

## Katharine Tynan - Poet

By Michael Howes

Location of plaque - 14 Victoria Road, Southborough.



Katharine Tynan was born on 23 January 1859 at Dublin, the fifth of the twelve children of Andrew Cullen Tynan, a farmer, and Elizabeth O'Reilly.

She spent most of her childhood in rural Ireland and was educated at a convent school in Drogheda. She is remembered mainly for her poetry and novels. Her first poem to be published was entitled “*A Dream*” and appeared in 1878 when she was aged nineteen. This was the first of an incredibly long list of poems and novels to be published throughout her life.

In her early years she was a major player in Dublin literary circles, brushing shoulders with big names such as W. B. Yeats, with whom she worked on *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland* in 1888. Yeats highly praised Tynan’s poetry and proposed to her in July 1891, unaware that she was already engaged to the writer Henry Albert Hinkson.

She married Henry in May 1893 and they moved to Ealing, West London. They had three children, Theobald, Giles and Pamela, born between 1897 and 1900. *The Wind In The Trees*, generally considered to be her finest novel, was published in 1898 in between having her first two children.

Her husband Henry received a law degree in 1902 and dabbled in writing but did not earn sufficient money to support the family, relying heavily on Katharine’s publications to contribute to the household income. This may explain the enormity of her lifetime’s work which includes ninety-four novels, twenty-seven poetry collections, twenty-three collections of stories, eight volumes of memoirs, three biographies plus a history, a travelogue and countless articles and reviews. She was earning the equivalent of at least £60,000 per year in today’s money.



The family lived for a brief time in Southborough, first at “Fairlawn”, 4 Park Road, from May to December 1910. In her autobiography *The Middle Years*, the reasons for moving to Southborough were for a view and also to be close to Tonbridge School. She wrote “We had found a house at Southborough having fallen in love with the glorious view from the hill over the Weald – only less beautiful than dear Malvern – and with bright, clean Tunbridge Wells, its Pantiles and all its many historical associations”.

Despite taking out a long lease on the house in Park Road, the family moved out suddenly and lived in temporary accommodation at the Hand and Sceptre and two other locations before taking a furnished cottage at “Sunnyside”, 14 Victoria Road, in April 1911. They stayed here until the December of that year before returning to Ireland.

It was her reminiscences of her time in Southborough written in *The Middle Years* that Tynan landed herself in hot water with the residents of the town. *The Courier* of 19 January 1917 reports of a “social indictment of Southborough” penned by Katharine Tynan who “holds a mirror to local society” in her book. It seems that some people took offence to

Tynan, a Catholic, referring to Anglican worshippers making their way to church as “figures in black crawling along like so many black beetles”. She also remarked that the area was the “cradle of Evangelicalism” and “the very old and the very Evangelical made up Southborough”. The extracts of the book that *The Courier* printed caused quite a sensation and prompted correspondence from readers in subsequent issues.

The newspaper then printed this delightful poem that Tynan had written whilst staying at the Hand and Sceptre, noting that she must have been enthusiastic in her praise of Southborough at the time and questioning the reasons for her later “complete revulsion of feeling displayed in her social indictment”:

*The sweetest place for man or woman,  
The Hand and Sceptre on Southborough Common  
Invites poor folks to come and rest  
When the town's ways are dustiest.*

*Sweet linen and the softest beds,  
And pillows for the weary heads;  
Good cooking and most excellent fare,  
My muse – but what of Southborough's air?*

*What of the Common, swelling green?  
Old trees with houses set between;  
All in a delicate old-world grace,  
This common is a heavenly place.*

*Such sights, such birds, such scents, sweet weather;  
I pray all pilgrim folks come hither;  
Of hostesses from Prague to Paris  
There isn't one like Mrs Harris.*

*Come for a day and stay for twenty  
Year, twenty years of peace and plenty;  
And find the twenty years a day,  
So fast the seasons run away.*

Her husband died suddenly in 1919 and Tynan moved to Dublin before travelling for several years, staying in France and Germany. She then settled at a flat in Wimbledon, still making a living from her writing despite failing eyesight. It was here that she died on 2 April 1931.

The Southborough Society erected a green plaque to commemorate Katharine Tynan in early August 2013. The unveiling was attended by many local residents and included a reading of the above poem.