

Leech, Sarah

by Linde Lunney

Leech, Sarah (b. 1809), poet, was born in 1809, in the townland of Ballylennan in the parish of Taughboyne, Co. Donegal. She was the youngest of six children of a protestant, probably presbyterian, weaver and farmer named Thomas Leech. When Sarah was only three years old, her father died of pleurisy, leaving the family in difficult circumstances. The eldest girl, then aged fourteen, had been to school, and tried to teach her younger siblings how to read, but had little free time. Sarah, aged six, attended school for three months. Though afraid of the teacher, she learned to read and soon displayed a longing for more education and for books to read. She was taught to write when she was twelve, around the time she had to start spinning linen yarn to earn her living. A local benefactor gave her a few books and religious instruction, and in about 1822, she started composing poems, some in standard English and some in the Scots language spoken locally. One of her Ulster-Scots poems, 'Elegy on a loquacious old woman' circulated in the neighbourhood, and a visiting gentleman, intrigued by the vigorous satire of the piece, tracked down the nineteen year old author, copied some of her poems and sent them for publication in the *Londonderry Journal*.

With the intention of exciting sympathy for 'the female orphan', both the newspaper piece and subsequent commentary on Leech stress her poverty and her piety. The editor of her only collection of poetry, *Poems on various subjects* (1828), remarks that her life was spent in 'labour, indigence, and obscurity', and hoped that the profits from publication would assist her 'pilgrimage through life' (McGlynn and Holland, 2006). Certainly Leech's life was not easy; she became lame, perhaps suffering from what may have been a condition like rheumatoid arthritis, which may also have caused painful eyes, because in 1826 she feared she was losing her sight. But the family, though it may have struggled at times, was clearly not destitute and retained respectability. The frontispiece to her *Poems on various subjects* (unique in Ulster vernacular poetry), a depiction of Sarah Leech at her spinning wheel, shows her well-dressed, and apparently Sarah was mortified to read about her lowly station in life in the *Londonderry Journal*.

In 1822, Sarah and her mother moved to nearby Lettergull. Local knowledge identifies the farm where Sarah lived, and a spinning wheel preserved there by the Gilfillan family is claimed as the very wheel depicted in the frontispiece engraving. This farm in the 1850s was over seventy acres, much larger than the average in the area. It is possible that an older Leech girl married a Gilfillan, and took in her mother and her sickly sister.

Leech's piety was genuine, and was movingly expressed in several of her poems. In her poems in English, her support for the Brunswick Clubs, formed in 1828 to

oppose catholic emancipation after the suppression of the Orange Order, and her strongly expressed distrust of catholic priests, may possibly have been somewhat exaggerated to please the unidentified Church of Ireland gentleman who edited her poems for publication. The sentiments expressed have been somewhat difficult for modern readers keen to re-position Leech as a local celebrity with appeal across the community.

A handful of poems in Scots present no such difficulties. They are the reason that Leech was rediscovered by language enthusiasts and republished in 2006 by the Ulster-Scots Agency. The surviving work is perhaps too scant to prove claims that she was a feminist or a spokesperson for putative nascent protestant working-class consciousness, but the vigour of Leech's language, the local colour, her inventive rhyming and metrical skill, and in particular her ability to speak on occasion for her community and way of life, mark her out as a poet who could have done more if her circumstances had permitted. Sarah Leech's 'Address to Mr Richard Ramsey on perusing his beautiful address to the author' shows self-awareness and self-confidence, even cheek, as well as slyly satirical use of classical allusion to puncture pretension.

Wi' heck weel-teeth'd and spit renewed I sat me down to spin contented  
And your address to me reviewed Which set my head amaist demented. ... My muse  
kens nought o' Sappho's lays, Who sung sublime on soaring pinion: O! how the  
neighbours round would gaze, If I love-struck, should leap off Binion! My Pegasus  
now fain would sink Grown dizzy wi' sic classic matter So I maun light, and let him  
drink A draught o' Foyle's inspiring water ...

(in McGlynn and Pauline Holland (2006), 15)

Nothing is known of Sarah Leech after the publication of her poems in 1828.

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Celine McGlynn and Pauline Holland (eds), *Sarah Leech. The Ulster-Scots poetess of Raphoe, County Donegal* (2006); Linde Lunney, 'The original spinsters: the role of women in the Ulster domestic linen industry', *Familia. Ulster Genealogical Review*, 23 (2007), 39–40; *Griffith's valuation*; NAI tithe applotment book, Taughboyne, Co. Donegal; Frank Ferguson, 'Sarah Leech' in *Ulster-Scots writing an anthology* (2008, eBook), 207