

*Three Burnt Books:*  
*An Unconventional Conservation Narrative*

*Dawn Worsley*

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*Degree of Doctor of Philosophy*  
*The Glasgow School of Art*  
*School of Fine Art*

## *The Burnt Book*

### *I*

All that was left of the Mackintosh Library after the archaeologists had shovelled out its fetid remains by the boxful was a baked-black cavern.

I moved to Glasgow in January 2016, a whole eighteen months after that lunch-time fire had devoured the west wing of the Mackintosh. I had never set foot inside the library. Never *felt* it. All I knew of the building was the bleak mass sulking behind a scaffold cage.

There had been scant material survivors of the fire and the subsequent bog of char and ash. A portion of books was merely soiled, preserved by months of airless compression under the silting carcasses of documents and furniture. There was the small, ordinary book that had been pulled out and had fixed up down in Oxford, and reappeared with extraordinary scarring. There was the uncanny cabinet panel, discovered in the shadows of the library after the archaeologists had done their work. Then there was the book that had lost its name and lost its place, and

all anybody could reliably tell me was that it was burnt. Very burnt.

I had spoken to librarians and conservators, professionals who habitually handled documents and had been intimately involved in the library's decantation. Reading over transcripts I had been puzzled by the obscurity of their recollections.

'I remember looking at the title which was ... something ... yeah, I can't remember, but I'm sure ... I'm sure I wrote about it in the report for the client,' said an AOC conservator.<sup>i</sup>

I asked whether it had been her job to find out what the book was called.

'No. I'm sure it's quite obvious when you open it up. I'll check the report, and I'll try and remember.'<sup>ii</sup>

She never did get back to me. Perhaps the book had been so mediocre or so common that it defied memory. Perhaps the book, disfigured and destitute, epitomised everything that the library had become. Yet, somehow, I doubted sentimentality could sway a seasoned conservator.

What rendered this forgetfulness strange was that many of the interviewees had remarked how visually striking the book was in its ruined condition. The meagre clues enabled me to sketch a basic reconstruction:

The book was big, bigger than A4; it was about five centimetres deep, the thickness of a large dictionary; it was

clothbound, although there was uncertainty over its colour; however, the disfigurement was specific:

‘I think about two-thirds of the book remained. It was burned from the short end, the top or the bottom end. Up and around two-thirds of the book remained ... just very charred, and it was in a relatively stable condition – the pages are legible, it can be identified – that’s our basis of a book that’s in relatively good condition from the library.’<sup>iii</sup>

Could the AOC conservator tell me more about what language it was in, how big was the typeface, for example?

‘No, I can’t.’<sup>iv</sup>

I asked whether there had been illustrations.

‘You see, I can’t really remember, to be honest. I remember it had a green ... I think it’s got a green textile cover, but the outer sleeve either wasn’t there or it’s been burnt – it’s not in place anymore. I can’t remember exactly anything about the content. I was purely looking at it from the condition of the material as opposed to ... a *book*.’<sup>v</sup>

The book had ceased to be. This new object had to be experienced as something new, but what that *something* was was either too anonymous or too uncomfortable to address.

It was agreed, though, that the book reeked.

‘We had it inside a plastic bag and we were careful not to handle it too much because, obviously, it could have been growing mould and nasty things like that,’ explained the Head of Library & Archives.<sup>vi</sup>

The second AOC conservator, on receiving the object said, ‘Even before you’ve unwrapped the packaging, you can smell the burnt elements of the material. I can’t really describe it, but it’s similar to the smell you have after you’ve had a bonfire, or something like that, that lingers on your clothes, but, far far stronger ... really strong smell ... almost quite chemical-y and it was ... it was ... just flashes back memories of being there.’<sup>vii</sup>

I urged her to continue.

She drew on a memory, ‘It’s funny because you smell other burnt things and other things that have a similar smell and it doesn’t have that effect. It’s not particularly pleasant ... it just brings around quite a sad emotion.’<sup>viii</sup>

The fetid object had provoked the conservator into accessing a memory of the library excavation, into reliving an associated emotion.

The Burnt Book could not intentionally stir a feeling. It could not perceptually care less. Yet, sentiment might have saved the Burnt Book from the same fate as other fire-stricken documents, when pragmatism had determined their fate.

What was the fine line, I asked, between choosing to retain or discard an object that had been salvaged from the library?

‘In terms of the books,’ explained the Head of Archives & Library, ‘it was: does it look like – with professional conservation expertise – we might be able to bring this back to a usable state, so it can go back into the collections

again and be used, because we felt like the library is there to be used, we don't want to be holding on to large collections of unusable books.<sup>2ix</sup>

She continued, "The Mack Library books are valuable and precious, but none of them are unique in the world, so, we always had to think is it better to get these individual volumes conserved or is it better to see if we can replace that individual volume with another copy of the same work?"<sup>x</sup>

Yet, the Burnt Book, an unusable book, survived, which begged two questions: (a) what did this object become when it became redundant as a book? and (b) what was its journey to become this new object?

One morning, overlooking the Mackintosh, a hive of construction workers then, the Mackintosh Restoration Project's Senior Project Manager told me a story about how a young archaeologist came to put aside the Burnt Book:

"The security guard at the Mackintosh Building, Danny Clark, said that one of the archaeologists had taken away a book. She'd gone back to Latvia, I think, or Lithuania. She'd left it with him because she just thought it didn't fit the criteria of being conserved, but it was still recognisable but terribly damaged around the edges and very sooty and very fragile and had mould on its cover – had lost its cover, I think, or lost part of its cover – but she just thought it was one of those things that, actually, if you had the

money, if you'd only had fifteen books, you'd probably would've just decided to conserve all of them.

'It's not a particularly special book in itself – there will be other copies of it – and she'd just taken it home in a plastic bag and kept it and then had gone back to Lithuania (I think actually, not Latvia) and given it to the security guard, and Danny had kept it under his bed and he'd spoken to me about it and I said, "Just bring it in" and he goes, "It's no use to me, but I didn't like to throw it away because she hadn't."

'So, he brought it in and I looked at it and I said, "I'll just keep it here, you never know," and I went to a meeting with Historic [Environment] Scotland and they were saying, "We would love to have a book for the exhibition," and of course, there aren't any we can give them for the exhibition! Then I suddenly remembered about this book, and I said, "Oh, hold on!" and I went into my drawer downstairs in my office and I said, "Do you want this?" and it's actually quite an important book now 'cause it's the only one they could've had.

'It's not a special book, but it has become a very special book because she decided to give it to the security guard. Now, many security guards would probably have said, "What's this about?" And thrown it himself. But he actually kept it under his bed for over a year and then just happened to mention it to me, and he just thought he'd been entrusted with something because she was no longer in the country and she had given him this and had made the effort herself.<sup>2xi</sup>

The young archaeologist had understood profoundly, as the conservator had demonstrated in her reverie, that objects are the conduits of memory. She had been immersed in the ash and the char and saw how the material was being discarded daily and had been compelled to retain something of the memory of the library in the fire.

Of the objects that had been extracted from the library, the Burnt Book was the most iconic. First and foremost, it had been a *book*, an obvious representative of a vanished library. The fire had purged it of an identity. It had wiped away its title and razed its habitation. For the time being, the enigma of the book had invested it with an aura of heroicism and it was celebrated as such. Nevertheless, with the devastation of the library, the Burnt Book had been displaced, it was nameless and homeless, and its future, precarious.

The dichotomy of what the book *was* and what the book *had been* struck me and I recalled the figure of Fame – blindfolded, capricious Fame – gesturing to the grave of an unknown British soldier, and that image designed to reinforce and, simultaneously, vindicate the shattered landscapes of soldier–artists and the silver halide shadows of men, hollow-eyed and spent.



## *II*

Engraved upon black marble and inlaid in the floor of Westminster Abbey begin the words:

BENEATH THIS STONE RESTS THE BODY  
OF A BRITISH WARRIOR  
UNKNOWN BY NAME OR RANK  
BROUGHT FROM FRANCE TO LIE AMONG  
THE MOST ILLUSTRIOUS OF THE LAND

How the Unknown Soldier was imagined into British national mythology is a composite feat of pageantry, poetry and pitilessness.

At the height of the Great War, a military chaplain wrestled with an idea to ease the anguish of loss. He settled on a ritual, that the remains of a British soldier be carried reverently over the sea to his native land. It was two years after Armistice that the chaplain, now a vicar of Margate, wrote to the Dean of Westminster with the proposal that the remains of a serviceman be exhumed, borne across the channel with honours, and lain amongst the kings as a representative of the unclaimed dead.

On 19 October 1920, a Memorial Service Committee was formed and four parties dispatched to the Somme, the Aisne, Arras and Ypres – among the most notorious killing fields of the war. From each site, unidentified remains were exhumed, sewn in sackcloth, transported to a makeshift chapel of rest in St Pol and lain on simple trestles under the Union flag and under the vigil of a chaplain and sentries.

I considered the implication of the dates. The fallen had lain in the ground – an unremittingly disturbed terrain – for *at least* two years. The remains of the four would not, likely *could not*, be identified as individuals, but they could be identified as British by the durability of army-issued buttons and boots.

The hero's journey is a rite of passage a transitioning from one identity into another. In mythology, many heroes must descend into the underworld, into a metaphorical if not literal death, to initiate the transformation.

On the night of 7 November 1920, a British general and a colonel dismissed the chaplain from the chapel. A body was selected at random. The officers sealed him in a plain coffin, then set that coffin in another of English oak. Whoever the Unknown Soldier had been in life, he ceased to be.

Whilst the Unknown Soldier continued to his final resting place at Westminster Abbey, the remains of the unchosen three were taken away and interred along the Albert–Baupaume road, where they vanished from history. My thoughts turned to the eight thousand books and journals that once populated the Mackintosh Library, also returned to dirt.

Some embryonic heroes face quest journeys, encountering the supernatural rather than death, a sort of other *otherness*, where they must prove their quality by completing a series of puissant tasks. I had this curious sense that the Burnt

Book had been tested, had descended and ascended, and was intent on testing *my* quality.

The prince errant, Culhwch, steadfast in wooing Olwen, the lovely daughter of the hostile giant-king Ysbaddaden Pencawr, is dispatched on a quest of forty impossible tasks, designed not to prove his eligibility as a suitor, but to assure Culhwch's demise. The objective of each of the tasks is to prepare for the (as Ysbaddaden saw it, *theoretical*) wedding breakfast and obtain tools for grooming the father-in-law's magnificent beard.

Culhwch enlists the advice of his cousin Arthur, who lends him the support of six of his finest knights. The existential journey is crowned by a supernatural boar-hunt before the climactic wedding scene. Ysbaddaden is beheaded and barbered with the hard-won tonsorial implements, fulfilling a prophecy that the giant would die when his daughter wed.

The hero's journey is cyclical: Culhwch's execution of Ysbaddaden's self-fulfilling prophecy of death; the Unknown Warrior's ceremonial repatriation; and I wondered what my own quest would unmask and what the consequences might be for the Burnt Book.

'The hunt for the Twrch Trwyth' is a story within the epic of *Culhwch and Olwen*. I considered this structure of a tale within a tale as the train from Glasgow skirted the snowy Ochil Hills to Stirling, since I had arranged to view and handle the Burnt Book, then on temporary display at the Engine Shed, HES's centre for building conservation.

This journey had more in common with a pilgrimage than a quest, since quests are about an *active* journey, while pilgrimages are about reflection upon the path to a destination, and the discovery on reaching it.

There is a pilgrimage route that runs along the north Wales coast, from east to west to Ynys Enlli, a 179-hectare mound of rock and soil two miles off the Llŷn Peninsula and less than twenty miles from the place I was raised. The island is saturated in mysticism. It has been inhabited since at least the second millennium BCE. By the fifth century CE, the island had become a religious sanctuary. The Breton, St Cadfan is believed to have established a monastery there in the sixth century that developed into a sizeable religious settlement 2,500 monks strong.

Legend has it that the island is the burial place of twenty thousand saints and that three pilgrimages to the island were the equivalence in piety to one pilgrimage to Rome. Other legends propose that the island is Avalon, or Ynys Afallon, the mysterious island of perpetual youth where Culhwch's cousin, Arthur, goes to convalesce following a mortal wound at the Battle of Camlann.

The monks of Ynys Enlli propagated a variety of apple unique to the island. A lone tree survives on the island to this day but cuttings have been propagated and trees are commercially available on the mainland. The Modern Welsh word for apple is *afal*, and the etymology of Afallon becomes obvious.

This visitation to Stirling and the signifier of the apple and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil set me pondering whether it is indeed upon the existentialist path or in the bite of the forbidden fruit that we discover knowledge.

Of course, the future was hidden from me then, although I had suspicions that it was the object itself that would reveal the final secret.

### *III*

I arrived at the Engine Shed to discover confusion over access to the book. While *it* was in Stirling, the key to the vitrine in which it was kept was in Edinburgh. The Burnt Book continued to defend its enigma.

Defiantly, I suggested that since the book was kept behind glass, I could still execute a visual analysis and return the following week to perform a more detailed survey, and with that, I wandered into the golden gloam of a red-brick shed.

In a far corner, a low vitrine leaned against the brickwork. Encased in green-dense glass, under the benevolent luminescence of LED lighting were three fire-ruined objects: the frame and mechanism of a clock, a brass light fitting, and a book.

Finally: *the* book.

Hitherto, the Burnt Book had been an idea, a magical object beyond my reach. Yet, here it was, still beyond reach as it lay locked behind glass, but real.

It had no title, no author's name. The binding cloth, the colour indistinguishable through a filthy encrustation, had boiled away from the board in fifty-pence sized blisters. The neck of the spine, from the outer top corner, diagonally down towards the foot of the spine, was missing.

What remained of the corner had the pulped quality of a torched wasp's nest, confounding a reading of the printed narrative. Words vanished into the fried black pages, then reappeared when caught in direct light, floating pearl-pale for an instant, before disappearing again.

The words hinted at the lost identity of the book and it was at that moment that I questioned the wisdom of seeking it.

The poetry of the concept of the Unknown Soldier was that he could have been anyone: an earl's son or the butcher's boy; a black-marketeer, a deserter, a decorated hero; or just one of thousands of enlisted common soldiers. What did it matter: the Unknown Soldier was more and less than the man he once was, a potent effigy to mitigate the grief and the guilt of a nation, an identity stolen for a greater good. I measured the risk of proving the identity of the Burnt Book as it slumbered on in its repose.

I did not see the book again for many weeks since the keeper of the vitrine keys had suddenly gone away. In the meantime, I busied myself with other research. I scrutinised ledgers with the names of joiners and cabinet

makers C.R. Mackintosh had hired to furnish the library. I studied the few photographs Bedford Lemere had taken of the space the year after the opening. I read newspaper articles, comparing pictures of firefighting crane appliances battling the flames in the west wing with the near identical pictures of the construction cranes installing new steel supports. I re-listened to the interviews.

The exhibition at the Engine Shed was ending. However, it was unclear when the fire objects would be returned to the School.

Christmas came and went.

It was January. The threat I had feared began to manifest. It was unclear whether the Burnt Book would be returning to GSA Library & Learning Resources or GSA Archives & Collections. It seemed the object may not be *bookish* enough for the working library and had not quite established a strong enough identity to be considered a historical material artefact.

By mid-January, the book had arrived at the library at my request.

I had arrived before the appointed hour, *fizzing* with impatience. The librarian supervising the handover arrived late and blushing. For what seemed to be unnecessary minutes, she searched around in her pockets for the key to the shared office. She found it in her jacket, slid it into the lock, turned and with a push of the door, slipped into the office as I waited outside.

She reappeared with a large plastic storage box.

#### *IV*

A group-study space stood directly opposite the librarians' office. Shouldering the door closed, I turned to place the box on the table in the middle of the space.

Lifting the tissue-wrapped dictionary-sized object out of a nest of bubble wrap, I perceived how much lighter it was than I had anticipated. Laying it on the table, it rocked blandly on its hull. As I carefully stripped the tissue, the book shed shards of ash in the paper-gutters.

The librarian had asked me to wear a face mask and gloves, but realising I could not smell a thing (which seemed counter-intuitive to the purpose of the analysis), I just put on the gloves.

Readied for a mouthful of the promised stench, I was disappointed by an unobtrusive odour vaguely evoking cold toast. I wondered if the conservator's methods of lightly stabilising the object had suppressed the rancidness of fire and dampness. Satisfied that the object was harmless, I put the mask aside.

Running a tape measure just above the cover and down its length, my gloved knuckle unintentionally rested against the surface. My nape prickled at a sensation of stepping out into a winter morning after a frozen night and finding oneself tumbling through a splintering crust into the fluff of the snowdrift beneath.

Recovered from the frisson of first contact, I tested the intactness of the adhesive that bound cloth to board with the gentle taps of a gloved knuckle.



I had not noticed through the dim light and the thick vitrine glass and the soiling of dye-run, mould and smoke, and the froth of brittle black and ashy-white scurf that clung to the fat, firm threads of the weave, that the heavy binding buckram was indigo blue.

The adhesive beneath the binding cloth had desiccated into a blistered oval clearing at the centre of the book cover. A furred limbal watermark circumnavigated the clearing. At the three surviving corners, the cloth clung to a board as rigid as fibreglass.

The Burnt Book had stiffened in an awkward rigor mortis, twisted and curled into a tortured gesture – a mummified carcass, air-parched and salt-preserved, spat out of the sea onto a bleak grey shore. Yet, the book seemed to wear its ruin with a quiet diffidence, a self-knowledge, and a certainty grew that there was more to it than its shabby appearance.

There exists a theory that the supernatural Orcadian selkie is evolved from the folk memory and glamourisation of seal-skin clad Sami adventurers from the frozen North. These strangers may have seemed quite other to the island people, with their exotic furs and their yearning for the faraway places across the sea. The book seemed to be dreaming of its own secret world, and seemed content to keep it to itself.

My fingers padded across the book cover; over the stiff blisters at the centre; outwards to the crusted edges; out to the book's fore edge, and nipped the foot corner between

thumb and forefinger, which crushed between my digits like bird bones.

A closing-suck of air had trapped the first five signatures in a frozen wave and I traced the grain and the knotty whorls, as cadaverous as Caledonian deadwood. The fore-edge had the appearance of a seasoned saw-cut log – shrunken and splintered – pulled, blazing, from the bonfire.

Two-sevenths of the spine remained.

The bloated book block was squeezed rigid by the corsetting bookbinder's stab-stitch; a straw-gold zigzagging thread binding a stack of loose leaves. This rebinding technique had been prevalent in libraries in the early- and mid-twentieth century and produced a robust, utilitarian book. Where the thread had burnt away, leaving just the edge of the page, each bound section seemed to have melted into a corkish tile. Where the burning was total, the sections had unfurled into a brittle black ruff.

The entire depth of the top corner was devoured. The binding board would have been a solid 3mm but had swollen into cheese-cracker fibrousness. The copper frazzle of the endpaper was barely present.

I peered between the breach of the inner and outer spine. What survived of the mull – the gauze that would have supported the stab-stitched spine – had drifted in a tumble of wrinkles. The back and front cover boards adhered to a single piece of the blue buckram cloth. The soft spine comprised of a strip of thin, supple card to accommodate

the flex of the open book. It was wrinkled from repeated opening and closing and years of reading, mellowing the material, but the flexibility that had come with use had reverted into an arthritic stiffness. I realised that an attempt to open the Burnt Book would be tantamount to vandalism.

A dirty plastic strip, petrified into a C-form, hugged what remained of the spine: the library reference label. What surprised me was not so much its presence as its legibility:

766.5.533BON

I wrote the reference code on a piece of paper torn from my notebook, with the intention of taking it immediately to the librarians' office, but found myself hesitating, torn by the consequences of discovering the identity of the book: injuring its mystique in exchange for finding it employment.

The librarians had believed that the Burnt Book could not be identified, which was curious since the library reference code was their currency. The object had been in the custody of the archaeologists, then the Mackintosh Restoration team and finally handed to the conservators. With the book in the hands of the conservators, they had ascertained its identity, but perhaps had not considered it important, since they were scrutinising it as a material object and not as a vehicle of knowledge. The librarians who had never handled the Burnt Book had not had the opportunity to study it as a *library book*.

BON represented the first three letters of the author's family name. My mind went instantly to 'Bone' since Gertrude Bone was the author of the Bruised Book that I had recently analysed. Muirhead Bone, Gertrude's husband and the illustrator of the Bruised Book, imposed himself upon my imagination.

An intangible sensation mingled with the visceral throb of a headache. A grittiness clung to the soft flesh inside my cheeks and at the back of my throat reminding me that I had been without the protection of a face mask for many hours. I hastily pulled it over my face.

A second librarian that I had interviewed six months previously knocked on the door and entered the space, curious about the book that he had not yet seen. His curiosity seemed tinged with revulsion.

We spoke casually about the book's frailty, its unimpressive odour – the superficial. Finally, I referred to the filthy reference label and, hesitantly, suggested that it was quite legible.

The librarian seemed rooted.

Weakly, I offer him the scribbled note. The librarian's gaze fell upon the paper, and a shadow fell upon his face.

I had whiled away some free time listening to the interview recordings only days previously and remembered how indifferent he had seemed when I had asked his opinion on the Bruised Book. However, there was something about that interview that I could not quite recall but felt was suddenly relevant.

I offered him the piece of paper in a final effort.

With a polite reluctance, he took it, looked at the symbols, put the paper down on the table, and turning to leave, he confirmed my suspicion.

The book had come from the Mackintosh Library's illustration section.

I stepped out of the library into the January evening. Across the intersection of Renfrew and Scott Street stood the Mackintosh, as dark and distant as it had ever been. I walked home.

There, I swallowed a cocktail of effervescent codeine and amitriptyline and attended to the matter that had bothered me. Reading the second librarian's interview transcript and his response to my questioning about the Bruised Book, I found the fragment of information that I had overlooked. 'Yes ... it's a small book, isn't it? ... it just makes me think of the, uhm ... of the other ... the Bone ... etchings which were of Glasgow which were a big folio volume of ... that was Gertrude Bone's husband wasn't it? ... which were destroyed in the fire ...'<sup>xii</sup>

I searched [abebooks.co.uk](http://abebooks.co.uk) for antique books authored or illustrated by Bone, paying particular attention to big blue books. The search results presented *Merchantmen at Arms* (1919) by David W. Bone, a blue book, but quarter-bound in leather; then *London Echoing* (1948) by James Bone also bound in blue cloth, but much slimmer than the Burnt Book. A third blue book, approximately the size of a

dictionary, with gold lettering high up on the spine and with none on the cover, appeared in the search. The book was titled, *Glasgow: Fifty Drawings* by Muirhead Bone (1911).

Triumphant, I put myself to bed.

## V

I am suspended in a murky, warm liquid.

The liquid is a little too warm, but it is cooling, and as it cools, the substance congeals around me into rancid molasses until I know not where is up or where is down.

And the molasses cools into sticky dirt, but the dirt is writhing, the dirt is alive, and it is not dirt at all but millions, BILLIONS of chattering invertebrates of every sort: shiny black millipedes, as hard as coal, their spiked heels tk-tk-tk-tk-tk-tk-tk-tk-tk-ing across my skin; fat snots of translucent slugs, thick puss oozing from their single flat foot; smoothly muscled dark worms, all mouth and gut and anus; steel-armoured woodlice chirr-chirr-chirr-chirr-chirr nervously; and the petulant dzz-dzz-dzzzz-zzzzzzz-dzz of gossamer blow flies, mercury eyes bulging, abdomen pulsating.

They wriggle up my nose, burrow beneath my nails, tangle in my hair. And as I thrash about me, ashen hands reach into the sludge of creatures and claw at my body, but they cannot get a grip of me, and I sink deeper and deeper and deeper into the teeming darkness as my throat fills with mandibles and pinchers and legs and wings.

I awake in the dark to a crushing diadem of pain.

Burning. I smell burning. Not burning – *burnt* – the acrid smell of burnt.

Then I realise –

the smell is coming from me.

## VI

Had the opiate and the antidepressant potion worked a shamanic magic following a day of breathing in loose particles of the book, inducing some hallucinogenic vision? What was that nightmare? Was that *my* body, *this* body, withdrawing into the sludge of a decaying library, or was it some other soil, some distant place, some distant time? Perhaps this had not been the experience of flesh and bone at all, but the anthropomorphised memory of paper and ink.

The still-dark morning conjured the illusion of eternal night. A pressing urgency roused me from my bed and back to the library. I suspected the lost identity of the Burnt Book to be *Glasgow: Fifty Drawings*, but I had to verify instinct with evidence.

A third librarian handed me the storage box, and as I proceeded to methodically unwrap the object, taking due care to wear the mask and gloves, I told him of my suspicion.

He considered my hunch carefully as he examined the reference code. There were other editions of *Glasgow: Fifty Drawings* in the library, he said, remarking how great – and how strange – it would be if the Burnt Book was indeed *Glasgow: Fifty Drawings* since plate 41 was of the west wing extension being built.

With that, he hurried away to retrieve a copy.

I contemplated the significance if the book was indeed *Glasgow: Fifty Drawings*. Merely being an obscure survivor of the 2014 Mackintosh fire alone might not save it as an archival object of significance. Its dramatic aesthetic and its curious journey certainly endowed the Burnt Book with a unique glamour. However, if the Burnt Book was indeed a book about Glasgow by a noteworthy Glaswegian illustrator, and contained within it an etching of the construction of the Mackintosh nearing completion, surely these qualities should ensure the book's canonisation?

I turned to the Burnt Book.

A black square flake, about 2cm each side, had pulled free and lay stiff upon the white tissue. I picked it up, raised it, allowing the flake to catch the light. It was not the purest black, that is, the ideological black of the pit, of the witching hour, or of deepest despair. This was the black of the hearth and the black of the pot: the tangible black of matter.

I pressed the point of my pencil into the centre of the flake: it snapped into splinters. There was an undeniably



sensual quality to the frangibility of burnt paper: the close-shorn velvetiness that left iron-black particles clinging to the whorls of fingertips; the inaudible crunch that only the skin perceives as the paper shatters into angular shards. My teeth were set on edge, but not unpleasantly so.

The book had given its warning, that an attempt to open it would be a violation too far.

The powder black of the pages absorbed the light when the subtle gloss and smooth surface of the printed ink glistened. Bobbing my face close to the object, I detected glimpses of pearly letters that lusted as the ink caught the light, a sudden sheen upon the surface, before vanishing, just as they had in Stirling.

The flaking of the brittle pages had left arbitrary contour lines and unexpected sinkholes exposing areas of the pages beneath, forging a new grammar from remnants of the old. I could discern the following: 'Bramble', 'Mr. Moore' and 'John Moore':



The third librarian returned with an A3 folio and a red book the size of two dictionaries put together. First, he untied the folio's knotted ribbon, pulling out two foxed and lightly burnt loose leaves. At the foot of each leaf were the words,

BUILDING THE SCHOOL OF ART, RENFREW STREET

The duplicate images of the west wing of the Glasgow School of Art had been drawn from the vantage of the corner of Scott Street and Sauchiehall Street looking northwards up Garnethill.

The inclining street was peopled with squat and sketchy forms as if their stature and transience – that is, their lack of physical rootedness and their temporariness – rendered them insignificant compared to the immovability of architecture. People dart about, they come and go, they live and die. Buildings, however, retain an aura of perpetuity that exceeds human years.

Rising out of Garnethill was an austere, muscular white tower, shining bright and divine against a sulking sky.

The draughtsman's pen suggested black slits for windows upon a sun-bleached south elevation, and finer vertical lines implied the long library windows of the west elevation windows, still in shadow.

The shabby slumped buildings that scattered about the foot of the proud new build dissolved into the deep embarrassment of their bricolage. The rounded hunch of the Hippodrome on Sauchiehall Street cast Scott Street into darkness.

Here was the budding and the wilting of human constructions, reminding the spectator that while buildings have an enviable lifespan, they are not deathless:



Another memory: the Mackintosh Restoration Project's Senior Project Manager had mentioned a print she had bought that she believed to be of the School of Art by Muirhead Bone.

She had bought it in a charity shop because she just liked it and only later had realised its subject:

'I just quite liked this lovely little etching. It's only about that big, and then I suddenly thought, I'm sure that's the library, and it's getting built, but what it looks like is, it's getting demolished because it's half-built and it's like a ruin, because it's a half-built gable and is a half-built wall-head and the windows aren't in, and there's cranes everywhere, and it just looks like it's ... like it's now, funnily enough ... and the first thing I thought is, it's like the demolition of a building and then when I got it home, and I looked at it I thought, "I think that's the library," and then I thought, "This must be the building of the library – the library tower," and with all the cranes and other things and the irregular shapes all over the place.

'[...].I put it on my wall and then about three weeks later the fire happened, and I thought it looks exactly like my picture because they'd taken down the gable and it looks like it's been demolished again and yet, you know, hopefully, it's going to be a rebuilding and I thought, "That is really weird".'<sup>xiii</sup>

I did not know then quite how *weird* this coincidence was. I put aside Muirhead's engravings, salvaged from other copies of *Glasgow: Fifty Drawing*, too far gone to be

retained. I turned to the big red book, that was a special edition, placed it upon a pillow, opened the cover, read the title page and speed-read A.H. Charter's 'notes on Glasgow' until I came upon page 3:

## GLASGOW : FIFTY DRAWINGS

on the banks of Loch Lomond, 'about fourteen miles beyond Glasgow,' Mr. Bramble passed to that town. Here he was hospitably received by 'Mr. Moore an eminent surgeon' (the father, by the way, of Sir John Moore), 'who introduced him to all the world at Glasgow;' and Bramble's words, though still judicious (as befitted one of his health and position writing to his doctor), have a warmth which Edinburgh did not stir in him. 'I am so far happy,' he says, 'to have seen Glasgow, which, to the best of my recollection and judgment, is one of the prettiest towns in Europe; and without all doubt it is one of the most flourishing in Great Britain.'

It is true that he found 'the water in the public wells hard and brackish,' as the city Fathers found long after his day, and, as a good hypochondriac, declared that 'it was of more consequence to consult the health of the inhabitants in this article than to employ so much attention in beautifying their town with new streets, squares and churches.' But his real feelings are divulged in a letter of his nephew and companion, Jerry Melford, who reports laconically 'My uncle is in raptures about Glasgow,' and Jerry, for his own part, declares 'Glasgow is the pride of Scotland; and indeed it might well pass for an elegant and flourishing city in any part of Christendom.' Smollett, you see, deserves well of his fellow townsmen.

Even so late as 1824 an English witness, Mrs. Hughes of Uffington, who made the grand tour in Scotland in affectionate reverence for Sir Walter, also had good words to say of our city. Although she had just come from Edinburgh and the Wizard



There they were, ‘Mr. Bramble’ and ‘Mr. Moore’ (father of physician and writer, ‘Sir John Moore’). And here was the proof I had coveted, that the Burnt Book *was* Muirhead Bone’s *Glasgow: Fifty Drawings*.

## VII

I stand on the corner of Pitt Street, the same spot Muirhead Bone had stood to sketch his drawing, and I listen to the breathing of plant machinery and the scratch of a steel tooth against asphalt and concrete.

The cordoning around the Mackintosh Building has receded slightly since the second fire in June 2018, but the blockade on Sauchiehall still stands.

The lower end of Scott Street is stitched across with galvanised safety barriers. At the upper end, strewn across the street are perhaps twenty-five sarcophagus-sized slabs of blonde sandstone, rosy in the September sunshine. They are almost perfect, so almost perfect they could have been freshly cut from the quarry, but for the clinging barnacles of mortar that betray that they have been pulled from the Mackintosh itself.

A huge mechanical chimaera clamps its platypus-feet into the broken asphalt and reaches its swan-neck high above Garnethill. Another two cranes stand on Renfrew Street: one green, one orange. Elbow-hinged, they work like a surgeon upon the building, their palms cradling construction workers that cut away at the blonde stone.

Mackintosh Restoration Project’s Senior Project Manager had been struck by the coincidence that only three weeks after purchasing the print, the first fire had struck, reproducing the image as reality. Now I stand and observe that same vista of the Mackintosh, ragged and incomplete, only a matter of weeks after discovering the identity of the Burnt Book.

It seems as if the fate of the Mackintosh, its rises and falls, is captured within the fatalistic illustration secreted away within the heart of *Glasgow: Fifty Drawings*.

The Head of Library & Archives had explained, “This one particular book ... not with any real sense of what we might do with it, and ... not really ... tracking its existence as part of our restoration project wasn’t something that we had on our list as, “We saved this,” it was just ... it was just kind of there, waiting for something to do with it really.”<sup>xiv</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Evans, Gretel (2017). ‘Interview Transcript: Gretel Evans’, vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 315.

<sup>ii</sup> Evans, Gretel (2017). ‘Interview Transcript: Gretel Evans’, vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 316.

<sup>iii</sup> Mitchell, Natalie (2017). ‘Interview Transcript: Natalie Mitchell’, vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 340.

<sup>iv</sup> Mitchell, Natalie (2017). ‘Interview Transcript: Natalie Mitchell’, vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 341.

<sup>v</sup> Mitchell, Natalie (2017). ‘Interview Transcript: Natalie Mitchell’, vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 341.

<sup>vi</sup> Stevenson, Alison (2017). ‘Interview Transcript: Alison Stevenson’, vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 226.

<sup>vii</sup> Mitchell, Natalie (2017). ‘Interview Transcript: Natalie Mitchell’, vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 331.

<sup>viii</sup> Mitchell, Natalie (2017). ‘Interview Transcript: Natalie Mitchell’, vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 331–32.

<sup>ix</sup> Stevenson, Alison (2017). ‘Interview Transcript: Alison Stevenson’, vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 226.

<sup>x</sup> Stevenson, Alison (2017). ‘Interview Transcript: Alison Stevenson’, vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 222.

<sup>xi</sup> Davidson, Liz (2017). 'Interview Transcript: Liz Davidson', vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 286–87.

<sup>xii</sup> Buri, David (2017). 'Interview Transcript: David Buri', vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 204.

<sup>xiii</sup> Davidson, Liz (2017). 'Interview Transcript: Liz Davidson', vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 292–93.

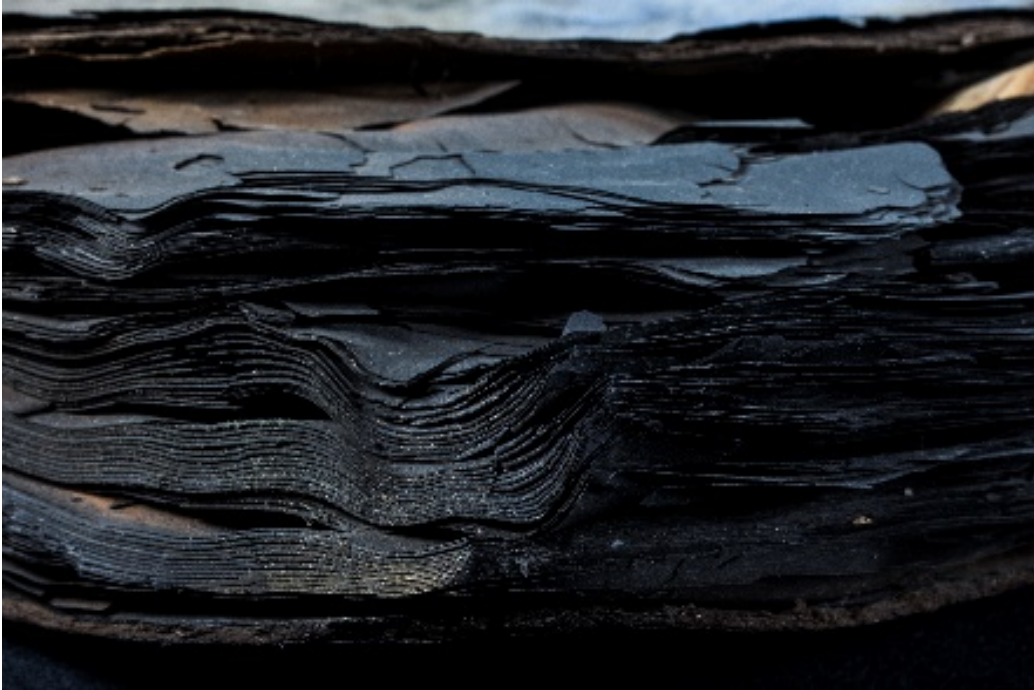
<sup>xiv</sup> Stevenson, Alison (2017). 'Interview Transcript: Alison Stevenson', vol. 1 of this thesis, p. 225.



**Plate 3.4** Detail of the burnt text block (credit: Ruudu Ulas)



**Plate 3.5** Detail of the burnt text block (credit: Ruudu Ulas)



**Plate 3.6** Detail of the burnt text block (credit: Ruudu Ulas)



**Plate 3.7** Side view of the *Burnt Book* spine (credit: Ruudu Ulas)