



**RICHARD VALENTINE WILLIAMS (RICHARD ROWLEY) (1834-1901)**  
**Poet and Playwright**

Richard Valentine Williams, who wrote poetry, plays and stories under the pen-name of Richard Rowley, was born in Dublin Road, Belfast. As a young man he entered the family firm, McBride and Williams, which in a linen town manufactured cotton handkerchiefs; in due course he became its managing director. After the firm's collapse in 1931 he was Chairman of the Northern Ireland Assistance Board.

In the meantime he had earned a reputation as a poet. His early poems, in *The City of Refuge* (1917), were somewhat rhetorical celebrations of industry; but his next volume, *City Songs and Others*, includes his most quoted poem *The Islandmen*: "Terrible as an army with banners,/Through the dusk of a winter's eve,/Over the bridge/The thousands tramp." More importantly perhaps, it also had some of those Browning-like monologues put in the mouths of Belfast working-class people (*The Stitcher, Oul Jane*) as well as the folksier utterances of the farming folk of Mourne, such as *Reticence and Thinkin' Long* - Rowley had by now moved to Newcastle, Co Down - which are arguably his best work.

He also wrote short stories - *Tales of Mourne*, 1937 - and at least one highly successful play, *Apollo In Mourne* (1926), in which the Greek god, banished from Olympus, comes to earth in the Mourne country, to devastating effect. In his final years he was working on a series of Bardic Tales, based on Celtic mythology, which, though impressive, have never been published.

During the Second World War Rowley founded, and ran from his Newcastle home, the short-lived Mourne Press. He died at Drumilly, Co Armagh, in 1947.

**Patrick Devlin**