More About Claribel

Martin Loft

Charlotte Alington Barnard (née Pye), born in Louth on 23 December 1830, is one of Lincolnshire’s, and Louth’s, lesser known daughters. She gained praise and fame as a poet and ballad writer in the decade from 1858 until her death in January 1869. Using the pseudonym ‘Claribel’, she wrote about a hundred ballads which were very popular in their day, although they are now mostly forgotten. She lived in Louth from her birth until 1857 when she and her husband moved to London.

Some letters of my great-grandmother, Margaret Boswell Loft, throw additional light on the early days of ‘Claribel’.7 Margaret, originally from Edinburgh, lived in North Elkinson, and then Louth, after the death of her husband in 1830 at the age of twenty-five, to her own death in 1860.

Charlotte’s father, Henry Pye, was known to Margaret as a prominent lawyer in the town, in partnership with Thomas Phillips Watte. In 1845 she was interested in a law suit about Mr Pye’s plans for an imposing house at North Somercotes, and recorded, ‘Mr Pye’s case about the Embankment is due to come on at the Lincoln Assizes this month’, and a few days later she added ‘everyone in the town is much pleased at Mr Pye and Mr Watte being successful in their law suit, as £5,000 depended upon it. His witnesses came into town in a waggon with blue ribbons, and went to dine at Mr Pye’s’. On 8 July 1847 Charlotte had the foundation stone of Louth Railway Station, an unusual honour for such a young person.7 However Margaret’s younger son, James, did not think the event was worth mentioning in a letter to his brother, Harry, except to say, ‘Pye and Watte gave an their clerks a dinner at the Masons’ Arms on the railway opening day’, which was likely to be of more interest to Harry since many of the clerks were his friends.

As a respectable well-educated widow Margaret Loft was often asked to act as companion and chaperon to young ladies of Louth. Charlotte Pye’s mother was an invalid for a long time, and as early as May 1845 was being prayed for at the morning and evening Sunday services at St James’s, Louth. So Margaret was glad to be able to help the family. In the severe weather of January 1845 she had to take shelter in Mr Pye’s summerhouse from a snow storm on her way to the Cedars, where ‘Charlotte played a great many Scotch Airs for me and two polkas of her own composition’. They were both at a party at the Emeris house two years later, when ‘Charlotte sang very nicely some of Jenny Lind’s favourite songs. She has a most sweet voice and great taste, and is altogether a most loveable girl. She is very pleasing and unaffected, as well as being very fine-looking’.

Mrs Pye died at the end of 1847. Margaret wrote, ‘Mrs Pye had been a long time in a very delicate state of health but I don’t think poor Mr Pye apprehended what danger there was. He had not returned from London above ten days when she died. He went for Charlotte and one of her school companions, who anticipated much pleasure going to the Hunt Ball and all the parties that take place at this season. It is a sad loss to her, poor girl. Mrs Pye was buried at Swinhope [the home of the Alingtons]’. A few days later she wrote ‘they say that Mrs Pye in her declining state had been in the habit of taking brandy, not so much in great quantity as so frequently, that her stomach was so weakened by it that she could digest nothing. She has had attacks of sickness for years past, when nothing would stay on her stomach and they continued sometimes for a fortnight, when Dr Banks feared she must sink from sheer exhaustion. She was a kind hearted woman who did so much good work among the poor that she will be sadly missed’. Margaret added, rather incongruously, ‘Dr Banks and Tom James have lost an excellent patient’.

The next reference to Charlotte is in December 1849, when she had recently become engaged to Charles Elmihirst, a Captain in the 9th Regiment of Foot, from West Ashby.

Miss Pye and Miss Gordon called on me with a basket of sausages. I had called recently and had the very great pleasure of hearing Miss Pye sing all sorts of songs, English, Scotch, Irish, Negro, etc. accompanied by Miss Gordon on the harp. She is a most pleasing, unaffected girl, and Charles Elmihirst will have quite a treasure in her. Mr Pye has given his consent at last to their engagement. She looks so happy and is in such high spirits now, that it is a delight to see her. There is no doubt that the anxiety about all this was the cause of her illness. She told me that when she was in Scotland she was so ill that she never expected to get home again. She sang the Jacobite airs with great glee, especially those about Bonnie Prince Charlie, and Miss Gordon always took care to say something quizzical, and to look unutterable things. I see that Elmihirst is now senior Captain of the 9th. I should fancy he will sell out when he gets his Majority, and they will not be married until then, as she is only nineteen. I do not think her Papa would agree to spare her to go about with the Regiment.

In May 1851 Margaret’s sister wrote to her from London, rather mysteriously: ‘The Hotchkins told us about poor Miss Pye and seemed to know all about it, perhaps not to the extent you mention. It is a most melancholy case, and the feelings of the poor father must be dreadful.’ In November of the same year Margaret’s son, James, wrote to her from Cambridge about the latest developments in Charlotte’s life, equally mysteriously.

What a shame it will be if Miss Pye marries Holloway after all; of the two I should certainly prefer the Elmihirst family but I suppose they fancy that Holloway may perhaps become a Judge when married to a Pye. I hope he will not put his foot in it. How fine it would be if Elmihirst were to marry an Earl’s daughter or something in that style. Harneis Watte said that Elmihirst had but two ideas, but still I think that was no excuse, as she must have known what he was when she was engaged to him. I am rather surprised that the Elmihirsts keep in with the Pyes after all that has happened.

Fig. 1. Mrs Charlotte Alington Barnard (‘Claribel’) by Willey photographer of Louth (E. M. B. Loft).
Hameis Waite, a son of Thomas Waite, had been at Louth Grammar School with the Loft brothers.

By the next time Margaret referred to Charlotte, in June 1856, she was married neither to Elmihurst nor Holloway, but to the Reverend Charles Barnard, who is said to have made up his mind to marry her when he saw her at her first Ball. Margaret wrote: 'Mrs Barnard attended the Drawing Room, and was so beautifully dressed that she was particularly mentioned in the Morning Post next day. Mr Pye says he never saw her looking so well.' Charles Barnard was the incumbent of Ruckland and Farforth with Maidenwell, but he and his wife lived in Louth, so continued to feature occasionally in Margaret's correspondence. In August 1856, 'Mary Wright saw Mrs Barnard at Mablethorpe, and at Mr Leake's, where the supper was served in the Barnards' house, while the dancing was in Mr Pyes music room.' In November 1856 'I wonder if Colonel Elmihurst and Mrs Barnard danced together at the Lincoln Ball? In March 1857 'The Barnards are to go away for a time, he is to take his father's Duty, so that he can go abroad.'

By September 1857 the Barnards had left Louth and were living in London. There was a sale of their furniture at the Firs, which seems to have been something of a social occasion.

I went with Mrs Parkinson, Mary Wilson and Walwya Iles and his wife to see the Barnards' furniture. I am glad I did not trust to getting their dinner service, as it was a very shabby one and not nearly as pretty as ours. Mrs Wright bought a bedstead, Mary Deane Allison gave sixteen shillings for a small stand; it was in bad condition too. Mary Wilson bought a great many things for the Clee house for her brother [The Revd Dr John Parkinson of Ravenstale].

The Iles family were farmers at Binbrook and Barnoldby. Mary Deane Allison was a daughter of Thomas Waite, and the wife of Thomas Falkner Allison, for many years Town Clerk of Louth. He was widely known as 'T. E.' but to Margaret and her sons he was always 'Falky'. Mrs Wright was the wife of the Reverend William Wright, the Rector of Healing, who lived in Louth while James Loft, his curate, looked after the parish.

Margaret's last mention of the Barnards was in a letter to her son in May 1859, and does little to clarify the family ramifications, though obviously the Barnards still 'kept in' with the Elmihurts. 'I saw Charles Barnard at the station – poor Mrs Elmihurst died last Saturday. Mrs Barnard is now at West Ashby. Will you tell your Uncle John? [This is John Henry Loft, of Healing]. He knew her very well at one time, I think. She died from cancer.'

Notes
2. These letters are in the possession of the author.
3. An account of the event in the Lincolnshire Chronicle was printed in Lincolnshire Past and Present, 21 (Autumn, 1995), pp.18-19.