

CARRICKFERGUS AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY



MARGARET CLARKE RHA (1884-1961)

The artist, Margaret Clarke, was born Margaret Crilly on 1 August 1884, at 17 Thomas Street, Newry. She exhibited her first pictures at the RHA signed with her maiden name. One of six children born to Patrick Crilly, a hackler in the flax trade, she grew up with a love of learning and a gift for drawing; and she attended night classes at Newry Municipal Technical School, planning to become a teacher. Art was a natural constituent of the school programme, and later in life she would reiterate her confidence in the importance of art and art appreciation in education. Her art instructor in Newry was Miss Minnie Nagle. Between 1905 and 1907 she took the South Kensington Board of Education Art exams with first class results. She then won a scholarship to the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, where she maintained herself through scholarships, working for the Art Teacher's Certificate, at the same time as studying painting under William Orpen, and winning silver and bronze medals in the British Board of Education Art Competitions. In 1911, the year after she qualified, she became Orpen's teaching assistant.

With the stained glass artist Harry Clarke (whom she married in October 1914), and the painter Sean Keating, she spent periods in the Aran Islands making drawings of landscape, ancient ruins and local people, to which she returned later in life when she was painting landscape on a regular basis. From a nationalist background, she valued the ideals of the Celtic Revival, painting her son-in-law, John Damien Bourke, as 'The Gael': but she never felt tempted to join Cumann na mBan as many of her fellow artists did. She quickly established herself as a painter of rich coloured realist portraits of writers, painters, and public figures, as well as of landscapes, flower paintings and some enigmatic works. She was elected an Associate of the Royal Hibernian Academy (ARHA) in 1926, and RHA in 1927. After her husband's death, she directed the Harry Clarke Stained Glass Studios with her daughter Ann Bourke, and her son David, also a painter.

Contributed by Hilary Pyle, Dublin