

## MARY BATTERSBY, A REGENCY ARTIST FROM COUNTY MEATH

Although little is known of Mary Battersby's life, recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge her talent and to re-evaluate her position within the canon of Irish artists. Anne Crookshank and the Knight of Glin, who were the first to research her oeuvre, drew attention to the brilliance of her use of colour, a quality which the fine state of preservation of the drawings included for sale here, only serves to emphasise. While scholars, notably Eimear O'Connor, have recognised her significance, as a marginalised Irish woman artist, the art market has not had the chance to appreciate Battersby's art, as, apart from the collection offered here, all of her extant work is contained in six albums split between the National Library of Ireland and the Ulster Museum. Her extreme rarity was forcibly asserted by Dr O'Connor - '*it seems that there is no other work in existence by this woman*'; in this context the discovery of an additional thirty-five works by the artist is an important milestone.

Battersby was active in Dublin, Belfast and her native County Meath in the first four decades of the nineteenth century. Although containing work dated as early as 1801, the albums now in the National Library were donated to the Royal Dublin Society in 1820 and 1836 while an album of paintings and flowers in the Ulster Museum is also dated 1836. In an inscription in this album she gives her address as Mountjoy Square, Dublin while in a letter of the same year she describes the three albums given to the RDS as 'Drawings from a collection of birds shot in Pennsylvania, North America, by Robert Battersby Esq. MD'; 'native birds which were all shot in the County Meath' and 'flowers drawn from nature'. The latest date that the artist is recorded is 1841.

Her motivation in presenting the drawings to the RDS was so show her gratitude for their 'beautiful Botanic Gardens and the amusement it afforded her' and to acknowledge the contribution that the Society had made to the 'great improvement' in Ireland's 'natural history, the arts, manufactures, agriculture and horticulture'. Although essentially a lady amateur artist - if one of exceptional talent - Battersby was clearly attuned to botanical and ornithological taxonomy: 'She was interested in documenting science in general and the Linnean system of categorization in particular, and not simply in making decorative paintings for pleasure'. As Dr O'Connor argues Battersby was able to 'circumvent and negotiate received convention by presenting her scientifically observed images of birds in a medium suitable for use by women - watercolour'.

From the clue of the Mountjoy Square address given in one of the albums, Crookshank and Glin established that No 16 was owned by a Mrs Battersby who lived there from 1816 to 1834. Further, O'Connor's research has shown that the artist was a member of the branch of the Battersby family from Bobsville, County Meath, who had been settled in the county since the seventeenth century. Indeed it seems that she was the daughter of William Battersby and his wife Mary Sharman.

Battersby's watercolour have been characterised by Eimear O'Connor as 'well-defined and admirably executed'. She continues: 'Her style involved drawing the outline of the flowers and birds first, which she then filled with watercolour. She stuck rigidly to the natural colour of her specimens and she did not use extraneous detail'. The collection which includes both native and exotic birds clearly comes from more than one source as some of the pictures are of noticeably large size. It is a welcome addition to the tiny oeuvre of this rare Irish artist.

William Laffan, September 2013

Literature, Anne Crookshank and the Knight of Glin, *The Watercolours of Ireland* (London, 1994) p. 116-17

Patricia Butler, *Irish Botanical Illustrators and Flower Painters* (Woodbridge, 2000) pp. 66-67

Eimear O'Connor, 'Miss Battersby: a case study', in *Irish Women Artists, 1800-2009, Familiar but Unknown* (Dublin, 2010), pp. 37-57