

Barlow, Jane

by Frances Clarke

Barlow, Jane (1856–1917), poet, novelist, and short story writer, was born 17 October 1856 in Dollymount, Dublin, the third child and eldest daughter of the Rev. [James William Barlow](#) (qv), history professor and subsequently vice-provost of Trinity College, Dublin, and his wife and first cousin, Mary Louisa (née Barlow) (d. 1894). Reared from early childhood in The Cottage, Raheny, Co. Dublin, she was educated by the family's governess and her father. She became proficient in French and German, and was a talented classical scholar and an accomplished pianist. She travelled much throughout Ireland, and in her twenties visited Italy, France, Greece, and Turkey. Having written prose and verse from an early age, she began her published career in 1885, with anonymous contributions to the *Dublin University Review*, then under the editorship of [T. W. Rolleston](#) (qv), who was impressed by her work and encouraged her to write more. These early efforts, like so much of her later work, were inspired by the Irish peasantry, with whom she was familiar from walking holidays along the west coast.

While her first book, *History of a world of immortals without gods* (1891), which appeared under the pseudonym Antares Skorpis, drew on her interest in the classics, she returned to more familiar ground in 1892 with the publication of *Bogland studies*. In this collection of verse narratives she attempted to capture the specific qualities of the English language as spoken in the west of Ireland. This was followed by the hugely successful collection of stories *Irish idylls* (1892). Running into nine editions, it was read in France, Germany, Britain and America, and led to her being regarded by critics as an Irish version of the Scottish writer William Robertson Nicoll (1851–1923).

Barlow continued to write prolifically, producing a further five volumes of verse, eleven collections of stories and five novels, among them *Kerrigan's quality* (1894), *The end of Elfinstown* (1894), *Strangers at Lisconnell* (1895) and *A creel of Irish stories* (1897). She also contributed to numerous magazines and journals such as *The Nation*, *Irish Homestead*, *Hibernia*, *Dana*, *The Bookman*, *Cornhill Magazine*, *National Review*, *Living Age*, and, in America, the *Literary Digest* and *Eclectic Magazine*. Her work was generally well received, but she had her critics: [W. B. Yeats](#) (qv), for example, noted that she wrote only of 'old women and hens'. Her efforts to produce a libretto for an opera by [Michele Esposito](#) (qv) were rejected by the composer in 1898, and her only play, a sentimental melodrama entitled 'A bunch of lavender', staged by the Theatre of Ireland in 1911, was not a success and remains unpublished. Similarly her novels *Flaws* (1911), in which she focused on the lives of the Anglo-Irish middle class, and her fantasy *A strange land* (1908), for which she adopted the pseudonym Felix Ryark, did not achieve the same popularity as her more 'Irish' works.

Contemporaries such as [Katherine Tynan](#) (qv) remembered Barlow as a quiet, introverted woman, who led a secluded life centred almost entirely on her family home. However, she was in many ways an active and independent-minded woman. Throughout her life she remained a keen hill walker, and took regular holidays along the west coast of Ireland. She was also an active member of the National Literary Society. A regular contributor to their 'original nights', in 1897 she was elected its vice-president. From 1896 to 1898 she acted as an examiner in English for the Department of Education. Having rejected organised religion, in later years she became increasingly interested in the Psychical Research Society. She was among the

first members of the society's Irish branch, and became a good friend of its founder, Dr Alfred Russel Wallace.

Despite her family's unionist background, she considered herself a nationalist from childhood. Inspired by the Young Ireland and Fenian movements, she contributed romantic nationalist verse to the *United Irishman* of Arthur Griffith (qv), though this was published anonymously, to avoid embarrassing her father. Similarly influenced by the Gaelic revival, she attempted to learn Irish and in 1900 was elected as an honorary member of the St Columba branch of the Gaelic League. Her lengthy correspondence with Katherine Tynan and Sarah Purser (qv) (who painted her portrait in 1894) testifies to these influences, and she often signed herself Sinéad. However, she later became alienated by the radical turn of Irish nationalism, and responded critically to the 1916 rising in verse.

After the death of her father in 1913 she and her siblings moved to Bray, Co. Wicklow. Plagued by poor health and low spirits, she found her work increasingly tedious, though she continued writing up to her death, which occurred on 17 April 1917 at St Valerie, Bray. Her final publication, *In Mio's youth* (1917), appeared posthumously. A very popular and critically acclaimed writer during her own lifetime, in 1904 Barlow became the first woman to be awarded an honorary doctorate from TCD. Her poetry was included in many contemporary anthologies of Irish writing, but interest in her work was not sustained, and her characterisations of the native Irish subsequently appeared stereotyped.

NLI, MS 8186–8; T. W. Rolleston and Stopford Brooke (eds), *Treasury of Irish poetry* (1900); Jane Barlow, *Between doubting and daring* (1916); Ernest A. Boyd, *Ireland's literary renaissance* (1916); Stephen J. Brown, *Ireland in fiction* (1916); *IBL*, viii (1917), 141–2; *Ir. Times* (18 Apr. 1917); *The Bookman* (June 1917), with photograph; Katherine Tynan, *Memories* (1924); Mary Duane, 'The life and letters of Jane Barlow', UCD, MA thesis (1955); John O'Grady, *The life and work of Sarah Purser* (1996); Rolf Loeber and Magda Loeber, *A guide to Irish fiction, 1650–1900* (2006), 117–20

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