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She painted seaweeds from the seashore

Ellen Hutchins (1785-1815)

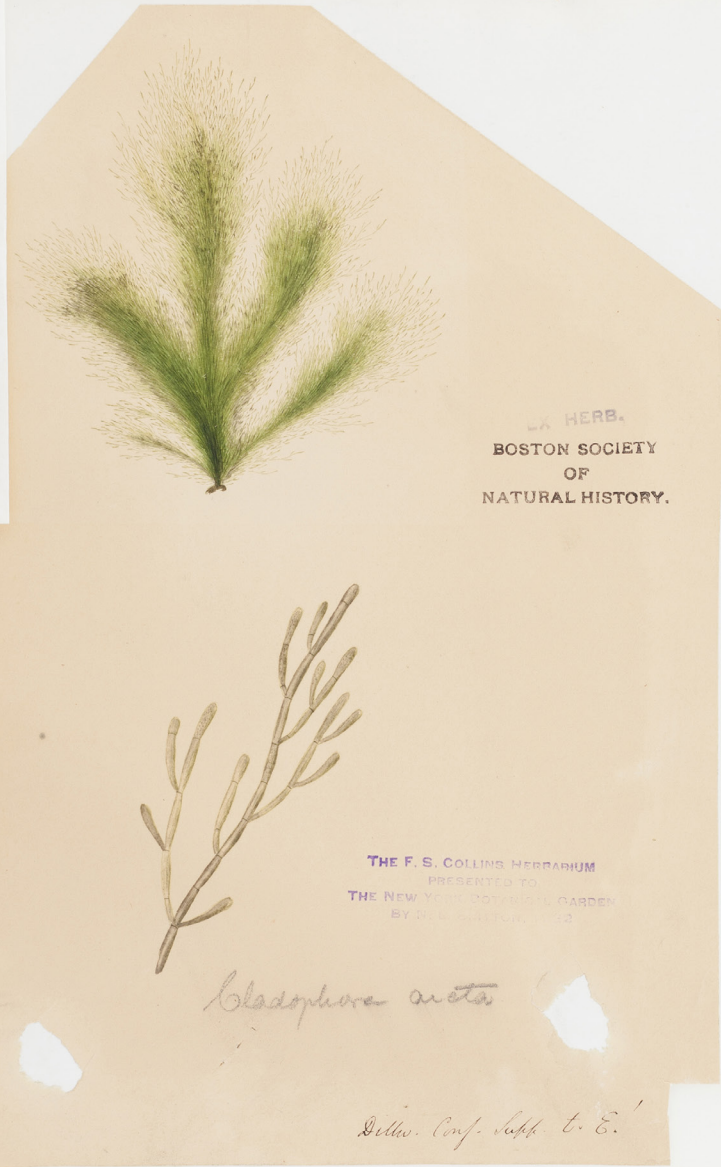


Ellen Hutchins (1785–1815)

*talented botanical artist
and Ireland's first female botanist*

by Madeline Hutchins

An organiser of the Ellen Hutchins Festival,
researcher on Ellen, and her great-great-grandniece.



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Person, time and place

Ellen Hutchins was a remarkable young woman who 'botanised' and produced exquisitely detailed and accurate watercolour drawings of seaweeds from Bantry Bay in the early 1800s, at a time when this was a very remote area and hardly visited at all. It was not yet known for its botanical diversity and wealth of plant species.

Ellen Hutchins was born in 1785 at Ballylickey and lived there all of her short life, except for attending a boarding school in Dublin and staying on afterwards, to recover from a period of illness, in the household of a family friend, Dr Whitley Stokes, professor of medicine at Trinity and a botanist.

Prescribed botany

On her return to Ballylickey, probably in 1804 aged 19, Ellen had caring responsibilities for her elderly and ill mother and a disabled brother. When she expressed her dismay at the prospect of becoming more and more secluded through her circumstances, Dr Stokes suggested that Ellen studied botany to encourage her in healthy exercise and give her an occupation indoors, identifying the plants and preparing specimens (dried plants on paper).

This 'prescription' of botany proved to be highly successful, as Ellen learnt quickly and was clearly very capable of distinguishing one plant from another and very determined when it came to pursuing new ones. She developed what she described as her 'passion' and 'pleasure in plants'. She was delighted when James Townsend Mackay, botanist at Trinity College Dublin, visited her at Ballylickey

in 1805. He suggested that she studied seaweeds. She poured her considerable energy into this 'large and difficult' branch of botany and within two years she had found at least seven species 'new to science'. Her specimens were sent by James Mackay to the leading seaweed specialists in Ireland and across the British Isles, including Dawson Turner, in Yarmouth on the East Anglian coast of England.

Ellen as botanical artist

There are tiny line drawings in some of Ellen's letters, showing the shape or the size of something, but it was 1808 before she attempted botanical drawings. In July that year, she was the first botanist to find the Velvet Horn, *Fucus tomentosus*, seaweed 'in fruit'. (From the lack of any sign of fruit or spores, it was about to be reclassified as a sponge.) This discovery helped establish Ellen's credentials as a botanist, and it set her going as a botanical artist.

On 27th July 1808 she wrote to Dawson Turner 'fearing that drying will alter its appearance, I have attempted to draw it as it appeared when recent'. Drawing was the only way of showing another botanist what you had seen. In December 1808 she sent the first batch of her drawings (including the full plant of Velvet Horn and some *Confervae*) to Dawson Turner who was delighted with them. On 8th January 1809, he wrote 'your *Fucus tomentosus* will be very soon engraved'. It is the first Plate in volume 3 of his great book on seaweeds, *Historia Fucorum*.

Ellen would have been taught to use watercolours at school, but she was self-taught in botanical drawing. She studied the drawings in the botanical books she owned, and drawings that Dawson Turner had sent her to help with plant identification. She particularly admired those by William Jackson Hooker, to whom her liverwort specimens were passed for his major publication, *British Jungermanniae*.

The value of illustration

Ellen attached great value to an accurate drawing and, once she realised that she could draw well, she made hundreds of drawings of seaweeds from Bantry Bay and shared them with fellow botanists. One seaweed specialist, Lewis Dillwyn of Swansea, Wales, at first dismissed her drawings as exaggerated in both size and colour and not at all as he saw the same seaweeds. After a visit to Bantry and Ballylickey in July 1809 he accepted that the 'heavenly bay' was 'perhaps the best garden in the world for the marine algae' (seaweeds), and there they 'attain an enormous size'.

Lifelike

Defending the accuracy of her drawings in a letter to Dawson Turner, Ellen cites the example of the young girl who helped her with boxes of specimens on the rocks, and back at home in her work room making specimens or drawings. When Ellen asked the girl to clear things away, she tried to pick up one of Ellen's drawings thinking that it was a seaweed.

Published drawings

Ellen's view was that a botanical book had very little value unless each species covered was fully illustrated. Some drawings of hers were engraved and used as illustrations in the major botanical books on seaweeds of her time; Lewis Dillwyn's *Synopsis of British Confervae* (1809) and Dawson Turner's *Historia Fucorum* (1808-1819). These large publications were very expensive, as each engraving was hand coloured.

Pleasure in plants: science and beauty

Ellen often wrote enthusiastically about the beauty of plants she found; referring to them as 'treasures' or 'exquisite little beauties' and 'my darlings'. While her prime interest was in the science, she also had a great appreciation of beauty in plants and landscape. She was particularly taken by the magnified details of plants under a glass (lens) or her microscope. She wrote to Dawson Turner about one seaweed, 'I am very glad you liked *Conferva dissiliens*. You could not but like so wonderful a plant. I spent 5 days admiring it & often wished your eye had been in place of mine.'

Material differences?

The materials Ellen used and those used by botanical artists today have changed relatively little, with the chief difference being that the paints are no longer toxic.

The quality of lenses has also improved. Despite the discovery of photography, botanical art is still greatly valued by botanists today in providing accurate and detailed plant portraits.

Last chapter

By 1813, Ellen was too ill to continue her botanising or drawing. She suffered from a liver complaint and her doctor treated her with mercury. Medicine at this time was very basic and mercury was not known to be toxic. In November 1814, very weak, but thought to be recovering, Ellen wrote her last letter to Dawson Turner, and ended it with 'send me a moss, anything just to look at'. Unfortunately, Ellen did not recover and she died on 9th February 1815 at her brother's home, Ardnagashel, near Ballylickey, a month before her thirtieth birthday, and was buried in Garryvurcha churchyard in Bantry with no headstone.

A fitting memorial

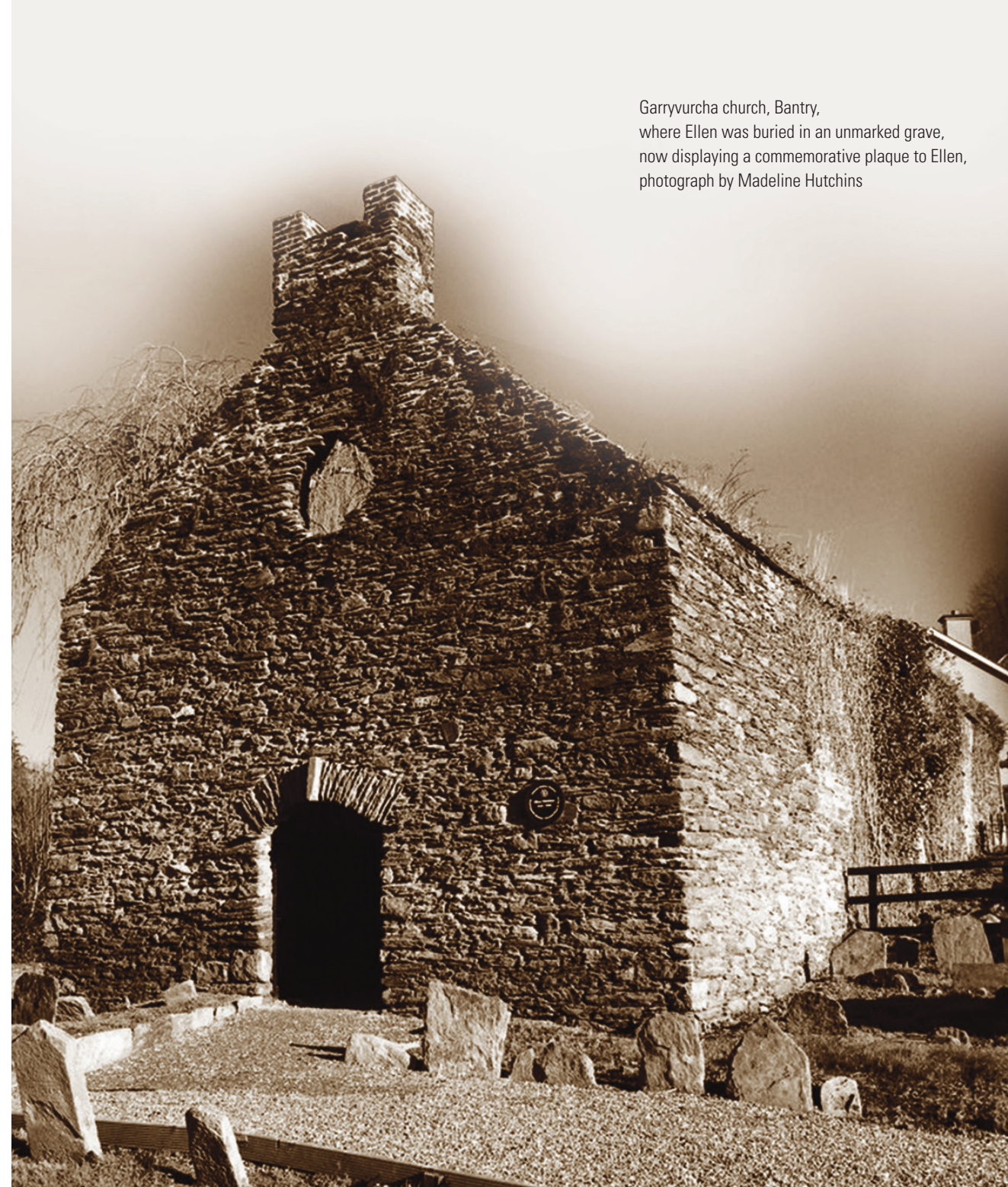
In 1914, a botanist, Henry Lett, writing a paper about Ellen, contacted the Hutchins family, still at Ardnagashel, and in his letter wrote 'It is a pity her name is not on some memorial stone at her grave, she well deserved that it should be.' Finally, in 2015, during the first Ellen Hutchins Festival, initiated by the Bantry Historical Society, this was achieved, with a special plaque to commemorate Ellen placed in Garryvurcha churchyard, Bantry and a small, discreet one by a side gate at Ballylickey House.

And a lasting legacy

Ellen sent many drawings directly to Dawson Turner, and others were given to him by Ellen's sister in law, Matilda, after Ellen's death. When he gave up botany, Dawson Turner passed nearly 240 of them to William Jackson Hooker, who became the first public Director of the Royal Botanic Gardens Kew, and the drawings were later acquired by the Library, Art & Archives at Kew where they are now. In addition, Museums Sheffield hold forty that once belonged to William Harvey of Trinity College Dublin, and two turned up in 2019 in the New York Botanical Garden's Herbarium, in among many of Ellen's specimens.

Her specimens (little pieces of Bantry Bay) are held in Herbaria in Ireland, the U.K. and the USA and are still used for ID and research. They are an important lasting legacy of Ellen's short but productive life.

For more information on Ellen Hutchins see www.ellenhutchins.com



Garryvurcha church, Bantry, where Ellen was buried in an unmarked grave, now displaying a commemorative plaque to Ellen, photograph by Madeline Hutchins

The logo for the Bantry Historical Archaeological Society features a stylized, vertical arrangement of the letters 'B', 'A', 'N', 'T', 'R', 'Y' on the left, with a decorative flourish. To the right, the words 'BANTRY HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY' are written in a serif font, with 'BANTRY' and 'SOCIETY' in a larger, orange-brown color and 'HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGICAL' in a smaller, brown color.

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Front cover image: Ellen's drawing of *Hutchinsia fastigiata*
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Board of Trustees of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

Inside cover image: Ellen's drawing of *Conferva arcta*
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Virtual Herbarium of The New York Botanical Garden (<http://sweet.gum.nybg.org/science/v2/>)