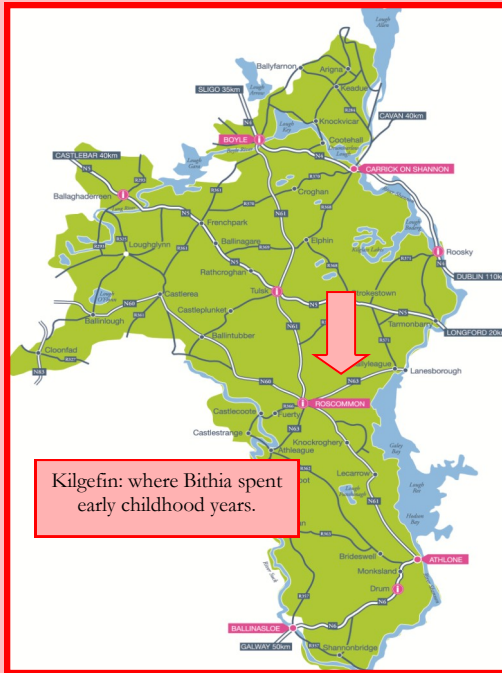




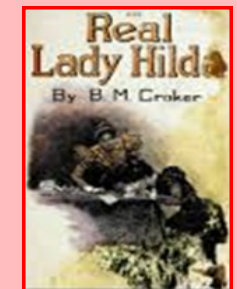
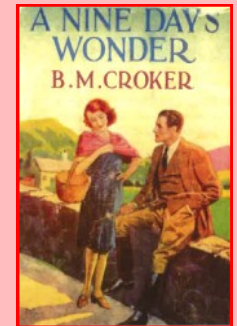
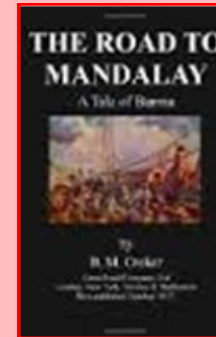
Roscommon County Council Library Services hold a substantial collection of the works and material relating to B.M. Croker. The holdings can be viewed at the Local Studies Section, County Library, Abbey Street, Roscommon. Full details can also be accessed through Library link on www.roscommoncoco.ie

Roscommon Anthology and Literary Map

Co-edited by Roscommon-born brothers, Michael and John O'Dea, *The Roscommon Anthology* is a beautifully produced book comprising selected writings by thirty-one writers with close associations to the county. Available online at www.theroscommonanthology.com

Roscommon Literary Heritage Series

6



B.M. Croker

Also available in the Roscommon Literary Heritage Series:

Douglas Hyde: a gifted writer, scholar and first President of Ireland who played a crucial part in the preservation of the Irish language, through his translations of near-forgotten Irish folk tales, poems and songs.

Percy French: a remarkable man, a unique talent. One of Ireland's greatest songwriters and a fine watercolourist whose charm and wit won over everyone with whom he came in contact.

John McGahern: often referred to as 'Ireland's Chekhov', McGahern lived the writer's life, quietly yet determinedly writing novels and short stories of great depth and beauty.

William Wilde: a complex man with a brilliant mind, Wilde was an aural and ophthalmic surgeon, archeologist, ethnologist, antiquarian, biographer, statistician, naturalist, historian, folklorist.

Oliver Goldsmith: the most naturally gifted writer of his generation, who was also a conundrum: a poet who didn't write many poems, a novelist who wrote one novel, a playwright who wrote one successful play.

More editions in the series will follow.

Text: Gerry Boland Design and Layout: Jacinta Carlos Ward

Roscommon has a proud history and a rich literary heritage. Its writers and poets have made a significant contribution to the national literature of Ireland. Roscommon County Council welcomes the production of these literary guides in promoting its cultural tourism. This second edition of the Roscommon Literary Heritage Series features three more major literary figures in the county.

B. M. Croker was one of the most prolific of all Irish writers. She wrote fifty books, mainly romantic novels and collections of short stories, including a large number of ghost stories. Many of her books ran to multiple editions. She was translated into several European languages and continued to be reprinted into the 1930s, after which her popularity waned. She published her first novel in 1882 and hardly a year went by from that date until her death in 1920 that didn't see one and sometimes two of her books published. The London Times, in an obituary piece on 22nd October 1920, wrote: 'Much of her success was due to her sympathy with youth, her quick sense of humour untainted by vulgarity, and the skill with which she contrived to hold her public's interest in her stories ... she made full use of her knowledge of human nature, her powers of observation, her retentive memory, and a ready vocabulary.' Regrettably, her remarkable achievements have never been properly recognised in the country of her birth.

Publications

Although she was incredibly prolific and hugely popular during her lifetime, her books have not passed the test of time and she has been out of print for decades. Fortunately,

Roscommon County Library has one of the most important collections of her work, with eighty-five copies of forty-one editions of her fifty titles.

Many of her novels and short stories are based around British colonial life in India and Burma. Her characters are generally British upper class and are placed in a variety of settings, in India and Burma, in Europe and Afghanistan, and in Australia. Some of her books are set in Ireland and others have segments of the novel take place in Ireland. Her books, frequently witty and always well-paced, include detailed observation of the people and the places in which the stories are set. A trait that runs through her books is a sympathetic and affectionate sentiment towards her 'native' characters.

B.M. Croker Locations

In Roscommon

(Left) The ruins of Kilgefin church and graveyard

(Right) Roscommon Library

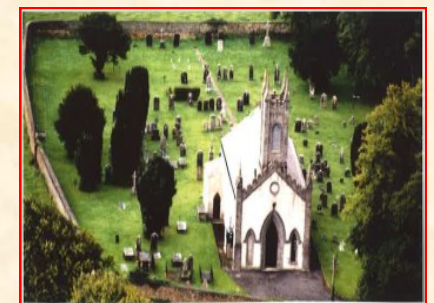


Outside Roscommon

(Left) Lordello, the Croker home in Shankill, near Bray, Co Wicklow

(Right) Rathangan Church where Bithia and John Croker were married in 1871.

Photos below used with the kind permission of Seamus Kelly, author of The Life and Works of B.M. Croker.



A Brief Biography

Bithia Mary Croker (1849-1920) was the daughter of William Sheppard, the Anglican Rector of Kilgefin, county Roscommon, and Bithia Watson, from Warrenpoint, county Down. She spent the early years of her childhood in Kilgefin and when her father died in 1856, she was sent to school in Rockferry, Cheshire, and later to Tours in France.

In 1871, she married an army officer, Lt. Col. John Stokes Croker of the Royal Scots Fusiliers (he also served with the Royal Munster Fusiliers) whose Anglo-Irish family came from Drumkeen in county Limerick. They were married in Rathangan, county Kildare and lived for a time in Oakley House in the village. Their only child, a daughter they named Eileen, was born in 1872. Bithia was a keen horsewoman and rode often with the Kildare Hunt.

John Croker was posted to India in 1877 and it was here, in the oppressive heat of that country, that Bithia began to write. She received early encouragement from some of her British women friends to whom she read extracts of her first novel, *After Long Years*, published in 1882 in London as *Proper Pride*.

The Crokers returned to Ireland in 1892 and settled in Shankhill, a few miles north of the seaside town of Bray in county Wicklow. Bray is often cited as the location of the Croker home, however Seamus Kelly, in his excellent *The Life and Works of B. M. Croker* (2007), has confirmed that the house, *Lordello*, was in fact situated on Lordello Road in Shankhill. Bithia held tennis parties here, tended her garden, and wrote.

The couple moved to Sandgate, near Folkestone, in Kent in 1897, in order to be close to their daughter, Eileen. John Croker died in 1911, aged sixty-seven. Bithia was seventy-one when she died nine years later, in a London nursing home on 20th October 1920. She was buried in Folkestone's Cheriton Road Cemetery.

1882 saw the publication of her first novel, *Proper Pride*. Serialised in 'Tinsley's Magazine' (London) and set in England, India and Afghanistan, it is a romantic tale of a couple who are kept apart for years by means of a false marriage certificate and some miscarried mail between them. All ends well, as is the case with many of the novels.

The book's success was guaranteed when the British Prime Minister, William Gladstone, was spotted reading it in parliament during a long and tiresome debate.



Photo used with the kind permission of Seamus Kelly, author of The Life and Works of B.M. Croker.

Pretty Miss Neville followed a year later and is set in the Indian station of Mulkapore and features as its central character a Miss Neville, a faithless coquette and huntswoman. In 1885, the novel *Some One Else*, which she dedicated to her Anglo-Indian friends, was published. Set in South Africa, it chronicles the mishaps that follow from a mistaken kiss. A year later *A Bird of Passage* came out in which two lovers are separated by the scheming of an unsuccessful rival. The location this time was the Andaman Islands in the Indian Ocean, but it moves to London and to Ireland as the story progresses.

Diana Barrington was published in 1888. It tells the story of a young woman who has been raised by her father and an Irish nurse in seclusion in a deserted region of India and who finds love and contentment with a Captain Fitzroy. *Two Masters* appeared in 1890, some of which is set in Ireland, and *Interference* in 1891, which begins in Ireland and ends in tragedy in India. There followed *A Family Likeness* (1892), *A Third Person* (1893), *Mr Jervis* (1894), *Married or Single* (1895) and *The Real Lady Hilda* (1895).

The extraordinary output continued. Of interest is *Beyond the Pale* (1896), a story located in Munster and featuring an Irish heroine called Galloping Jerry. It was serialised in *The Times*. During this period, she published several collections of stories, among them *To Let* (1893), *Village Tales and Jungle Tragedies* (1895), *In the Kingdom or Kerry* (1896), *Jason* (1899), *A State Secret* (1901).

Terence, another Irish novel, appeared in 1899. Dedicated to the Irish Tourist Development, it is set in an angler's hotel in Waterville in county Kerry (where the Crokers holidayed) and is a story of love and jealousy among the Protestant upper classes. Croker adapted it for the stage and it enjoyed a successful run in America.

Johanna (1903) is the story of a beautiful but unsophisticated peasant girl who is forced by her stepmother to leave her home in Kerry and who ends up living a hard and unfulfilled life in Dublin, until her lover returns from the wars and finds her. *A Nine Days Wonder* (1905) is a story of love between the classes and is set in Ireland and in England. One of her most popular books, it ran to thirteen editions.

More stories appeared in the same year with the publication of *The Old Cantonment*, with *Other Stories of India and Elsewhere*, and this was followed in 1906 by the popular novel, *The Youngest Miss Mowbray*, 119,000 copies of which had been sold by 1920.



The Company's Servant, described by the *London Times* in an obituary piece following her death as 'perhaps the best book she ever wrote', came out the following year, and also in the same year *The Spanish Necklace*, which features the heroine Hester Forde, a shy young heiress who tours the Continent and who is wooed by a Spanish nobleman.

An astonishing eighteen books appeared in a ten-year period, between 1909 and 1919. *Katherine, the Arragant; Babes in the Wood; Fame; A Rolling Stone; The Serpent's Tooth; In Old Madras; Lismoyle: An Experiment in Ireland; Quicksands; Given in Marriage; The Road to Mandalay* (made into a successful film in 1926); *What She Overheard; A Rash Experiment; Bridget; Blue China; Jungle Tales; The Pagoda Tree*.

Lismoyle and *Bridget* are of particular interest to the Irish reader, the former featuring a young English heiress who comes to stay in the stately but dilapidated mansion of Lismoyle. The main character of *Bridget* is a beautiful but poor young Irish woman who lives a hard life in a far corner of Ireland but whose circumstances improve by the end.

The Chaperon was published in 1920, the year of the author's death. She had advance orders from her publishers for several more books which she never finished. *The House of Rest* was published posthumously in 1921. In 2000, a collection of her ghost stories was published by Sarob Press, under the title *Number Ninety and Other Ghost Stories*.

