



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL
1991**

© County Tipperary Historical Society

**www.tipperaryllibraries.ie/thc
society@tipperaryllibraries.ie**

ISSN 0791-0655

Margaret Ryan, Poet of Garrynoe

by Michael Fitzgerald

Over a century ago the Dublin literary and religious magazine *Irish Monthly* began to publish occasional verses, mainly religious, over the initials "M.R.". These poems were notable for their simple purity and intensity of feeling. Since the initials coincided with those of the editor, Fr. Matthew Russell SJ, Kickham's close friend and biographer (and brother of Lord Russell of Killowen), confusion was caused. The author then began to use the name "Alice Esmonde".

Then in 1889 a collection of her poems appeared in book form under her real name, Margaret Ryan, with the title *Songs of Remembrance*.¹ Although they attracted much attention from the discerning, few knew the writer. This shy and retiring woman was content to live in obscurity to the end of a long life, always avoiding the limelight. Only a brief mention in the prestigious *Cabinet of Irish Literature*, published around the turn of the century, recalls her work.

In October 1893 the *Irish Monthly* published a selection of reviews of *Songs of Remembrance* four years after its publication. Culled from many papers — Irish, English and American — they are invariably favourable. The only criticism, if it can be called such, was of the vein of sadness which permeates all her poems.

This article also included a letter from Aubrey de Vere, then regarded as a leading Irish poet, wholly favourable and cordial in tone. However, Margaret Ryan's later poems do not appear to have been re-published, although a few appeared in an article in the *Irish Monthly* over 30 years ago.²

Margaret Ryan was born in Garrynoe and baptised in Ballingarry on 26 October 1847, daughter of a prosperous farmer, Martin Ryan, and his wife Mary Butler. Her mother seems to have come from another parish, since the marriage of Margaret's parents and the baptisms of some of the family are not recorded in Ballingarry. She was probably the youngest of a large family.

A local tradition persists that some of Margaret's siblings died early in life because of that scourge of the age, tuberculosis. It is possible that Margaret herself survived a brush with "TB"; her poems sometimes show a sensitivity often characteristic of those who have suffered from it.

Two of her brothers became priests. The more distinguished, Dr. John Ryan, was born in 1831 and educated at Maynooth, where he became a professor even before he had been ordained. He was a curate in Moyne for some years, and later administrator in Thurles before being appointed parish priest of Ballingarry in 1871. When in 1870 Archbishop Leahy went to Rome for the first Vatican Council, Dr. Ryan accompanied him as theologian.

When in 1875 the archbishop died the priests of the archdiocese chose Dr. Ryan as most worthy to succeed. However, the Pope appointed Dr. T.W. Croke, who had completed a term as bishop in New Zealand.

SONGS
OF
REMEMBRANCE

BY
MARGARET RYAN

("Alice Esmonde")

DUBLIN
M. H. GILL AND SON
O'CONNELL STREET
1889



and. Croke appointed Dr. Ryan Vicar Forane of the Archdiocese.

The other priest brother, Fr. Philip Ryan, also educated at Maynooth, was born in 1835 and served for a time in his native Ballingarry as curate. Later he became PP of Mullinahone, where he died in 1895.

Margaret received her secondary education at the Ursuline Convent in Thurles. In later years she looked back with great affection at her years there. Some of her poems refer to this convent. One is entitled "St. Ursula at Thurles: a Centenary Ode", and its opening stanza reads:

O happy childhood's home!
The brightest of youth's dreams are linked with thee,
And though far off thy children's steps may roam,
By olive-skirted shore, or storm-tossed sea,
Their hearts will ever tenderly
Return across the separating foam
To thee, their dear old home.

Another poem, "Beside the Suir", recalls the places she knew there:

There's the convent grey and the spire above,
With its clear background of the deep blue skies,
I can see every spot in that place I love,
As I stand here and close my eyes.

Margaret's school years in Thurles seem to bear a definite connection with the pen-name she adopted, "Alice Esmonde". According to the recollections of Sr. Mary of the Sacred Heart, recorded about 1975 when she was 90, a Sir Thomas Esmonde was a frequent visitor to the convent. His family had a long connection with both the Ursulines and the Ryans.

Sir Thomas Esmonde (1786-1868) belonged to the same Wexford family as Sir John Esmonde (1893-1958), who was an MP for N. Tipperary during World War I; Sir Anthony Esmonde, a TD for Wexford in the 1950's; and Judge John Esmonde, who died recently. The family have been in Co. Wexford since the 14th century.

Little is known about Margaret's early adult years. But it may have been then that some of her relatives died, for some of her earliest poems show a deep sense of sorrow. After her elder brother's appointment to Ballingarry she seems to have become his housekeeper. Although deeply attached to all her family, he was nearest to her, and when he died aged 54 in 1885 the poignancy of the poems she wrote after his death are evidence of this. One in particular, "A Dark Day", reads in part:

Strong men are preparing a home dark and lone,
They're working in silence and sorrow—
Making a bed for a tired tender head,
A strange hard bed hewed from common grey stone,
Where he will be sleeping to-morrow:
And bells are ringing, and sweet psalms singing,
And tears to a thousand eyes are springing.

A deep religious feeling permeates all Margaret Ryan's work. Katherine Tynan, who edited the *Cabinet of Irish Literature*, compared her work to Miss Rossetti's and included a poem called "A Mountain Rose". Here are two verses:



I know a rose upon a mountain far,
A white and crimson flower that never dies,
That sends its perfume to the farthest star,
Clear past the moon and skies.

I think, till thinking strengthens to a hope;
That two sweet hands across a cruel tree,
Pierced through and through, high on a green hill's slope
Will bring my rose to me.

Margaret felt deeply for the poor and deprived, although it must be said that she did not identify with them to any great extent. Also, she regretted that she did not know the Irish language.

This English speech is hard and cold,
Would I might weave here at your feet,
In mine own language soft and sweet,
A song half my love might hold!

Ah! Strange to see my father's tongue,
And wide my people live apart:
The song is from a Celtic heart
Although in alien English sung.

Soon after her brother's death in 1885 Margaret left Ballingarry and took up residence in St. John's Place, Kilkenny with a companion and housekeeper, Margaret Delaney. Probably a family settlement enabled her to do so. Margaret Delaney may have been a relative by marriage; other members of the Ryan family had married Delaneys, and this seems to have been a lifelong friendship.

The poet's sorrow's were not yet over. Fr. Philip Ryan died in 1895, and two nephews, both seminarians, died of tuberculosis. One is said to have been ordained on his deathbed; the other, Martin Ryan, died in Margaret's home where he had come after leaving his college because of illness on 14 October 1905.

Another nephew, James Ryan, was a chemist and had a shop in Parliament St., Kilkenny. He lived with her until, on his marriage, he moved to Arklow. Margaret always kept up a friendship with the Presentation Sisters in Ballingarry, in particular with Mother Michael and Mother Regis. Messages passed, usually through Ballingarry folk visiting Kilkenny, in the form of books.

She died on 2 February 1932 in her 85th year at her home. She lies buried in her family grave in Ballingarry, on the right as one approaches the church from Main St. No obituary appeared in any Tipperary or Kilkenny newspaper — proof of Margaret Ryan's retiring life-style.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people supplied information for this article; some are now dead. They include Mother Mary of the Angels, Sr. Mary of the Sacred Heart, Mrs. Aylward of Springfield, Mrs. Vaughan of Ballingarry, and Dan Kealy. Others who gave valuable help were Mrs. M.M. Phelan and Mrs. Ada Loughrey of Kilkenny, and the Kilkenny Co. Registrar.

FOOTNOTES

1. D.J.O. O'Donoghue's usually authoritative *The Poets of Ireland* (Dublin & London, 1912) inaccurately gives the year(s) of publication as 1880-81, p.410.
2. See issue for May-June 1960.

