

Maxwell, William Hamilton

by Desmond McCabe

Maxwell, William Hamilton (1792–1850), novelist, historian, and clergyman, was born 30 June 1792 in Market St., Newry, Co. Down, son of James Maxwell, merchant, and his wife, a daughter of William Hamilton. He witnessed the hanging of two United Irishmen in the town in 1798. Educated at the school of David Henderson in Newry, he matriculated into TCD on 7 December 1807. A misspent college life may have stood him in good stead later as novelist and bon viveur. He graduated BA in spring 1812. The notion (which he may have fostered) that he soldiered in the Peninsular campaign in 1812–14 has been rejected; the inglorious reality was that he stepped into a minor career in the church after being disappointed of an inheritance from an aunt. He was ordained deacon in Carlow (1813) by Bishop Percy Jocelyn (qv) of Ferns. Made curate that year of the parish of Clonallon, near Newry, at an annual salary of £75, he mixed easily with officers of the town garrison. In 1815 he became chaplain of the Newry masonic lodge. In the uproar following a wild prank in which he was involved, he was transferred in 1819 to the prebendary of Balla, Co. Mayo, an office in the gift of the Hon. William Stuart (qv), archbishop of Armagh, who was a friend of Maxwell's father-in-law. His clerical income rose to nearly £300 a year in tithes, though his duties were greatly diminished. There was no glebe house in the benefice and he lived in Castlebar for a time. He was quickly a leading figure in the round of social engagements in the county towns and houses, building a reputation for hard drinking, gallantry, and hilarious table talk. Provided with thirteen acres of glebe land near Balla, he raised fat cattle for the Ballinasloe October fairs.

Made county magistrate c.1820, he intermittently attended petty sessions at Balla and Castlebar. In November 1830 he chaired an inquiry into charges of embezzlement by the Castlebar sergeant of police, although he generally appears to have taken a relaxed attitude to his duties on the bench. He usually passed his days fox-hunting, shooting, and fishing, often with the 2nd marquess of Sligo, who made him his personal chaplain, perhaps for expert advice on misdeeds. Given the use of a hunting-lodge on the Sligo estate in 1824, he wrote his first novel, *O'Hara; or, 1798*. This dramatised the predicament, first of a protestant landlord tried and hanged in 1798 for membership of the United Irishmen, then that raised by the exploits of his embittered son fighting for the rebels in Antrim and Down. It retailed insights into the northern rebellion which Maxwell had picked up in Newry. Published anonymously in London, it sold few copies but undoubtedly influenced the first novels of Matthew Archdeacon (d. 1853) of Castlebar. The Colburn publishing house offered him £300 for rights to his second work, *Stories of Waterloo* (1829), in which he mined barrack-room anecdotes and an extensive reading to produce stories of the later French campaigns. This eventually went into ten editions. In the early 1830s he edited the local tory paper, the *Mayo Constitution*.

He brought out his most celebrated and durable work, *Wild sports of the West*, in 1832. Written while he stayed as a guest in Westport House, it was a bulky but readable account of his day-to-day adventures as a sportsman in a hunting lodge on the Mayo coast, either in Ballycroy or near Louisburgh. The scenes of hunting, whether seals, eagles, or game, are described with great zest and clarity, and interspersed with valuable observations on aspects of western peasant life, together with numerous items of folklore. There is a rough humanity in his picture of peasant society, though he regretted the breakdown of quasi-feudal society in Mayo: 'I suspect that food is abridged in about the same proportion that freedom is extended' (*Wild sports*, 279). It was immediately popular and has lasted. Though he should perhaps have continued in this vein, he chose instead to produce more romantic fiction, including *The dark lady of Doona* (1834) and *Captain Blake* (1838). The former recounted episodes in the legend of Granuaile (qv). The latter tells two stories, again of father and son. The first concerns Maj. Robert Blake, a bewhiskered, noble-hearted, devil-may-care, younger son of the wild Blake family of Mayo. Taking the blame for a practical joke played by his fellow-officers, he is put on half pay, soothes his feelings by flirting with his voluptuous cousin, elopes with a girl met once in a carriage in England, almost saves the day at Castlebar in August 1798, and is restored to the commission by a grateful military, only to die when shot by the enraged husband of his enamoured cousin, soon after which his wife dies in childbirth and the picaresque adventures of his son commence.

Like all his fiction there is much male braggadocio and racy detail and some narrative energy. The psychology of the characters is paper-thin; bits and pieces of folklore are dropped into the story for colour. His eighteen novels and histories ran through at least 104 editions between them up to the 1900s. His style reputedly influenced the novels of Charles Lever (qv). But his non-fiction – in history, sport, or biography – is more interesting to the modern reader. *Wild sports* was original in form and was much imitated in later Irish Victorian diaries and journals of sporting incident. Maxwell was ejected from his living in Balla in 1845, nominally for non-residence. He settled first in Portrush, Co. Antrim, and then in Scotland; his health deteriorated due to excessive drinking; and he died 29 December 1850 in poverty at Musselborough, near Edinburgh.

He married (1817) Mary, second daughter of Thomas Dobbin, a merchant from Armagh. Gossip suggested that the marriage proved unstable.

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*Papers relating to the state of the established church of Ireland*, HC 1820 (93), ix; *Returns relating to rent-charges payable in each diocese in Ireland*, HC 1854 (499), lviii; Charles Gavan Duffy, *My life in two hemispheres*, i (1898); *DNB*; Francis C. Crosle, *Notes on the literary history of Newry* (1897); Stephen J. Brown, *Ireland in fiction* (1919); *Alumni Dubl.*; Colin McKelvie, 'Towards a bibliography of the writings

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