

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO MARY JANE IRWIN AND HER POETRY

Adrian Roche



Mary Jane Irwin was baptised on 26 January 1845 in Clonakilty.¹ She was the eldest child of a large family. Her father, John Maxwell Irwin, was born in Enniskeneane in 1817, and married Margaret Keohane of Rosscarbery in that parish on 26 January 1844.² It is now known that the family originally lived at no. 2 Main Street (now Rossa Street), in the townland of Scartagh, Clonakilty, for several years,³ while Maxwell Irwin built his business as a merchant. He is listed in *Guy's Directory* of 1875–6 as a vintner, coal merchant and seed merchant on Clonakilty's quays, as well as having an agricultural depot in the town.⁴ Maxwell Irwin was also a town commissioner⁵ and a strong nationalist. At some point the family moved to Strand House on Sand Quay, Clonakilty.

In October 1860, Mary Jane enrolled in the Sacred Heart Convent in Roscrea, Co. Tipperary, where she enjoyed music and art, and where she developed her literary talents.⁶ In 1864, a few months after she had finished her schooling, she met the Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. According to Rossa, he remembered first meeting Mary Jane about five or six years earlier, when he called to the house to meet with her father, but she appeared to have no clear recollection of this.⁷ Despite the concerns of her parents, Mary Jane



Fig. 1: Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa (née Irwin), September 1868, the year that the poems that follow were published (Photo: Ó Coisdealha).

– then aged nineteen – married Rossa on 22 October 1864.⁸ Rossa previously had four sons with his first wife, Nora Eager, who died in 1860, and another boy with his second wife, Ellen Buckley from Castlehaven, who died in 1863.⁹ Mary Jane and Rossa had thirteen children.

By 1865, Mary Jane was publishing poems in the Fenian newspaper, the *Irish People*, which was managed by Rossa.¹⁰ Later that year, Rossa was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment for treason. Mary Jane wrote many letters of protest to the papers, and also in support of her brother James, who was arrested in 1866.¹¹ Between 1865 and 1867 Mary Jane helped form, and acted as secretary of, the Ladies Committee for the Relief of State Prisoners, which attempted to raise funds for Fenian prisoners.¹²

In 1867, due to having no funds to support herself and her family, Mary Jane departed Ireland for New York, where she received the help of William

Roberts, then president of the Fenian Society. While staying with the Roberts family, Mary Jane wrote her book *Irish Lyrical Poems*¹³ which was published in New York in 1868.¹⁴ It is dedicated to her husband, for his devotion to the cause.¹⁵ The two poems that follow this brief introduction are taken from that volume. Mary Jane took elocution lessons and began touring the US in 1868, giving talks and lectures to raise monies for her own independence and that of her children, and in order to repay debts while also aiding the Fenian cause and helping Fenian prisoners, as well as with the aim of appealing her husband's case in the House of Lord's in England. Her talks made a great impression on her audiences around the country, as was noted in a variety of newspapers at the time.¹⁶ In January 1870, she travelled to England and continued her talks, as well as writing. In 1871, Rossa received an amnesty on the proviso that he would accept exile in America, and the family returned to New York.

During the years that followed, Mary Jane focussed on her family although she still firmly believed in Rossa and the Fenian cause and helped him in writing his memoirs, as well as making occasional public appearances.¹⁷ In 1905, the couple moved to Ireland, but returned to New York the following year due to Mary Jane's poor health.¹⁸ On 29 June 1915, after a long period of illness, Rossa died on Staten Island, and Mary Jane and their daughter Ellen (Eileen) returned to Ireland with Rossa's body which was buried in Glasnevin cemetery, Dublin.¹⁹

Mary Jane died the following year at her home in Staten Island on 16 (or 18) August 1916.²⁰ Her daughter, Eileen MacGowan, later said that 'Mamma was as great a heroine and made as many sacrifices for the cause as Papa did as a man'.²¹

It is anticipated that a more detailed examination of Mary Jane's life will appear in the next volume of this journal in commemoration of the centenary anniversary of her death.

A Visit to My Husband in Prison²²

May, 1866.

Within the precincts of the prison bounds,
Treading the sunlit courtyard to a hall,
Roomy and unadorned, where the light
Thro' screenless windows glaringly did fall.

Within the precincts of the prison walls,
With rushing memories and bated breath;
With heart elate and light swift step that smote
Faint echoes in this house of living death.

Midway I stood in bright expectancy,
Tightly I clasped my babe, my eager sight
Restlessly glancing down the long, low room
To where a door bedimmed the walls pure white.

They turned – the noiseless locks; the portal fell,
With clank of chain, wide open, and the room
Held him – my wedded love. My heart stood still
With sudden shock, with sudden sense of doom.

My heart stood still that had with gladsome bound
Counted the moments ere he should appear –
Drew back at sight so changed, and shivering waited,
Pulselessly waited while his steps drew near!

Oh! for a moment's twilight that might hide
The harsh, tanned features once so soft and fair!

The shrunken eyes that with a feeble flash
Smiled on my presence and his infant's there!

Oh! for a shadow on the cruel sun
That mocked thy father, Baby, with his glare;
Oh! for the night of nothingness or death
Ere thou, my love, this felon garb should wear!
It needed not these passionate, pain-wrung words.
Falling with sad distinctness from thy lips,
To tell a tale of insult, abject toil,
And day-long labor hewing Portland steep!
It needed not, my love, this anguished glance,
This fading fire within thy gentle eyes,
To rouse the torpid voices of my heart,
Till all the sleeping heavens shall hear their cries.
God of the wronged, and can thy vengeance sleep?
And shall our night of anguish know no day!
And can thy justice leave our souls to weep
Yet, and yet longer o'er our land's decay!
Must we cry still, "How long, oh Lord, how long!"
For seven red centuries a country's woe
Has wept the prayer in tears and blood, and still
Our tears to-night for fresher victims flow!

An Exile's Memory of Love and Home²³

There's a dream in my heart of my childhood's days,
 But no sunlight gilds it:
In a shadowed nook from life's noontide blaze
 Sad memory shields it:
There's a voice soft and low,
 Like the streamlet's flow,
 Rippling music ever;
 Holy eyes, like a cave
 'Neath a moon-lit wave,
 Where the light waves sever:
From a twilight of tender memories gleam
These hallowed eyes of my childhood's dream.

There's a dream in my heart of my childhood's home
 In a pleasant valley,
Where the crested waves and the western foam
 Like white chiefs rally;
With their murmurs still
 Do my heart-caves fill,
 And I'm pining,
 For my Irish band,
 And my native strand,
 And my love's eyes shining –
From a twilight of tender memories gleam
These hallowed eyes of my childhood's dream.

(Endnotes)

- 1 Baptism record, Clonakilty parish, Diocese of Cork and Ross, County of Cork, microfilm 04772/02, p. 116, Catholic Parish Registers, National Library of Ireland, <http://registers.nli.ie>.
- 2 Marriage record, Rosscarbery parish, Diocese of Cork and Ross, County of Cork, microfilm 04773/05, p. 68, Catholic Parish Registers, National Library of Ireland, <http://registers.nli.ie>.
- 3 Griffith's Valuation, <http://www.askaboutireland.ie> [accessed 10/10/2015]; Mary Jane Irwin's baptism record, microfilm 04772/02, p. 116. Thanks to Tomás Tuipéar and Michael O'Mahony for bringing these records to my attention. See also <http://www.westcorkgenealogy.com/Files/WCork/gp3664.html> [accessed 10/10/2015].
- 4 *Francis Guy's County and City of Cork Directory*, 1875–6, pp. 188–91, <http://www.corkpastandpresent.ie/places/streetandtradedirectories/1875-6guyscountycity/> [accessed 10/10/2015].
- 5 *Guy's Cork Directory*, 1875–6, p. 188.
- 6 Lehne, S. 1995. *Feminism: A Male Issue? A Case Study of Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa (1845–1916)*. MA Dissertation, St Patrick's College, p. 19; Ó Coisdealha, T. 'Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa (1845–1916)', *Fenian Graves*, <http://feniangraves.net/O'Donovan%20Rossa,%20Mary%20Jane/Bio.htm> [accessed 11/10/2015].
- 7 Lehne, *Feminism: A Male Issue*, p. 20.
- 8 Marriage record, Clonakilty parish, Diocese of Cork and Ross, County of Cork, microfilm 04772/03, p. 154, Catholic Parish Registers, National Library of Ireland, <http://registers.nli.ie>.
- 9 Wyse, K. 2015. *Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa 1831–1915*. Local Studies Dept., Cork County Library. Booklet compiled as part of an exhibition in Skibbereen and Clonakilty libraries, 2015, see <http://www.corkcoco.ie/co/pdf/182088707.pdf> [accessed 01/11/2015].
- 10 Ó Coisdealha, 'Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa (1845–1916)'; Anon. 1959. 'Mary Jane Irwin'. *Clonakilty District Past and Present: A Tourist Guide to the Area*. Skibbereen, <http://www.failteromhat.com/maryjirwin.php> [accessed 11/10/2015]; Tuipéar, T. n.d. *Historical Walk of Clonakilty and its Sea-Front*. Clonakilty, p. 9; O'Regan, P. 2015. 'Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa: The most typical Fenian of them all'. *Skibbereen and District Historical Society* vol. 11, pp. 1–38, at p. 12.
- 11 Ó Coisdealha, 'Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa (1845–1916)'.
12 Lehne, *Feminism: A Male Issue*, pp. 22–6.
13 O'Donovan Rossa, Mrs. 1868. *Irish Lyrical Poems*. New York.
14 Ó Coisdealha, 'Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa (1845–1916)'.
15 O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Lyrical Poems*.
16 Lehne, *Feminism: A Male Issue*, p. 33–5.

- 17 Lehne, *Feminism: A Male Issue*, p. 89.
- 18 O'Regan, 'Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa', p. 30; Anon. 'Mary Jane Irwin'.
- 19 O'Regan, 'Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa', p. 30-2.
- 20 Ó Coisdealha, 'Mary Jane O'Donovan Rossa (1845–1916)'; Anon. 'Mary Jane Irwin'; Tuipéar, *Historical Walk of Clonakilty*, p. 10.
- 21 Lehne, *Feminism: A Male Issue*, p. 95.
- 22 O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Lyrical Poems*, pp. 43-4.
- 23 O'Donovan Rossa, *Irish Lyrical Poems*, p. 66.