
Fans of Helen Waddell might wonder what else remained to be said about their heroine after Monica Blackett’s 1973 memoir (The Mark of the Maker: a portrait of Helen Waddell) and Dame Felicitas Corrigan’s biography of 1986, but in fact the author of this latest book has had the inspired idea of offering parallel lives of Helen and her childhood friend, later scholarly companion, Maude Clarke, in a very successful and engaging study. Both ‘daughters of the manse’, Helen’s father was a Presbyterian missionary in Japan (she was, in fact, born in Tokyo), while Maude’s was a Church of Ireland rector in Belfast. Having met as students in Queen’s University Belfast in 1910, their relationship continued unbroken until Maude’s tragically premature death in 1935. Both excelled at Queen’s and both looked set for equally distinguished academic futures, but while Maude did go on to enjoy a highly successful graduate career in Oxford, followed by a temporary teaching position in Queen’s and then a permanent position as lecturer in History at Somerville College, Helen’s hopes of doing the same were stymied for ten years by the need to care for her near-blind widowed step-mother (and, FitzGerald argues, by the misogynistic attitudes of Queen’s academics, who resolutely refused to appoint her to a tutorship — despite her qualifications). As the tenth (and last) child of her father’s marriage, there seems to have been no debate amongst the siblings about who should fulfil the familial duties; but whereas Maude’s parents provided nothing but encouragement for her ambitions, the demands placed on Helen by her curmudgeonly (and increasingly alcoholic) step-mother almost drove her to despair.
Once embarked on her academic studies, Maude decided to concentrate on English constitutional history (‗a field which rendered women almost completely invisible‘ [6]). Her researches were to result in several publications of lasting significance: a planned book on the *Modus Tenendi Parliamentum* appeared as a number of articles in 1932 and 1933, and her *magnum opus*, published posthumously, *Medieval Representation and Consent* (1936). She was also invited to contribute a volume to the *Oxford History of England* series (‗the only Irish person and the only woman among the contributors‘ [137]). A string of ancillary studies, published in the leading scholarly journals of the time, added to her reputation throughout those years. An earlier interest in the history of the Franciscan houses in Ireland had been set aside, while a planned volume of essays on Irish history was offered to a Dublin publisher in 1918, but unfortunately came to nothing. Sadly, no trace of the text appears to have survived. One wonders what she might have had to say on the subject.

For Helen, however, the ten-year period from 1910 to 1920 (when her step-mother died), while not altogether barren, were nowhere near as productive. In fact, her earlier researches into the place of women in English drama before Shakespeare (parts of which she drafted into chapter-form, and which are reproduced as an appendix to this book), were abandoned, partly because she had become dispirited by her personal situation, but also because she was inspired — quite unexpectedly — by the poetry and songs of the goliards and the earthy *Carmina Burana*. ‘From “the resultant shock of astonishment and delight” was born *The Wandering Scholars‘ (107). Fortunately for her, Helen’s scholarly interests had been kept alive (and generously endowed) by an old family friend, the Presbyterian Rev. George Taylor, who provided her with 60 guineas a year for four years (1916–1920), during which she did all the reading and researching for the volume.
Considering that he was ‘concerned about the moral impact of this degenerate reading’ (55), we can only admire Dr Taylor’s generous spirit! It was all the more magnanimous given Helen’s striking defence of the Easter Rising of 1916 and an argument in favour of Irish Home Rule that she sent in a long letter to Taylor, who (like a great many of his contemporaries) viewed the events of 1916 as a betrayal and a stab in the back. It is hardly coincidental that her father had been an ardent Home Ruler, and that an ancestor was hanged in front of his manse for participating in the 1798 rebellion (23)! But while the Rev. Taylor was probably not for turning, the result of the good doctor’s beneficence was the book by which Helen was to become famous.

Published on 28 April 1927, within three days *The Wandering Scholars* had hit the top of the best-seller lists, and stayed there. The book was described by Eileen Power — another eminent medievalist and an exact contemporary of Helen’s — as ‘not only ... the fruit of a wide and solid learning, but ... the fruit of a poet’s mind; and scholars with poets’ minds are rare enough in this wicked world’ (122). The *Irish Times* reviewer was even more to the point: ‘[the author] almost seems to find an impish pleasure in breaking with the staid solemnity of previous investigators, and in mingling recondite researches with gleaming fun’ (123). Not everyone agreed, of course, and some of the more po-faced academics turned up their noses at Helen’s occasionally free renderings of Medieval Latin verse. But though scholars from G.G. Coulton to Peter Dronke might decry her work by stating that ‘the real weakness ... is a certain lack of intellectual rigour’ (Dronke, quoted on p.167) — and even the great James F. Kenney, in his monumental *Sources for the early history of Ireland* (1929), dismissed it as *haute vulgarisation* — in fact, many contemporaries felt and most present-day scholars agree that behind her translations lay a genuinely poetic and original insight. Even so rigorous a critic as Gerard Murphy (classically trained as well as a
leading Celtic scholar) could state that Helen was a ‘master of interpretation, skilled in all branches of her craft’ (125). Very soon she was the toast of London and the necessary accoutrement to every self-respecting high-society soirée, to such an extent that A.E. (George Russell) complained that ‘every person in London who asks me to lunch or dinner or tea offers dear Helen as an attraction’ (146)! The list of famous people whom she came to know, in London and elsewhere, is legion (as, apparently, was the number of her early suitors!). Enid Starkie (described as ‘an Irish Somervillian’, 110) had earlier tended on Helen when she was ill in Paris (June 1924, the occasion of her famous dream about Héloïse); the others included A.E., Stanley Baldwin, George Bernard Shaw, Yeats, and Virginia Woolf (134–5).

With the publication of *Medieval Latin Lyrics* in 1929 and *Peter Abelard* in 1933 (reprinted fifteen times in that first year alone!), Helen’s literary success was confirmed (and her financial position secured). Sadly, her new-found wealth led her into what Monica Blackett rather dramatically described as The Fatal Mistake: the purchase of a large, rambling house in London, big enough to accommodate all her family and still have bedrooms to spare. Maude Clarke (and A.E.) warned her against it, but to no avail. Whether the worries of running such a large establishment really did wear her down, however, is a moot point. *Beasts and Saints* appeared in 1934 and *The Desert Fathers* in 1936, and all the time she was being asked to give talks and lectures, at home and abroad. More likely the causes of her grief were more tangible. With the tragic early death of Maude in November 1935, Helen mourned ‘the loveliest creature [she] ever knew and [her] best friend’ (181). And with the ever-darkening skies over Europe after 1938 — and the memory of the terrible loss of life during the First World War — there were other things to worry about than dinner-parties and royalties.
Her poetic spirit notwithstanding, Helen’s world was not cut off from the reality of what was coming. Appalled by the Munich Agreement and its betrayal of Czechoslovakia, when German tanks rolled into Poland she penned a superb poem (which later she sent to Churchill):

*The Polish Eagle, nailed to the bar door,*  
*Torn wings outstretched, bedaubed with blood and turd;*  
*Beneath in German and in Russian script,*  
*“So perish all who trust in England’s word”.*

Sadly, the years after 1945 saw Helen gradually decline into dementia and her remaining literary projects never came to pass. But her popularity remains undiminished, as witnessed by the regular reprintings of *The Wandering Scholars* and *Medieval Latin Lyrics*. Whether her initial success was due to a feeling that the loss of so much of England’s youth in Flanders’ Fields could be assuaged ‘by creating goliards who replicate the lost young men’ (166) — as a latter-day literary theorist would have us believe — may be doubted. More likely it was the sheer unadulterated brilliance of her translations that made a mostly barren desert of dreary Latin verbiage come alive. What would she have done without Gottschalk — ‘condemned for life to the Benedictine Order’! — or Sedulius Scottus, and all the lesser characters who play their bit-parts in her marvellous evocation of the times? Allied to that was her gift for recreating the personalities of the poets and goliards and making them come alive. Hers was a very different approach to the one espoused by Maude Clarke, whose stern demeanour belied the sometimes impish turn of her personality.

All kinds of questions and considerations arise from reading this wonderful book. For example, did Helen know W. G Hanson’s four lectures, published as *The Early Monastic Schools of Ireland, their missionaries, saints and scholars* (Cambridge 1927)? Its account of ‘The Schools’, ‘St. Columban and his contemporaries’, ‘Irish Scholars of the
eighth and ninth centuries’, and John Scotus Erigena’ [sic] is remarkably similar to Helen’s description of those Irish Wandering Scholars. Or are we to assume that she deliberately eschewed reading it (if she knew it at all), as she did George Moore’s novel, *Héloise and Abelard*, which she ‘dared not read’ because she feared ‘lest that wizard prose of his should come between me and these two so sharply remembered in my own mind’ (cited in Blackett 1973, p. 221). And what of the early years? Maude Clarke, aged thirteen, was sent to Alexandra College, in Dublin, for some of her schooling. Did she ever encounter the formidable Margaret Stokes (sister of the more famous Whitley, the Celtic scholar), who taught there for many years?

And what of the Queen’s years? The great F. M. Powicke looms large (though he himself was only five foot tall), and the classicist, R.M. Henry (brother of the painter, Paul, whose dreary Connemara landscapes are in every auction-house these days) whose Sinn Féin allegiance was so striking; but these were also the years of E.R. Dodds and Thomas Hodgkin. Is there any talk of those two in the still unpublished letters of Helen? Sadly (as Jennifer FitzGerald points out) Maude appears to have destroyed almost all her correspondence, so that only three letters from her to Helen during the years 1913–15 have survived.

A running theme throughout the book is the feminist approach to history-writing, and much is made (and rightly so) of the other distinguished women scholars of the age: Maude Cam, and Jocelin Otway-Ruthven, Dorothy L. Sayers and Eileen Power (was she also a spy?), all of whom knew Helen and Maude; but what of all those other Irish women who were contemporaries of theirs (many of them sturdy Northerners!)? One thinks of Alice Milligan and Alice Stopford-Green, or Margaret Dobbs and Cesca Chenevix Trench and her sister, who devoted themselves to Celtic Studies. Did these women ever come into contact with one another? The Gaelic League idea found footing in Queen’s early
on: a branch was established in 1906 (‘under the patronage of the College President’), and R.M. Henry was an enthusiastic supporter (22). The effect of the League’s propaganda around his time (especially in the lead-up to the establishment of the National University of Ireland in 1908) may have been more profound than has been realized: when Helen got an ‘A’ for her first undergraduate essay at Queen’s, she reported herself (in a letter to her sister Meg) as ‘thanking the goodness and the grace that on my birth had smiled …’ (10). The allusion is to a verse that was drummed into Irish school-children of the time (and lampooned by the League):

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I \text{ thank the goodness and the grace } \\
\text{ that on my birth has smiled, } \\
\text{ and made me in these blessed times } \\
\text{ a happy English child.}
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The most glaring question of all raised by this book, of course, is: would Helen have achieved what she did, had she succeeded in obtaining a life-long university appointment? Given the later success of C.S. Lewis (another Belfast-man!) and J.R. Tolkien, perhaps she might indeed have straddled both horses successfully. But the experience recounted by her in a letter to Enid Starkie (165) about how a proposal to elect her a Fellow of the British Academy had been blocked (by Coulton) — because she was rumoured (in 1933) to be writing a novel! — suggests that things would probably have turned out differently for her. Advised to postpone the novel for a year, Helen refused.

There is so much else that could be said about the protagonists of this volume, but surely an edition of Helen’s letters should be part of that project. Launched at a conference held in Belfast in May 2012 to celebrate the life and writings of the woman (HW) who was known to her Dublin contemporaries as ‘Ulster’s Darling’, this volume is a marvellous tribute to her and to her lifelong companion, two of the most influential
Irishwomen of their time. Author and publisher are to be congratulated on a job well done.

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