

ELLEN HUTCHINS

a botanist.

It may be of interest to those who have found the name of Ellen Hutchins in the records of botanical research, to learn something of her life and surroundings, as gathered from letters and the conversation of the few who knew her -

The family of Hutchins in Ireland is descended from two cousins, who came from Devonshire between 1600 and 1640 - Thomas who held lands near Michels town, and other parts of the rich pasture lands of the county Limerick at Crégane Castle; and Richard, who, having served under the Earl of Orrery during the Civil War in ¹⁶⁴¹~~1641~~, settled at Blackrock, now Bantry House.

The relationship between the two branches of the family was renewed when Richard's daughter, Hannah, married Thomas' grandson, also named Thomas; and a second marriage took place later, when in 1759, Thomas Hutchins of Ballylickey married Elinor, only daughter of Arthur Hutchins of Crégane - of this marriage, Ellen was one of the children.

Members of the family have lived at various places on the shores of Bantry Bay, and the house in which Ellen was born (Ballylickey) is now occupied by them. It stands at the Head of the Bay, facing West, and has an extended and beautiful view of the mountains at each side, and of the islands which break the long sheet of water. It was here that Ellen

studied nature. Very little is known of her father, whom she was too young to know. He was a magistrate and was much respected in the country. At this time very severe and unjust laws were in force against Catholics, and a Protestant, who coveted a Catholic's horse, could seize it, on paying five pounds for it. A priest, who had been so treated, referred his case to Thomas Hutchins, who ordered the horse to be restored to him, on the grounds that it was of much higher value than the price offered. He strongly objected to the practice, common among gentlemen, of excessive drinking of wine after dinner, and endeavoured to check it, even declining to sit at the head of his own table, where he knew he should be expected to fill his glass each time the decanter passed him. He had been in Paris and was detained there on parole, probably on suspicion of being a spy. He was said to be a remarkably good sword's-man, and to speak French "like a native" excitedly, while at other times his manner was very quiet. He had probably received a good education and desired the same for his children.

He died in 1787, only six of his many children, surviving him. Of these, three of his sons had been at school. The eldest and perhaps the second, had passed through Trinity College, Dublin - and prepared for professions as a barrister and a solicitor. The ~~third~~ third son, while still at school, met with an accident, a fall on the ice, which so injured his spine, that he became a confirmed invalid. Ellen's letters describe him as "driving in a light carriage and being carried

to a boat." He was however able to assist his brothers in the management of their property.

While Ellen was still very young, she was placed in a school, between Dublin and Donnybrook. As she grew up, she became delicate, and it was found that she had been insufficiently fed, healthy appetited not being considered lady-like. Dr. Whitley Stokes, who was a friend of the family, was consulted; and when it was proposed to take her home, he said "I think you had better give her to Mrs. Stokes and me." And Ellen went to live in his house in Harcourt Street. Dr. Stokes warned Mrs. Stokes to take no notice of Ellen's nervous state, nor of her disinclination for food, and advised that some small thing should be left in her room, which might tempt her to eat, when alone. This plan was successful and after a time Ellen regained her appetite and health.

No doubt the companionship of Dr. Stokes' family, and the conversation of the cultivated people, whom she met at his house, had a reviving interest for her, and took her thoughts off herself.

However this may be, the time came when she was well enough to return to Ballylickey - It was natural that she should shrink from the prospect of the life she would lead there.

Her mother was now an elderly woman in feeble health. The only brother living at home was the invalid, Thomas; and the only other member of the household was her father's aunt

Isabella, daughter of Beversham Harman of Laharen, known as "Aunt Bel," whom Ellen described in Feb. 1806, as "having been in bed all the winter, and not having left her room for 3 years," and who died soon after, aged about 100 years. Ellen's only sister, Katharine, the eldest of the family, had died in 1789. She was said to be very handsome and constantly on horseback, as she walked with difficulty. The only memento of her, is a silhouette of her father, executed by her, clearly and carefully cut, and valuable as being the only likeness of him. She had done one of her mother also, which was lost.

There were no cousins, nor relations of Ellen's age to bring a cheerful element into the family circle; and few visitors came to the house. There was little communication with distant places, and the scenery of Bantry Bay and Glengarriff, so famous now, had not attracted strangers. Even a journey to Cork was a difficult and dangerous expedition; the roads were so bad that men were sent on to fill the boggy holes with furze bushes and stones, to enable the carriage to pass safely; and Mrs. Hutchins had often preferred to ride there on a pillion behind her groom. Ellen confided her fears to Dr. Stokes, and he advised her to take up the study of some branch of natural history, and offered to lend her books. Botany was the subject he recommended, as it would encourage her to spend much time out of doors, and give her quiet and interesting occupation at home.

Similar advice was given her by an exiled French lady, a refugee, who taught her french, and who said that the study

of Botany had been a solace to herself, when she, like Ellen, had to live with uncongenial people.

It is probable that through Dr. Stokes Ellen became acquainted with Mr. Mackay, the Curator of the College Botanical Gardens in Dublin, with whom she corresponded and whom she consulted when classifying the specimens of the plants she collected.

In 1807, Mr. Mackay made her acquainted with Mr. Dawson Turner, to whom she supplied specimens and drawings of "Sea plants" for his "Historia Fucorum" - Her illustrations of the plants are careful and beautiful drawings, even to the most minute parts of the frustification, and yet so modest was she about her work that she hesitated as to the propriety of allowing her name to appear in the descriptions of her discoveries:

She writes to her brother:

"For some time past, I have amused myself learning Botany. I am told by those that are good judges that I have made very great progress for the time I have been learning, in a curious and difficult branch, that of marine plants. I have been very successful and have discovered a great number of kinds unknown before. Of these new plants, plates and descriptions will be given by botanists now publishing their works, and it is usual to mention the place where the plant was found and the name of the person who was the discoverer. I desired that my name should not be published. I have since been asked to allow it to be mentioned. I am doubtful whether I ought to do so or not, I beg you to tell

"me what I should do. Mrs. Tayler and Phyllis wish my name to be mentioned for the plants I have found, and I would not suffer it to be done until I know if you thought it right. I send my plants to Mr. Mackay, a very good botanist, who was sent by the College to this and many other parts of Ireland, and who has made great discoveries in Botany. He gives me all the information I want and sends the plants to those who describe and publish them. I also send a great many to Dr. Stokes and have made him a very fine collection. He says he is quite astonished at the progress I have made." and again "Tom Tayler tells you wrong, when he says that I am a great botanist, for indeed I am very far from it. I have I believe made pretty good progress for the time I have been learning. My powers of observation are small and I have had too few books to do much. All the fine books on Botany are expensive and my mother cannot afford to give me books. In the sea plants, a large and difficult branch, I have done most. I have made a great many discoveries of new ones, no less than seven already and some that are not yet determined. Mr. Turner, a great botanist in England, has sent me some rare sea plants - Some of the new plants I found were sent to him. He was so pleased with them that he sent me some of the rarest kinds found in England and some foreign ones and some plates and descriptions by him of Fuci and Lichens."

Fortunately her scruples were overcome, and her name has taken its place among the botanists of her time. Sir

James Smith, Sir William Hooker, Dr. Taylor, Mr. Mackay, Mr. Dawson Turner, have recorded her success.

A Swedish botanist, who went to Dublin purposely to meet her, was amazed to find a young girl as the discoverer of the many plants which bear her name. ^x"In the journal of Botany, Feb. 1912, o. 63, under the title of Eighteenth Century women botanists, a reprint from a little work the "Primitiæ Floræ Esseque-boensis" by G.F.W. Meyer published in 1818, a tribute is made to the botanical work of Miss Hutchins. She is described as having lately died at Bontajae in Ireland, and allusion is made to Hepatic Jungermannia Hutchinsia, named after her - and of her having found many ~~new~~ ^{new} plants to English Botany."

She was keenly interested in her work, and rejoiced in it as a means of diverting her thoughts from the many difficulties and anxieties of her home life.

A field at Ballylickey is still called "Miss Ellen's Garden," where she tended her plants and those sent her by Mr. Mackay; and her happiest hours were spent in it and in her little boat, when it was rowed beside the rocks at low water, that she might gather the sea plants, which grew there undisturbed and uninjured, bringing her treasures home, to examine and classify, and share with her friends.

^xFrom a paper by the Rev. H.W. Lett prepared for the Royal Irish Academy.

^xSpecimens of many rare species of cryptogamie plants
 " discovered by her are in the British Museum and the remarkable
 " collection of plants which she made, together with a large
 " number of beautiful drawings and notes on the plants, passed
 " into the possession of Dawson Turner and are now in safe
 " keeping at Kew."

But it was not only her love for Botany that attracted her friends. Dawson Turner writes to her of the books he reads; Dr. Warburton's letters to Dr. Hurd, containing criticisms of the literary men of the day; "Parson's Travels from Scanderoon to Bussorah": "Mount Caucasus," with an account of its natural history, translated from the German; Byron's Poems, and those of Sir Walter Scott, of which she had copies. He quotes passages from Dante and Tasso and from some French poets. He invites her many times to visit him at Yarmouth, and make acquaintance with his family. He asks her to become Godmother to one of his daughters, and continually gives her news of the "Little Ellen's" progress. Sir William Hooker sends her his "Tour in Ireland" and Mr. Mackay, besides sending her plants for her garden, helps her to get books.

In October 1812, Ellen and her mother were in Bandon. Both were ill and in need of better medical advice than Bantry could supply, and it was there Mrs. Hutchins died in March 1814, and there she was buried.

^xFrom the Rev. H.W. Lett's Paper.

Ellen did not long survive her. Returning home, she went to Ardnagashel, where her brother Arthur and his family lived, and she died there, on the 10th of February 1815. She was buried in the church-yard in Bantry, outside the southern wall of the old church.

Her brother Thomas, who died in July of the same year, must have sadly missed her loving care and sympathy; during those last years of his life.