Mangan, James Clarence

by Sean Ryder

Mangan, James Clarence (1803–49), poet and translator, was probably born 1 May 1803 in Dublin, the second of five children of James Mangan (1765–1843) from Shanagolden, Co. Limerick, who may have been a hedge-school teacher, and Catherine (née Smith; 1771–1846), whose family owned farmland in Co. Meath as well as commercial property in Dublin. There is no record of his birth, but his baptism took place on 2 May 1803 at the catholic chapel in Rosemary Lane in the Liberties. The name ‘Clarence’ was a nom de plume adopted as an adult. The Mangans ran a grocery at 3 Fishamble St. near Christ Church, but the father's extravagance and unwise attempts at property speculation appear to have led to bankruptcy, and the family changed address several times after 1810. With the financial support of his mother's family, Mangan was educated at a Jesuit school in Saul's Court, followed by periods at schools in Derby Square, Arran Quay, and Chancery Lane, gaining a knowledge of Latin, French, Spanish, and Italian.

From rebuses to ‘translations’ In 1818, to help relieve the family distress, Mangan was apprenticed to Kenrick's scrivenery in York St., and the same year published his first poems: faddish rebuses, enigmas, and puzzle poems for two of the popular Dublin almanacs of the day (Grant's and the New Ladies'). These early efforts, though highly formulaic, display the love of wordplay and verbal trickery that would characterise Mangan's work throughout his writing life. They also include his earliest nationalist poems, among which was a rebus on the name of Robert Emmet (qv).

In 1826 his apprenticeship ended, and he became a legal copyist at Matthew Frank's offices in Merrion Square. The poet later described these years of employment as alienating, degrading, and wretched, and partly blamed them for his subsequent abuse of alcohol. However, it is also clear that during this time he formed important friendships with other Dublin writers and satirists, including John Sheehan (qv) and the young wits associated with the anti-tithe Comet newspaper, and that he took an interest in public affairs – he was among the signatories to a petition for repeal of the union in 1831. From 1829 to 1838 Mangan was employed in Leland's solicitor's office in Fitzwilliam Square. During this period he contributed to a range of very different periodicals, including Petrie's antiquarian Dublin Penny Journal, the scurrilous Dublin Satirist, the unionist Irish Monthly Magazine, and the nationalist Vindicator.

His most substantial contributions, beginning in 1834 and continuing up to his death, were made to the Dublin University Magazine. Indeed Mangan's fame among his contemporaries rested chiefly on the twenty-two ‘Anthologia Germanica’ articles he wrote for the magazine, consisting of translations from the German romantics, especially Schiller, Rückert, Goethe, and Freiligrath, accompanied by mercurial
and often humorous prose commentaries. Mangan appears to have been self-taught in German, and although briefly employed in the early 1830s as a tutor in the language, there is no evidence that he ever visited Germany, or indeed that he ever travelled further than his maternal family farm in Co. Meath. Beginning in 1837, the *Dublin University Magazine* also published a series of oriental ‘translations’ by Mangan (‘Literae Orientales’), purporting to be from Persian, Turkish, Coptic, and other languages, but in fact either entirely original or adapted very freely from existing translations by German poets – a technique the poet described whimsically as the ‘antithesis of plagiarism’ (Lloyd, 103). Mangan did translate some Italian and Spanish poetry for the *Dublin University Magazine*, but certainly not from the Serbian, Polish, Chinese, ‘Hindostanee’, ‘Chippewawian’, ‘Tartarian’, or other languages in which he claimed to have found his originals. Like Thomas Moore (qv) before him, Mangan used exotic voices and oriental motifs to comment obliquely on Irish history and identity – for instance, in his pseudo-Turkish poem ‘The Caramanian exile’ Mangan’s speaker bewails the cultural and psychological devastation caused by the imperialist invasion of his homeland.

**Irish antiquity, language, and nationalism** Mangan’s contact with antiquarians such as George Petrie (qv) and John O’Donovan (qv) in the 1830s led to his employment as copyist at the ordnance survey office from 1838 to 1841, and sparked his interest in the Irish-language material then being collected, edited, and translated by these scholars. Mangan appears to have had no more than a cursory knowledge of Irish, and relied on others to provide him with literal translations which he would then ‘versify’. His Irish translations (beginning with ‘The woman of three cows’ in 1840) were celebrated for capturing the spirit, if not the exact sense, of the originals (although scholars such as O’Donovan sometimes displayed irritation at the poet’s willingness to invent and embellish). When it was no longer possible for financial reasons to continue employing him at the ordnance survey, Petrie and others arranged for Mangan to work as a cataloguer in Trinity College library (1842–6), where the young John Mitchel (qv) famously spotted him perched on a ladder, ghost-like and absorbed in the reading of a large volume. During the 1840s Mangan’s work took an increasingly political turn, especially after his recruitment by Charles Gavan Duffy (qv) to write for the *Nation* in 1842. He published some of his most complex and memorable poetry in that paper during the famine years of 1846 and 1847, and then in John Mitchel’s radical *United Irishman* during the spring of 1848. Some of these poems, like ‘Dark Rosaleen’ and ‘O’Hussey’s ode to the Maguire’, are impressive in their emotional and rhythmic power. Others, like the harrowing ‘Siberia’ and ‘A vision of Connaught in the XIIIth century’, display a psychological intensity unique among Irish poets of the period. Characteristically, alongside such serious work Mangan continued to compose inventive verse satires, with titles such as ‘To the Ingleezee Khafir calling himself Djaun Bool Djenkinzun’.

**Distress and death** Mangan’s final years were spent in considerable distress, with no fixed abode, suffering from ill health, depression, alcoholism, and perhaps opium addiction, though he denied the latter. He appears to have been giving some
financial support to his parents until their deaths in the 1840s, and towards the end of his life lived periodically with a dysfunctional younger brother, William. He had been dismissed from his library employment in 1846 (the precise reasons are not recorded, but were probably related to alcoholism), so his irregular income in this latter period derived from his writing and from the generosity of friends, including Charles Gavan Duffy, Samuel Ferguson (qv) and the Rev. C. P. Meehan (qv). These benefactors tended to view Mangan with a combination of sympathy, frustration, and distaste as he delivered his poems for immediate payment, or borrowed money, then disappeared into a world of ‘tap-rooms and low public houses’ (O'Donoghue, 178). In the summer of 1849, having already spent some days in the Kilmainham fever sheds suffering from cholera, Mangan was discovered in a state of severe malnutrition, and was admitted to the Meath Hospital. He died seven days later on 20 June 1849, his last poetic effusions apparently consigned to the fire by a nurse. The poet was buried in Glasnevin cemetery: according to C. P. Meehan, only three mourners attended the funeral.

Mangan's legacy The popularity of Mangan's work in the decades after his death was based mainly on an appreciation of the powerful emotion, melodic skill, and nationalist sentiment of his later poems, and on the ease with which his immiseration could be romanticised into a kind of martyrdom. John Mitchel influentially linked Mangan's poetry with his personal suffering to describe him as 'a type and shadow of the land he loved so well' (Mitchel, 15). Bleak and despairing poems such as 'The nameless one', published posthumously, encouraged later readers to see Mangan as Ireland's doomed poète maudit. W. B. Yeats (qv) admired Mangan as 'our one poet raised to the first rank by intensity' (Yeats, 396), far superior to the poetic propagandists that surrounded him, while James Joyce (qv), also an admirer, saw in Mangan the figure of a tragic artist imprisoned by a 'hysteric nationalism' he could not transcend. Among international writers, Edgar Allen Poe was almost certainly influenced by him, and Herman Melville was a known admirer. A handful of poems, including 'Dark Rosaleen', 'O'Hussey’s ode to the Maguire', ‘A vision of Connaught in the XIIIth century’, and ‘The nameless one’, featured regularly in Irish school texts for much of the twentieth century.

Recent scholarship has tended to draw attention to other aspects of Mangan's literary legacy. Although frequently identified as a romantic nationalist, his use of multiple personae and self-parody, his linguistic playfulness, and his provocative blurring of boundaries between ‘originals’ and ‘translations’ make him seem strikingly modern, a forerunner of twentieth-century experimentalists like James Joyce and Flann O'Brien (qv). As if to mock the conventions of authorial earnestness and sincerity, Mangan hardly ever published under his own name, adding the nom de plume ‘Clarence’ in 1832 (echoing ‘false, fleeting, perjured Clarence’ from Shakespeare’s Richard III), and deploying more than a score of other pseudonyms throughout his writing life, the most famous being ‘The man in the cloak’. Mangan's politics were similarly protean – despite his affiliation with the Young Irelanders his work expressed a surprisingly wide range of political views, from militarism to
pacifism to cynicism. His physical appearance reflected his eccentricity: Charles
Gavan Duffy remembered him ‘dressed in a blue cloak, midsummer or midwinter,
and a hat of fantastic shape, under which golden hair as fine and as silky as a
woman's hung in unkempt tangles, and deep blue eyes lighted a face as colourless
as parchment’ (Duffy, 109–10). Sometimes this attire was supplemented by two
voluminous umbrellas and green goggles. Along with these public mannerisms,
contemporary accounts remark on Mangan's extreme personal shyness and solitary
behaviour. For the most part he seems to have avoided close personal relationships.
He told Gavan Duffy that he had made a proposal of marriage to a certain Margaret
Stackpoole in 1834, but that she had rejected him.

Mangan was extraordinarily prolific. He wrote nearly a thousand poems for
various periodicals, though he published only one collection during his lifetime,
the *Anthologia Germanica* (1845) which reprinted 130 of his German translations
(without the original prose commentaries that had appeared in the *Dublin University
Magazine*). Some of the Irish translations on which he had been working in the last
two years of his life were published posthumously in John O'Daly's *Poets and poetry
of Munster* (1849), and his verse translation of the seventeenth-century satire ‘Tribes
of Ireland' appeared in John O'Donovan's edition of the poem in 1852. Although
known primarily as a poet, Mangan also wrote occasional stories and essays; these
include parodies of popular literary genres, writings on the supernatural, and a
series of critical articles on contemporary Irish authors. Mangan's highly imaginative
autobiographical fragment, written in 1848, was first published in 1882 by C. P.
Meehan. He also wrote a brief autobiographical essay under the initials ‘E. W.' for
the *Irishman* newspaper, published posthumously in August 1850. Early editions of
the poetry, such as those by John Mitchel (1859) and D. J. O'Donoghue (qv) (1903),
are limited in scope and textually unreliable, and have been superseded by a seven-
volume critical edition of Mangan's collected works, edited by Augustine Martin (qv)
and others (1996–2002). This edition also includes a biography of the poet by Ellen
Shannon-Mangan and a comprehensive bibliography by Jacques Chuto. Mangan's
surviving manuscripts are few: most may be found in the collections of the NLI and
the RIA. The only image of Mangan taken from life is a small silhouette made in
1822, now in the RIA. Frederick Burton (qv) drew a deathbed portrait of Mangan as
he lay in the mortuary of the Meath Hospital. This portrait, the original of which is in
the NGI, has been the basis for most subsequent images of the poet. A death mask
alleged to be that of Mangan was purchased in a Dublin bookshop in 1911 by C. P.
Curran (qv); it is now in the Dublin Civic Museum. In 1909 a memorial bust of the
poet by Oliver Sheppard (qv) was erected in St Stephen's Green, Dublin.

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John Mitchel (ed.), *Poems by James Clarence Mangan* (1859); John McCall, *The
life of James Clarence Mangan* (1882); Charles Gavan Duffy, *Young Ireland* (1888);
D. J. O'Donoghue, *The life and writings of James Clarence Mangan* (1897); W. B.