

How to Run a Shebeen

There comes a time in every man's life when he puts his empty glass down on the counter, looks around for someone to serve him and finally in despair mutters to himself, "I could run a better pub than this lot."

Most people are happy to leave it at that but not my father. He had owned one pub and managed another and he just couldn't let the opportunity of one last boozier pass him by. Nowadays we'd call it a retirement project; some men dream of long afternoons on the golf course or taking a cruise round the Med, but not Dad. He just couldn't stop working till working stopped him.

My father had inherited a country shop and saw the opportunity to put his life skills as a farmer, publican and armchair philosopher to good use. He would transform from grocer to spirit-grocer, but without any of the tedious legal formalities.

A word on the law; there are a few benighted individuals out there who delight in setting the police on an honest businessman. It is likely that one day a cop will call at your door. If he's just an average cop he will say "we've had reports" and give you a stern look, but if he's a clever cop he'll wait until a sunny day and arrive in his shirtsleeves and announce, "Is there e'er the chance of a bottle of beer? The drouth is choking me." The answer is always no. I can't be clearer about this; a firm but polite "No" will save you a world of trouble and your name in the papers.

I will always remember the day two young Guards called to our shop, put their caps on the counter and calmly appraised the rows of empty grey beer crates my old dad had stacked high against the wall. One of them ordered a Cavan Cola – which was suspicious in itself, while the other asked my father if he had anything stronger. My poor dad looked up at them with his cornflower blue eyes and Sellotaped glasses, and intoned in a mixture of sadness and shock, "We don't sell any of that stuff here." We never heard from them again.

The whiskey should always be a premium whiskey. A second-rate whiskey decanted into an empty premium bottle is acceptable in the cities, but don't try it with any countryman over the age of twenty. You do not sell brandy. No vodka. Nothing blue or orange or green. No ice. Tins of beer may seem like a good idea but need to be kept cold, and anyway the older drinker prefers a bottle; it's just the right size. Your local licensed premises isn't your competition, it's your wholesaler. They will be only too glad to sell you a few extra crates of beer and a few bottles of whiskey on a regular basis.

There should be no jukeboxes, no pool tables, no optics and no high stools. No peanuts or dartboards. There should be no happy hours or anything else that comes between a hard-working man and a quiet drink. Remember, this is your home, but it's where your customers get to socialize and tell lies and recall the exciting moments of their lives. So, as it's partly their home, make sure it is always clean and warm. An open fire is preferable to central heating in a shebeen no matter what people say. A turf fire is ideal, with

coal added if the priest calls, because the priest is a blessing on any house he visits and anyway, some of them have been known to buy a drink. Having said that, keep a back-up gas heater for the worst of winter weather, when you are kept busy making hot whiskeys and Irish Coffees.

There is a lot to be said for Irish hospitality, but it cannot always be extended to young yahoos who do not yet know their limits or to the drunk driver; they must be firmly warned off. This is not a "public" house, it is your house and you must decide who enters under its roof. For my father the ideal customers were farmers and council workers (the men who breast feed the shovel and take a nice long nap in the cab of a big yellow lorry while the rain pours down outside). Best of all were the retired men who will buy a loaf and a litre of milk, and buy a half 'un and a bottle of stout as an afterthought. They tend to get up in the morning, so their custom is to be encouraged as they won't try to sit you out.

In many ways my dad's shebeen (he never liked the term) was a day care centre for the elderly bachelors and widowers of the surrounding townlands. Pension day was the busiest day of the week. The customers would start to arrive around eleven o'clock for a leisurely drink before lunch. Throughout the afternoon old codgers in long black overcoats and peaked caps would appear, and soon the kitchen would soon be full of pipe-smoke and heated conversation. All the while the old fellow presided from an armchair in the corner rarely raising his eyes from the crossword unless for the latest gossip or to voice his opinion on some current political impasse. The topics of conversation were what you might expect when Border men of a certain vintage foregather: the winter of '63, the Gunner Brady, how to treat glanders, the right way to sharpen a scythe, as well as the dos and don'ts of smuggling and poteen-making, Kerr Pinks versus Arran Banners and the usual births, deaths and marriages of the parish.

There were a few old hands who could be relied on for a song or a recitation when they were sufficiently lubricated. A seasoned reciter in full flow could rattle the windows and scare the dog, taking his cap off at the most poignant moments for added effect. If the reciters played it for laughs, the singers expected total silence through the full sixteen verses of *The Chapel of Swanlinbar* complete with footnotes bemoaning the lack of fighting spirit in the men of a certain townland. The *craic* would continue until late afternoon when the party would break up and everyone headed home. The men on bicycles would glide off through the mizzle with their shopping bags swinging from the handlebars, heading for secluded cottages up long, lonely lanes.

Over time my dad's older customers died off and weren't replaced, and so the shebeen gradually wound down. Dad was winding down himself, but the shebeen had given him a second wind at the latter end of his life. I doubt he ever really made a profit on the venture; it hardly covered the cost of the old man's cigarettes (Player's Navy Cut, twenty a day and he smoked them like each one was the last he'd ever smoke) but he had a wealth of friends, and it's always a good feeling to get one over on the forces of law and order.

Kevin Connolly works with the Roma and Traveller communities in Belfast. He studied creative writing at the Met. Born in Fermanagh, he lives in South

Belfast with his wife, daughter and cat.



Elemenopy

Elemenopy – the feeling you get when reciting the middle of the alphabet, is a key ingredient in Colm Keegan’s creative writing workshops, whether working with adults or younger, whether it’s poetry, screenwriting, short stories, rap, or songwriting. Whatever it is, it doesn’t matter. Everything starts with ELEMENOPY.

Remember learning the alphabet?

You’re five or so and thinking, “are you serious?”

The Length of it!

It goes all around the classroom!”

Then a while after that, the teacher points at you and says “Ok, tell me the alphabet.”

You stand up in front of the whole class, probably your first performance ever, and you begin, not knowing if you’ll make it to the end. The Z feels miles away.

A B C D E F G H I J K

ELEMENOPY.

you hit it,

the sweet spot at the heart of the alphabet

the free and easy feeling of just going with it and not caring

You’re thinking Happy Days! I can do this! I’m almost there!

You don’t care, you’re just in it.

That's Elemenopy. That feeling. The secret ingredient in all great poetry, all great writing, and all great art.

Think about the first time you have to stand up to somebody, somebody you are afraid of, somebody who is putting you down, who has you backed into a corner. You feel your feelings swirl around in your stomach, like wasps in a jar, you try and keep it in but eventually it gets too much, you feel a heat in your neck or your cheeks go red, you feel the feelings rising up in your throat and before you know it you're saying what you were afraid to say.

It's out.

The other person backs off, agog.

And you're thinking. Woh, did I actually say that?

That sounded great, that was a proper smackdown!

That's Elemenopy.

Or when you fall in love, and there's nothing you can do about it anymore, you have to let them know, you have to go in for that first kiss, you know you could lose everything but it's inevitable, you can't help yourself.

That's Elemenopy too.

Sometimes your life feels like the surface of a still lake, and a moment hits and you feel the ripples flow out from you and back in again. It can be a good thing or a bad thing. Everything syncs up and you're thinking

"I'm alive. This is what it feels like to be alive. I am going through something, and on the other side of what's happening right now I will never be the same again."

When you record those moments, that's poetry.

The poet Ted Hughes was obsessed with catching animals.

He caught foxes, rabbits, birds, frogs, everything.

At one time he went to school with 40 mice in his jacket.

Then he grew up.

He stopped catching animals and started writing poems and he said once that they are the same thing.

Have you ever caught a butterfly?

You don't clap your hands on it and slap it on the table and go, "YUSS! I caught a butterfly! It's a pancake now but so what."

You do it with care, it is a considerate act. You can catch your feelings and your memories the same way.

Have you ever read Seamus Heaney's *Mid-Term Break*?

Everybody feels the same punch in the gut when they reach the last line.

"A four foot box, a foot for every year."

He took that moment and handled it with such humility and grace.

If you catch a moment right, and put it into words, it can live on, it can live longer than you.

There are words written thousands of years ago and the feeling behind them still lives on, every time somebody comes along and opens that book, it's like the butterfly flies back out.

Good writing isn't just about words, it's about Elemenopy. Put the feelings first. Start with the heart, and the art will come.

Colm Keegan led a workshop for Fermanagh Writers in April. He hosts the [Kingfisher Writers' Retreat](#) in Dublin

Colm Keegan [reads Elemenopy](#) [Soundcloud]

Seamus Heaney [reads Midterm Break](#) [Poetry Ireland YouTube]

[Fermanagh Writers, Books and Learning: A Long Tradition](#)

In 1607, Sir John Davys, Attorney-General, said of Fermanagh folk that they were '*rather inclined to be scholars or husbandmen than to be kerne or men of action.*' [1](#)

We are told of the old learned families in the county: the Husseys, the Whelans, the Corcorans, the Breslins, the Keenans, the Lunnys, the Cassidys, and the O'Dolans, all of whom produced historians and poets. It was a McManus from Seanad McManus (Bellisle), one Cathal Óg, who directed the compilation of the Annals of Ulster and a Rory O'Lunny who did much of the writing. Along with the Annals of the Four Masters (compiled in Donegal), it is one of the two most important annals for the early history of Ireland.

Fermanagh after the Plantation has a proud tradition of scholarship and literary endeavour.

First, the historians. In the 17th century the Rev. Andrew Hamilton wrote

"The Actions of the Enniskillen-Men" in the *Glorious Revolution* of 1688-90. In the 18th century Mervyn Archdall edited *Monasticon Hibernicum*. In the early 20th century the 4th Earl of Belmore, William Copeland Trimble, Cyril Falls, Rev. J.E. McKenna and Rev. William Steele and W.H. Dundas were all active.

In fiction and poetry, Peter Magennis 'The Bard of Knockmore' (1817-1910) was one of the earliest modern Fermanagh writers. He published two novels: *The Ribbon Informer, a tale of Lough Erne* (1874) and *Tully Castle, a tale of the Irish Rebellion* (1877). These were followed by a book of poems called simply *Poems* (1888).

Fermanagh's most prolific novelist was probably Shan Bullock (1865-1935). Between 1893 and 1931 he wrote over twenty books, mostly novels and short stories, with two collections of poetry and an autobiography called *After Sixty Years* (1931). He also wrote a biography of Thomas Andrews the designer of the Titanic, titled *Thomas Andrews, Shipbuilder* (1912). Bullock was a retiring, modest man but his writing enjoyed considerable popularity for a time in both Ireland and Britain. He worked in the Civil Service in London and lived mostly in Surrey, where he was able to make literary contacts but shied away from any publicity. His father had been farm manager on the Crom Estate, where Bullock was born and reared. Among the woods and waters of idyllic Crom Castle and its surroundings the young Bullock came in contact with local fishermen, labourers and craftsmen. While he respected the forthrightness and hard work ethic of the local Protestants his sympathies seemed to lean in the direction of the poorer Catholics with their easy manner and friendliness. His novels *By Thrasna River* and *The Loughsiders* and his autobiography *After Sixty Years* are considered three of his best works. John Wilson Foster said that his work was "valuable as social history, but the author staidly lacks sympathy with his own, often unpleasant characters, particularly the Protestant characters. This lack drains his fictional world of warmth and life, despite the quirky humour."² Yet Foster also says that "of all Ulster writers Bullock perhaps comes closest to an intimate knowledge of both sects."

Myrtle Johnston became something of a teenage sensation when she published her first novel, *Hanging Johnny*, in 1927. Few in the county today are aware of her or her writing. She was born in Magherameena Castle about three miles from Belleek in 1909 but her and the family had moved to England by the time of her debut novel, which became a best-seller.³ Her later works failed to reach the heights of her first, yet the critics recognised her distinctive style and talent.

Another modern writer who set all three of her novels only a few miles from Bullock territory was Anne Crone. Anne, born in Dublin and lived and taught in Belfast, but as both a child and adult she spent many of her summers with her aunts, the Plunketts of Derryad, outside Lisnaskea. Love and land were her themes. Her three novels: *Bridie Steen*, *This Pleasant Lea* and *My Heart and I* were first published between 1949 and 1955. Mary Rose Callaghan said of her work, "Crone's writing, though sensitive and lyrical, is mannered and dated. Nonetheless, she does understand human emotions and does know the foibles of her characters. Her characterization of young women is

excellent. Bridie Steen, for example, has *Emily Bronte's depth of feeling and Jane Austen's charm and common sense. This Pleasant Lea is almost as good.*"⁴

The next wave of Fermanagh historians began in the 1950s and 1960s period, led by three priests; Mulligan, Livingstone and Gallagher, as well as Mary Rogers, W.A. Maguire and William Parke. They are succeeded by the likes of J.B. Cunningham and Breege McCusker. The Clogher Historical Society, one of the oldest and largest in the country, is still active and thriving.

Three writers of fiction who grace the Fermanagh scene today are Seamas MacAnnaidh, Carlo Gebler and Blanaid McKinney. MacAnnaidh was born in Dublin but was educated in Enniskillen and has lived most of his life in the county. His writing has been mostly in Irish but he has also written much on local historical matters and taken part in documentary films. Gebler is a 'blow-in' of some duration. A documentary film maker as well as writer, he wrote a telling account of the political and religious divide in Fermanagh in his *The Glass Curtain*. McKinney is a native born and bred, and has published three collections of short stories.

In poetry we had Francis Harvey, who died a few years ago. Though a noted poet with a number of collections, and member of Aosdana, he did not have a high profile. Frank Ormsby, born near Irvinestown and living in Belfast, is now the best known poet of Fermanagh origin. He has published a number of collections and for many years was editor of *The Honest Ulsterman*. He has also edited a number of poetry anthologies. Mary Montague, born in Ederney, is another well-known poet with two published collections behind her.

This is a mere flavour of Fermanagh's long tradition of learning and scribbling. Whether you are a native or a 'blow-in' or a 'barbarian,' I hope it will be of some use and interest to you.

Dermot Maguire is editor of *The Spark* local history magazine

¹ *The Fermanagh Story*, by Peadar Livingstone

² In *Dictionary of Irish Literature*, ed. by Hogan

³ See John B Cunningham's article on her in *Fermanagh Miscellany* 2011

⁴ *Dictionary of Irish Literature*

[The Genesis Of Corncrake](#)

Corncrake magazine was conceived over a cup of coffee at Pete Byrne's kitchen table one Saturday morning two years ago. Pete, Tony Viney and I had gone back to his house to 'have a chat and a coffee' after a Fermanagh Writers Committee meeting, when out of the blue he suggested we should publish a magazine covering all the Arts in this area.

When Pete moved to Liverpool a few months later the magazine almost went with

him, but I was encouraged by the Committee to explore the possibilities. Our first major decision was that Corncrake would be an online magazine. The name was chosen because the bird is rarely seen and was almost wiped out; but is on the way back, and it was felt that this is a near-perfect metaphor for artistic endeavour in this area.

We needed a properly designed website, but would find it difficult to meet out that expense out of our limited funds, so I looked for alternative sources. I attended an information day at the Clinton Centre hosted by the NIHE Social Enterprise Team and was encouraged to apply for a grant from the Social Enterprise Scheme. This enabled us to have the site professionally designed and we were also able to draw on the public relations expertise of the NIHE team.

Jenny Brien was appointed as editor to sift through the material submitted and prepare it for publication. Caimin O'Shea is our Assistant Editor and Webmaster, who is technologically savvy to keep the website running smoothly, in liaison with the web designer, Paul 'Harry' Harrington.

So here we are two years down the line, and the magazine is ready to go. We plan to cover all the Arts in Fermanagh and neighbouring counties. We will publish bi-monthly and we plan to develop into the must-read local Arts Magazine. We will conduct a survey in the near future to check whether there might also be a market for a printed version.

Many people have helped to get Corncrake to this point. There are too many to mention here, but you know who you are and I would like to thank each one of you for your efforts.

John Monaghan Chair of Fermanagh Writers

So, what have these shy birds with the croaky voices got to say?

They know this country well, and some write of specific places. Peter Byrne has a poem about Rossorry Church graveyard; Angela McCabe has one about a garage in Ballinamore and its connection to John McGahern. Kevin Connolly tells the story of a shebeen in County Cavan, and Richard Pierce of how a corncrake once disrupted a recital at Castle Coole.

That love of place comes naturally to us. Dermot Maguire traces it through more than three centuries of Fermanagh Writers, poets, and historians. Precisely because of that love, and because we are part of a long tradition, we modern corncrakes can also be disruptive. You can hear that in John D Kelly's poem. We can say things that perhaps otherwise would be left unsaid. When writers and poets get it right, they can be – quite literally – the voice of the community.

You wonder perhaps why the Social Enterprise Team is funding an Arts Magazine? That's why.

You think Art is a luxury, only for comfortable people, comfortably off? Yes, it is, if you think of Art only as something to be marketed and consumed. Art

is more than that; art is the very lifeblood of the community, and a community that can not produce art is dead. Art is simply this – finding the right word, the right note, the right image, the right gesture – to speak to the heart of your neighbour and reveal something that was always there, but they didn't know it.

Anyone can create art. Giles Turnbull is blind – and a poet. Zeus Cooney sold the first painting he ever made. You might too – or you might not. As Colm Keegan says “Start with the heart and the art will come.” You don't have to do it alone. Writers and artists influence each other in ways they cannot imagine, simply by being aware of their work. So, in this first issue, novelist Anthony J Quinn writes about the influence of the Tyrone landscape, Richard Pierce shares his love of classical music, Chris Campbell reviews a film set in the Belfast of 45 years ago, and poet John Llewellyn James ponders an enigmatic Canadian painting.

Corncrakes are migrants; they bring memories from all over the world. The Corncrake calls, not only because it must, but to find a mate to lay a egg and carry on the species. This is our first egg, and now it's pipping, ready to hatch.

Jenny Brien Editor

I still remember my first local gig like it was yesterday, a nervous young boy trying to act cool taking my first steps into a world that, until then I didn't even know existed. I couldn't get over the fact that people just went about writing and playing their own music and even better, arranging gigs that were heaving with people in my otherwise quiet small town.

I remember seeing the two headline bands, *Odium Halo* and *Fractured*, and thinking straight away, this is it, this is what I'm going to do. Before then those kinds of shows only existed on television, but once I realised it was happening in my own back yard there was no question about it.

One thing that really stood out to me was being given a small pamphlet on arrival; it was something I had never seen before, a collective arts magazine for the local music and skate scene called “Badlands”. I hadn't just stumbled into a music scene, but a community, something that would define my teenage years and the person I would become. I kept that magazine for twelve years as a reminder of where my journey started, mostly because of these few simple words that resonated with me, which were written by local musician Kevin McHugh.

That's what it's all about, making connections. Linking one chord to the next, bridging chorus to verse, gelling words with music creating something that wasn't there before. Well it was there, just in a different form. It was hanging in the air making its presence felt until there was nothing else to do but write it down.

That's what we do, and the biggest connection, the hardest one to achieve is between the writer and the listener.

You know when you hear a song and it seems it's about you? It perfectly describes how you feel?

Someday I hope to write that song, to capture a moment. To hit on that magical combination of words, that perfect melody line so when you hear it you feel like it's always been there whispering in your ear, telling you things about yourself, and about me.

What am I talking about? I don't know; I'm just trying to make a connection.

I kept those words for a long time, because they were important to me, and because I felt they would be put to good use someday, so when John Monaghan approached me about helping set up Corncrake I felt perhaps that day had come.

Making connections isn't just the goal of the artist, it's our goal in undertaking this project. To connect our immediate community and hopefully further afield, to help people meet and share their works and to let those works make a connection with someone else.

My journey as an artist hasn't been an uphill struggle, it's been a gentle float downstream, carried by all those connections I've made throughout the years. My only hope is that we can give some of that back with Corncrake and help carry a few more folk on their own journeys.

Caimin O'Shea Assistant Editor