



Kindred Spirits

Drew University's fifth [Transatlantic Connections Conference](#) was held in Bundoran from January 10–13 to celebrate the many ties between the United States and Ireland. The cover image features the Choctaw Nation memorial that commemorates how they, though suffering greatly themselves following the Trail of Tears that drove them from their own land, sent money to buy food during the Great Famine.

In that same dark time, according to family tradition, Paula Meehan's family left Leitrim for Liverpool, only to remain stuck in the Monto district of Dublin for the next century. These are a few notes from her final keynote speech which was, she said; *just an excuse for giving out poetry*.

The speech was titled *The Kindness of Strangers*, and she began by saying how much she relied on that in her early wandering years.

The bad stuff you met, the negativity, the aggression – if you have a path as an artist, all that can be turned into power for the good... That's the only truth I know.

She dedicated the reading to [Alicia Suskin Ostriker](#), who was also present.

[Her book [Stealing the Language](#)] *gave me a kind of an armour to survive the world that I was heading back to here in Ireland... I knew I would get the poems I needed here on this island, in my native city.*

While she had been away, heroin had hit the city. In her latest book, [Geomantic](#), Paula took her inspiration from the commemorative quilts that communities made for their children lost through addiction. Especially hard hit was her own community:

the descendants of O'Casey's tenement dwellers ... they knew story and they knew song. They gave it with such generosity.

There are 81 short poems designed as patches, each with nine lines of nine syllables each.

The Promise

I won't do it. Not today. I won't
do it anyway. Not today. No.

Not because I can't do it. I won't.
Fallow fields lie dreaming under snow.
They won't be ploughed; not this spring they won't.
On the fencepost, a grey hooded crow
is part of some mystery I won't
fathom now. Though I'm really quite low.
I won't do it. Not today. I won't.

It interests me that the imagery in material that's suitable for children is often ferocious and violent and terrifying... If we learn to feel fear in what should be a safe place, maybe then when we're in the 'real' world and encounter fear, our bodies won't close down in the face of it.

The Broken Bough

We held our breath when you were a boy,
Out on a limb of the old oak tree
Helpless below as you shimmied up
Into its shadowy canopy.
That day the bough broke and you hung there
Alone through the sudden thunderstorm
We came upon you after, unafraid
though drenched to the bone. The pattern set;
all those times since, we wasted our breath.

The American poet [Gwendoline Brooks](#) was the first person of colour to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Literature. Her book *A Street in Bronzeville* gave Paula:

models and clues as to how I could write about my own community without patronising them, without making excuses, without 'on-behalf-ism' ... How do you negotiate your own demons and your own road with the responsibility of singing to and for your community? ...

This poem was inspired by a line of hers; *the singers and workers that never handled the air.*

The Ghost Song

From a dream of Summer, of absinthe
I woke to Winter. Carol singers
decked the halls of some long-lost homeland.
Late-night shoppers and drowsy workers
headed for the train. The night you died
was two-faced. June light never far from
mind though snow fell. I handled grief like
molten sunshine; learned to breathe your high
lithe, ghost song from thinnest air.

She was asked to write a suite of poems for the [Museum of Tenement Life](#) in Dublin.

I really do believe that Poetry is a sovereign state; it's not History, it's not Sociology, it's a state onto itself. Unless we take those

freedoms ... we may be .. co-opted by various agendas and gangs... If poetry is to be always an exploration, so you don't even know your own agenda till you've written it, it can lead to some strange arguments... I think I alarmed them slightly when I presented the finished piece, which is called Museum.

She discovered that the word originally meant *a place to put things that please the Muses*, so she wrote a sonnet for each of the Nine Muses. The house that is the Tenement Museum was built for Lord and Lady Molesworth. It was one of the earliest and grandest Georgian houses on the North Side. It went from being a family mansion of the ruling class to being a family to a room. The classical Georgian iconography was still there, but its meaning didn't become apparent until she studied poetry.

In the tenement where she grew up the front door was always left open so homeless people could come in, to sleep under the stair or in any nook and cranny they could get into. There were ex-soldiers of the Great War, and the displaced women of Monto, the old red-light district. She remembers being sent out with a cup of tea for them in the morning.

To Polyhymnia, the Muse of Sacred Poetry

Our Lady of the Apocalypse

Our Lady of the Apocalypse, who never closed your heart
to the dissolute; pray for us, who gave shelter
in broken-down Georgian tenements
Who kept the doors open to the demented ones,
those who came in rags and miasmas of foul odour,
in delirium tremens, the worn-out old spunkers,
the displaced relics of Imperial trauma.
Oh, sweet daughters of Memory, veiled in Enigma,
who brought longed-for oblivion to the meths-drinkers,
the dipsos, the alcos, the put-down no-hopers,
those who came in from Chaos, from cold, from winds,
from rains, to sleep it all off in hallways and stairwells.
Who rent the long night with sobs, who cried out to you
in the throes of their last agony.

Grant them eternal succour.

Jenny Brien

The Magic of Music

There are so many things in this world that divide us as human beings, that seem to create conflict and strife, but if there is one thing that can be pointed to, as bringing brings people together in a positive way, it is music.

More than any other art form, music has this great collectivising aspect. It can be enjoyed on your own, in the privacy of your home or through the plastic earpieces of your iPhone, but there is little doubt that the experience is enhanced by coming together and sharing it, either by participating or just communal listening.

Some anthropologists have speculated that early humans sang before a common language was developed. You don't always need to comprehend the precise meaning behind chants, chorals or songs, for them to touch the emotional centres of your cortex. From the ululations of the warriors of the Serengeti, to plainsong in Gregorian Chant, from the whirling Sufi dervishes to the polyphonic harmonies of traditional Georgian, the keening sorrows of Iberian Fado to contemporary Gangsta Rap – they all have the capacity to reach into our hearts and to transport us to other, more ethereal forms.

My Grandfather sang at weddings and funerals, – sadly, much more of the latter. He did it for a shilling, which paid for the following Saturday:, a ticket to the rugby or a theatre show, a few beers, a sneaky bet and fish & chips on the way home. He had a lovely lyric tenor voice, that to my biased ears, sounded like the great Enrico Caruso on the 78 that he used to played on a gramophone.

Music was always present in my home as I grew up. We had one of those old Radiograms and I used to play all my parents' records: *Favourite Arias*, Mario Lanza, Kathleen Ferrier, Frank Sinatra, Nina Simone – to *The Dubliners*. I would sit on the speaker part of it, turn the Bass wheel up to 10 on the dial (there was no 11!) and feel the deep, low vibrations through my backside.

To my parents' horror I moved on to heavy rock and metal of *Led Zeppelin*, *Queen* and *Iron Maiden*. That was was simply beyond their comprehension at the time – though I later had my father watching VHS videos with the likes of Meat Loaf, Gary Moore, *Heart*, and *Whitesnake* and thoroughly enjoying them.

This was the thing; my parents taught me not to be too 'precious' in your music listening and to try different things, my tastes remains catholic and eclectic to this day.

Live music has led me to have many wonderful experiences and come together with a diverse range of people: a week in Bayreuth, enjoying *The Ring Cycle* by Wagner and the endless conversations in the hotel bar with fellow Wagner enthusiasts; seeing *Madame Butterfly* for the first time and having my heart broke sore by her death at the end. Then there was a Manowar concert in Birmingham. where Joey DeMaio played *Sting of the Bumblebee* (his take on the

more well-known *Flight*) on a 12-string Rickenbacker Bass, and the even more impossibly flying digits of Scandinavian axeman Yngwie J. Malmsteen in Bristol.

There was that time in Edinburgh seeing Scotrock band *Runrig*, when the notes of Banks of Loch Lomond struck up and I was grabbed by a leery-eyed, bekilted native and told to '*Sing ye Sassenach gobshite ye*' (I am Welsh but I did not argue the point). So we sang and pogoed until I needed a double hip replacement and – my blood roiling with Braveheart blue woad – I was rewarded with a whisky-sodden sloppy kiss on the lips. It was a little forward, but *When in Rome...* as they say.

Then in Dublin one steamy July evening, I went to see *The Lone Bellow*, a band who performed a range of self-penned Americana. At the end of the concert, they came down from the stage and in the middle of the crowd, sans electric amplification, performed Paul Simon's *Slip Slidin' Away*. Kanene Doheny's soulful vocals were met with a chorus of 200 drunken concert-goers.

Here's the thing, it was not roared out: instead there were perfect harmonies, totally unrehearsed; and we sang with restraint, gentleness and with perfect pitch. It was a spiritual experience and our cheeks were wet with tears; it was an unforgettable moment.

Music at its best is capable of these all things and many more besides. Music is magic and those of us blessed to be open to it, can have our lives transformed by it.

John Llewellyn James

[ComicFest 2017](#)



After last year's very successful launch the Enniskillen ComicFest returns on 5th and 6th May 2017, bigger and better, to celebrate all aspects of storytelling and sequential art. *ComicFest 2016* proved that there was a great demand for an event of this type in the

Enniskillen area.

Comics currently enjoy a very high profile with many titles regularly topping literary sales charts, and both television shows and films based on comics growing ever more successful. Related subjects like animation and computer games are booming industries.

Our schools programme last year was very popular as *Moving Image and Creative Media* attract more and more students who want to pursue a career in these industries and want first hand information in storyboarding, storytelling, digital art and character design. Primary schools and Enniskillen library also saw comics as a fun way of engaging children and encouraging them to read. The Library now has a special section for graphic novels and comic collections.

Over twenty Writers and Artists from across the UK and Ireland will be attending ComicFest 2017 and guests of honour include John Wagner and Carlos Ezquerra, the creators of Judge Dredd; Steve MacManus, legendary editor of *2000AD*; and Marvel and DC artist Yanick Paquette. Also among the guests is Nigel Parkinson who draws Dennis The Menace and Minnie The Minx for the *Beano*.

The highly regarded British comic *2000AD* is celebrating its 40th Anniversary this year. We are very proud to announce that the Enniskillen ComicFest has been awarded Official Status by *2000AD* publishers *Rebellion* and the Fermanagh Film Club will be having a special screening of the acclaimed documentary *Future Shock!: The Story Of 2000AD* on Wednesday 3rd May in Fermanagh House. Tickets will be available on the door. Friday 5th May features our Schools Programme with the attending professionals presenting a range of talks and running workshops in Enniskillen Library. Then on Friday evening ComicFest is proud to present *A Celebration of 40 Years Of 2000AD* in the Ardhowen Theatre where all our guest creators will be interviewed and video material screened. The audience will also be able to put questions to our *2000AD* Guests. Tickets cost £8 and are available from the Ardhowen.

Our main event is taking place on Saturday 6th May and this year our venue will be Enniskillen Castle. Yes, a Comic Convention in a Castle! The event will run from 10am until 6pm and no ticket is required. All our guests will be signing and sketching everything from Dennis The Menace to Batman throughout the day and there will be a programme of panel discussions and interviews. This is also Free Comic Book Day and free comics will be available, one per visitor. There will also be costumed characters in attendance for photo opportunities, as well as independent comic creators, exhibitors, merchandise and back issue dealers. As a special treat for our younger visitors we will periodically be running a Hero Academy and a Princess Academy, where any young apprentice hero or princess can receive training through fun activities and games.

ComicFest 2017 will conclude with a charity auction with all proceeds going to the *Horizon West Children's Hospice*. Last year we raised £2100 for this very important charity and we hope to increase on that this year.

Enniskillen ComicFest thanks the *Arts Council For Northern Ireland, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Fermanagh Lakelands Tourism, Enniskillen Castle and Enniskillen Library* for their support.

The Enniskillen ComicFest Team:

Chairman: Paul Trimble

Secretary: Aaron McVitty

Treasurer: Matthew Gault

Logistics: Chris Fawcett

Social Media Co-Ordinator: Stephen Trimble

Media Production: James Eames



[Women Aloud Fermanagh](#)

For the second year in a row, the female members of *Fermanagh Writers* joined other women writers in Northern Ireland on 8th March to celebrate *International Women's Day*.

Throughout the Province 150 women writers, organised by *Women Aloud NI*, hosted a series of literary public events, including readings, bookshop appearances and library events to inspire women everywhere to write, read, and champion the literary work of local women.

Fermanagh Writers hosted *Women Aloud Fermanagh*, an evening of stories and poems in our usual meeting place at *Blakes of the Hollow*, Enniskillen. The event brought together women writers from Fermanagh Writers and Omagh Robins, as well as other writers living in the border counties. The evening provided an opportunity for writers in the region to meet each other, chat, and share ideas and our writing. Our members have enjoyed our participation in the *International Women's Day* celebrations these past two years. Although it's only the women on stage, some of our male members help behind the scenes, operating the sound system and collecting admission fee. We try to include everyone in this fun and rewarding event.

The evening was a great success as a social and performance event. The small but enthusiastic audience enjoyed the writers' heartfelt performances and the writers had a chance to experience an audience's response to their work as well as to meet with other writers who understand and share their passion.

The atmosphere was relaxed yet professional. The MC Kate O'Shea left the call for performers open until everyone had arrived, so that those who might have been hesitant to get up in front of an audience had time to gather their courage and decide to brave it. But the relaxed atmosphere belied the organisation and polish behind the programme and none of the writers gave anything less than her best on stage. Each writer who stepped up to the microphone gave a poised, confident reading. The stories and poems ranged from a rant by Queen Maeve to a poignant story of childhood superstition and fear to a condemnation of female genital mutilation and much more. The readings were funny, sad, poignant, inspiring and stirring.

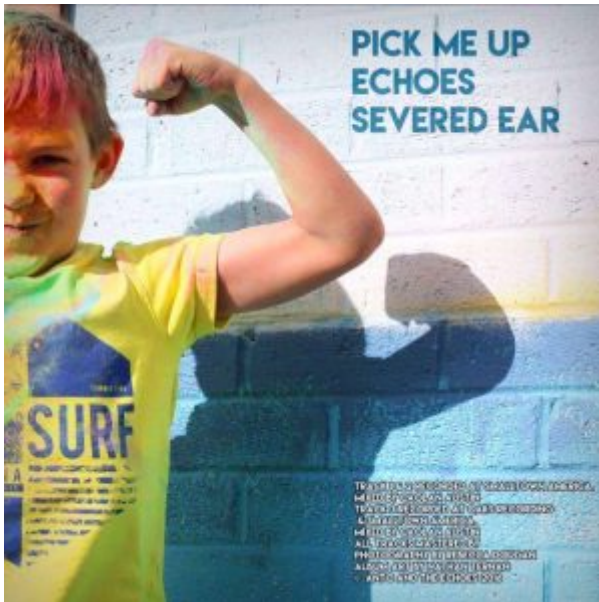
Most of the events Women Aloud NI organise to celebrate International Women's Day are free so that they are accessible to as many people as possible, but before our first Women Aloud evening last year, we decided to charge a small admission fee to raise money for the work of Fermanagh Women's Aid. This year the admission fee also covered the cost of supplying a complimentary copy of our publication *Tavern Told Tales* to each audience member. As a result of this year's event, Fermanagh Writers will donate £100 to *Fermanagh Women's Aid*. It's great to be part of something bigger than our own group and satisfying to share our writing with others. So we are looking forward to continued links with Women Aloud NI and to celebrating with writers throughout the province again next year.

Dianne Ascroft



[A Colourful Debut](#)

2016 may have been a tough year for music, but that certainly wasn't the case for emerging Fermanagh band [Anto & the Echoes](#). After only a few short months of forming and honing their sound, they took on their debut gig in July. Punters were turned away from *Charlie's* bar as the crowd reached maximum capacity early in the night. A series of well-received gigs around Northern Ireland followed, and the band returned to *Charlie's* to close the year with another sell-out show.



This year has built further on their success, after spending some time in the studio, they have returned with a short Irish tour to promote a new three-track EP titled [Youth](#). February saw the Echoes playing Dublin, Omagh, Portrush and *The Empire Bar* Belfast, finishing their tour with the release of an accompanying music video for their track *Severed Ear*.

The EP is a collection of three songs, with a vivid and engaging stadium rock sound. The first track, *Pick Me Up*, is a chaotic upbeat number, with punk & surf-rock guitar sound juxtaposed with flamboyant saloon piano reminiscent of *Mungo Jerry's Summertime*, overladen with rich harmonies and a vocal line with hints of *Queen* and *Kate Bush*.

The second track, *Echoes*, is a sentimental and nostalgic party anthem, falling in line with a more familiar stadium rock sound akin to *The Killers* and *U2*, with powerful crescendos and rich layered vocals carrying a strong sense of emotion.

Severed Ear is a love song through the eyes of a tortured painter, with a huge dynamic guitar sound played over a host of colourful lyrical metaphors. The accompanying music video perfectly captures the colourful essence of the song, with the location and cast used as a literal blank canvas for a rainbow of expression.

Frontman and songwriter Anthony Breen has worked in the film industry on *Game Of Thrones*, *Line Of Duty* and various feature films, and used his experience to envision the video and bring it to life with great help from his cinematographer Declan O'Granaah.

Caiman O'Shea is a poet and singer-songwriter, and the driving force behind [The Thing Itself](#).

Room, Room, Room for Mummers' Rhymes



The start button on the vintage cassette player makes a loud clunk. The tape hisses and crackles, then my father's voice fills the room with with a tumbling run of words:

*Room, Room, my gallant room, give me room to rhyme
I'II show you some activity about this Christmastime
The active youth, the active age
Our act was never acted on the stage...*

In 1977 I had recorded my father as he pulled out rhymes from his time as a mummer in Mulleek in the 1930s and 40s. As a child I had heard fragments of them from him in place of nursery rhymes.

Now, 19 years after his death, his voice brings back to life the crunch of heavy boots on rough lanes in the full December darkness of the Fermanagh countryside. He is one of a troupe of high-spirited young men roaming the back roads to bring an ancient drama into the kitchen of every house. Only his feet are cold; He is in a "lather of sweat" inside his heavy straw costume and he is glad to be able to take off his plaited straw headpiece between houses. Only some of his fellow mummers wear straw costumes, others wear long tunics and an "assortment of every rag they could get their hands on." Disguise was essential.

They approach a house. The Captain raps sharply three times on the door. This signifies something out of the ordinary in a place where neighbours announce their arrival with the noise of the latch lifting.

The door opens, the light from candles or oil lamps spills out into the darkness.

"Any admittance in his house for the Captain and his mummers?" is the formal request.

Then, with permission given, the camouflaged men burst in, ducking under the

low door of the thatched cottage. They form a semi-circle at one end of the kitchen, from which each in turn steps forward to deliver their rhymes. There is Room, The Captain, Jack Straw, Beelzebub, Wee Divil Doubt, The Wran, Turkish Champion and Prince George. A fight breaks out between Turkish Champion and Prince George. There is a fierce clashing of wooden swords and Prince George falls down dead. The Captain shouts for the Doctor. The Doctor has medicine!

*The rue, the sue, the knuckles of a bumblebee,
The heart's blood of a smoothing iron,
All boiled up together.
And mixed in a jenny wran's bladder.*

The Doctor brings Prince George back to life with this concoction. A melodeon is played. A mummer called Miss Funny, complete with handbag and dress, dances with the Captain. There is more music and 'sport', and money is collected for the mummies' ball. Then, with a chorus of '*the best of luck to yis all*', the fantastical troupe disappear again into the darkness.

On the tape when my father says the rhymes, his words run together as fast as his tongue can move. He stumbles over some of the rhymes, and he wonders aloud if there is "any man alive in Ireland today who knows all of the rhymes." Back then in 1977, he saw mumming as something dead, something belonging to the past.

So did the American anthropologist Henry Glassie, who had recorded mummies' rhymes in Ballymenone in south Fermanagh in 1972. In his scholarly, yet affectionate book, *All Silver no Brass*, written in 1975, he sees no place for Mummies in the modern Ireland where there is heat and light at the flick of a switch and nearly everyone has a car.

Of course at that time the Troubles had suspended mumming. When men of death prowled the roads it was no longer safe to invite masked men into your home in mid winter. Henry Glassie recognised the conflict between mumming and the troubles. He had seen beyond the mumming tradition as a response to the ancient concerns about the ebb and flow of light. He saw the play as demonstrating a community's genuine potential for violence, then containing it, subduing it, and resolving its tensions in music and dance. The Troubles perverted this vision. Vincent Woods demonstrates this perversion in his heartbreaking play *At the Black Pig's Dyke*. In it, sectarian assassins disguised as mummies go about their awful task of killing.

In spite of the Troubles and the trappings of modernity, the mumming tradition has proved resilient. In 1979, my father's fellow Mulleek man, the renowned traditional singer Paddy Tunney, devoted a chapter in his book *The Stone Fiddle* to the mummies' rhymes. My father's fear that no-one remembered them all was unfounded. In the same year, the Creevy mummies from outside Ballyshannon were revived. They brought the ancient drama, not just to homes in the locality and to pubs and hotels over a wide area, but also to Irish Americans in New York and Boston. My father's rhymes echoed all around me as I found myself in turn gathering an 'assortment of rags' to make a costume for my husband who had joined the Creevy mumming troupe.

If you are lucky enough to see the mummers, you will be linked back to a tradition which was first recorded in Ireland in the 17th century. It was in turn brought here from England, where it can be traced back to the 12th century, but its origins are still further back in the misty, pre-Christian era of sun worship.

While the rhymes and characters have changed over the centuries depending on time and place, the theme of death and rebirth has been constant. The mumming tradition itself has, like the play, experienced the ebb and flow of death and rebirth. The Creevy mummers ebbed in the 1980s, but between 1980 and 1995 a troupe of mummers became an annual school tradition in Ballyshannon Vocational school.

We may see ourselves as a modern, sophisticated people, but when we see the mummers, we connect again with life's unchanging central mystery of death and new life. The stop button on the cassette player makes a loud clunk but my Father's voice can still warm the room.

Room, Room, my gallant room, give me room to rhyme!

Olive Travers

The image I chose (origin unknown), came from a book published in the early 1970's. I do not know if either it or the caption is earlier. **Jenny Brien**

[The Band of Blind and Bugged](#)

Huw

First in line, as I have some vision
...slightly blurred.

I am well used to the dark as a miner.
(Must find a way to live like this.)
At least I can still sing.

Oh God. What a needless war.

*

Prentiss

I joined up to get away..

Goodbye to the windy island
Isolated, with bloody sheep.

Got to London – what a revelation!
Warmth and cultured people.
I was eating a meal
When all hell broke loose.

All is now darkness – not going back
to Orkney.
London's out too.
Go South to find something to do.
(But who wants a blind shepherd?)

Oh God. What a mindless war.

*

Séamas

Must not stumble for the men behind
...and those in front.

Just a flash – then black darkness.

Won't be able to gather flax
Though I could learn to weave.
Will my girlfriend be waiting for me?

God what a sodding war.

*

Chaplain

I asked to go to the Somme
To bring comfort and succour to our troops
Two days in and shrapnel hit my face
Left me scarred and blinded

Now I cannot read God's Holy Word
Or serve the Eucharist.
(Though I may take Confession.)

Oh God. What an unholy war.

*

Lance

I enlisted as my family expected
For centuries we have served our country.

Blinded now and incapable of walking upright.
(Will I be able to ride a horse?)
No more hunting, though fishing is possible.

My brother will take over our Estate.

God. What a wasteful war.

Anna James

Frank's Letter

(with interjections by Cathy Donnell as Resa and John Monaghan as Frank)

My dear Cousin Resa

Frank: What side of the bush did yon rose spring from?

Just a p.c. to acknowledge your welcome letter received some weeks ago.

Resa: Feels like a lifetime.

I would have written a few lines before this if I had not been expecting to go on leave any time

Resa: Heaven forfend

but it seems now that leave has been put back for a few weeks, on account of things being a bit unsettled.

Frank: Bloody Fritz and this bloody war!

I am having a tip-top time

Frank: as Colonel 'Stupid' Platt says

out here

Resa: Wherever 'here' is

at present & am not too keen about getting leave. This is a home away from home.

Resa: What's wrong? Is James..?

Frank: Lying to her is getting so hard.

I will now conclude.

Both: Phew-ee.

*I hope you are well. Very best wishes from
Your affect. Cousin Frank Cost.(Costelloe)*

Resa's reply

(Written by Cathy Donnell with asides by John James and John Monaghan)

Dear James,

Received Frank's letter last week. It would seem that you're both having a jolly time.

Frank: If only..

James: I wish..

It will soon be Christmas and I'm so sad to hear that you'll probably not be home.

We are all well. Your Uncle John calls most days. He's aged a lot since you left. October was wet and cold. The spuds proved a good yield this year again, thank God, but with only myself here the work was hard and in the end I had to ask for Martha's help.

James: Her sister

Frank: Shortage of fit men these days

James, you know how I hated you joining the British Army but I'm starting to understand your reasoning.

James: At last

Redmond might succeed. Please God he will. Mrs Corey got bad news about Pat.

James: Poor Pat

The poor craither is walking the roads weeping and lamenting. There's talk she'll be taken to the mental.

James: God help Mrs Corey

James please mind yourself and look out for Frank, you know how reckless he can be. The fox took two chickens

Frank (to James) I told you fix that henhouse on your last leave

but I've fixed the henhouse so that not even ould Nick himself could get in. I'm sending you socks and an Aran jumper.

James: good, we'll need the warmth for the winter.

Come back safe James. I'll be needing you.

James: I wonder why she said that?

Resa: I'm pregnant

Love from your wife Resa

James's letter to Resa

(written by John James and John Monaghan)

My dear Resa

Frank is writing this for me. I hope when you get this everything is well with you and the family. Is your Mam still there in the cottage?

Resa: She went home last week

I am pleased the potato crop turned out so good. Pity you didn't have more help from the village.

Resa: I couldn't ask Uncle Dan, he's so thin these days and you know the neighbours haven't spoken to me after the rebellion in Dublin

Things have settled a bit since Frank wrote to you. I am hopeful for leave soon. I'd love to have Christmas at home.

Frank wants this business over with now.

Your loving husband James



[A Fresh Portrait](#)

Of the many great events on offer at Fermanagh's [Flive](#) festival, one spectacle in particular stood alone in the limelight. *Young Stephen*— an energetic, one-man dramatisation of James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Adapted for stage by Prin Ó Duigneáin, Paddy McEaney stars as Stephen Dedalus, Joyce's own semi-fictional avatar.

The performance provides a fresh interpretation of Joyce's work, focusing on the childhood of Stephen Dedalus. Set mostly during Stephen's first term at boarding school, the play examines the influence of two major factors in Joyce's early development; religion and politics.

Keeping to one setting and limiting the themes helps reel in Joyce's chaotic style. True to the spirit of portrait, McEaney's performance gives a strong sense of perspective through his narrative voice. A simplistic and immature

vocal tone opens the play, showing us a world through the eyes of an infant, then a sharp change to clear and serious dialogue shows us the trials of adolescence. His mastery of voice eases the understanding of this fast paced play, with frequent time skips and multiple characters. These subtle changes in accent and tone aid suspension of disbelief in a way that makes it easy to forget this is a one man show.

It isn't just the acting talent that holds the staggered story together, but a minimal yet effective attitude towards stage props. A simple dressing panel serves to hide a small number of clothing items, the various hats and jackets which help discern between Stephen and the other characters, while a wooden box serves as table, school desk, bed and pulpit. A certain amount of imagination is still required to picture the changing locations, or believe that our bearded protagonist is a teenage boy, but the small touches can make all the difference, especially the iconic glasses that serve an important role in the plot and help us see Joyce brought to life on stage.

There is no better time to revisit Joyce's formative work, with the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising earlier this year, exploring the art of that era gives us an important first-hand account of the period. The political and theological upheaval of the time had a huge impact on Joyce, as evidenced by his bringing up these themes repeatedly in his semi-autobiographical work.

One of the vital parts of transitioning to adulthood is the epiphany that adults have differing beliefs, and are not always right. We see Joyce beginning to form his own beliefs and opinions, as he challenges the authority of the priests in his Catholic boarding school and sees the disruption caused by secular politics discussed at a family dinner.

Snippets of these themes are present from the opening lines of the play, with dialogue cleverly chosen from the source material to strengthen them. The climactic final scene, so expertly weaved by McEneaney, takes on a life of its own as Stephen's family clash on the stage. Where the protagonist himself disappears behind other characters, in a sense he is embodied by the audience, who get to experience his anxiety instead.

This surreal feeling really adds to its magic of the play, but sadly it is over too soon. Despite McEneaney's talent, no one could be expected to give such an energetic and heartfelt performance for a longer running time.

Young Stephen is an easy performance to view, but slightly less so to digest. Fans of Joyce's work will relish it, but may be left disappointed they can't witness *more* of the powerful rendition. As McEneaney says of performing Joyce's work, 'great writing will always speak for itself,' but in this case great acting has helped it speak volumes.

Caimin O'Shea

Young Stephen was performed at Blakes of the Hollow on October 2nd, and again late October in the Columbian Hall Theatre, Galway, with further dates to be confirmed.

Radio Days

When Fermanagh Writers were first contacted by Owen McFadden, a BBC radio producer working in Belfast, the original brief was for some of our older members to write reflections on their past experiences for a Sunday afternoon programme on BBC Radio Ulster called *The Time of our Lives*.

I was probably one of the first to pitch in. Being twenty years older than the qualifying age, I wrote a piece called *My First Love*, about my childhood in war torn Liverpool.

It was all about food.

I was hungry right up until I was sixteen years of age, when I joined the Royal Navy. That was the first time I could ever remember walking away from a table that still had food on it.

When I was selected to take part the next ordeal was to go into the studio in Enniskillen and record while Owen listened in over at he BBC in Belfast.

I found the experience of talking into a microphone while wearing headphones listening to myself to be quite unnerving. It was a bit like talking inside my own head and the result was quite alarming as the headphones boomed while I was speaking. Anyway the recording person soon fitted me up with a quieter pair of headphones and I only had to read through the piece twice before they were satisfied.

At the end of my piece I finished with the line –

My next true love was cigarettes; but that is another story.

I felt that might give an opportunity for a second recording session but so far they haven't rung me back.

When I listened to the transmission I was quite surprised at how I sounded. On the day of recording I had felt as though I had won the 'monotonous voice of the month' award, but it sounded quite good on the radio, apart from my rather odd accent.

I say 'odd accent' because I was raised as a child in Liverpool, Glasgow and Limavady in more or less equal portion, and so would claim that I was beaten up in the playground in three different dialects. Kids can be very unforgiving.

Owen realised that there was a wealth of talent in the group and started to invite more writers to take part, both as readers and as guests. Wayne and Louise Hardman talked about his career as a sports reporter and their handweaving business [Wove in Hove](#); Catherine Vallyly about her encounter with a man who kidnapped himself; Trish Bennett about her mother's obsession with

a potato peeler – and there were many more.

So, the whole BBC experience has been good for a number of the writers in the group and Owen McFadden has promised to come down to Fermanagh give us some tips on how to write for the radio, and perhaps collect some more stories.

Another early memory of mine was remembering seeing a bronze ‘death penny’ on the wall at both of my Grandfathers’ houses which commemorated deaths in the First World War. Neither of the families would talk about them.

It took me quite a lot of ferreting with the help of Natasha Martin at Enniskillen Castle Regimental Museum (another one of Fermanagh Writers) for me to eventually root out the facts.

They were two men who had grown up together as kids in Limavady and had met up again when they signed up with the 10th Battalion of the Inniskilling Fusiliers. They were yards from each other when they were killed on the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

When they died they were no relation to each other, but the nephew of one married the other’s niece – my Mum and Dad.

My mothers’ uncle’s body was never found. His name is on the monument at Thiépval. My father’s uncle’s body was only found in 1934 when the War Graves Commission were creating the long term cemeteries that we know today. So it was over seventeen years after his death that they informed his mother that he was now accounted for.

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Bob’s article about the fate of his great-uncles was published in the July 1 edition of the *Newsletter*.