

# Far from Silent: Nineteenth-Century Irish Women Writers

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Nineteenth-century Ireland has been portrayed as a silent period in Irish women's literary history. Excepting a few, major female voices, the nineteenth century has been known as an era dominated by male writers. In reality, however, this was a fertile period for Irish women writers who were actively publishing for an eager audience. Between 1800 and 1900, in excess of five hundred women were writing and publishing, throughout all genres.

Researching the lives and works of these women presents gender-specific problems, the most basic of which is establishing the author's identity. Women writers offer a host of possible names for the researcher, beyond the expected mix of married and maiden names. Women were more likely to seek anonymity when publishing their literary efforts, and their pseudonyms incorporated placenames, initials, social status ('by a Lady') and men's names. Miss Carew, for example, was particularly ambiguous about gender, publishing as both Frank Pentrill and Mrs Frank Pentrill during her career. When Lady Dufferin's husband objected to seeing his wife's name appear in print, she simply began publishing her verses under a pseudonym, or using her sister's name, Lady Caroline Norton. Cecil Frances Humphreys Alexander published under the pseudonym of 'X?' for a time. Some women added to the researcher's potential misery by publishing under the initials of their pseudonyms. Those women belonging to religious orders pose further challenges by publishing under their names in religion or as an anonymous member of a specific religious order. When these gender-specific pseudonyms are connected to the paucity of detail regarding women's biographies, the frustrations for researchers become clear.

## *The volume and context of women's publications*

Simply the statement that there were in excess of five hundred Irish women writers during the nineteenth century should dispel the belief that women were silent. Just how far from silent these writers were becomes evident from examining the publishing records of some female authors. Elizabeth Thomasina Meade (1850-1915) wrote approximately 280 volumes, beginning circa 1875 and concluding with works published posthumously in the 1920s. Katharine Tynan Hinkson published 184 volumes during her career. The publishing output of Meade and Tynan-Hinkson is unusual, yet the overall publishing records of nineteenth-century women frequently indicate over twenty volumes by an

individual. The extent of multi-volume publishing is demonstrated by the following sample of women authors: Mary Sweetman, or 'M.E. Francis', who published fifty-eight volumes, Lady Rosa Mulholland Gilbert's fifty volumes, Lady Norton's thirty volumes, Mrs S.C. Hall's twenty-five volumes, and Kathleen O'Meara, 'Grace Ramsey', who published twenty-one volumes. Yet these women and the number of works they published are only a representative sample of multi-volume publishing by Irish women. The number of female authors who each published up to twenty volumes prohibits a listing of individuals. Suffice it to say that Irish women were publishing in significant numbers and volumes.

Irish women writers of the period had a variety of publishing opportunities. The major publishing centres were Dublin and London, with smaller publishing firms in Belfast, Cork, Tuam, Dundalk, Londonderry and Larne. Newspaper printers occasionally functioned as book or pamphlet publishers. Pamphlet publishing was a viable option, particularly for writers interested in political or social causes. Subscriptions for forthcoming volumes were commonplace and women frequently printed their works 'for private circulation', especially in the early nineteenth century. Monthly magazines also flourished and encouraged women to submit pieces in all genres: poetry, serialised novels, essays, tales, short stories, travel pieces, religious articles and non-fiction pieces. The *Irish Monthly*, edited by Father Matthew Russell, was especially diligent in promoting writing by women and in recording biographical information about the women published. For some of these writers, Russell's 'Nutshell Biograms' constitute the only biographical source.

Contemporary interest in nineteenth-century women's writings and in what we now call feminist collections of literature and biography was very substantial, evidenced by the collections of writings by and about women. In 1877 Elizabeth Owens Blackburne Casey ('E. Owens Blackburne') published a two-volume set of biographical information entitled *Illustrious Irishwomen*. Casey's chosen subjects include authors, actors, political figures and famous beauties of the day. Elizabeth Sharp (Mrs William Sharp) published a feminist anthology, *Women's Voices; an Anthology of the Most Characteristic Poems by English, Scotch and Irish Women* (London, 1887). Miss C.J. Hamilton published two separate studies pertaining to literary women: *Women Writers: Their Works and Ways* (London, 1892) and *Notable Irishwomen* (Dublin, 1904). Some years later, Helena Walsh Concannon produced two volumes with feminist concerns: *Women of Ninety-Eight* (Dublin, 1919) and *Daughters of Banba* (Dublin, 1922).

### *Literary Families*

Far from being isolated in their efforts, an examination of genealogical connections indicates a web of family support for women writers. Of particular note in this regard were a number of sisters who wrote and published simultaneously. The four Sweetman sisters pursued literary efforts from their early childhood, when

they produced two magazines, the *Ivy Home Magazine* and the *Ivy Home Library*, from the garden of their Co. Laois family home, Lambert Park. Mary Sweetman became a prolific novelist. Her sister Elinor published four volumes and submitted a number of poems to the *Irish Monthly* during the period from October 1889 to May 1894. Agnes, a third sister, married Anthony Egerton Castle, and the couple co-authored forty-two volumes. Mary Sweetman married Francis Blundell whose two sisters were writers. Later, Madge Blundell became her mother, Mary's, biographer.

Three of the four Furlong sisters, Alice (c.1875–1948), Mary (1866–1898) and Katherine (1872–1894), were published poets. The Furlongs lived in Tallaght, near to the family home of Katharine Tynan. The physical proximity generated a literary friendship, particularly between Alice Furlong and Katharine Tynan, although Tynan did not hold Mary Furlong's work in high esteem, noting that 'From the age of fourteen Mary scribbled determinedly in spite of much good and unpalatable advice from editors'.<sup>1</sup>

Literary friendships are to be found throughout the mass of nineteenth-century Irish women writers. Katharine Tynan Hinkson was strongly influenced by her friend Rosa Mulholland Gilbert. The two women travelled together prior to Mulholland's marriage. Hinkson later suspected that Sir John Gilbert did not entirely approve of her liberal views, thus he tempered his wife's friendship with Hinkson.

Lady Dufferin, herself a member of the Sheridan literary dynasty, was a strong influence on her fellow writers. Among her Northern contemporaries, a number of single poems and volumes of poetry were dedicated to her. Religious causes or denominations also generated friendships among women writers. Sarah Geraldina Stock, a Protestant missionary, developed a friendship with Cecil Frances Humphreys Alexander, wife of William, Primate of Ireland. The editor of the *Irish Monthly*, Father Matthew Russell, introduced, one-to-another, a number of women who wrote for his magazine. Another cluster of women poets were affiliated with the *Nation*. Although writers tended to publish pseudonymously in the *Nation*, women writing for the same periodical undoubtedly held opinions of, and were, in turn, influenced by their contemporaries. A thorough study of women writers associated with the *Nation* has yet to be undertaken. Although Mary Eva Kelly O'Doherty ('Eva'), Ellen Mary Patrick Downing ('Kate', 'Ellen' and 'Mary') and Lady Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde ('Speranza') are frequently cited, lesser known women remain unexplored: Kate Culhane, Fanny Forrester, Olivia Knight, Katharine Mary Murphy, Ellen O'Leary, Marie M. Thompson, Jane Verner, Elizabeth Willoughby Treacy Varian, to name but a few.

A number of women writers were related to famous male political and literary figures of the nineteenth century: Ellen O'Connell Fitzsimon was the daughter of Daniel O'Connell, Mary Jane Irwin was the 'little poetess wife' of Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, Ellen O'Leary the sister of John O'Leary, Ely McCarthy the

1 Katharine Tynan Hinkson, *Cabinet of Irish Literature*, (4 vols; London, 1902–3), iv, p. 241.

sister of Justin McCarthy, and Charlotte Grace O'Brien the daughter of William Smith O'Brien. These literary women were overshadowed by the men in their families, but their strong genealogical connections provide evidence of a significant support network, and demonstrate an interesting link between family politics and the writings these women produced.

### Genres

The nineteenth century was not a period of specialisation in terms of genre, so women writers were comfortable selecting the genre to suit the subject when they took pen in hand. Although Thomas MacDonagh called Alice Milligan 'the best living Irish poet' in the October–November 1914 issue of the *Irish Review*, Milligan wrote plays, essays, biography, children's literature, a novel, and co-authored a travel book in addition to the poetry MacDonagh praised. Such multiple-genre writing was the normal state of writing for nineteenth-century Irish women.

Women were also active in writing non-fiction during this period. The Clerke sisters, Agnes and Ellen, were noted scientists. Agnes (1842–1907) was a brilliant astronomer while Ellen (1840–1906) was a poet, mathematician and geologist. Agnes's first text on astronomy was begun when she was fifteen years of age. *A Popular History of Astronomy During the Nineteenth Century* was published in 1885, and it became a standard text throughout Europe for many years. Neither Agnes nor Ellen ever married, the two sisters preferring to live together life-long. They travelled extensively about Europe and as far as the Cape of Good Hope in pursuit of astronomical phenomena. Agnes published a further six volumes pertaining to astronomy and astrophysics, and a single non-scientific volume entitled *Familiar Studies in Homer* (London, 1892). Ellen Mary Clerke shared her sister's interest in astronomy, as *Jupiter and His System* (London, 1892) indicates, but she was best known for her poetry and published three volumes of poems from 1881 to 1902. Ellen was also a gifted linguist, publishing articles in Arabic and providing versified translations of Italian poetry for Dr Garnett's *History of Italian Literature* (London, 1898). In her biography of the sisters, *Agnes Mary Clerke and Ellen Mary Clerke; an Appreciation* (privately printed, 1907), Lady Huggins calls Ellen a particularly 'devoted and exemplary Catholic'. Ellen's poetry was largely devotional, with *The Flying Dutchman and Other Poems* (London, 1881) being perhaps her finest volume. The sisters died within one year of each other, at their home in London. Other scientific women of the nineteenth century and their chosen fields were: Katherine Bailey – botany, Margaret Stokes – archaeology, Mary King – astronomy and microscopy, and two notable historians, Alice Stopford Green and Eleanor Hull.

Travel writing was especially fashionable during the nineteenth century and women were eager participants in this genre. Among the most prolific and adventurous of the women travellers was Beatrice Grimshaw, born 1880 in

Cloona, Co. Antrim. Grimshaw moved first to Dublin about 1900, then to London where she worked out a trade arrangement with several shipping companies and exchanged her publicity writings for free travel. An initial voyage to Tahiti in 1906 began her career as a travel writer. She ran a coffee plantation in Papua, New Guinea for a time, and was the first Caucasian woman to visit certain parts of Borneo and New Guinea. In addition to contributing articles to the *National Geographic* and *World Wide Magazine*, she published a steady stream of travel books, novels and stories, totalling thirty-eight volumes from 1897 to 1943.

Among those writers whose subject-matter came from nearer home, writing in dialect is a trend to be found predominantly among Northern authors. Elizabeth Gertrude Heron Hine (1857–1951) was a resident of Carrickfergus, Co. Antrim, and wrote under the pseudonym of 'Elizabeth Shane'. *Piper's Tunes* (London, c.1920), *Tales of the Donegal Coast and Islands* (London, 1921), and *By Bog and Sea in Donegal* (London, 1923) were written as Hine believed the English language to be spoken in the coastal areas of Donegal. Another Northerner, Agnes Nesta Shakespeare Higginson, later Mrs Walter Skrine, published under the pseudonym of 'Moirá O'Neill'. A resident of Rockport, Cushendall, Co. Antrim, Moira O'Neill's poetry was heavily anthologised during her lifetime. Her *Songs of the Glens of Antrim* (Edinburgh and London, 1900) and *More Songs of the Glens of Antrim* (Edinburgh and London, 1921) were very popular and captured the Glens of Antrim tales in dialect; their popularity continues to the present.

Writing verses as lyrics and hymns was also a popular endeavour of women writers during the nineteenth century. Lady Dufferin published a companion volume to her collected poems which gives the musical adaptations for some of the poems. Mary McDermott, of Killyleagh, Co. Down, occasionally composed music to accompany her poetry, as did Charlotte Cowan Jobling, a Belfast woman who published under the pseudonym of 'Irish Molly'. Mrs Jobling's unusual style of writing verse caught the attention of W.J. Paul, who noted in *Modern Irish Poets* (Belfast, 1894) that she wrote the last verse first, the first verse second, and filled in the middle verse last. Her unique method of writing generated a career total of more than 800 poems and 150 songs, all published as single submissions to periodicals. In 1850, Charlotte Canning wrote an entire opera in verse, and Miss Davis's verse operetta was performed at a London theatre in 1892.

Among the many women writers in need of further study are a number of authors from the earlier part of the nineteenth century. Little is known about the life of Mary Benn who published two volumes of poetry, *The Solitary; or a Lay from the West* (London, 1854) and *Lays of the Hebrews* (London, 1854). Mary Balfour (c.1775–c.1820) was probably born in Derry, but she operated schools in both Belfast and Limavady; her *Hope, a Poetical Essay; with Various Other Poems* (Belfast, 1810) was published anonymously. Margaret Graves published under the pseudonym of 'Derenzý'. *A Whisper to a Newly-Married Pair, from a Widowed Wife* was originally published in 1824, but editions continued to be published until 1886. Graves published another five volumes before her publishing activities ceased circa 1828. Better known is Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna (1790–1846), author

of the historical novel, *Derry, a Tale of the Revolution*, published under her pseudonym of 'Charlotte Elizabeth'. She wrote another eleven volumes before her death in 1846, but *Derry* remained her most popular work, with editions continuing for another half-century after its original publication.

Translation was a common writing activity for nineteenth-century women, particularly during the latter part of the century. A variety of languages were translated, with several women notably proficient in multiple languages. Languages translated from, or translated into, included Arabic, Chinese, French, Greek, Hindustani, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Latin, Portuguese, Russian, Scandinavian languages, Welsh and Yoruban. Frances Sarah Johnston Hoey, Mrs Cashel Hoey, was an especially prolific translator. She published twenty-nine volumes of translations from French, in addition to eighteen volumes of original work in assorted genres. It may be noted that some of the geographic areas represented by languages listed above, particularly those associated with Africa and the Far East, were centres of missionary activity. Women who either worked as missionaries or who were married to missionaries frequently published translations of Christian literature into the local languages. In some cases the women were publishing native tales from their missionary areas translated into English for readers at home. Amy Beatrice Carmichael was a prolific writer with twenty-six volumes to her credit. She was proficient in Japanese and Hindustani as a result of her missionary assignments. A similar pattern of translation activities exists among women married to members of the British military and posted to foreign lands.

Finally, with regard to genre, one of the most successful of nineteenth-century women writers was Nannie Lambert O'Donoghue, a leading equestrian writer who produced six volumes from 1877 to 1895. Generally publishing under her married name, Mrs Power O'Donoghue, she was a journalist, novelist and poet. She wrote two non-fiction books pertaining to women equestrians which were instant best sellers. *Ladies on Horseback; Learning Park-Riding and Hunting with Hints Upon Costume and Numerous Anecdotes* (London, 1881) was translated into five languages and reportedly sold over 94,000 copies. *The Common Sense of Riding; Riding for Ladies with Hints on the Stable* (London, 1887) was not as popular as the original volume, but was regularly reprinted and a new edition was issued in 1905. Her three-volume novel, *Beggar on Horseback* (London, 1884) sold an estimated 23,000 copies.

### *Women's Religious and Social Writings*

At least fifteen cloistered religious women, during the nineteenth century, were writing poetry for submission to magazines or publishing volumes of their poems. The verses produced by religious women were largely devotional, although secular themes do emerge in some of their work. Margaret Cusack, 'the Nun of Kenmare' or Sister Mary Francis Clare, was the most prolific of the group and the most unusual. While a cloistered member of the Poor Clares convent in Kenmare, Sister

Mary Francis Clare ran a successful publishing house, Kenmare Publication Agency. *Cloister Songs* (London, 1881) was her only volume of poetry. During the early part of her publishing career she specialised in hagiography and history. *A History of the Kingdom of Kerry* (London, 1871) and *A History of the City and County of Cork* (Cork and Dublin, 1875) are her best known works and prized by book collectors. Her concern with the status of women is revealed in *Women's Work in Modern Society* (Kenmare, 1874) and *A Nun's Advice to Her Girls* (Kenmare, 1877). In her later years, following a tempestuous life, she renounced her Catholic faith and wrote a series of anti-Catholic volumes: *The Black Pope; a History of the Jesuits* (London and Brighton, c.1896), *Is There a Roman Catholic Church?* (London and Brighton, 1897), and *Revolution and War; The Secret Conspiracy of the Jesuits in Great Britain* (London, 1910), among other volumes. Less colourful than Cusack were nuns like Sister Mary Stanislaus MacCarthy, the daughter of Denis Florence MacCarthy and a Dominican; Maria Gibbons, Mother Columba, a Loreto nun from Navan; and Mary Gertrude Reddin, of the Loreto convent in Dublin.

Evelyn Noble Armitage's anthology, *Quaker Poets of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1896), reveals that seven Quaker women were engaged in writing poetry during the nineteenth century. The biographical notes Armitage includes for each writer indicate that several of these Quaker women later resigned their membership in the Society of Friends. The reason for their departure generally centres on a conflict between nationalistic politics and pacifistic Quaker beliefs. Hannah L. Harvey, born in 1854 near Waterford, was one such woman unable to reconcile her Quaker faith with her militant nationalism. Debroah Webb, a Dubliner born in 1837, also left the Society of Friends, but politics did not play a part in her decision. Webb's family had been active in 'all reforms and good causes, especially that of the negro slave', their house a resort 'particularly of abolitionists and escaped slaves'.<sup>2</sup> When Webb renounced her Quaker faith it was to pursue spiritualism and lesser known religious alternatives. As a whole, Quaker women's poetry focuses on strong biblical or social themes. Eleanor Dickinson's *The Pleasures of Piety, with Other Poems* (1824), Mrs Neale's *Biblical Sketches and Hymns* (1854), and Sarah Greer's *The Chained Bible and Other Poems* (1857) reflect the general themes of Quaker women's devotional verses.

Women hymnists were prolific, with Cecil Frances Humphreys Alexander being the most active of the group. Mrs Alexander was the wife of William, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of Ireland. One anecdote recalls her being sent a collection of musical scores by a minister who needed the lyrics as quickly as possible. He thought it would take her several months to complete the task, but he received the lyrics almost by return courier. The minister boasted about Cecil's abilities as a hymnist thereafter. Sarah Geraldina Stock, another hymnist, spent most of her life in Africa, most likely as a missionary. She was fluent in Welsh and Yoruban, writing in both languages, and probably spoke Swahili. One

<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Noble Armitage (ed.), *The Quaker Poets of Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1896), p. 289.

of her novels is set during the Zulu Wars, and she was associated with the Victoria Nyanza Mission in Uganda.

Charlotte Grace O'Brien, daughter of William Smith O'Brien, exemplifies the nineteenth-century woman concerned with social issues. Born in 1845, at Cahirmoyle, Co. Limerick, she showed little interest in politics prior to 1880. Thereafter she dedicated her life to the question of emigrant rights, and worked to ensure safe and civilised shipboard conditions, especially for unmarried women emigrants travelling on the coffin ships. She also operated a pre-emigration boarding house for emigrants in Cobh. O'Brien was a regularly published poet, with four volumes to her credit. Her nephew, Stephen Gwynn, edited a volume of selections from her writings and correspondence in 1910, adding his own memoir of his aunt to the volume.

Sarah Gaynor Atkinson was another woman of social conscience. Born in Athlone in 1823, she married George Atkinson when she was twenty-five years of age. In 1861 she presented a paper on the workhouses at the Social Science Congress of 1861, in Dublin. She was a close friend of Rosa Mulholland Gilbert and of Katharine Tynan Hinkson who described Atkinson as one 'with perfect womanly sweetness', having 'a masculine force and clearness of intellect'.<sup>3</sup> Mrs Atkinson published three volumes, largely with biographical and hagiographic content. A book of essays with a memoir by Rosa Mulholland Gilbert was posthumously published in 1895.

One of the period's most memorable 'oddities' was Martha Spence (1812-73), an Irish writer who emigrated to America in 1834. She was a Dubliner who converted to the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints following her arrival in Utah. She married a Mormon man, and became one of his three living wives. Spence kept a diary about her life in a polygamous marriage on the American frontier.

### *Women's Biographies*

The lives of two individuals, Ellen Mary Patrick Downing and Alice Furlong, are worth exploring in some detail, since they provide vivid examples of the romanticised female biographies of the nineteenth century. Researchers should note that women connected to political movements are very frequently the subjects for fictionalised biography. Ellen Mary Patrick Downing was connected to the *Nation* and to the Young Ireland and United Irishmen political groups. Her life is one of the most interesting and tragic of the century, and one of the most heavily romanticised. Downing was born 19 March 1828, in Cork. She was the daughter of the resident medical officer at the Cork Fever Hospital, and began writing poetry while she was still in her teens. At seventeen years of age, her first poem appeared in the *Nation*, under the pseudonym of 'Kate'. Downing also used

<sup>3</sup> Hinkson, *Cabinet*, iv, p. 36.

the pseudonyms of 'Mary', 'Ellen' and her initials, 'E.M.P.D.'. The romanticising of Downing's life centres on her brief romantic relationship with a young man, possibly Joseph Brennan, who was transported for his political activities. A.M. Sullivan states in his biographical sketch of Downing in *New Ireland* that Brennan forgot his youthful vow of marriage while he was in exile. Downing, according to Sullivan, was so heartbroken by Brennan's unfaithfulness that she stopped writing and died a short time later. Unfortunately Mr Sullivan's account of Downing's death is contradicted by her publishing record. Downing continued to write and publish for twenty-two years after Mr Sullivan reported her demise. Her death actually occurred in 1869.

Alice Furlong suffers the same fictionalised fate in the context of the 1916 Easter Rising. The romantic version of Furlong's life says that she retreated into isolation in Tallaght after the 1916 executions, never speaking or writing another word in the English language. The isolation shrouding Furlong's later years is challenged by her publishing record, which shows English-language articles by Furlong appearing as late as the 1930s.

Such attempts to fictionalise women's biographies traded heavily on the perception of women as the weaker vessels, overly sensitive and dedicated to the point of martyrdom whenever their emotions were heavily engaged, either through an excess of love or faith in a political ideology. The history of nineteenth-century women writers, long overdue a detailed examination, reveals a very different profile, with many accomplished and successful female authors, publishing in an often startling diversity of genre.<sup>4</sup>

4 For further information regarding the women featured in this article, see Anne Colman, *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Irish Women Poets* (Galway, 1996).