

'My Margaret, Your Toshie', by Keith Adamson

Review by Nia Clark



My Margaret, Your Toshie is best described as a 'novel based on the intertwined lives of Margaret MacDonald & Charles Rennie Mackintosh'.¹ The novel is written from Margaret's perspective, and we discover how the two met through her recollection in Chapter 2. She recounts their time at The Glasgow School of Art where Margaret and her sister, Frances, Mackintosh, and Herbert MacNair became known as 'The Four'. Margaret recalls weekends spent sketching in the South Ayrshire fishing village, Dunure, where they were invited by John Keppie. She, and Keith Adamson, credit Fra Newberry for bringing them together: '[s]omehow, he realised straight away that if he put us together, something marvellous would happen' (28). In *My Margaret, Your Toshie*, Adamson shifts the focus from Mackintosh's work to his relationships, and especially his relationship with Margaret.

The novel opens in Walberswick-on-Blyth, where Margaret and Charles are outsiders. Charles in particular is viewed as 'the strange Scotsman' (10), and the locals begin to suspect him of being a German spy. Following Charles's arrest and subsequent release, the couple decide to relocate to London. In Chelsea they discover 'a social scene of like-minded people: a collection of artists and writers that felt like their natural milieu' (17). Indeed, it is also a novel about the

relationship between the arts. Through Margaret and Charles, and their friendship with the painter John Duncan Fergusson and dancer Margaret Morris among others, architecture, painting, dance, and literature all come together in this text.

A turning point in the novel for Mackintosh is his departure from architecture – though there are references to his designs throughout, including The Willow Tea Rooms, The Glasgow School of Art, Scotland Street School, Hill House in Helensburgh, and The Glasgow Herald building, which ‘should have [...] kicked off his career’ (31) – and a move towards a new medium, watercolour. Importantly, Adamson gives Margaret’s work space too. He describes her taking inspiration from ‘the looping tendrils of a white convolvulus’, drawing ‘human forms [...] that were themselves elongated and sinuous, inspired by the forms of the plants’ (23–24). Margaret and Charles are presented as equals, and later in the novel she even signs Mackintosh’s painting, thus underlining the importance of their partnership both romantically and professionally. As Margaret confides in Meg, she realised she was ‘more than a companion and fellow artist’ when Charles invited her to move in with him in their first home in Glasgow: “‘you don’t think I can do it all on my own, do you?’” My heart leapt. It was the first time he had ever acknowledged my contribution to his work in so many words’ (58–59). Adamson invites the reader to reflect on Margaret’s importance for Mackintosh in life and in work.

Mackintosh’s move to watercolour painting coincides with a move to the south of France. In the first half of the novel, we witness the breakdown of the relationship between Mackintosh and John Keppie (of Honeyman, Keppie, and Mackintosh) and Mackintosh’s alcoholism, which culminates in the dissolution of their partnership in 1913. As Mackintosh’s health begins to deteriorate, he and Margaret make the decision to move to Newberry’s cottage in Walberswick, which is followed by the move to London, which at first offers the possibility of ‘a whole new life outside of Glasgow’ (70). Soon after their arrival in London, Margaret’s sister, Frances dies. Richard Emerson notes that ‘refreshingly, the story is told from dark to light’² and indeed, Frances’s death, shortly followed by the death of the MacDonald sisters’s mother, acts as a turning point in the novel. The Mackintoshes decide to throw a party for friends, inviting Meg and Fergusson, Patrick and Anna Geddes, and Rudolph Ihlee, who tells Charles he is moving to Collioure, where the Fauvists Henri Matisse and André Derain lived.

Ihlee tells Charles that while Matisse may have moved to Nice, there is 'still quite a colony of artists in Collioure' (87) and with the proceeds of her mother's house, Margaret and Charles decide to move to France. Alongside adaptations of real letters between Margaret and Charles,³ these imagined conversations are woven throughout the novel - in Chapter 9 Mackintosh is introduced to Picasso, for example - and secure the Mackintoshes position as key figures in the visual art and design scene in Europe.

With the change in climate, we move to Part II of the novel. The couple start their journey in Amélie-les-Bains, spending time in Collioure, before moving on to Villefranche where Charles 'record[s] the local flora in watercolour' (105). They enjoy a stint in Antibes, where they join Fergus and Meg, who is teaching there. Adamson brings dance and architecture into juxtaposition when a student at the summer school Meg invites Mackintosh to speak at, asks, "Do you think the way you assess a work of architecture has anything in common with the way you would assess dance?" Mackintosh replies, "My mentor, Francis Newberry, used to say that the education of all artists must be conducted on one grand principle, and therefore they must all be educated alike - with one common aim" (109). He continues:

If you were to ask how you are to judge dance, the answer is just as you would judge painting or sculpture or architecture - form, colour, proportion, all visible qualities - and the one great invisible quality in all art, soul. (110)

Through this exchange with a younger audience, Adamson continues to give Mackintosh a voice, but also artistic recognition in his lifetime that was not realised in full.

The fragility of life is also emphasised throughout. Following the deaths of Margaret's mother and sister in Part I, Margaret falls ill in Part II and has to return to London for treatment. During this time Margaret and Charles write letters to one another, and the novel's title is taken from Mackintosh's letters, which he signs 'MMYT'. After some time, Margaret returns to France and the novel comes to a close back at their favourite L'Hôtel Jambon, where Charles becomes ill with what turns out to be throat and tongue cancer. In France, Mackintosh embraces his new life as a painter, but the novel's closing lines portray him as a polymath:

'You are a great architect, Mr Mackintosh,' says Margaret. Charles manages a muffled laugh. 'You must remember, Margaret, that in all my architectural efforts, you have been half, if not three-quarters of them.' [...] 'But you are also a great painter. In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say, a genius of the first order.' (184)

Most importantly, Margaret's importance for Charles personally and artistically is never underestimated throughout the novel. Adamson skilfully weaves fact with fiction to tell the story of their collaboration in life and work and to shine light on Mackintosh the man.



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