

Winifred Mabel Letts (1882- 1972) was an poet, novelist, and playwright married to William Verschoyle of Saggart and buried in Rathcoole Churchyard.

(Article by Mervyn Ennis, Saggart Heritage group)

Winifred Mabel Letts was born on 10 February 1882 in Broughton Salford, Manchester of an English father (Rector Ernest Letts) a clergyman, and an Irish mother (Isabel Mary Ferrier). She spent many childhood holidays in Knockmaroon, located on the edge of the Chapelizod side of the Phoenix Park, Dublin, which was her mother's home. Winifred was educated initially in Bromley in Kent and at 16' she persuaded her parents to allow her to move from Bromley boarding school to attend Alexandra College in Dublin. In doing so she was to join the roll of honor with other important writers Edith Somerville 1858-1949, Mary Manning 1903-1999, and Dorothy McArdle 1889-1958, who studied at Alexander College.

After her father's death, in 1904, she and her mother returned to Ireland and lived in a house called Dal Riada in Blackrock, County Dublin.

Her writing career began in 1907 when she published two novels. In 1913 she published her first collection of poetry – *Songs from Leinster*. Winifred was to go on to have two plays *The Eyes of the Blind* (1906) and *The Challenge* (1909) accepted by the newly founded Abbey Theatre. In doing so she was at that time only the second lady to do so, Lady Gregory, one of the Abbeys cofounders, being the first. Winifred was to publish nine novels and a book of poetry in the following nine years before being interrupted by the First World War.

Her poetry was making such an impact that in 1914 some of her works were set to music by the Irish composer Sir Charles Villiers Stanford who took six poems and called them *A Sheaf of Songs from Leinster*. In later years Letts's poems were to be set to music by five other composers: Ina Boyle, Ivor Gurney (under the pseudonym Michael Flood), Rhoda Coghill, Dorothy Park, and Haldane Campbell Stewart.



Winifred M. Letts

At the outbreak of war in August 1914 few people imagined how long or how disastrous a war between the great nations of Europe could be, and most believed that their country's side would be victorious within a matter of months. But by June 1915 with casualties mounting the realities of war struck home. Living within walking distance of Linden Auxiliary Hospital which was taking wounded for rehabilitation, her mother Mary F Letts, then aged 67, volunteered to work for the VAD on 11-6-1915 undertaking housework and attending at dressings her experience must have been positive as Winifred joined on the 21-06 -15. She was a mature woman of 33years and went on to progress to become a nurse specializing in what to day we would call physiotherapy and massage therapy. From Linden, she was transferred to 2nd West General Hospital in Manchester. Her commitment and dedication brought her to work at the Almeric Paget Military Massage Corps, where she worked as a masseuse at an army camp in Alnwick, Northumberland, and in the Military Orthopaedic Hospital back in Blackrock tending to the wounded. I suppose she could be said to be an early form of a physiotherapist to amputees.

Despite all the upheaval and challenge as a nurse viewing firsthand the horrors of war she yet found time to produce a collection of poems. In 1916 *Hallowe'en and Other Poems of the War* were published and proved so popular that it was reprinted in 1917 and renamed *The Spires of Oxford and Other Poems*.

Her most celebrated poem the Oxford poems addresses the tragic loss of the many young men whose studies and future glories were set aside as they volunteered to take part in the war to end all wars.

They left the peaceful river,
The cricket-field, the quad,
The shaven lawns of Oxford,
To seek a bloody sod –
They gave their merry youth away
For country and for God.

In another of her poems *the Deserter* makes the case seldom told of the young terrified soldiers who could not face the guns and froze or turned tail and ran from the battlefield. 'he feared to die
Was scared as any frightened child,
His knees were shaking under him,
His breath came fast, his eyes were wild.'

But Deserters paid the ultimate price with 'An English bullet in his heart.'

'They shot him when the dawn was grey.
Blindfolded,..... at dawn before the firing squad.'

The full text of the poem is worth reading.

The Deserter

There was a man, - don't mind his name,
Whom Fear had dogged by night and day.

He could not face the German guns

And so he turned and ran away.

Just that - he turned and ran away,

But who can judge him, you or I?

God makes a man of flesh and blood

Who yearns to live and not to die.

And this man when he feared to die

Was scared as any frightened child,

His knees were shaking under him,

His breath came fast, his eyes were wild.

I've seen a hare with eyes as wild,

With throbbing heart and sobbing breath.

But oh ! it shames one's soul to see

A man in abject fear of death,

But fear had gripped him, so had death;

His number had gone up that day,

They might not heed his frightened eyes,

They shot him when the dawn was grey.

Blindfolded, when the dawn was grey,

He stood there in a place apart,

The shots rang out and down he fell,

An English bullet in his heart.

An English bullet in his heart!

But here's the irony of life, -

His mother thinks he fought and fell

A hero, foremost in the strife.

So she goes proudly; to the strife

Her best, her hero son she gave.
 O well for her she does not know
 He lies in a deserter's grave.

This poem *The Deserter* is often used in collections of World War I poetry. In recent years the British public has made great strides to recognize these soldiers were traumatized victims of war and possibly suffered post-traumatic stress disorder. Which left them with the inability to understand the consequences of their behaviour.

What Reward?

You gave your life. Boy.
 And you gave a limb:
 But he who gave his precious wits,
 Say, what regard for him?

One had his glory,
 One has found his rest.
 But what of this poor babbler here
 With chin sunk on his breast?

Flotsam of battle,
 With brain bemused and dim,
 O God, for such a sacrifice
 Say, what reward for him?



So in a sense, Winifred was before her time in putting their cause to the forefront rather than depicting them as cowards to be hidden and shamed. Today modern psychologists inform us that in conflict a person has three choices almost hot-wired into his being, Fight, Flight, and Freeze. One has to pose the question of why were those who reacted in the way of the latter two responses deemed cowards and executed when they were merely acting out of their humanity. Fear is recognized as protective energy, not cowardice. Letts appears to have recognized this and reflects it in her sensitive protest war poetry. Her work predates the protest poetry of Winifred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon and the writing of Robert Graves, yet she is seldom credited with this or remembered for it. In doing so she was also going against the culture of her tribe. As it was not unusual on the streets, trams, and busses throughout Britain



for a woman to come up to a man in the street suspected of not being in the Army and give him a white feather, or stick it in the lapel of his coat. A white feather is the sign of cowardice, so they meant he was a coward and that he should be in the army doing his bit for king and country. This campaign of shaming men into enlisting was supported by significant women's writers of the day such as Emma Orczy of *Scarlet Pimpernel's* fame and Mary Augusta Ward as well as other prominent members of the Suffragette movement and early feminists.

Robert Graves in 'Goodbye to All that' mentions a white feather experience he had when home from the front. Apart from questioning the populist stance on cowardice Winifred is also deeply taken by the stoic resilience displayed by the wounded and writes of a young wounded 23-year-old soldier who bravely bears his lot without complaining. In doing so she reveals real deep humanity as a loving caring human being.

To A Soldier In Hospital

Courage came to you with your boyhood's grace
Of ardent life and limb.....

How did you learn to bear this long-drawn pain
And not complain?.....

How do you lie here month by weary month
Helpless, and not revolt?

What joy can these monotonous days afford
Here in a ward?

Yet you are merry as the birds in spring,
Or feign the gaiety,
Lest those who dress and tend your wound each day
Should guess the agony.

Lest they should suffer—this the only fear
You let draw near.

but you
Have learnt it in your youth.

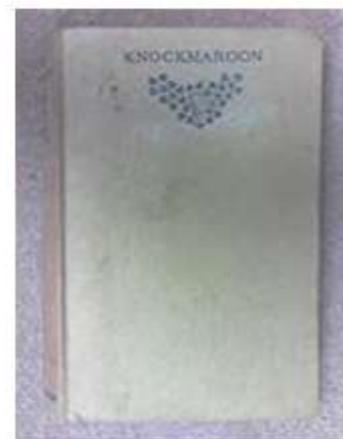
You know the wisdom taught by Calvary
At twenty-three.

Death would have found you brave, but braver still
 You face each lagging day,
 A merry Stoic, patient, chivalrous,
 Divinely kind and gay.
 You bear your knowledge lightly, graduate
 Of unkind Fate.

Careless philosopher, the first to laugh,
 The latest to complain.

After the war, Winifred continued to write. In 1926 at the age of 44, she married 66-year-old widower William Henry Foster Verschoyle, of Kilberry, County Kildare. He had lost two sons in the 1st World war and after they married they lived between his properties at Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin, Tassagart, and in Kilberry, Athy, County Kildare. It is said that on their marriage William chided Winifred, *'there are two things you did as Miss Letts which are no longer appropriate, now that you are Mrs. Verchoyle – attend the Arts Club on Fitzwilliam Street and swim at Seapoint.'* In 1933 she produced a book for children Knockmaroon, 1933 which is considered by many to be her best work. The book was illustrated by her stepdaughter Kathleen Verchoyle. She continued to write producing More Songs of Leinster (1926) St Patrick the Travelling Man. The Story of his Life and Wanderings (1932) Knockmaroon (1933), Pomona & Co. (1934), Pomona's Island (1935), The Gentle Mountain (1938). By all accounts, Vers and Win as they were sometimes known had a happy marriage together. This happiness is recounted in one of the poems she dedicated to William; he died during the Second World War on the day after Christmas 1943 aged 84 at 19 Fitzwilliam Square. After he died she lived for a time with her sisters in Faversham, Kent. She returned to Ireland in 1950 and bought Beech Cottage in Killiney, County Dublin, where she lived until finally moving to Tivoli Nursing Home, Dún Laoghaire, County Dublin in the late 1960s.

Winifred had self-deprecating humor and described herself as a 'back door sort of bard'. In an Irish times



interview in 1957, she described herself as ‘ a period piece, a has-been, totally unknown to this generation, twelve years later she was to tell Maeve Binchy ‘ that the only reason she is interesting was that she knew so many of the people Ireland cared about.’ Despite having been well known and widely published in her lifetime, she was to fade stage left from Irish literary history, until Bairbre O hOgan and Dr. David Clare, from Mary Immaculate College, produced essays on her.

One is left wondering is there a sense of self-fulfilling prophesy in her poem
Delaney of the Rifles

No history will hold his (her) humble name.
No sculptured stone will tell
The traveler where he (she) fell;
That he (she) lies among the dead
Is the measure of his fame.

She died in 1972 and is buried in Rathcoole, Co Dublin
24. In an unmarked grave.



Some of her works include:

The Story-Spinner (1907)

Waste Castle (1907)

The Quest of the Blue Rose (1910)

Bridget of all Work (1909)

Diana Dethroned (1909)

The Rough Way (1912)

Naughty Sophia (1912)

The Mighty Army (1912)

Songs of Leinster (1913)

Helmet & Cowl: Stories of Monastic and Military Orders (1913) with M. F. S. Letts

Christina's Son (1916)

Hallow-e'en and Poems of the War (1916)

The Spires of Oxford, And Other Poems (1917)

Corporal's Corner (1919)

What happened Then? (1921);

More Songs of Leinster (1926)

St Patrick the Travelling Man. The Story of his Life and Wanderings (1932)

Knockmaroon (1933)
Pomona & Co. (1934)
Pomona's Island (1935)
The Gentle Mountain (1938)

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This article is drawn from the online work of Winifred Letts' researcher Bairbre ohOgan .

An appreciation of Winifred Letts by Dr. David Clare, Mary Immaculate College UL.

Poets .Org.

Wikipedia.

All poetry .com

My Poetic side –Winnifred Mary Letts