

## Importance of Biodiversity in the Song School Mural

Renowned Arts and Crafts artist Phoebe Anna Traquair painted the inner walls of St Mary's Cathedral Song School between 1888-1892. Her murals depict *Benedicite Omnia Opera*; a canticle celebrating Creation. The text encourages humans, angels, and all living things to praise the lord – 'O Ye Works of the Lord, Praise Ye the Lord.' Commissioned by Dr Cazenove, Sub Dean of the Cathedral and a member of the Edinburgh Social Union, the work was part of a wider philanthropic effort to bring deeper morality and meaning to art in the late nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Traquair was inspired by the enlightened humanism of the period, literally and symbolically bringing together humankind, nature, and divinity by incorporating them all into her painted procession (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> She highlights the importance of biodiversity as a display of God's creation, including a mass of flora and fauna on each of the walls. This use of botanical imagery stems from a range of sources, including her Arts and Crafts contemporaries, the Pre-Raphaelites, and early Italian renaissance painters.<sup>3</sup> All of these artists shared Traquair's belief in the spiritual beauty and importance of nature.<sup>4</sup> Today, St Mary's Cathedral aims to uphold the importance of biodiversity in their response to the ongoing climate crisis. They are using Traquair's visual celebration of nature to influence their ecological vision for the future of the Cathedral.

Born in Dublin as Phoebe Anna Moss in 1852, the artist had a middle-class education imbued with art, nature and Christianity.<sup>5</sup> Her style was influenced by her brother, an art collector who owned multiple paintings by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as well as visits to local collections featuring medieval illuminated manuscripts.<sup>6</sup> Between 1869 and 1872, she attended the Royal Dublin Society's School of Design, where she was assigned to illustrate fossils for the Scottish naturalist and palaeontologist Ramsay Heatley Traquair. She would go on to marry Traquair and continued to illustrate his scientific papers until his retirement, demonstrating her interest and wealth of experience in representing the natural world.<sup>7</sup> Her love of nature is highly documented by scholars and in her own words. The Scottish architect Robert Lormier noted that she was 'such

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair 1852-1936*, (National Galleries of Scotland, 2005), 19-20

<sup>2</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 10

<sup>3</sup> Murdo Macdonald, "An Outstanding Vision of Life," *The Scotsman*, August 16, 1993

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Meagher, "The Pre-Raphaelites," *The Met*, October 1, 2004

<sup>5</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 13

<sup>6</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 13

<sup>7</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 14

a lover of simplicity, and the things that give real lasting pleasure are the simplest things of nature.’<sup>8</sup> Traquair herself said she wanted to ‘match the beauty of the red-tipped buds, sunlight through green leaves, the yellow gorse on the hill, the song of wild birds.’<sup>9</sup>

In 1887 she wrote to the prolific writer John Ruskin for advice on medieval illumination and their correspondence lasted for several months.<sup>10</sup> Both intended to reflect Christian messages through their work and saw even the smallest details of the natural world as important in God’s greater plan.<sup>11</sup> Many of her designs, including the Song School Mural, are reminiscent of William Morris’s prints (fig.2). Traquair, like Morris, was a prominent figure in the Arts and Crafts movement in the late nineteenth century. This artistic trend blurred the lines between the decorative and fine arts, calling for works that would elevate the lives of the working classes and using nature as a prime example of God’s creation.<sup>12</sup> The Pre-Raphaelites also inspired Traquair’s painting style and ideological basis. Their initial aim was to keenly observe the natural world, as well as encouraging contemplation of social and moral issues.<sup>13</sup> Rossetti’s works, blending religious symbolism with detailed observation of natural forms (fig.3), particularly influenced Traquair’s botanical focus.<sup>14</sup>

The east wall is the focal point of the Song School mural. All of the depicted figures face the representation of Christ above the east window, as the Benedicite exhorts all living things to praise the Lord (fig.4).<sup>15</sup> The grapevine surrounding Christ represents peace and abundance, related to Micah 4:4 -- ‘they shall sit every man under his vine and fig tree, and none shall make them afraid.’<sup>16</sup> The gospel also connects consecrated wine to the blood of Christ: ‘for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.’<sup>17</sup> Hence the grapevine symbolizes the connection between humankind, nature and the divine – a central theme that

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<sup>8</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 10

<sup>9</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 10

<sup>10</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 17

<sup>11</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 10

<sup>12</sup> “Phoebe Anna Traquair,” *National Galleries of Scotland*, accessed 10 March, 2025

<sup>13</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 13; Meagher, “The Pre-Raphaelites”

<sup>14</sup> Meagher, “The Pre-Raphaelites”

<sup>15</sup> Margaret G. Campbell, *Phoebe Anna Traquair’s “Benedicite Omnia Opera”: Mural paintings in the Song School*, (St Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral, 1998), 6

<sup>16</sup> Ernst Lehner, 1950, *Folklore and symbolism of flowers, plants and trees*, (Tudor Pub. Co, 1950), 50

<sup>17</sup> Valentina Savo, Alma Kumbaric and Giulia Caneva, “Grapevine Symbolism in the Ancient Euro Mediterranean Cultures,” *Economic Botany* 70, no. 2 (2016), 195

continues throughout the mural. In the lower section of the east wall, Traquair depicts three New Testament scenes – *The Gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost*, *The Three Marys visiting Christ's Empty Tomb*, and *The Healing of the Dumb Man* (fig.5). The central image of the three Marys is set in the Scottish Borders, with the Leaderfoot viaduct in the background signifying the 'here and now.'<sup>18</sup> Around the feet of the women are flowers of the Scottish countryside, including daisies, harebells, and wild roses (fig.6). This triptych is flanked by two groups of choristers singing, on the North side in front of a Scottish scene and on the South side framed by an Irish landscape. Behind them are classical columns one of which is engraved with thistles, the centuries-old emblem of Scotland (fig.7). This altogether situates the biblical scenes and messages in the context of contemporary Scotland, evoking a strong sense of cultural identity. Traquair was a contributor to the Celtic revival movement and here she blends Christian imagery and traditional Celtic themes, such as a reverence for local nature and heritage.<sup>19</sup> She tailors the biblical messaging of the mural to the concerns of everyday Scottish people by including imagery familiar to the contemporary viewer.

The south wall displays the influence of the early Renaissance in its union of art, nature, music, and religion. The impact of Fra Angelico's art is highlighted through the bright palette, dynamic figural and vegetal forms, and blending of the earthly and divine (fig.8).<sup>20</sup> Traquair wrote that the art of Fra Angelico 'is so purely spiritual I can't compare him, unless it be to spring flowers, or boy's voices, or birds.'<sup>21</sup> Thus, she casts a clear similarity between the transcendent effects of art, nature and song. This also relates to the lyrical works of Botticelli – particularly his *Primavera* (fig.9). In this piece and the Song School mural, the viewer can sense the rhythmic movements of the figures, and the artist includes a range of symbolic meaning behind the abundance of botanical imagery. Halfway along the south wall, the embodiment of Summer, inspired by the 'flora' in *Primavera*, carries an armful of roses (fig.10).<sup>22</sup> These signify the Virgin Mary, known as the 'rose without thorn' due to her lack of sin.<sup>23</sup> The rose is also depicted on the east wall where the three Marys visit Christ's tomb (fig.6), again linked to the purity of the Virgin and her child. In addition,

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<sup>18</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 31

<sup>19</sup> Phoebe Anna Traquair, *National Galleries of Scotland*

<sup>20</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 34

<sup>21</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 34

<sup>22</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 35

<sup>23</sup> Sally-Anne Huxtable, "Roses in art and collections we care for," *National Trust*, accessed 10<sup>th</sup> April, 2025

Christmas roses are featured falling around the embodiment of summer, and beneath the cherubs on the north wall archway (fig.11). Like normal roses these signify divine love and purity, but the Christmas rose has a specific meaning related to the Nativity. According to legend, a young girl saw the wise men travelling to see Christ and wept because she had no gift to give him. Her tears fell to the ground and from them the Christmas rose grew.<sup>24</sup> Thus, this particular flower represents the birth of Christ, hope, and the idea of joy from sorrow. Lilies are also depicted growing along the south wall (fig.10). Roses and Lilies are the plants most associated with the garden of Heaven due to their connotations of beauty and purity.<sup>25</sup> Christ told the Israelites to ‘consider the lilies of the field,’ describing them as more glorious in their simplicity than king Solomon in his best adornment.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the figures on the south wall walk over a meadow filled with tulips, daisies, poppies, and daffodils (fig.1). These plants are associated with spring, and thus represent life, renewal and resurrection.<sup>27</sup> The hollyhock and fruit trees in the hands of the choirboys (fig.12), representing ‘O all ye green things upon the earth, bless ye the Lord,’ continue the implication of fertility and abundance.<sup>28</sup>

Whilst the west wall continues the same style and narrative, its particularly vibrant and detailed design was influenced by the work of William Blake (fig.13, fig 14).<sup>29</sup> The majority of this section is filled by the organ and the window. However, two angels on either side sing praises to the lord, and the Four Beasts below – eagle, ox, man, and lion – symbolize the four evangelists -- John, Luke, Matthew, and Mark.<sup>30</sup> The walls are linked by the foliated border which prominently runs beneath each scene, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living things and the ever-presence of nature in everyday life.

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<sup>24</sup> Frederick William Burbridge, “Christmas Rose” *The Plant World* 2, no. 7 (1899): 118

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Haig, *The Floral Symbolism of the Great Masters*, (Trubner & co. ltd, 1913) 30

<sup>26</sup> John Ingram, *Language of flowers; Or Flora Symbolica: Including Floral Poetry, Original and Selected*, (Frederick Warne and co., 1887), 273

<sup>27</sup> Paul Barolsky, “Botticelli’s ‘Primavera’ and the Poetic Imagination of Italian Renaissance Art.” *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 8, no. 2 (2000): 32-33

<sup>28</sup> Claire Powell, *The Meaning of Flowers: A Garland of Plant Lore and Symbolism from Popular Custom and Literature*, (Juniper Books, 1977), 142; Jennifer Meagher, “Food and Drink in European Painting, 1400-1800,” *The Met*, May 1, 2009

<sup>29</sup> Friends of Mansfield Place (pamphlet), *Mansfield Traquair Centre*

<sup>30</sup> “Conservator’s Report: St Mary’s Cathedral Song School, Palmerston Place,” *Historic Buildings Council for Scotland*

The north wall continues the Benedicite. Representing the ‘children of men,’ Traquair depicts the workers who had prepared the Song School walls for her to paint.<sup>31</sup> They stand on a cobblestone street in front of Edinburgh Castle, personalizing the mural to its local audience (fig.15). The last panel of the north wall, bordering the east, represents the natural world -- ‘Fowls of the Air,’ ‘Whales’ and ‘Seas and Floods’ -- all praising the Lord.<sup>32</sup> The plants that grow in the lower section -- foxglove and daisies (fig.16) -- and the birds that fly amongst the clerics and altar boys -- robins, sparrows, bluetits, and chaffinches (fig.17) -- are native to Scotland, again localizing the message of the Benedicite. Animals and plants (or ‘green things’) have their own sections in the mural, but they are also intertwined throughout. Thus, Traquair highlights the importance of biodiversity through the abundant and broad range of flora and fauna she depicts throughout her work.

When she painted the murals in the late nineteenth century, Traquair aimed to connect the themes of the Benedicite with the lives and concerns of the contemporary Scottish audience. Though her work predates the modern environmental movement, it resonates with twenty-first century concerns about ecological preservation. Today, St Mary’s Cathedral is using the mural in order to call attention and respond to the climate crisis. In 2022, the Cathedral publicly recognized the climate emergency, pledging to work with and support congregations and government in order to tackle it.<sup>33</sup> They are dedicated to being responsible stewards of creation, caring for the local environment, and acting for environmental justice.<sup>34</sup> Traquair’s mural holds great relevance in this context. Visually and symbolically the artist celebrates the interconnectedness of all God’s creations, acknowledging the divine presence in every living thing, including plants and animals as well as humans and angels. In the face of environmental degradation, the painting reminds its viewers of the sacred nature of creation and fosters a sense of stewardship and care. Using Traquair’s painting as inspiration, the A+E program resident at the Cathedral holds workshops centred around art and ecological preservation. They are improving the environment with gardening groups, climate change discussions, and demonstrations such as the Pilgrimage for

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<sup>31</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 36

<sup>32</sup> Cummings, *Phoebe Anna Traquair*, 36

<sup>33</sup> Declaration of a Climate Emergency, *St Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral*, accessed March 10, 2025

<sup>34</sup> Eco-Cathedral, *St Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral*, accessed March 10, 2025

COP26.<sup>35</sup> The Cathedral will continue to emphasize the environmental consciousness that Traquair's Song School mural promotes through its vibrant expression of the spiritual beauty and value of nature. For those interested in experiencing the murals and the Cathedral's eco-initiatives first-hand, visiting the Song School offers an opportunity to engage with its beautiful testament to the connection between art, faith, music and ecology.

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<sup>35</sup> A+E, *St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral*, accessed March 10, 2025; Pilgrimage for COP26, *Art and Ecology*, accessed March 10, 2025

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Figure 2. William Morris, Acanthus wallpaper, 1875, V&A, London





Figure 3. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *The Daydream*, 1880, V&A, London – Example of similarity between Traquair's painting and the Pre-Raphaelites



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Figure 5. East wall of St Mary's Cathedral Song School, triptych: *Christ healing the dumb man, the three Marys visiting Christ's empty tomb, and the gift of the holy spirit at Pentecost*. Image from St Mary's Cathedral website



Figure 6. Song School, detail of east wall, *The Three Marys Visiting Christ's Empty Tomb*. Image from St Mary's Cathedral website.





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Figure 12. Song School detail of south wall, choirboys holding fruit trees and hollyhock. Image taken from St Mary's Cathedral website.





Figure 13. Song School west wall. Image taken from St Mary's Cathedral website.

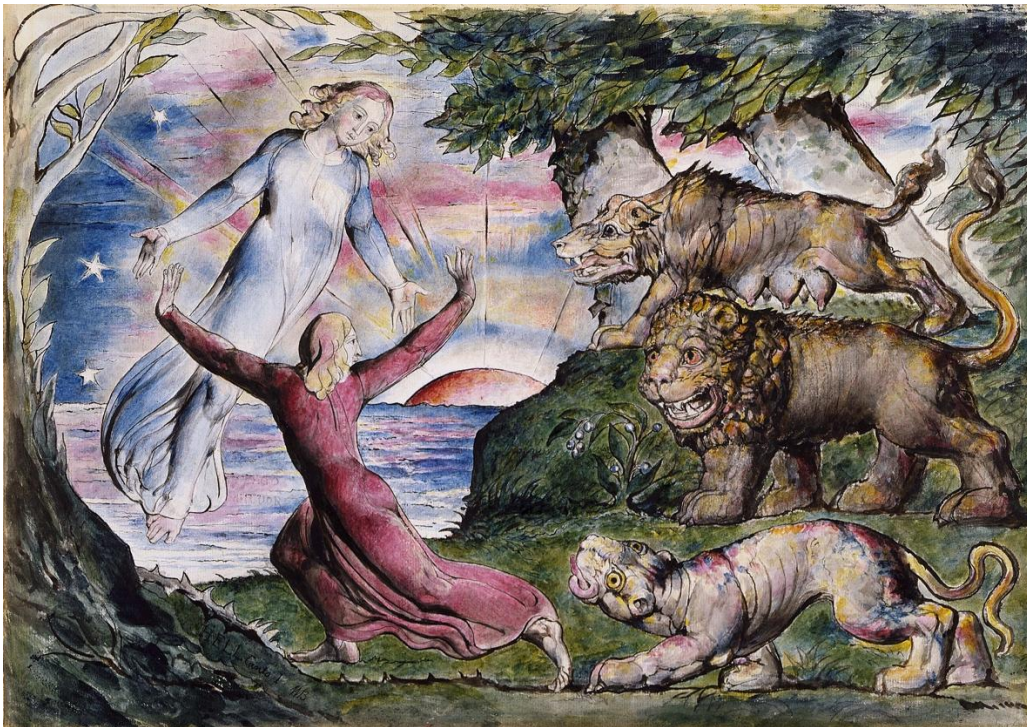


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