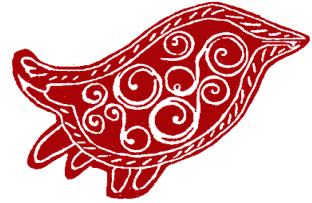


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Jane Williams, an outstanding 19th-century Cork silversmith and her work

By FIONA AHERN



Plate 1. Portrait of Jane Williams in oils. (*Courtesy John Williams*)

Jane Williams (née Terry) was born in Cork on the second of December 1771. She was descended from a respected Cork family, the Terrys, who numbered goldsmiths, barristers, linen traders, merchants, maltsters and farmers among them. Her great-grandfather, John Terry, had been mayor of Cork in 1719.¹ Terrys had been made freemen of Cork in the past, including Carden Terry, Jane's father. Carden Terry

was a noted silversmith, having been apprenticed at the age of sixteen, serving his time most likely in his grandfather's workshop. He set up a workshop at the 'New House within 2 doors of Broad Lane, Corke, at the Sign of the Golden Cup' in 1764² and took on apprentices, among them being John Williams. It is likely that Jane, one of seven daughters, was working in the family business at that time, alongside John Williams. Girls at that period did not undergo a formal silversmithing apprenticeship but learned on the job with the apprentices. John Williams and Jane Terry were married on August 6 1791 in St Peter's Church, Cork, when both were just twenty.³ Four years later in 1795, Carden Terry made John Williams a partner in his silversmithing business and struck a new maker's mark to celebrate this. John Williams also had a jewellery business on the Grand Parade, Cork, probably a retail outlet for the silver workshop. As was the custom of the time, the young Williams family most likely lived above the shop. Jane presumably continued in the workshop after her marriage, although her work went unrecorded as was the common practice of the time when silverware was marked in the name of the workshop owner rather than individual workers. Everything changed, however, when John Williams died in June 1806, aged only thirty-four⁴ and father of seven children.

By this time Carden Terry was sixty-four, on the point of retiring, his dreams of passing on the business to his son-in-law now shattered. He was, of course, also concerned for the future of his widowed daughter, Jane, and her children.

The solution was to make Jane his business partner and grant recognition to her as a silversmith in her own right. By striking a new mark in 1807 incorporating Jane Williams' initials under his own, Carden Terry simultaneously granted her the goodwill and protection of his name as a recognised and outstanding silversmith while also fore-fronting his daughter as a practising silversmith.

Jane was not unique as a woman running a business at the beginning of the 19th century. While she undoubtedly came from a well-to-do family and her brother was at that time a practising attorney in the South Mall, Cork, she was not of genteel birth, but rather grew up in a craftsman's family. There are numerous instances of women involved in trade and running their own businesses in Cork at that time. A total of 32 different occupations for women and 91 women engaged in business emerge from West's 1809-1810 Cork City directory.⁵ These businesswomen were running their own businesses in the city centre, many of them situated on the Grand Parade, alongside Jane Williams. However, Jane, dealing with the wealthiest of clients of both sexes, designing and working with the most expensive of materials, taking charge of the workshop and its employees, keeping the books and making the monthly trips to the Dublin assay office with the latest parcel of silverware, would have been a notable and outstanding businesswoman in the small city of Cork. She began the partnership with her father when she was thirty-five years of age, a woman in her prime, reared to the business and well-positioned to succeed.

A new government act passed in 1807 made it compulsory that 'all silver wrought, sold or bartered in Ireland be subject to a 6d duty and any goldsmith found selling silver or gold without hallmarks be subject to £100 fine.'⁶ The Act also provided that all silverware must display the sovereign's head stamp as proof that the duty had been paid.⁷ Such a hefty fine must have galvanised the hitherto independent Cork

silversmiths into conforming at last to the law and from 1807 regular parcels of silverware were sent by Cork silversmiths to be hallmarked in Dublin. One of the first to send silverware to Dublin from Cork on a regular basis was Jane Williams. An examination of the surviving Goldsmiths' Corporation of Ireland's *Account Books of Work Examined (November 1809 to March 1816)*,⁸ gives even greater insight into the workings of the Carden Terry/Jane Williams workshop at that period. These are the only surviving ledger books belonging to the Goldsmiths' Corporation at that time which detail the type and amounts of silverware sent to be assayed. Study of these account books immediately makes clear that it was Jane Williams who was in charge as all the entries for the workshop are entitled 'Williams, Cork.'

A fascinating picture of the life of Jane and her customers emerges as the monthly parcels of silver are documented. Silver cream ewers, chalices, snuffers and snuffer trays, church flagons, pickle forks, canes, pap boats, freedom boxes, waiters, snuff boxes, teapots and asparagus tongs jostle on the tightly-written pages of the ledgers with the more mundane ladles, spoons and forks. The 'bread and butter' of the workshop was obviously flatware, especially the thousands of spoons of all descriptions sent to be assayed: salt spoons, egg spoons, teaspoons, dessert spoons, table spoons and gravy spoons. Approximately 5,000 teaspoons were sent to Dublin over the period of seven years examined while in the same period only 430 forks and 53 knives were dispatched; 520 salt spoons were listed, perhaps given as small gifts, or possibly being constantly replaced as they were easily lost or stolen. Pickle forks and asparagus tongs seem rather exotic but reflect the eating habits of the time. Each monthly parcel contained some especially lovely pieces of silver hollow-ware, generally a silver tea-service of teapot, cream ewer and sugar basin, but frequently a special commission for a customer such as a lidded tankard, an egg-stand, a freedom box, a cruet frame or a tureen. Although

teapots were regularly included, in all 49, only three coffee pots were sent for assay by Jane and no chocolate pots or hot-water jugs featured. Two silver saucepans were listed, for use at the table for heating brandy. Five pap-boats were included, which were used almost certainly to feed babies. Towards the end of this period Jane Williams sent a snuff box, two canes and four cases for assay, reflecting social mores of the time, when gentlemen might twirl their silver-topped canes and proffer their silver snuff-boxes while their women-folk made morning calls, bringing their calling-cards in silver cases. This was an era when silverware was a sign of affluence and the sideboards of the newly-rich middle classes creaked with displays of the family silver, ranging from tea-sets to tureens. While the ruling class had disappeared to England with the passing of the Act of Union and the removal of the seat of power to London, the middle classes who had made their money in the boom times from house building and trade, were still entertaining lavishly and showing off their newly acquired wealth to their neighbours and friends. Cork was, at that period, an active industrial centre, manufactures and commerce prospered and provided employment for its growing population. Silverware in all its glory, shining in the candlelight of the dinner table, was a perhaps not so subtle way of saying 'We have arrived!'

In all, approximately sixty different types of silver items were created by Jane Williams in the workshop, twenty-three of those being flatware, the rest a wonderful array of silver hollowware. On three occasions church-commissioned pieces were included in the monthly Williams parcel to Dublin, these being a chalice, church plates, dishes and church flagons. The *Account Books of Works Examined* also list silver boxes under the Williams Cork account, possibly snuff boxes, but more likely the freedom boxes commissioned by Cork Corporation in highly decorated and engraved gold or silver to house parchments granting the freedom of the city to various dignitaries. This was a lovely custom of

the 18th and 19th centuries, as the luxurious box containing the parchment could be later used for tobacco, cigars and such like. Fourteen boxes and one snuffbox are listed in the Williams accounts during the period 1809-1816. These boxes are highly prized nowadays as collectors' items. The variety of silver articles and amounts produced by Jane Williams and sent for hall-marking in the period 1809-1816 are listed in the Appendix below.

However, the list of items from the Williams workshop scarcely prepares us for the sheer beauty, craftsmanship and skill of the silverware emanating from this Cork studio. Discussing the Terry/Williams workshop, Douglas Bennett alludes to 'the quality of the workmanship and design from this little workshop which is so delightfully different from anything being produced in Dublin.'⁹ The period being examined here, from 1807, when Jane Williams first entered her mark, to 1822 when the workshop closed, falls into the regency period, a 'disastrous period for design in Ireland.'¹⁰ However, at a time when many of the wealthy middle-classes were going to London to buy mass-produced, machine-made and of course consequently cheaper silverware, Jane Williams held her own by refraining from the excesses of the regency period and adhering instead to the linear simplicity of the neo-classical style. She used classical oval shapes, gadrooning, simple reeded borders and brightcut engravings of festoons and swags to decorate her hand-made goods.

When questioned by this author, James Weldon, Dublin dealer in Irish Georgian silverware, described Jane Williams as an excellent designer, with a distinctive feminine touch and likened her work to that of renowned English silversmith Hester Bateman. Mundane terms in the account books such as 'pap boat,' 'bread basket,' 'butterdish,' 'box' do not do justice to the wonderful creations in silver, and occasionally gold, issuing from the Williams workshop in Cork.

Accounts of Jane Williams often state that the workshop closed on the death of Carden



Plate 2. Silver cream jug, Jane Williams. (Courtesy John Williams)

Terry in 1821, thereby implying that the workshop did not survive without him. In fact, C.C. Woods, writing some fifty years after the death of Jane Williams, spells out that Carden Terry was either dead or retired in 1812, as he was no longer involved in the business.¹¹ In 1812, Carden Terry was seventy, a very old man for that era, and, amazingly, he survived for another nine years. His death may certainly have prompted Jane to review the business, but she was not the only silversmith looking at the viability of the workshop. From the heady days when silversmiths could scarcely keep pace with the orders rolling in for every type of sil-

verware, orders had reduced to a mere trickle as customers with an eye for a bargain bought mass-produced goods in England. The age of the machine and factory goods had arrived and all over Ireland, silversmiths were facing the downturn, bankruptcy and ruin. It is very probable that the years 1817 to 1821 were difficult trading years for the silver business in Cork, when local custom dwindled as the trading fortunes of Cork's foremost families floundered. Jane finally closed the workshop in 1822. Other Cork silversmiths swiftly followed her example and by 1850, the once-thriving Company of Cork Goldsmiths had ceased to exist.



Plate 3. Grand Parade, Cork (detail), photograph taken around the turn of the 20th century. Number 44 is on the right, second building to the corner with South Mall. Lawrence Collection, L_ROY-1935. (Courtesy of National Library of Ireland)

But the story of Jane Williams does not quite end with the closure of her silver workshop. Pigot's *Directory of the City of Cork, 1824*,¹² reveals that the indefatigable and ever-enterprising Jane re-invented herself as a linen draper, following in the footsteps of other Terrys in the past. She set up shop at 44 Grand Parade, using the same premises as before, but this time styling herself 'Jane Williams and Sons, Linen Drapers' (Plate 3).

While other famous silversmiths went bankrupt or died in penury, Jane now staked her reputation as a respected, well-known and outstanding businesswoman to promote her sons in business, just as her father had done for her, back in 1807. Jane Williams, Cork's remarkable silversmith and outstanding businesswoman of the 19th century, died on April 17 1845, at the age of seventy-three.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- 3 John Bowen and Conor O'Brien, (2005) *Cork Silver and Gold*, Cork, p.186.
- 4 *Ibid*, p.186.
- 5 West (1809-1810) *Directory of Cork City*.
- 6 Douglas Bennett, (1972) *Irish Georgian Silver*, London, p.168.
- 7 *Ibid*, p.168.
- 8 Dublin, National Library of Ireland microfilm n.6063, P6789, Goldsmiths' Corporation of Ireland *Account Books of Work Examined November 1809 – March 1817*.
- 9 Bennett, *op.cit.*, p.187.
- 10 *Ibid*, p.142.
- 11 As quoted in Bennett, *op. cit.*, p.189
- 12 J. Pigot and Co. (1824) *Directory of the City of Cork*.

APPENDIX I

*Analysis of the variety and amount of silverware sent to Dublin by Jane Williams from
the Account Books of Work Examined November 1809–March 1817
(Goldsmiths' Corporation of Ireland)*

Hollow-ware (38 items)		Flat-ware (23 items)	
Box	14	Asparagus tongs	4
Bread basket	11	Butter knife	20
Butter-dish	2	Butter ladle	35
Can	4	Dessert forks	154
Cane	2	Dessert spoon	532
Case	4	Egg spoon	216
Chalice	2	Fish knife	16
Church flagon	2	Gravy spoon	25
Church plate	4	Knife	53
Coffee pot	3	Ladle	105
Cork (bottle-top)	1	Long fork	14
Cream ewer	58	Pickle fork	31
Cruet frame	2	Punch ladle	1
Cruet stand	1	Salad fork	2
Cup	3	Salad servers	2
Egg-stand	1	Salt spoon	520
Freedom box	1	Skewer	32
Funnel	23	Soup ladle	5
Funnel saucer	8	Sugar tongs	114
Goblet	3	Table fork	416
Lidded tankard	1	Table spoon	797
Mustard tankard	1	Teaspoon	4,812
Pan	1	Tureen ladle	9
Pap boat	5		
Plate	9		
Punch jug	2		
Sauce boat	2		
Saucepan	2		
Snuff box	1		
Snuffer	2		
Snuffer-stand	2		
Snuffer tray	9		
Stand	2		
Sugar basin	46		
Teapot	4		
Tray	3		
Tureen and cover	4		
Waiter	3		