

Howley, Martin (2010) 'The Gauntlet Press's Original Emblem' in: *DA: A Journal of the Printing Arts* 65 (2010): 87-91.

Readers of *THE DEVIL'S ARTISAN* will remember that an issue of this journal in 1999 was devoted to Richard Outram and Barbara Howard's The Gauntlet Press, the principal organ by which they disseminated short print runs of exquisitely crafted letterpress publications combining their talents as artist and poet and aspiring through them to serve 'For spreading truth and making love expand'.<sup>1</sup> The productions of the press have been the focus of a recently completed digital archive hosted by Memorial University of Newfoundland's Digital Archive Initiative.<sup>2</sup>

'The Gauntlet Press' is an unusual name and one which must surely have had special significance for Richard and Barbara. Every publication the press issued included a colophon identifying it as a Gauntlet Press publication and a distinctive printer's mark. Richard and Barbara, over time, used four different marks for the press. You will find all four reproduced on the Gauntlet Press Web site. The earliest and perhaps the most intriguing used a striking visual motif. Here is what it looks like:



Richard once explained the name Gauntlet Press by reference to the trope of 'throwing down the gauntlet' but he went on to state that the name alludes also to the fact that Barbara had strong Scottish ties, her mother being a double Mackintosh, and the ancient motto of the Mackintoshes was '*Touch not the cat bot a glove*' – 'don't touch the cat without a glove'. He also mentioned a violinist named Ambrose Gauntlet whose playing he and Barbara had admired.<sup>3</sup> The violinist and the McIntosh motto are both real: you can easily find both on the Internet. But, as Richard himself acknowledged, these are obscure allusions, allusions that it is unlikely anyone else would have discerned if Richard had not pointed them out. It is as if by deliberately focusing on the least likely aspects of the

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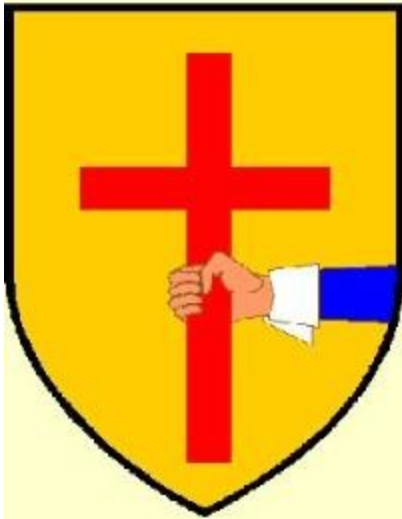
<sup>1</sup> Richard Outram, 'A Brief History of Time at The Gauntlet Press (Or, Some Days the Earth Moved)', *DA* 44, Spring/Summer 1999, 5-18, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> <http://collections.mun.ca/gauntletpress>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

emblem Richard is hinting that multiple levels of meaning are embedded within it. Let us see what else can be gleaned from it.

Firstly, the Gauntlet Press was very much a collaborative labour of love. If Barbara Howard's line of descent from the Mackintoshes is alluded to *sub rosa* in the design of the emblem, would not Richard's family line somehow be included in it, too? And if so, how? I got a partial answer to these questions earlier this year when I was looking at a book on the Irish O'Donnell Clan<sup>4</sup> and I came across a reproduction of the clan's official crest, which looks like this:



The similarity of this design to that of the Gauntlet Press emblem struck me immediately. The resemblance could be just coincidental but that is unlikely. Richard's middle name was Daley, the surname also of his mother. Daley is the name originally used for centuries by a line of descendants of the fourth century Irish king, Niall of the Nine Hostages, before they were officially renamed as the clan O'Donnell. In fact, the preferred designation of the O'Donnells in Gaelic is still the Clann Dálaigh. So, unless I am much mistaken, an allusion to Richard's Gaelic family connections is integral to the design, and the Gauntlet Press emblem subtly associates Richard and Barbara's press with the Gaelic/Gallic side of each's ancestral lines. But I doubt this was done simply to memorialize their family connections one generation back. It seems more plausible that they are consciously identifying themselves through their family roots with the tradition of the magnificent illuminated manuscript books which Ireland and Scotland bequeathed to the world in the middle ages, books like the Book of Kells, in which the decoration and text were seamlessly combined, a tradition to which Barbara and Richard were to add lustre through the Gauntlet Press.

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<sup>4</sup> Vincent O'Donnell, The O'Donnells of Tir Chonaill: a concise history of the O'Donnell clan, Inver, Co. Donegal, Ireland, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 2000.

There is another possible reason why their Gaelic roots would have been stressed in connection with their artistic mission. As readers of Robert Graves's *The White Goddess* will remember, the Gaelic language is uniquely distinguished by the fact that each of the letters in its alphabet is also the designation for a different kind of tree. The tree alphabet is centuries old and harks back to an era when the natural world was a universal frame of reference, a world in which people's lives were immersed in the rhythms and continuities of Nature. Trees are, after all, a synecdoche for the whole of the natural world and the relationship humans have with it. Trees are an important motif in Richard and Barbara's work, too, and it is easy to imagine their relish in an alphabetic system that reflects the reverence their Irish and Scots ancestors felt for grove and forest.<sup>5</sup>

But, going back to the Gauntlet Press emblem, there remains an awkward question that needs to be answered. If the Gauntlet Press design is an adaptation of the O'Donnell crest, why did Richard and Barbara make the changes that they did? I think one answer is fairly obvious. The passion cross is the supreme symbol of the Christian faith, a faith neither Richard nor Barbara espoused, so the cross has been replaced by what both Richard and Barbara referred to as a tree symbol. Their faith seems to have been one in which the divine is apprehended through love of the world of nature, above all nature in its highest impulses, and a tree is a very potent symbol of the life force in nature. But this is actually a very specific symbol: it is a modification of the well-known astrological glyph for the planet Saturn, a modification utilized by botanists to designate plants of the tree genus. Take away one of the horizontals and you have the sign of Saturn.<sup>6</sup> If we infer this to be a deliberate allusion to the planet Saturn, two other levels of interpretation suggest themselves, one cosmic, the other alchemical.

'Astrologically Saturn has become a symbol for... relentless natural forces and the hard, fixed structures of the world of matter. In astrological graphical symbolism the glyph of Saturn illustrates the idea that the crescent of receptivity, the personality, submits to the restrictions of matter.' The Gauntlet grasps the symbol of Saturn, with its cross of matter elevated over the crescent of the soul, as an expression of acceptance that the soul's yearnings must be given shape and form within the limitations of time and space. 'Saturn is known as the Greater Malefic, the bringer of sorrow, and the one who deprives. But Saturn only brings sorrow and deprivation in those areas of a person's life that are based on illusions or unrealistic expectations.'<sup>7</sup> The realistic perception of life's exigencies was a preoccupation of Richard's and Barbara's work together. It was their shared conviction that, as Peter Sanger has expressed it, 'affective and intellectual knowledge are never disincarnate. Love can only be incarnate. So also must be poetry.'<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example,

<sup>6</sup> This derivation would have been readily apparent to Richard and Barbara from their stated source for the tree symbol. See Rudolf Koch, *The Book of Signs*, London, 1930, pp. 51-3 and 63-4.

<sup>7</sup> Symbols.com. Online encyclopedia of Western signs and ideograms. 'Symbol 17: 8'. (<http://www.symbols.com/encyclopedia/17/178.html>)

<sup>8</sup> P. Sanger, 'Richard Outram: a preface and selection', *Antigonish Review*, issue no. 125, 114-18, p. 117. *The Antigonish Review*. An on-line version is at: <http://www.antigonishreview.com/bi-125/125-petersanger.html>.

But why is Saturn clasped by a gauntlet rather than a bare hand? Well, the crescent of Saturn's glyph is conventionally interpreted as representing the sickle by which, as the grim reaper, he is the agent of death in the natural world. In its encirclement of the sickle's cutting edge, the Gauntlet can be seen as that which enables the wearer to confront the menace of death without being intimidated by it, in much the same way that a glove would have protected a member of the Mackintosh clan against the menacing crescent of a wildcat's extended claw. This figure suggests that the Gauntlet Press may be regarded as a medium for apprehending life through a shared artistic vision that for Richard and Barbara protected them against the destructive element.

An alchemical reading of the emblem is suggested by the fact that, in the alchemical lexicon, Saturn is equivalent to lead.<sup>9</sup> Lead, of course, is the principal raw material from which the moveable type used in a letter press is formed. But lead is also the chief substance from which the alchemists strove to achieve the transmutation of base metal into gold, the lead of death being transmuted into the gold of light and life. The Gauntlet Press parallels the alchemical enterprise, enshrining as it does Richard and Barbara's quest for a poetic and artistic transmutation of the raw materials of life, a quest for some true marriage of word and image that would express, in Richard's words 'our astounded delight in our own discovered mutuality of body, mind and Spirit'.<sup>10</sup>

All of these implied readings of the Gauntlet Press emblem argue for it as a death-acknowledging yet powerfully life-affirming symbol. If I have interpreted it well, the emblem embraces a vision, a manifesto and a pledge to pursue both in accordance with an ancient artistic tradition, to which The Gauntlet Press was destined to make such an illustrious contribution. The original motto on the O'Donnell clan's crest is the Latin phrase 'In hoc signo vinces' – 'By this sign you will triumph'. It might stand as a fitting motto for The Gauntlet Press, too.

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<sup>9</sup> I owe the suggestion of an alchemical allusion here to Amanda Jernigan.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Outram, from the afterword to *Brief Immortals* (2003).