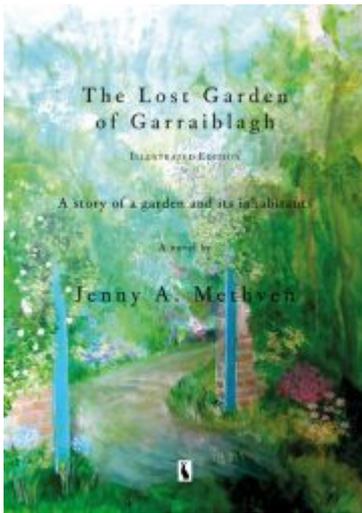


The Lost Garden of Garraiblagh



For me, one of the few positives of the first lockdown was that it provided the time and space for creativity. The novel I had been working on for the past few years, including a high level of research, was now at the critical point of completion – the final draft with editing and completion of the illustrations. Now there was nowhere to go and no excuses left. It was time to finish the novel and self-publish.

The Lost Garden of Garraiblagh is the story of a garden, interwoven with the stories of the people connected to it. It is a love story, reaching from Victorian times in and around Belfast through to the present day in Northern Ireland.

1869 in Belfast

Amelia Henderson, the strong willed, independent young wife of an up and coming linen manufacturer, has a passion: she wants to create a formal Victorian garden on their newly acquired Garraiblagh estate on the northern outskirts of the fast-growing city. She must learn to work with James Black, the renowned Scottish head gardener and plant hunter, brought to Ireland to oversee her ambitious project.

As the years pass the garden and those living and working in it become bound together by the magic of the place, yet the same time they are forced to deal with pressing events outside the sanctuary of the tranquil garden and its small community of family, gardeners and house staff. The garden suffers, as its people do, during the turbulent times that have been experienced in the north of Ireland over the last one hundred and fifty years. The spirits of the past are ever present and the garden itself is a force of nature always seeking to achieve harmony.

During the most recent 'Troubles' of the 1970s and 1980s the garden loses its immunity from the outside world. In one awful moment the outside horror visits Garraiblagh. Can the garden recover? Can it once again help negotiate

social and political change and difference as the Good Friday Agreement is signed?

Ultimately the novel, the story of Garraiblagh is one of hope.

As I worked on the final drafts of *The Lost Garden of Garraiblagh*, I saw the need that people have for a connection with the natural world through their gardens. This need to be close to the soil was very evident during lockdowns locally with people queuing to buy plants etc from the garden centres. Throughout history gardens have been created in times of peace – but also as a response to traumatic events. There is no doubt they help our mental and physical health in times of stress. My MSc dissertation in Peace and Conflict Studies focussed on the peace-building powers of gardens around the world. I became fascinated by the history of gardens constructed in some of the most depressing and difficult of situations, such as the trenches and nursing stations of World War I.

Practically, I needed to adapt the way I did things. Simple things like art materials for the illustrations had to be sourced on-line rather than buying locally or travelling to Belfast. Several drafts had to be printed, and I worried that printing paper might become difficult to obtain.

Yet I was lucky in my writing of *Garraiblagh*. It was enormously helpful to have beta readers who kindly agreed to read the final draft and provide me with feedback. I will always be grateful to them.

My editor was my husband Willie, who is himself a writer and currently working on his MA in Creative Writing. He carried out close reading of the text and recommended several helpful changes. He then had the onerous task of formatting the text and images for publication. No mean feat: especially when there are so many illustrations and the book is quite lengthy (150,000 words). It was work that he may not have been able to do in the timescale, without lockdown.

When *The Lost Garden of Garraiblagh* was published in October 2020 I had hoped to be able to mark the event by giving readings in various locations. That is still something I plan to do when lockdown is lifted. I was very pleased that LibrariesNI bought several copies of the book.

You can visit my website jennymethven.com for further information.

The Lost Garden of Garraiblagh is available for sale in both ebook and paperback from Amazon, hardback from Lulu.com and paperback from Bookshop.org.