

# 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.*'<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup>

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.

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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*