



**TIPPERARY HISTORICAL JOURNAL  
1992**

**© County Tipperary Historical Society**

**[www.tipperaryllibraries.ie/thh](http://www.tipperaryllibraries.ie/thh)  
[society@tipperaryllibraries.ie](mailto:society@tipperaryllibraries.ie)**

**ISSN 0791-0655**

# Julia Kavanagh (1824 — 1877) — a novelist from Thurles

---

By Noreen Higgins

Julia Kavanagh was born in early January 1824 in Thurles. The only child of Morgan Peter Kavanagh and Bridget Fitzpatrick, she was baptised on 9 January in the “Big Chapel” at Thurles, built nearly 20 years previously. Her father, Morgan Kavanagh, was an author and a poet of some note. He published a poetical romance in ten cantos the year his daughter was born which failed to gain the critical acclaim for which he longed.

In her early childhood Julia’s parents left Ireland for London. Later they moved to Normandy in France, and it seems that they also resided for some time in Paris. This continental residence at an impressionable age enabled Julia to give graphic descriptions of French life and characters in her novels and other works. *Adele*, *Dora* and *Nathalie* are all romantic novels set in a French atmosphere.

In 1844 when 20 Julia Kavanagh returned to London and began to establish her literary career. She contributed articles and short stories to the magazines of the day, such as the *People’s Journal*, the *Popular Record* and *Chambers Journal*. Her father had meanwhile taken up the study of language. In 1844, he published a book entitled *The Discovery of the Science of Language*; this was unfavourably reviewed in the *London Literary Gazette*

Julia Kavanagh’s first published novel was *The Three Paths — A Tale for Young People* in 1847. This was followed by *Madeline: A Tale of Auvergne*, a romantic tale of a self-sacrificing peasant girl in Auvergne. In 1853 she published the novel *Daisy Burns — A Tale* in three volumes; this was later translated into French under the title *Tuteur de Pupille*.

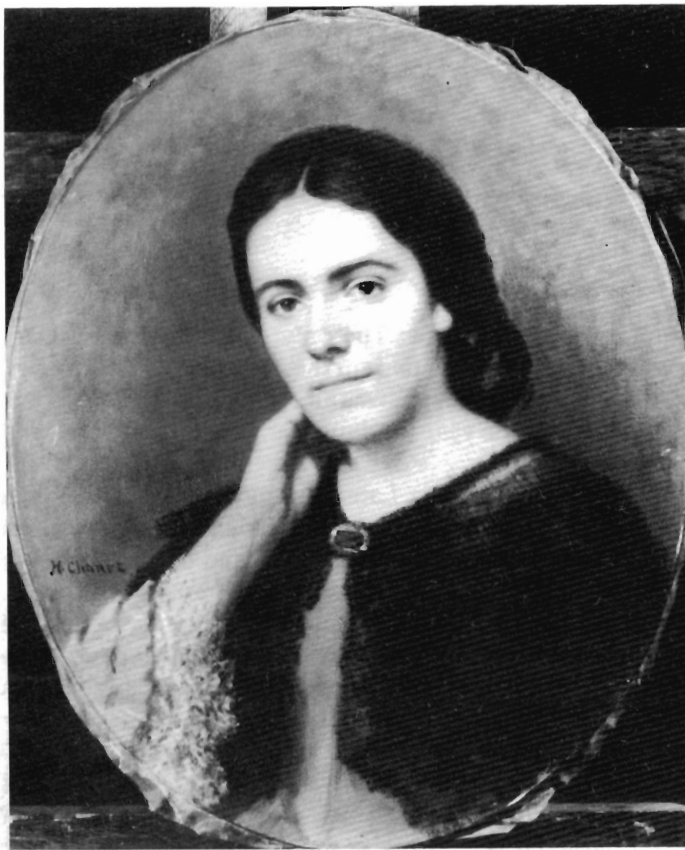
Other novels include three that achieved wide popularity — *Adele* (1858), *Nathalie* (1859), and *Queen Mab* (1863). *Adele* is the story of a heroine descended from the noble Courcelles family, who live in an old chateau in Normandy. *Nathalie* is the story of two sisters, Nathalie and Rose. Rose is a spiritually-minded invalid, resigned to her fate, while Nathalie is more concerned with the earthly pleasures and dejections in her courtship with the hero of the novel. It is also set in Normandy.

Lesser known novels by Julia Kavanagh include the following tales, mostly set in a French atmosphere: *Beatrice*; *Grace Lee*; *Rachel Grey*; *Bessie* (1872); *Sybil’s Second Love* (1867); *Silvia*; *The Two Lillies* and *John Dorrien* (1875). She also published some short stories. These included the volumes entitled *Seven Years and Other Tales* and *The Pearl Fountain and other Fairy Stories*, written in conjunction with a relative, Bridget Kavanagh — possibly her mother. Her last book, *Forget-Me-Nots* (1878), was another collection of short stories, published posthumously.

Julia Kavanagh’s novels are essentially light tales which transport the reader to “a delightful region of brightness, romance, gaiety and fancy, which cannot fail to leave a pleasant impression on the mind”, according to Mrs. Charles Martin, in the *Irish Monthly*.<sup>1</sup> Kavanagh’s novels, she continues, are crowded with characters always coming and going “with a restlessness that sometimes embarrasses the plot”, but are nevertheless “always cleverly drawn”.<sup>2</sup> The *Academy*, a literary journal, in an obituary of Kavanagh, describes her novels as “remarkable for gracefulness of style and feeling . . . (but) not distinguished for depth of thought or profound grasp of character”.<sup>3</sup>

Mrs. Martin also reveals something of the writing process that went into Julia Kavanagh’s novels. It appears that her mother Bridget was deeply involved in their composition. Julia read “aloud to





Julia Kavanagh, from the portrait by Henri Chanet

BY PERMISSION OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF IRELAND

her sightless parent as she wrote . . . discussing characters and weaving plots with her."<sup>4</sup> Her mother objected to sad endings in stories — hence the gaiety and lightness of so many of the novels. However, one of Julia's last works, *Oldments Love* (1877) was an exception; Mrs. Martin surmises that the foreboding of the author's impending death was responsible for this "sad tale".<sup>5</sup>

Although most of Kavanagh's life was spent outside Ireland, she never forgot her Irish heritage. Sir Charles Gavan Duffy included a letter by her in his book *"My Life in Two Hemispheres"* and recounts a meeting with her in 1855. In 1849 the newspaper *The Nation* had been suppressed following the Young Irelanders' revolt in 1848. Duffy, hoping to revive the paper, published in April 1849 an article in *The Times* entitled 'Wanted — a few workmen' to try to obtain new and previous contributors.

Kavanagh wrote him a letter, offering her services free of charge, and also offering to contribute

anonymously so that he would not think she was trying to gain herself publicity. The letter is quoted in full in his book, as he thought it to be "a touching illustration of the unconquerable sentiment of nationality which lives in the Irish heart . . ."<sup>6</sup>

"I am Irish by origin, birth and feeling, though not by education, but if I have lived far from Ireland, she has still been as dear as the faith and religion of my youth." She thought of Ireland as "a sorrowing mother, dear though distant and unknown".<sup>7</sup> It does not appear that she ever wrote for the paper, but her interest in Irish matters continued. Duffy recalls meeting her at a reception in London in the summer of 1855.

Kavanagh informed him that she was learning "Gaelic" and had planned a volume of sketches from Irish history, but the scheme had not materialised. She also wrote two highly acclaimed historical works — *French Woman in the Eighteenth Century* (1850) and *Women of Christianity*.

The first of these was published in two volumes in London by Smith & Elder Co. Hurst & Blacknett had been responsible for most of her novels. The book was to be "devoted to the analysis of the power of Women in the Eighteenth Century . . . who exercised a power so extensive.. that they ruled (French) society as women of the world; the empire of letters... fine arts... the state as favourites and advisors to the king".<sup>8</sup>

The two volumes detail the lives of such famous French women as Madame du Maintenon, Madame du Maine and Madame du Pompadour. They also chronicle the lives, trials and deaths of

Madame Roland and Queen Marie Antoinette at the time of the Revolution. There are interesting chapters on the fate of women during the Reign of Terror.

*French Women of Letters* (1862), also in two volumes, appeared when Kavanagh was living Paris. Her main objective, as stated in the preface, was to show "how far for the last two centuries or more women have contributed to the formation of the modern novel".<sup>9</sup> This work proved so popular with the public that a companion work called *English Women of Letters* appeared the following year, dealing with the lives of such women as Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth and the Bronte sisters.

Kavanagh was also a skilled writer of travel books. In 1853 she travelled extensively through France, Switzerland and Italy. This tour led to *A Summer and A Winter in the Two Sicilies* (1858) in two volumes. This was described as a "lively book, by no means unreadable . . . despite the slipshod ungrammatical English of its style and the questionable tastes of occasional passages" by the *Dublin University Magazine* of February 1859.<sup>10</sup> It includes descriptions of Naples, Capri, Palermo, Bai and Sicily, and an account of the devastation of Pompeii in a loose translation from the letters of Pliny the Younger.

At about this time an unpleasant experience occurred in Julia Kavanagh's life. Her father, although still publishing books, was not enjoying the same success as his daughter. In 1857 he published a novel entitled *The Hobbies*, but placing Julia's name in conjunction with his own.

It appears that she had seen the manuscript of this work and had suggested some alterations. However, she strongly objected to her name being used in the published version. She wrote a letter to the journal *The Athenaeum* in 1857 denying any share in the novel, which her father's publisher contradicted.

Julia Kavanagh never married but spent her life writing, travelling and caring for her invalid mother. She spent the last few years of her life in Nice, and pre-deceased her mother, dying on 28 October 1877 after a short illness. She was buried in the Catholic cemetery in Nice, where a marble monument marks her grave.

A portrait of Julia by the French academic artist Henri Chanut was presented to the National Gallery of Ireland in 1884 by her mother. She is shown wearing a shawl and had brown long hair (caught in a snood) and brown eyes. Before its donation to the Gallery, it was exhibited in 1883 in both Paris and the Royal Academy in London. Although now in store in the Fresco room at the Gallery it is included in the popular *Fifty Irish Portraits*.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. *Irish Monthly*, February 1878, pp.96-100.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *The Academy*, November 10, 1877, p.449.
4. See n.1.
5. *Ibid.*
6. London, 1898, Vol. 2, p.11.
7. *Ibid*, p.12.
8. Vol.1, Introductory Chapter, p.1.
9. Vol.1, preface, p.111.
10. pp. 185-192.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- T. K. Hinkson: *The Cabinet of Irish Literature*, Vol.3, (London, 1904).  
Catherine Hamilton: *Notable Irishwomen* Dublin, 1904).  
Ann Stewart: *Fifty Irish Portraits* (Dublin, 1984).

