

# DOING THE HONOURS

*Perfectly depicting momentous royal occasions in the medium of paint is a privilege that is seldom plain sailing, as **Mary Miers** finds from talking to Hugh Buchanan*

**H**ugh Buchanan is used to last minute invitations when it comes to painting royal occasions. A telephone call in 2002 required him to jump on the sleeper that night and go straight from Euston to Westminster Hall to record the lying in state of the Queen Mother (the picture now hangs in the House of Lords). He had little more warning for his latest commission, which depicts the King being presented with the Crown of Scotland at St Giles' Cathedral on 5 July last year.

Would he be free to attend the event on Wednesday, asked Adam Bruce, Marchmont Herald, who had persuaded the Lord Lyon that the occasion should be painted and that Hugh was the artist to do it. 'To me it was a challenge that it would have been cowardly to duck,' says Hugh, who is one of Britain's finest architectural watercolourists, best known for his dramatically lit historic interiors.

As he discovered over the two days of dress rehearsal, 'many of the beadles at St Giles' are former art students, so I spent a very convivial time drawing the Gothic tracery and recording the patterns of light from the lofty windows.'

There was, however, a drawback that became fully apparent on the day. 'I was

placed in the southeast corner, near the musicians, looking obliquely from the rear of the cathedral across the nave towards the pulpit. As the seats in front of me filled up, I realised that the foreground of my composition was going to be entirely the backs of heads. The royal family was just visible in the distance, the Moderator looked impressive in her pulpit and the TV cameras formed interesting silhouettes as they glided across the floor, but it was still mainly rear views of kilt jackets and hats. I'd warned the Lord Lyon's office that I was in the wrong place but was told to use my imagination; I suppose they had more important things to worry about.'

Hugh was not surprised when the drawings he presented at the Lyon Court were rejected. It's a measure of his technical skill that he was able to rescue the situation with the help of some excellent photographs taken by Jane Barlow. Her main view didn't include the Queen or the equerries, but he was able to get additional footage from her and insert them into the group.

So, it was back to St Giles' in early November to sketch out the new composition. The light was quite different now and many adjustments had to be made to assimilate the images taken in July. Just as the Duke of Hamilton was presenting

**A REGAL ART:**  
Hugh Buchanan's painting captures the King being presented with the crown of Scotland in St Giles' Cathedral.







**ABOVE LEFT:** Stanley Cursiter's *The Honours of Scotland: Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth and HRH, the Duke of Edinburgh at St Giles Cathedral, 24 June 1953*. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Hugh Buchanan at work on his painting.

the Crown, a sudden sunburst had sent a Gothic-shaped shaft through the clerestory. Hugh captures this moment of illumination brilliantly. Light flickers over the figures, catching on the details of uniforms, transforming the service sheets into a flock of white birds, lending sparkle and vivacity. 'I never apply white paint,' he says; 'the white is simply the light of the paper, masked-out and then revealed'.

All superfluous detail is stripped away, the focus narrowed to the small group in the north transept – the King and Queen, the Duke and Duchess of Rothesay, their equerries, the Duke of Hamilton, the Lord Lyon and the Dean – framed by soaring arches. Beneath the crossing to their right, the great marble block of the high table strikes a modernist note, conceived by the artist as 'a necessary foil to the antiquity, which is symbolised by scars on the lefthand column'.

Also in this vein are the spotlights. 'I needed

to capture their blinding, neon glare,' says Hugh, who usually works with natural light. 'Although my panoptical treatment is invented, the over-lit atmosphere is real; that's why it was crucial to have been present at the service, even if in the wrong place.'

Once I'd cracked the spotlights, I realised I had something, that essential peg around which to build a composition. I'd taken some imperfect photos with my iPhone and they were a great resource. When you photograph a bright light, you get lens flare, which produces all sorts of compositional devices. These made the picture.'

Although not a portrait painter, Hugh is adept at capturing likenesses and has done several commissions. 'Normally I would never let people into my studio until a certain point because it becomes very distracting, but, as everybody knows exactly what these subjects look like, I realised it was important to get early feedback.'



*'The figures shouldn't be seen in isolation, but as the components of an ancient ceremony in the shrine of Scotland'*

He hadn't anticipated all the to-ing and fro-ing, however. After much debate, the foreground silhouette of a cameraman was ditched. On four subsequent occasions when he thought he'd finished, further adjustments had to be made. 'One day, when I was buying the milk and papers at our local shop, I saw Jonathan Yeo's new portrait of the King. I looked at that bunch of sausages and thought, "help; what are my hands like?" And I realised they were equally bad and needed re-doing. Friends singled out Kate's ankles (too thick), the Duke of Hamilton's jacket (too pale), the King's head (too big). I corrected all these details using the finest brushes'.

Hugh's latest work is the only painted record of the service of thanksgiving and dedication at which Charles III accepted the Honours of Scotland by touching them. The regalia is the oldest in Britain, comprising the Crown (refashioned in 1540) and Papal gifts of Sceptre and Sword of State that were used at the coronations in Scotland of Mary, Queen of Scots, James VI, Charles I and Charles II. The sword, now too fragile to be used, was represented at the service by the new ceremonial Elizabeth Sword.

The vicissitudes of history have seen the Honours smuggled away and hidden on several occasions, including being locked up in Edinburgh Castle between 1707 and 1818. Since then,

they have been paraded and inspected on royal visits to Edinburgh, but only presented to a British sovereign once before – in 1953, when the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth attended a similar service. Driven by the Church of Scotland and carefully orchestrated to avoid any semblance of a coronation, the event was politically tactful and replete with Scottish tradition. There was one jarring note: the Queen's attire.

'I was told to limn the Queen as she appeared – and did so,' said the Orkney artist Stanley Cursiter, whose painting of the occasion hangs in Holyroodhouse. Although he agreed that it 'looked strange among the robes and uniforms' to see the Queen receiving the Crown in a short coat-frock with matching hat, he refused to repaint her in more appropriate garb. He did, however, airbrush out her handbag.

By comparison to Cursiter's crowded, richly detailed oil painting, Hugh's watercolour is intimate and spare, but he was happy to be pointed gently in the direction of reinterpreting the earlier work, as it allowed him to exaggerate the architecture. 'I think I was also channelling the geometry of Cursiter's experimental abstract period in my use of directional tropes. Kate's finger on her service sheet, William's eyebrow and the Duke of Hamilton's parting: all are exaggerated lines pointing to the King and Crown that unify the composition physically and emotionally. They link the group to the architecture, which would otherwise overwhelm. The figures shouldn't be seen in isolation, but as the components of an ancient ceremony in the shrine of Scotland.'

As Magnus Linklater observed in *The Times*, while outside the city's 'high kirk' demonstrators tried to drown out Scotland's equivalent of the coronation, 'inside, a splendidly orchestrated and intensely Scottish celebration in front of His Majesty and the Queen carried on triumphantly.' This painting of that celebration, funded by the New Club and destined to hang in its atrium, is likewise a triumph, psychologically perceptive and technically brilliant. **SF**

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