

# Introduction to the Life and Works of W.M. Letts (1882-1972)

Winifred Mabel Letts (1882–1972) was a ground-breaking poet, children's writer, short story writer, dramatist, novelist, amateur botanist, animal lover, philanthropist and champion of women. Letts, like other often overlooked female writers of the period, made a significant contribution to Irish literature.

Letts was born on 10 February 1882, in Salford, Manchester. She was the youngest of three daughters of an English rector, Rev. Ernest F. Letts, a graduate of Trinity College Dublin, and of his Irish wife, Mary Isabel Ferrier.



Rev. Letts was an antiquarian, an author, an expert on ecclesiastical architecture, and the grandson of John Letts, who published, in 1812, the world's first commercial diary. Mary Isabel was the daughter of Alexander Ferrier, of Knockmaroon at the Phoenix Park, Dublin. Alexander was one of the founders of the Dublin textile wholesalers, Ferrier Pollock & Co., later headquartered at Powerscourt Townhouse, South William Street.

When she was nine years old, Letts followed her two older sisters into the “dark abyss” of boarding school - the School of S. Anne in Abbots Bromley, Staffordshire. But happy memories of the holidays she had spent in her mother's home at Knockmaroon inspired her, at the age of sixteen, to move to Dublin, to be educated at Alexandra College, the first establishment in Ireland to provide a university-type education for women.

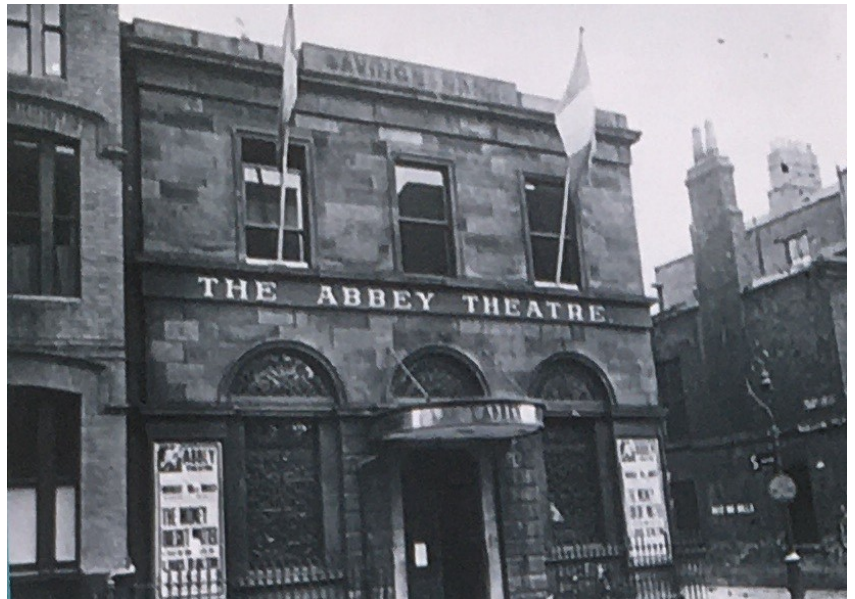


She returned to Manchester but following her father's death in 1904, Letts, her sister Mary, and her mother, moved permanently to Dublin. They lived at 'Nyanza', 4 Glenart Avenue, Blackrock and moved, in 1914, to 'Dal Riada', 19 Avoca Avenue, Blackrock.

# W.M. Letts

## The Dramatist

In January 1907, W.M. Letts attended a performance of J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea* in the recently-opened Abbey Theatre. She was so inspired by the play that, in response, she wrote a one-act tragedy, ***The Eyes of the Blind***, about a murder in a Wicklow bog. She submitted it to the Abbey and to her "great surprise", it was accepted. Letts was only the second woman (Lady Gregory being the first) to have a play in



the Abbey. On Easter Monday, 1 April 1907, the play was performed along with three other one-act plays, *Deirdre* by W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory's *The Rising of the Moon* and *Spreading the News*. The cast of Letts's play was Máire O'Neill, Brigit O'Dempsey, William Fay and his brother, Frank.

Two years later, Letts's second play, ***The Challenge***, was performed, also at the Abbey. Unfortunately, the costumes, designed by the actress, Sarah Allgood, were totally inappropriate for the serious nature of the work. On the opening night, Letts had to beg Lady Gregory not to go up to the theatre gallery to order the audience to stop laughing! The play ran for four performances.

Letts's three-act play, ***Hamilton and Jones***, was performed by Lord Longford's Company in the Gate Theatre in 1941. The play recounted the changing fortunes of a Dublin drapery firm from its foundation by a Dublin Protestant merchant family in 1886, picking up the story again for 1916, and again for 1936. The Dublin Protestant merchant family sounds remarkably like her maternal Ferrier family.

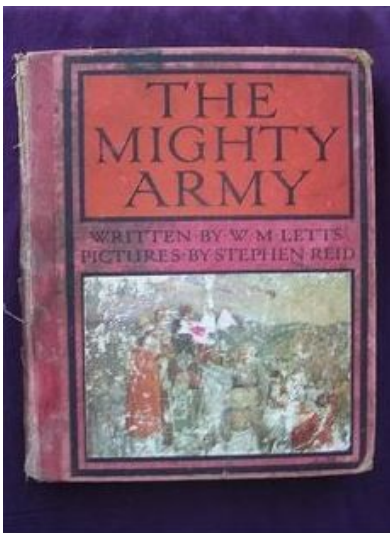
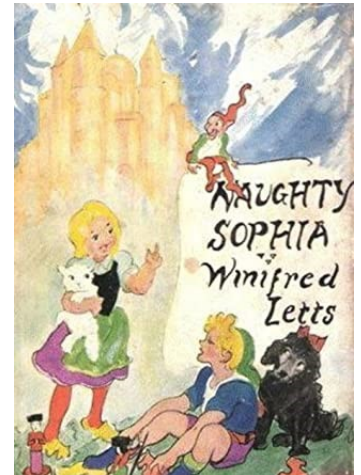
Various plays and sketches by Letts were performed on stage and broadcast on Radio Éireann and on the BBC Home Service over the next thirty years, including ***Cupid in Disgrace***, ***Miss Stasia***, ***When It Strikes Ten***, ***Joy and Mr Mulligan***, ***Dublin in Queen Anne's Reign***, ***The Dean's Tree*** and ***The Red-haired Woman***. Radio Éireann also broadcast ***The Eyes of the Blind*** in October 1945 and again in August 1946

# W.M. Letts

## The Children's Author

W.M. Letts published twenty-two books in all, including many for children. She began her first book, *The Story Spinner* (1907), by introducing us to the Story Spinner himself: a “little ancient man, like ... an Irish leprechaun” who spins stories on his spinning wheel and weaves them on his loom.

In her second book, *Naughty Sophia* (1912), the Story Spinner spins the tale of a bold Archduchess who is expelled from the Palace of Wunderheim in Germany and is sent to live with the town toymaker and his family. This book was one of the most successful of all Letts's publications and was reprinted four times.



In the beautifully illustrated *The Mighty Army* (1912) and *Helmet & Cowl: Stories of Monastic and Military Orders* (1913), which was co-authored with her sister, Letts introduces readers to some well-known, and other lesser-known, male and female saints.

From the 1930s to the 1950s, Letts's writings, including *Naughty Sophia* and *What Happened Then?* (1921), were broadcast regularly on BBC Radio's hugely popular *Children's Hour*. Her stories about a young girl named Pomona were voted the “second favourite stories” on *Children's Hour*. *The Irish Times* in 1935 described Letts as “one of the programme's most successful writers”.

The Pomona stories were later published as *Pomona & Co.* (1934) and *Pomona's Island* (1935). This latter book and Letts's next book, *The Gentle Mountain* (1938), which was also broadcast, are both set in the Northern Ireland countryside and reflect her own great interest in Irish myth and legend, as well as her unwavering belief that country life, fresh air, nature and the company of animals are the best medicine for any sickly city child!



# W.M. Letts

## The Poet

When learning poetry off by heart was a valued exercise in Irish primary schools, 'The Harbour' and 'A Soft Day', two poems by W.M. Letts, were firm favourites. Similarly, 'Tim, an Irish Terrier' was a test piece for elocution exams. These three poems were published in ***Songs from Leinster*** (1913), her first book of poetry. A contemporary review in the literary journal *The Irish Book Lover* refers to "the humour, beauty and pathos ... in the ... verses of this gifted writer."

Letts commented that she "never heard anything memorable or musical" in drawing room conversations and that all her "ideas came from the back door", from people selling things and delivering vegetables. A conversation with a woman selling blackberries inspired her to write 'Blackberry Time', which was published in *The Spectator* in 1910. The editor encouraged her to continue writing and suggested she write poems to be set to music by Charles V. Stanford, and sung by the baritone, Harry Plunket Greene. Subsequently, Stanford composed music for sixteen of her poems, and set another poem, 'Easter Snow', to the traditional air of the same name.

In ***Songs from Leinster*** and ***More Songs from Leinster*** (1926), Letts wrote about people, places and things she loved, including the dignified, although impoverished, women and children of Dublin city slums, fishing villages in Wexford, the Wicklow mountains, and animals, especially her beloved dogs:

No matter the size of the dog he'll meet,  
Tim trails his coat the length o' the street.  
D'ye mind his scars an' his ragged ear,  
The like of a Dublin Fusilier?  
He's a massacre dog that knows no fear.



Elizabeth (Lolly) Yeats at the Cuala Press used many of Letts's poems on greeting cards and prints. Her poem 'The Hurley Player' was paired with a Jack B. Yeats illustration of the same name.

In the early 1960s, Letts donated the royalties from her writings, and allowed her poems to be printed on special leaflets, to raise funds for the Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

# W.M. Letts

## The War Poet

In the summer of 1914, the idyllic lifestyle W.M. Letts had enjoyed – looking after her mother, doing the flowers, reading, and cycling through the Wicklow mountains – came to an end with the outbreak of the First World War.

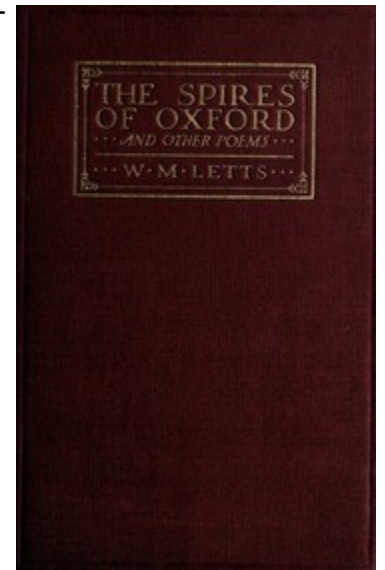
Letts began training in the Royal City of Dublin Hospital in Baggot Street in June 1915. She was posted as a VAD nurse to 2<sup>nd</sup> West General Hospital, Manchester and served there from August 1915 to June 1916. On her return, she was a member of the Co. Dublin 50 VAD, assisting in the Blackrock Branch of the Irish War Hospital Supply Depot. She qualified as a masseuse (nowadays called a physiotherapist), became a member of the Incorporated Society of Trained Masseuses, and gained a qualification in Medical Electricity. She was part of the Almeric Paget Military Massage Corps and worked, treating invalided soldiers, in a Military Massage Camp in Manchester, in Alnwick Convalescent Camp in Northumberland and in Blackrock Military Orthopaedic Hospital.

Letts's hospital experiences gave her war poems a unique perspective. She witnessed first-hand the long-term pain and suffering of the injured, she saw the horror and futility of war, and she identified with the women and families who waited, in vain in so many cases, for the young men to return. She wrote of "men's blood and women's agonies". *Hallowe'en and Poems of the War* was published in 1916, and republished, in 1918, as *The Spires of Oxford and Other Poems*. Her 1917 poem, 'The Connaught Rangers', was printed on the dinner menu for the disbandment dinner of the 2nd Battalion, Connaught Rangers, in 1922.

One of Letts's best-known war poems is 'The Deserter', a heartrending description of the fate of a young soldier, "scared as any frightened child", who was shot for desertion.

But who can judge him, you or I ?  
God makes a man of flesh and blood  
Who yearns to live and not to die.

It is worth noting that Letts's book of war poetry predated those of Francis Ledwidge, Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.



## W.M. Letts

### Later Life and Career

In 1926, W.M. Letts married William H.F. Verschoyle. They lived in 19 Fitzwilliam Square and, at weekends, visited the Verschoyle estate in Kilberry, Co. Kildare. Letts far preferred country life to city life, as we read in her book of memoir essays, *Knockmaroon* (1933):

I do not speak of town with any love,  
for to be in town is but to exist, while  
to be in the country is to live ...

I like to come here when the hedges  
are full of hazel-nuts and great jewel-  
clusters of Guelder berries. October  
days lie gently and hazily on the fields.



While continuing to write and to publish, Letts was involved with many charities and pursued many interests - she was an active member of Irish Women Writers' Club, of PEN and of the Wild Flower Society. She campaigned to have certain clauses in the 1937 draft constitution changed, and also against literary censorship. She was involved in the Fresh Air Fund, bringing children from Dublin slums on country holidays, as reflected in an August verse in the *Book of Birthdays*:

Oh! I'm sorry for children in the street  
Ragged poor children with hot scarred feet.  
They never hear branches toss in a gale,  
They play on the pavement, they're thin and pale.  
We ought to give them even a day  
Of seaside or meadow where they might play.

Her penultimate book, *St Patrick the Travelling Man* (1932), reads like a travelogue, as Letts imagines Patrick traversing the land, from Pollshone in Wexford to Moville in Donegal, from Slemish Mountain in Antrim to Foynes in Limerick. Letts and her husband William also traversed Ireland – by car in their case – visiting friends, exploring archaeological sites and collecting wild flowers 'in a scientific and well-regulated way'.

Following William's death in 1943, Letts moved to Kent to live with her sisters. She returned to Ireland in the 1950s and bought Beech Cottage in Killiney, Co. Dublin. She moved into a nursing home in 1969 and died there on 7 June 1972. She is buried, with her husband, in the Church of Ireland graveyard in Rathcoole, Co. Dublin.