

THE BIRDS' NEST MAGAZINE

Ann Nugent gives an insight into this charming 19th-century publication

Some years ago, when I had been living for some time at a small township near the border between Victoria and South Australia, finding myself out of health and tired of the place, I determined to take a trip to Melbourne, for a time at least, and try the effect of rest and change.

So wrote 'Raven' in the 1879 Summer volume of *The Birds' Nest Magazine* (*BNM*). It was probably Raven's Australian travel tale that interested the National Library in collecting the available copies of the Ireland-based magazine. In his 'Journey in Victoria', Raven describes his journey across country with a wool

waggoner's horse-drawn team to the port of Belfast (now Port Fairy), and then on to Melbourne by steamer.

Raven was one of the many 'bird-authors' in *BNM*. Indeed, the third rule of the magazine stated that members were 'to take the name of a bird as their *nom de plume*'. Bird of Paradise, Jackdaw, Laughing Jackass, Robin, Emu, Linnet, Swift, Blue Cap, Bull Finch, Starling, Humming Bird, Grasshopper Bird are but a few of the chosen names.

While the bird metaphor has a quaint charm, and the anonymity of the pseudonyms allowed a degree of authorial freedom in the 1880s, today it is very disappointing not to be able to find out more about these contributors, not even their real names. Paramount among the birds was the editor of the magazine, Miss 'Birdie' Holdsworth. She wrote as Linnet, and she is one of only

above left:
'A Journey in Victoria'
reproduced from *The Birds' Nest Magazine*, Summer, vol. 2, 1879
edited by Miss Birdie Holdsworth
Manuscript Collection, MS 6046

above right:
Title page
reproduced from *The Birds' Nest Magazine*, Spring, vol. II, 1882
edited by Miss Birdie Holdsworth
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"Nead le Farrige" The Nest by the Sea Spiddal, June 1882' reproduced from *The Birds' Nest Magazine*, Winter, 1883 edited by Miss Birdie Holdsworth Manuscript Collection, MS 6046

Rose Finch reproduced from *The Birds' Nest Magazine*, Summer, vol. 2, 1879 edited by Miss Birdie Holdsworth Manuscript Collection, MS 6046

two 'birds' I have been able to identify, terrestrially speaking.

The National Library holds three copies of *The Birds' Nest Magazine* from 1879, 1882 and 1883. They are delightful volumes, each measuring approximately 13 centimetres by 20 centimetres, of about 200 pages, cloth bound and handwritten. Interspersed with the written text are pencil sketches, watercolour drawings, pressed fern leaves, calligraphic headings and floral borders. It seems only one copy of each issue was made and this copy was circulated among subscribers, rather like a circulating library. When the magazine was posted on, the subscriber was required to forward a postcard to Miss Holdsworth so that, at any given time, Birdie knew exactly where the *BNM* was travelling.

Even the smallest of magazines has a purpose and *BNM* was no different. The contributors and subscribers to *BNM* were drawn by a higher purpose: they were evangelical in intent and their practical goal was to raise funds for an orphanage in Dublin, not surprisingly known as the 'Nest' and the children resident there as the 'nestlings'. There is no doubt that the 'birds' contributed to the good care of the Irish orphans, but their goodness was of the moral improvement kind. Running through some of the *BNM* articles and cartoons is a barely hidden contempt for the native Catholic Irish.

Take, for example, little Rose Finch, whose photograph appears in Volume Two, Summer 1879. (The fact that the child had a bird's name as her own, must have further

endeared her to the 'birds' of *BNM*). A brushed and combed Rose peers at the camera, her perplexed face betraying an anxiety beyond her years. Miss Holdsworth comments: 'I am told the photograph does not do Rosie justice, she is a bright intelligent child'. She continues, 'It will be for her support that the money of the *BNM* goes to the Nest. I am told that she is one of the 60 little ones, who have been sent to a home in the country while the

Nest was being repaired'. It is likely that this 'home in the country' was Nead le Farrige, or Nest by the Sea, at Spiddal, Galway, as illustrated in the Winter 1883 edition.

Miss Holdsworth then relates a stereotyping account of Rosie's young life: 'She is one of 3 children whose mother died of consumption, and whose father a drunkard left them. It is not known what has become of him, and it is well the children are saved from a life of misery'. Four years later, a report in the Winter volume of 1883 suggests that the future is looking rosy for Rosie. Miss Holdsworth writes 'our little "nestling" (Rosie Finch) is getting on nicely. She does not grow much, but she is very



clever and intelligent & if strong enough will be trained for a teacher', noting also that Rose is 'a most decided Christian'. Girl orphans were mostly trained to go into service.

In the Antipodes, Raven's view of the Australian working class provides a sharp contrast with the experience of the Irish orphans. Raven writes, 'my fellow-travellers were a middle-aged man and his son, ordinary working people—but the working class in Australia is far superior to that of England, most of the men having emigrated, and as only the better educated and more adventurous men go out, it becomes a kind of selecting process'. Raven asserts, 'no one can starve [in Australia] whatever else may befall him'.

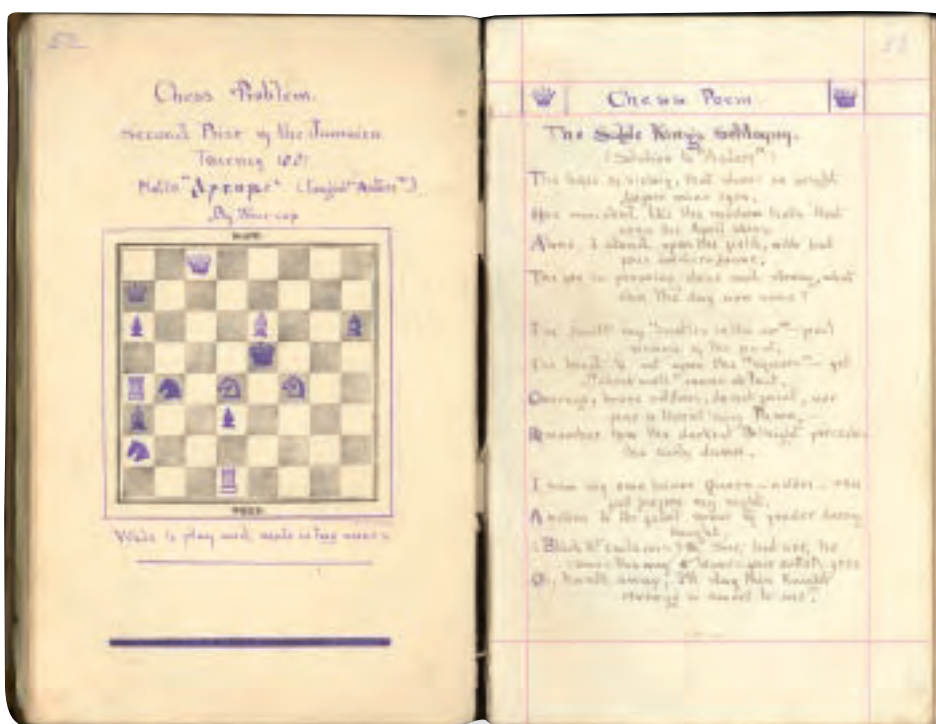
Although the magazine had its fair share of pious tales, Miss Holdsworth was a skilled editor who aimed for variety. Original poems, word games, short stories, translations and quotations, jokes and cartoons all added to the *BNM* mix. Spring 1882 carried an intriguing report from Turkey, 'Christmas With the Moslems', indicating a connection between the Birds' Nest group and Christian missions based overseas. Chess notes and puzzles were provided by Blue Cap (aka Miss F.F. Beechey, 'the first lady to win a prize in competition with the sterner sex'). Miss Beechey later published a book, *Chess Blossoms*. As well as his 'Journey in Victoria', Raven wrote a series of 'Rambles

in the Old World', including Switzerland, Germany and Sweden. Resting on his travel experiences, Raven opines that, 'The only people in this world who know how to live really comfortably are those who speak the English language, and especially those who live in America'.

Reading the *BNM* is like reading letters: there is the feeling that one knows the writers. For the contemporary readers of *BNM*, there was the possibility of replying immediately on the blank pages devoted to 'Criticism'. One long-running debate focused on the propriety of using slang in literary publications, but the most severe criticism was directed at a pietistic short story, 'In Unwed Union Blest', no doubt a titillating title for late-Victorian readers. The plot concerns lovers, Mabel de Vere and Hugh Marshall, who are separated by a misunderstanding; the heroine devotes herself to good works in a hospital and when seven years later, her would-be husband returns, she refuses him for a second time whereupon he experiences a conversion and devotes himself to a life of good works. Wren fairly sizzles on the Criticism page, "'In Unwed Union Blest" is most absurd, why could they not have blessed each other & the world at the same time?' Water-wagtail's criticism is even more severe, 'why did she [Linnet] choose



'Christmas with the Moslems' reproduced from *The Birds' Nest Magazine*, Spring, vol. II, 1882 edited by Miss Birdie Holdsworth Manuscript Collection, MS 6046



'Chess Problem' and 'Chess Poem' reproduced from *The Birds' Nest Magazine*, Spring, vol. II, 1882 edited by Miss Birdie Holdsworth Manuscript Collection, MS 6046

such a foolish story? We have too many disappointed lovers turning good in the mag ... It is degrading to religion to mix it up with sentimentality? [sic] ... In this case Mabel and Hugh should have married ... Fancy walking off with "Farewell"!!' Poor Linnet (Miss Holdsworth) rejoins bleakly with a margin note, 'There's no fancy but a reality!!' And that is as close as we get to the person of Miss Holdsworth.

Raven continues his journey, sometimes walking beside the team of horses, sometimes aloft on top of the wool bales—making sky dreams by day and, at night, enjoying the rough fare and camping out under the wagons. This regimen, he writes, combined to give him 'such a healthy vigour and airy lightness and freedom to both mind and body, as I never experienced before or since'. On their journey, the team passes through Coleraine and Hamilton before arriving at Belfast. At this point we glimpse, ever so slightly, the human being behind the bird mask. Observing a group of young travellers, Raven sees himself somewhat conventionally as the romantic solitary traveller, 'myself a wanderer, without anyone within a hundred miles at least who knew my name'.

The 1883 volume is the last in the Library's *BNM* collection, so Rose Finch's future remains a mystery. She might have trained as a teacher and become a Christian missionary

in a foreign land, or she might have followed in the footsteps of Miss Thomas, who was held up to the female orphans as a model of 'the faithful servant'. A gift of the late Miss Thomas in 1879 had made possible extensions to the Nest's holiday home. A plaque commemorating her generosity states that for 69 years, Miss Thomas 'served in the family of the Ladies Boyle'. The dedication concludes with a reference to Romans XII, 11: 'Do not grow slack in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord'.

Raven's steamer weighed anchor at Warrambool (Warrnambool), 'the potato mart of the colony', to take on a full cargo of potatoes, before proceeding to Melbourne. After breaking free from a mudbank on the Yarra 'more like a canal than a river', he records that they were 'soon alongside the wharf at the end of Flinder's street ... once more in Melbourne this great and handsome city of 200 000 inhabitants, which only 35 years before only consisted of a few huts on the banks of a creek!' Raven's subsequent articles in *BNM* suggest that he continued to indulge his taste for travel and mild adventure.

And the story of Miss Birdie Holdsworth, how did it end? Again, I have no evidence beyond 1883, when her address was c/- F. Arthur Holdsworth Esq.—a brother, father or uncle? She lived at Cummeen, Carrigaline, County Cork, Ireland. Carrigaline is situated at the head of the Owenabue

estuary which forms part of Cork's Lower Harbour; plenty of water birds there. But what of Cummeen, why was that name chosen for the Holdsworths' home? Once again, one needs to go no further than the birds. Today, Cummeen Strand, in Sligo, has national protection status as an important wintering and passage site for wildfowl and waders, Brent Geese and Bar-tailed Godwits. Each year, the birds escape the Arctic winter by flying south and embracing the eastern, northern and western shores of Ireland. Today, the birds of Cummeen are witness to Miss Holdsworth's pervasive bird metaphor, and a living reminder of her Birds' Nest circle.

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'Rambles in the Old World'
reproduced from *The Birds' Nest Magazine*, Summer, vol. 2, 1879
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