Voynich, Ethel Lilian

by Lawrence William White

Voynich, Ethel Lilian (1864–1960), novelist, translator, and composer, was born 11 May 1864 at Lichfield Cottage, Ballintemple, Co. Cork, youngest of five daughters of Professor George Boole (qv) of QCC, eminent mathematician and logician, and Mary Boole (née Everest), educational psychologist and eccentric philosopher, niece of Sir George Everest, surveyor-general of India, after whom is named the world’s highest mountain. After the sudden death in her infancy of her father (December 1864), the family, in straitened circumstances, moved to England. Hypersensitive, reared amid the chaotic bohemia of her mother’s London home – save for two traumatic years in Lancashire with an emotionally abusive uncle – she dressed entirely in black from age 15 until her marriage, in mourning for the condition of the world. A small legacy allowed her to study music in Berlin (1882–5). After learning Russian in London from an exiled revolutionary, Sergei Kravchinski, alias Stepniak, she travelled in Russia (1887–9), giving music lessons in St Petersburg, associating with families of political prisoners, and rendering medical assistance to the poor. In London she married (1891) a Polish political exile named Habdank-Woynicz, recently escaped from Siberia; he became a naturalised British subject, anglicising his name to Wilfred Michael Voynich. The couple assisted Stepniak in his political work and propaganda until the latter’s death in a railway accident (1895); Ethel Voynich – or ‘E. L. V.’, as she was called – made a dangerous journey alone to the Ukraine to organise smuggling of contraband publications (1894). Encouraged and guided by Stepniak, she published translations from the Russian: Stories from Garshin (1893); a selection of Stepniak’s pamphlets, Nihilism as it is (1894); and The humour of Russia (1895). In 1896 she had an affair with the shadowy adventurer Sigmund Rosenblum, a.k.a. Sidney Reilly, latterly ‘ace of spies’ of the British secret service, said to possess eleven passports and a separate wife to accompany each; meeting in London, they travelled Italy together until he deserted her in Florence. The fabric of her first novel, The Gadfly (1897), was woven from various sources, not least the emotional shocks of her own life. For the protagonist she drew upon the experiences of both Reilly and her husband: Reilly’s early life for the complicated parentage and South American adventures of Arthur Burton, a.k.a. Felice Rivarez, the eponymous ‘Gadfly’; Voynich for the character’s prison experiences and immersion in nationalist revolution. The character of her heroine, Gemma Warren, ‘one of the most impressive attempts of the time to present an emancipated woman’ (Kettle, 174), was drawn from Charlotte Wilson, mistress of Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin. The book proved an international literary phenomenon: a bestseller through numerous editions, it held a special attraction for revolutionaries of all hues; it was widely read in the British labour movement into the 1920s and enjoyed a vogue amongst Irish republicans (see Peadar O’Donnell, The gates flew open, ch. 14). Translated into over thirty languages, it commanded enduring popular and critical appeal in eastern Europe and the USSR, where
it was acclaimed one of the world’s great novels and was adapted for theatre, opera, and cinema. A 1955 Soviet film version with a score by Dmitri Shostakovich won an award at the Cannes film festival. Set against a quasi-historical pastiche of the 1840s Italian *risorgimento*, the book has nothing to do with socialism. Its appeal derived from the combination of heroic revolutionary idealism, conspiratorial intrigue, and anti-clericalism with the psychological fascination of the central character. Voynich rises above melodrama in the complexity of her unsentimental, if sensational, resolution of moral and psychological problems.

None of Voynich’s next three novels – *Jack Raymond* (1901), *Olive Latham* (1904), and *An interrupted friendship* (1910), a prequel to *The Gadfly* dealing with the protagonist’s South American experiences – approached the success of her first. Increasingly sombre in tone, they move away from optimistic political interest to morbid concentration on extremes of physical and psychological suffering and impairment. Voynich published translations of the Ukrainian national poet Taras Shevchenko (1911). During the first world war she undertook social work with the quakers. Joining her husband in New York in 1920 (where he had moved in 1914 with his secretary Anne Nill) she devoted herself largely to music, publishing a number of cantatas and a translation (1931) of the letters of composer Frederic Chopin. A final novel, *Put off thy shoes* (1945), treating the early life in Cornwall of the *Gadfly* heroine, was a critical and popular failure. The discovery of her existence, alive if aged, in New York by Russian literati in 1955 occasioned feverish celebrity in the USSR and a modest advance of royalties. After living quietly with her companion Anne Nill and adopted daughter, she died in New York, aged 96, 27 July 1960.

Her husband, Wilfred Voynich, became a noted bibliographer and antiquarian bookseller in both London and New York. The so-called ‘Voynich manuscript’ – an enigmatic medieval vellum quarto written in an as yet undeciphered secret script, which he discovered in a villa near Rome in 1912 – passed on his death (1930) into the possession of Ethel Voynich, herself an enthusiast of ciphers and cryptograms. The volume is now in Yale University’s rare-book library. Two sisters of Ethel Voynich achieved note: mathematician Alicia Boole (qv) and chemist Lucy Boole (qv).
