

Mulholland, Rosa (Lady Gilbert)

by James H. Murphy

Mulholland, Rosa (Lady Gilbert) (1841–1921), novelist, was born in Belfast, daughter of Dr Joseph Stevenson Mulholland. She was educated privately and spent some time travelling in the west of Ireland, being subsequently credited in higher social circles with having an authentic insight into the Irish peasantry. She was encouraged in her brief artistic career by the painter Sir John Millais, but Charles Dickens helped to launch her literary career by publishing one of her novels in *All the year round*. She wrote poetry and fiction, in which women's experience figures prominently, and articles on social issues. She published over forty novels and during a fifty-year writing career was a prized contributor to the *Irish Monthly*, edited by Matthew Russell, SJ, brother of Charles, Lord Russell of Killowen (qv). In 1891 Rosa married the historian John T. Gilbert (qv), who was knighted in 1897; they lived at Villa Nova, Blackrock, Co. Dublin. Seven years after his death she published a life of her husband (1905).

Later forgotten, Mulholland was a highly popular and significant writer in her day and was anthologised by W. B. Yeats (qv) in *Representative Irish tales* (1891). Indeed, she ought to be credited as an early Irish revivalist. Her article 'Wanted an Irish novelist' (1891) called for Irish writers to stay in Ireland and avoid the allure of writing exclusively for a British audience. She was the leading exponent of an upper-middle-class catholic fiction which sought to modify the adverse image of Irish nationalism during the years of the land war and home rule crisis, and to promote the claims of its own class to national leadership. *Marcella Grace* (1886) envisions a solution to the land war, not in tenant proprietorship, but in the rise of a new class of sympathetic catholic landlords. A late novel, *The return of Mary O'Morrough* (1908), however, acknowledges the new reality of small-farmer Ireland and the failure of conciliation with Britain.

One of her sisters, Clara, was a children's novelist. The other, Ellen, was the wife of Charles Russell of Killowen, who in 1894 became the first post-reformation catholic lord chief justice of England.

James H. Murphy, *Catholic fiction and social reality in Ireland, 1873–1922* (1997)