apart from stained glass, she also designed the vestments. In awarding the building its gold medal for the period 1965–7, the RIAI commended 'the loving care that has been lavished on it by architect, builder, client, artists, craftsmen' (RIAI Architecture Gallery website). A remarkably harmonious conception in every aspect, in 2000 Burt church was named Irish building of the twentieth century in separate polls of architects and the general public from a shortlist of ten nominated by the RIAI.

More spare in extent was the stained glass executed by Moloney for McCormick's St Michael's church (1971), Creeslough, Co. Donegal, another exemplary example, but in a markedly different style, of harmonisation between building and landscape; the high, tapering and battered walls, suppressed roof, and fan-shaped plan combined to create contours that echoed the hilly terrain. Moloney's six small, irregularly aligned windows were situated close between the only other apertures to pierce the massive walls – the entrance portal and an inset cistern for rainwater – design features that, together with the white, pebble-dash cladding, referenced the vernacular cottage architecture of the region. Jewel-like in their diminutive radiance, depicting such Christian iconography as a dove, the Agnus Dei, and loaves and fishes, the windows were leaded in a manner equally effective when viewed internally or externally. Moloney also designed the altar tapestry (worked by Veronica Rowe) and executed inset enamels for the tabernacle (made by John Behan). At the stylistically similar church of St Mary's (1974), Maghera, Co. Londonderry – a development in an urban environment of McCormick's concepts at Creeslough – Moloney fabricated seven eucharistic windows, a well as the sanctuary cross, and enamel insets fixed to the altar, ambo, font, and aluminium entrance doors.

For St Oliver Plunkett church (1976), Toome, Co. Antrim, Moloney created a window in the *dalle de verre* technique, utilising unusually thick slabs of coloured glass set in a concrete matrix (rather than the lead comes used in standard stained-glass technique), a practice effecting deeper colour effects, accentuated by chipped, light-refracting facets on the inner side, but necessitating simple, minimally detailed imagery. Providing the sole lighting in a lateral eucharistic chapel, the window was embellished with such apropos symbols as loaves and fishes, lamb, bird, lamp, chalice, and host. In a rare instance of work in a non-catholic church, Moloney fulfilled a commission from McCormick in Donoughmore presbyterian church (1977), Liscooley, Co. Donegal, for six small windows on the theme of divine light; five of the windows symbolically represented Old Testament references to the light of God, while the sixth window, placed in the opposite wall, represented Christ as the light of the world. The semi-abstract style complemented the simplicity of the interior finishes, and the understated idiom of presbyterian liturgy. She also designed a reredos hanging depicting the burning bush.

Moloney's other commissions for McCormick included stained-glass windows in Holy Family church (1966), Southampton, England, and St Clement's retreat house chapel (1967), Belfast. She fulfilled commissions in other media for Our Lady of Lourdes (1976), Steelstown, Co. Londonderry (altar and ambo insets; painting of Christ on wooden cross); Christ Prince of Peace (1977), Fossa, Co. Kerry (glass insets on entrance doors); and St Patrick's (1979), Clogher, Co. Tyrone (stove-enamelled doors depicting Good Shepherd, tree of life, sun and moon).

One of Moloney's earliest commissions was for the church of Our Lady Queen of Heaven (1964) at Dublin Airport, designed by Andy Devane (qv), where the stained glass comprised clerestory lighting and stations of the cross set into the lateral walls. At Our Lady of Lourdes (1968), Ballyconnell, Co. Cavan (Philip Shaffrey, architect), her windows added colour and interest to a severely minimalist concept. Her work for Belfast-based architect Laurence McConville included windows in the south-transept extension (1968) to the 1851 church of St MacNissi, Magherahoney, Co. Antrim, where her striking imagery included the Holy Spirit placed at the centre of seven concentric circles, as well as non-figurative designs. Moloney worked in three churches designed by Dublin-based Richard Hurley (1932–2011), including alterations (1974) to the 1819 St Joseph's church, Tinryland, Co. Carlow, for which she executed an Apocalypse window. Her last commissions included windows to the eponymous saints in St Stephen's church (1982; Michael Brock, architect), Killiney, Co. Dublin, and St Francis of Assisi church (1982; Joe Treacy, architect), Drumnabey, Co. Tyrone. After trying unsuccessfully over six months to complete a commission in the late 1980s, she retired from making stained glass.

Moloney was unmarried. She was elected to Aosdána (1982). Her family history notwithstanding, she was entirely apolitical. Deeply reticent about her art, she rarely returned to a site to observe the work she had accomplished, let alone speak about it. She died at her home in Ballsbridge on 6 March 2011. The funeral was from St Mary's church, Haddington Road, to Glasnevin cemetery.

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GRO (birth, death certs.); *Ir. Press*, 5 Sept. 1947; 9, 12 Mar. 1951; 20 July 1989; *Ir. Times*, 11, 13 Jan. 1969; 10 Mar. 1971; 4 Apr. 1981; 18 Aug. 1989; 27 Dec. 1994; 12 May 2000; 8, 26 Mar. 2011; Nicola Gordon Bowe, *Irish stained glass* (1983), slide pack with explanatory text; Richard Hurley and Wilfrid Cantwell, *Contemporary Irish church architecture* (1985); Michael Hopkinson, *Green against green: the Irish civil war* (1988); *Aosdána* (1996); Richard Hurley, *Irish church architecture in the era of Vatican II* (2001); Joanna Mooney Eichacker, *Irish republican women in America: lecture tours, 1916–1925* (2003); Frank Rodgers, *Glass in the glens* (2004); Paul Larmour and Shane O'Toole (ed.), *North by northwest: the life and work of Liam McCormick* (2008); Richard Hurley, 'Cities for God', *Irish Arts Review*, xxv, no. 2 (summer 2008), 124–9; 'Con Moloney' and 'Kathleen Barry Moloney',

[www.ucd.ie/archives/collections/depositedcollections](http://www.ucd.ie/archives/collections/depositedcollections) (includes biographical and contextual abstracts and descriptive catalogues); National Inventory of Architectural Heritage, surveys, [www.buildingsofireland.ie](http://www.buildingsofireland.ie); RIAI gold medal, RIAI Architecture Gallery, [www.irisharchitectureawards.ie](http://www.irisharchitectureawards.ie); [www.aosdana.artscouncil.ie](http://www.aosdana.artscouncil.ie); [www.rip.ie](http://www.rip.ie); [www.findagrave.com](http://www.findagrave.com); internet material accessed Feb.–Mar. 2017

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