

Address to Lettergull

Written by Sarah Leech

O Lettergull, weel may you fare,
And usual broils ne'er vex you mair,
That Providence may aye shew care,
For ane and a',
Shall ever be my earnest prayer,
Tho' far awa'.

May barley on your braes still grow,
And rough heads on your Craigen knowe,
Wi' which to mak' a rantin lowe,
When North winds blow,
And gear in plenty on you row,
Tho' I'm awa.

May ruthless bailiffs ne'er be sent,
To drive you for a back-gaun rent,
But may your time in joy be spent,
Without alarm,
While rosy health and sweet content
Smile on ilk farm.

O that your kye or nowtes may ne'er
Be taught Phil's cauld poun' wa's to fear,
But may you have guid country cheer,
Wi' beef and meal,
That shall continue thro' the year,
And never fail.

May nae curst carlin or fell sprite,
Wha ride on broom-stick nags by night,
By cantrips carry off your right,
At morn or e'en,
And elf-shot stanes your kye ne'er blight,
By wounds unseen.

But tak' a kind advice frae me –
O, tipple not the strong maut bree,
Lest late in Mary's glen you see
Some goblin sprite,
Or hear the wailing sad banshee
Howl through the night:

For Joyce and Simpson baith can tell,
How they heard there a ghaistly yell;
But what thro' fear those loons befel,
Let them declare,
And how they scamper'd off pell-mell –
O, what a pair!

Poor silly gowks, they thought the cry
Of Sawney, who lay hid hard by,
Their boasted courage thus to try,
Was that of Cloutie,
That darklins came their haste to spy,
When sent on duty.

But fare ye weel – may you ha'e claes,
Wi' health to roam about the braes,
And Guid preserve you a' your days,
Frae Satan's reach,
Is what the muse sincerely prays –
Your's – Sarah Leech

Vocabulary

weel – well

mair – more

aye – always

ane – one

a' – all

row – roll

blaw – blow

awa – away

knowe – knoll, hillock

mair – more

ilk – each, every

kye – cows

nowtes – cattle, usually cattle for fattening

cauld – cold

carlin – witch

stanes – stones

maut bree – ‘malt broth’ i.e. whisky

ghaistly – ghostly

gowks – fools (literally ‘cuckoos’)

Cloutie – Devil

braes – hills

claes – clothes

Poem Analysis

Here again the metre is ‘Standard Habbie’ (see ‘Tay’). Although an older poem, it is less consistently Ulster-Scots than its modern counterpart. For instance, in order to find a rhyme for ‘sprite’, the poet is forced into using the English ‘night’, ‘right’ and ‘blight’ rather than the Ulster-Scots *nicht* or *richt*, which display a language feature called the ‘voiceless velar fricative’ (which is the ‘ch’ sound made at the end of the words ‘bricht’ and ‘nicht’ in ‘it’s a braw, bricht, muinlicht nicht’ – a supposed test of Scottishness). On the other hand, many Ulster-Scots poets find it expands their range of choice to be able to change between Ulster-Scots and English.

The second verse shows another interesting feature of pronunciation. The *grow*, *knowe* (meaning ‘knoll’ – a small hill), *lowe* (meaning ‘fire’) and *row* should all be pronounced to rhyme with English ‘how’, not ‘go’. Television and radio broadcasts that warn of traffic jams often mention ‘Sandy Knowes’ roundabout, and when the presenter mistakenly calls it ‘Sandy Nose’, you will know better!

Another point to note is the references to *cantrips* (magic) and *elf-shot stanes* in the fifth verse. A knowledge of superstitious beliefs in the fairy world – if not the beliefs themselves – survived in the writings of a number of the Ulster-Scots poets. At a time when the care of livestock was not supported by professional vets, farmers often believed that sickness in their cattle (*kye*) had been caused by *elf-shot stanes* (which were actually prehistoric flint arrowheads that were still to be found in grazing land at the time). Later in the poem, *Clootie* makes an appearance: this is the Devil, in reference to his cloven hooves. In this case, however, Sarah Leech advises that to avoid seeing such appearances the reader should stay away from strong *bree*. *Bree* is ‘broth’, which the poet uses figuratively: *barley bree* is whisky.



Poet Bio

Sarah Leech

Sarah Leech was born in 1809 in a village called Ballylennan, near Raphoe in County Donegal. Her father died when she was only three, leaving her mother to bring up six children on her own. The family was very poor, but Sarah's older sister had been taught to read and tried to give Sarah a start with her alphabet and spelling. At age six, Sarah was sent to school in a neighbouring village; however, she was terrified of the schoolmaster and didn't seem to be making much progress. Then when she had only been attending less than three months, the school was closed down, to her great joy.

To everyone's surprise, Sarah had improved so much that she was able to read a chapter in the Bible, and this encouraged her to keep reading. When she reached the age of twelve, she was taught a bit more about how to write, but the family's need to bring in money meant she had to leave school and take up work as a spinner. At about this time, she discovered poetry, and could memorise the poems she liked.

In 1822 the family moved half a mile away, to Lettergull, and it was there that Sarah started to write poetry for her own amusement. One of her poems, *Elegy on a Loquacious Old Woman*, so impressed a local man that he persuaded her to let him write down some of her poems, and she was really embarrassed when they appeared in the *Londonderry Journal*.

Sarah suffered some kind of eye infection in 1826, and for a while it was feared that she would lose her sight. Then a serious and long-lasting attack of rheumatism confined her to home and stopped her being able to walk, except with a crutch. Although she had become a school teacher with a small number of pupils, these health problems forced her to give up teaching and she had to fall back on her spinning to make a living. Her only known book of poetry, called *Poems, on Various Subjects*, was published in Dublin in 1828. Sarah passed away from ill health in 1830.