

Maria Regina Roche (c. 1764 - 1845)

Maria Regina Dalton was born in Waterford, County Wexford, in 1764, the daughter of Captain Blundell Dalton, an officer in His Majesty's Fortieth Regiment. The Daltons were descended from an ancient Irish family. Showing the makings of a novelist early in life, she later wrote of her childhood, „Books were my early passion. The punishment inflicted on me when I did anything to displease was to have them locked up from me. Ere I could well guide a pen, I strove to give utterance to the workings of my mind in writing.’¹ The family moved to Dublin where Dalton wrote *The Vicar of Landsdowne, or Country Quarters* (1789), a light-hearted novel in which its hero Captain Manning, a young army officer exudes „exquisite sensibility, exalted honour, and tender benevolence’. It is a youthful work and starts with a cow impeding the progress of two young ladies who are rescued by two army officers. At times the authorial voice is heard; Sedgeley, a young curate objects to novels „they are seldom written with any judgement; they fire the fancy without improving the heart; they amuse the mind but give no information to the understanding; they promote VICE by misrepresenting VIRTUE.’² Dalton's second novel, *The Maid of the Hamlet*, (1793) has a dull and uninteresting plot but is noteworthy for its prophetic beginning „Yet if that Power (whose ways, however dark and intricate they may appear, are still directed by wisdom and by goodness) should allow calamity to pursue us even to the very brink of the grave, there are resources which can console and mitigate, and render our situation not utterly cheerless.’³ At this point in her life, Dalton was not to know how bleak her own future would be. In 1794 she married Ambrose Roche after which the couple went to live in England. It was to be a marriage beset with ill health and extreme poverty yet Maria Regina appears to have remained a devoted wife until her husband died in 1829.

Little is known about the Roches's early life together in London. By 1802 Ambrose Roche had been made bankrupt. Mrs. Roche had inherited a small patrimony from her father but was swindled out of it by a John Boswell, an unscrupulous solicitor, who purchased her life interest in the estate, telling her that it was worth nothing, and then defaulted on the promised annuity after two years. He also purchased Ambrose Roche's life interest for £50. Due to Boswell's fraudulent actions, which were to take years to resolve through the courts, and the refusal of Richard Martin, MP for Galway, to pay back a £500 debt, the couple were left

¹ Letter from Mrs. Roche to Jos. Snow, the Royal Literary fund, 19 November 1831. Letters to Royal Literary Fund, British Library, Loan MS 96, case 590.

² Maria Regina Dalton, *The Vicar of Landsdowne* (printed for the author, 1789) p.171-2

³ Maria Regina Dalton, *The Maid of the Hamlet* (William Lane, 1793) p. 1.

destitute and at times on the brink of starvation, worn out by litigation and drained by lawyers' fees. Letters (dated between 1826 to 1831)⁴ to the Royal Literary Society's Fund from Mrs. Roche and others, in which she asks for monetary assistance, describe her and her husband's circumstances in some detail.⁵ At the time the couple were living in lodgings at 6, Stangate Street, Westminster.⁶ In 1825 Ambrose Roche suffered a severe stroke. According to J. Wheeler, the doctor who wrote on the couple's behalf to the Royal Literary Society in January 1827, Roche kept his mental faculties and self possession showing patience and fortitude and although very weak, could walk by September 1826. Wheeler wrote that his wife gave him „affectionate and assiduous attention' and never went to bed, sitting in a chair at his side.⁷ Edward Popham, a solicitor from Lincoln's Inn wrote to Richard Martin in December, 1826 saying that Mr. and Mrs. Roche were about to be expelled from their lodgings for non payment of rent, and „I would to God I could impress upon you a sense of the suffering endured by their hopes and expectations being so repeatedly blighted.'⁸ In a final letter to Richard Martin Popham quoted Mrs. Roche as saying that she was „exhausted by what I have suffered, literally dying, as Mr. Roche and I are of broken hearts.'⁹ Despite Martin's alleged income of £5,000 a year, the £500 debt was not to be retrieved.

By the autumn of 1831 Roche had returned to Ireland hoping to settle her complicated legal affairs in the Chancery court. The outcome is not recorded but it is known that the last few years of her life were spent on the Mall at Waterford where she died at the age of 81 on 17 May 1845. Her Christian faith supported her through years of tribulations and is alluded to in her dedication to H.R.H. the Princess Augusta of her novel *Contrast*. „Religion, that inward principle of action, that stay and sanctuary of sorrow and of suffering, cheered and supported me through the dreary path, until the long night was over, and the dawn of comfort broke in upon the bed of sickness.¹⁰ vii – viii. The obituary notice in *Gentleman's Magazine* (July 1845) referred

⁴ The principal letters are dated 5 March, 1826, 15 March 1826, 6 December, 1826, 6 January, 1827, 11 January, 1827, 16 January 1827, 27 January 1827, 23 February, 1827, 15 March 1827, 30 April, 1830, 12 May, 1830, 7 July 1831, 4 August, 1831, 5 August 1831, 7 November, 1831, 9 November 1831, 19 November, 1831, and 3 December 1831. The main correspondents, other than Mrs. Roche herself, include Mr. Popham, the Roches' solicitor, J. Wheeler, the Roches's doctor, and R. H. Baines, a solicitor and friend.

⁵ Letters, as above. Letter from Edward Popham of Lincoln's Inn to Sir B. Hobhouse Bart. 23 February 1827. Although this letter is in the Royal Literary Society's Fund collection at the British Library, it is actually a request that the recipient puts his name list on the subscription list for *Contrast; or, Helena and Adelaide*.

⁶ See website www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=47124 for a drawing of the front elevation of houses in Stangate Street.

⁷ Letters. 27 January, 1827.

⁸ Letters 6 December, 1826.

⁹ Letters 11 January, 1827

¹⁰ Maria Regina Roche, *Contrast*, (A. K. Newman, 1826).

to her as a distinguished writer and that „many young hearts, now old, must remember the effect upon them of her graceful and touching compositions.’

Today Maria Regina Roche is not remembered as an impoverished supplicant in a hopelessly entangled legal case, but as a novelist of considerable repute in her time. In total, she wrote fifteen novels, with two further attributions, almost all published by William Lane, followed by A. K. Newman, of the popular Minerva Press. Most of her work is romantic, sentimental, and as befits a follower of Ann Radcliffe, contains Gothic episodes, illustrated by a passage from *The Discarded Son* (1807),

„The building was not only known to be remote from every inhabited one, but the wind made a hollow and a moaning noise throughout it, that might well at times have been mistaken for the sighings and lamentations of distress: a shattered staircase descended to the hall, above which all appeared involved in ruin, mystery, and darkness; while on the green and slimy walls, the quivering and uncertain light threw shadows more fantastic than any but the most disordered imagination could possibly have given birth to. ¹¹

Heroines of acute sensibility are subjected to persecution by unscrupulous villains, the forests are dark and menacing, and ruins are inhabited by ghosts mostly visible only in the imagination of the heroine. Heroes are handsome, often aristocratic; love in marriage invariably triumphs in the end but only after endless misfortunes and misunderstandings.

The most popular of Roche’s novels was *The Children of the Abbey*, (1796), which reached its 10th edition in 1825, was still in publication in 1882 and is read today; there were also French and Spanish translations.¹² Sales surpassed those of Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and Jane Austen referred to the work in *Emma*. Surprise is expressed by Emma that Mr. Martin had never heard of the title. *The Children of the Abbey* is a romance novel of sensibility with Gothic episodes. The plot is complicated and improbable and concerns the story of Amanda, a virtuous girl who possesses ‚a soul of exquisite sensibility’. She is pursued by Colonel Belgrave who ‚instantly marked her for his prey’. A second plot, in parallel, tells the story of her brother Oscar. Endless misunderstandings and

¹¹ Maria Regina Roche, *The Discarded Son; or, The Haunt of the Banditti* (Minerva Press, 1807) p. 57.

¹² *Les enfans de l’abbaye*, trad. par André Morellet (1797, 1801).

Oscar y Amanda: Amor y virtud triunfantes ... Verdadera y única refundición castellana por D. E. Villapando de Cárdenas [adapt.] (1868);

heartbreak ensue before brother and sister both find happiness in marriage. In the background are ruined buildings, chapels, convents, a castle, a Tudor Hall and a ghostly figure for good measure. Fortitude, and above all a belief in morality prevail as in all Roche's novels which also emphasise the precarious position of women in a male dominated society.

Not all of Roche's earlier novels were as successful as *The Children of the Abbey*. *Clermont* (1798), one of the 'horrid' novels discussed by Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1818) was not well received. A reviewer remarked: 'mystery is heaped upon mystery, and murder upon murder, with little art, and great improbability.'¹³ Again in 1814, on the publication of *Trecothick Bower*, the *Critical Review* published another scathing criticism:

„Regina Maria Roche is one of those ladies who assiduously feed the pig-stye of literature in Leadenhall-street and Trecothick Bower has now issued forth another monument of her literary fame. If grotesque and unnatural character, improbable events arising from impossible causes, a wild and disjointed plot, and the most bombastic and inflated language, be the constituents of a novel, Regina Maria Roche has succeeded to the fullest extent.¹⁴

Fortunately, not all Roche's readers agreed about the poor quality of her writing. Edward Popham of Lincoln's Inn wrote to Sir B. Hobhouse, Bart on 23 February, 1827 asking him to add his name to a subscription list for *Contrast; or, Helena and Adelaide*, Roche's second to last novel.

„We cannot refrain from expressing our admiration of Mrs. Roche, who amidst the vicissitudes of fortune and the shock of accidents, has preserved a mind unclouded, and a spirit unsubdued, and persevered in accomplishing the work described opposite, on the public patronage of which rests her last hope of being able to meet the combined calamity of want and sickness.'

¹³ *Critical Review*, November, 1798.

¹⁴ *Critical Review*, January, 1814.

It must be assumed that many similar letters were sent as the final list amounted to 204 subscribers including five Royal Highnesses, and an impressive number of members of the aristocracy and church. Roche appreciated this support and wrote in her Preface to the book:

„Their generous sympathy has restored the author to comparative happiness. Those who can imagine the effect produced on the mind, when a long night of sickness and privation has given place to the dawn of health and comfort, and where gloom and despair have been succeeded by hope and sunshine, may form some faint notion of this auspicious change.’¹⁵

Roche’s last six novels reflect her return to Ireland; she dealt with some of the Irish issues of the day as, for example, the difficulties which absentee landlords created, a theme that had preoccupied her more famous contemporary, Maria Edgeworth, in her novel of 1812, *The Absentee*. Roche’s *The Tradition of the Castle, or Scenes in the Emerald Isle* (1824), contains nationalist sentiment with a message for those landlords to stay at home. At a dinner described in *The Munster Cottage Boy* the guests discuss Ireland:

„Tis by conduct of this kind – „tis by either inveighing against, or turning into ridicule, every thing belonging to Ireland, that she has gradually lost her proud pre-eminence amongst nations. When strangers hear those that have been nurtured in her bosom, and battered on her soil, abusing her, „tis natural for them to conclude she is everything that is odious and despicable. But the bad policy of this will yet be perceived, when, deserted, and of course impoverished, she is unable, through such means, to furnish her unnatural children with the supplies their vanity and extravagance need elsewhere.’¹⁶

The poverty of Ireland, and that experienced by Roche herself, is reflected in *The Munster Cottage Boy*, although not without humour. During breakfast the pig comes in, and, „next all the cocks and hens, with a whole tribe of geese and turkies, which, not choosing immediately to retire, kept up such a screaming, and racing, and fluttering about, that, together with the spitting of the cat as they approached her, and the growling of the dog when they disturbed him, soon made the place resemble Bedlam.’¹⁷

¹⁵ Maria Regina Roche, *Contrast; or, Helena and Adelaide* (A. K. Newman & Co., 1828) p. xiv.

¹⁶ Maria Regina Roche, *The Munster Cottage Boy*, (A. K. Newman & Co., 1825) p. 131.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 126

Maria Regina Roche may be said to bridge the gap between Romantic novels of sentiment, coloured in with the Gothic, and the hard grind of working class life leading on to the Victorian novels and Dickens. Despite the many adverse comments made about her work in the *Critical Review* there is much to enjoy in her writing. Lovers of fiction of the long eighteenth century would do well to ensure that *The Children of the Abbey* is on their reading lists.

Published works

- 1789 *The Vicar of Landsdowne; or, Country Quarters: a tale*, by Regina Maria Dalton.
Printed by the author and sold by J. Johnson. (second edition, William Lane, Minerva Press, 1800)
- 1793 *The Maid of the Hamlet: a tale*, by Regina Maria Dalton (William Lane, Minerva Press)
- 1796 *The Children of the Abbey*, by Maria Regina Dalton (William Lane, Minerva Press)
- 1798 *Clermont*, by Regina Maria Roche (William Lane, Minerva Press)
- 1800 *Nocturnal Visit*, by Maria Regina Roche (William Lane, Minerva Press)
- 1807 *Alvondown Vicarage*, attributed to Maria Regina Roche (William Lane, Minerva Press)
- 1807 *The Discarded Son; or, Haunt of the Banditti*, a tale, by Regina Maria Roche (Lane, Newman, Minerva Press)
- 1810 *The Houses of Osma and Almeria, or Convent of St. Ildefonso*, by Regina Maria Roche (Newman, Minerva Press)
- 1813 *The Monastery of St. Columb; or, The Atonement* by Regina Maria Roche (Newman, Minerva Press)
- 1814 *Trecothick Bower; or, the Lady of the West Country*, by Regina Maria Roche (Newman, Minerva Press)
- 1814 *London Tales; or, Reflective Portraits*, by Regina Maria Dalton (later Roche) John Booth, London). Doubts have been cast as to whether this is by Roche.
- 1820 *The Munster Cottage Boy*, by Regina Maria Roche. (Newman, Minerva Press)
- 1823 *The Bridal of Dunamore, and, Lost and won*, two tales, by Regina Maria Roche (A.K. Newman)
- 1824 *The Tradition of the Castle; or, Scenes in the Emerald Isle*, by Regina Maria Roche (A.K. Newman)
- 1825 *The Castle Chapel*, by Regina Maria Roche (A.K. Newman)
- 1828 *Contrast*, by Regina Maria Roche (A.K. Newman)
- 1836 *The Nun's Picture*, a tale, by Regina Maria Roche

Anna, or Edinburg by Regina Maria Roche, writing anonymously (London, Hill, 1815)

See Natalie Schroeder, 'Regina Maria Roche, Popular Novelist, 1789–1834: The Rochean Canon', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 73 (1979), 462–68. She doubts the work is by Regina Maria Roche.

Bibliography

There are a number of articles written and references in books about Maria Regina Roche; I am particularly indebted to the following:

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Schroeder, Natalie, "The Anti-Feminist Reception of Regina Maria Roche", *Essays in Literature* 9 (1982) 55-65

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Schroeder, Natalie, „Regina Maria Roche and the early Nineteenth Century Regional Irish Novelists,' *Eire-Ireland* 18 (1984) 116-130.

Nocturnal Visit, Maria Regina Roche, intro. Robert D. Mayo (New York: Arno Press (Ayer Company,) 1977)

Johnson, Claudia L. ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Wollestonecraft* May 2002 (includes review of „The Vicar of Landsdowne' from *Analytical Review* 4 May 1789, 77.

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