

A Corncrake Story

In 1940, during the Second World War, a Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), was appointed to help promote and maintain British culture. Chaired by Lord De La Warr, President of the Board of Education, the Council was government-funded and after the war, in 1946, was renamed the Arts Council of Great Britain. However, it was not until 1962 that the Arts Council of Northern Ireland was established and, in the meantime, the local version of the CEMA committee continued to promote the arts here, chaired by Captain Peter Montgomery, distinguished member of an Anglo-Irish family whose leafy estate and Jacobean-Revival pile grace the outskirts of Fivemiletown.

Captain Peter, as he was affectionately known, was unusually handsome, in a Rupert-Brooke-First World-War-poet sort of way, tall, broad-shouldered, flat-stomached, and with a flop of blond hair. He and Anthony Blunt had been lovers when they were at Cambridge together. He had founded the Fivemiletown Choral Society, which practised and performed in Enniskillen. My parents were both keen members, so it was natural that they should hear about, in the late fifties/early sixties, I can't remember the exact date, a recital, to be held in Castle Coole, sponsored by CEMA, by the Belfast-born soprano, Heather Harper.

A couple of years later she would make the musical headlines by stepping in at the very last moment to sing the soprano role in the world premiere of Benjamin Britten's magnum opus, the *War Requiem*, given in the newly-rebuilt Coventry Cathedral. The performance was to be seen as an act of reconciliation between nations after the Second World War, with the British tenor, Peter Pears, the German baritone Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau and the Russian soprano, Galina Vishnevskaya. As the performance approached it became clear that the Soviet authorities would not allow her to leave Russia so, at ten days' notice, Miss Harper learned some very difficult modern music and gave a stunning performance, with the eyes and ears of the world watching and listening.

But that was all ahead of her. The CEMA concert at Castle Coole took place on one of those rare, hot, sunny, early-summer days from which dreams of childhood are made. I was a gangly teenager, the chief chorister of the Cathedral in Enniskillen and passionate about music, so there was no question that I would not go with my parents.

Miss Harper sang, amongst other things, Ravel's *Chansons Madécasses*. I think I remember that she started off as a mezzo. It was certainly the first time I ever heard (the beginning of) these wonderful sultry songs, their mood enhanced by the heat of summer wafting in through the entrance door, which had been left wide open.

The performance was in French, so perhaps the irony of the middle of the three songs, with its strongly anti-colonial sentiments, being sung in a building erected from the proceeds of the harvesting of Caribbean hardwoods by slave labour, was lost on the listeners. It is a very angry song, but not

as angry as Captain Peter became when an audacious corncrake commenced his fortissimo opposition on the far side of the gravel sweep. Though Captain Peter was handsome and well-put-together he was not the most physically coordinated of men and, as the recital was paused to allow the removal of the unwelcome counterpoint, we all watched him zig-zagging through the long grass, waving his arms and shouting "Shoo! Shoo!"

He returned to the Hall, beads of sweat on his brow, his collar and blond quiff awry, and the concert proceeded, suffused with polite good humour. It didn't last. Mr Corncrake didn't take the hint.

Eventually three male volunteers, the teenage me included, were posted strategically in the meadow and the doors and shutters of the Hall closed against any possible audio-interruption. Captain Peter was taking no chances. The songs, set in the heat of dusty Madagascar, continued in spartan neoclassical half-light.

Richard Pierce is a retired architect who has exhibited his watercolours, has written a novel, climbed Kilimanjaro, swims a mile a day and spends half the year in Finland with his partner.

'71

It's not often that a French friend emails me about a film which, 'I must absolutely see'. She had just watched it at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival and wondered if I had already seen it; I hadn't. The film was the superb directorial debut by Yann Demange: **'71**. When presented at the Berlin Film Festival in 2014, it had five nominations and won him the award for Best Director.

Set in West Belfast in 1971, during early years of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the film is a behind-the-lines look at the impact of the conflict on both the civilians population and the British army. The plot is not new; during action a young and inexperienced soldier, Gary Hook, becomes separated from his unit led by an equally inexperienced Lieutenant. Severely beaten, and after witnessing the killing of a comrade, he finds himself abandoned in enemy territory – the Falls Road – a British soldier in blood stained army fatigues.

There are echoes here of the 1948 James Mason thriller *Odd Man Out* in which an IRA gunman passes a night hiding from the British army in the same city. Hook navigates the nightscape of battle torn, rubble-strewn streets lit by the flames of burning cars. It could be any city at war.

His ordeal will lead him through loyalist strongholds and see him become a ploy in a nationalist plot. There is a heart-stopping chase sequence through alleys and demolished houses in war-torn Belfast in which he is hunted down by the IRA.

Where '71 excels is in its avoidance of the tone of tragic correctness which most dramas about the Troubles assume. It faces squarely the complexity of the 'enemy within' in a world where the UK authorities are running high-level informers, and the Provisionals are plotting against their own chiefs; bad blood and bad faith making it impossible to know who to trust. There are no heroes here, no redemption moment; only the tragic reality of human beings caught up in violent conflict. The re-creation of West Belfast in the early 1970's is the most realistic I have seen on film. Added to a sense of detachment with which the subject is presented, this makes '71 one of the most real and immediate films on the 30-year conflict.

With Black Taxi Tours of the area now making the world of '71 seem very far away, if not unreal, such films serve to remind us of what was 'lest we forget.'

Chris Campbell retired to her native Enniskillen after working and living in Belfast and Belgium for many years. The Brussels Cinema Museum stoked her love of the art form and she is a member of the [Fermanagh Film Club](#).

in Fermanagh

[Music in Fermanagh](#)

Music in Fermanagh is a relatively new organisation. Up until its recent merging with its neighbouring district, Fermanagh District Council regulated its arts spending by consulting its Arts and Culture Advisory Committee made up from local volunteers. Several of its members were keen for Ardhoven Theatre to present more classical music but after much discussion it became clear that it would be better if the impetus came from an independent organisation, rather than the Council or Ardhoven – and so *Music in Fermanagh* was born. The help of Ian Davidson of FODC and Jackie Owens of Ardhoven was invaluable in the setting up. We now have five board members and four advisors.

Last year we enjoyed putting on two events. The first, a two-day celebration of the life and work of the composer Joan Trimble, coincided exactly with the centenary of her birth. The evening concert, which featured her music exclusively, was a sell-out and had a warm, festive air. The second was a performance by the RTE ConTempo Quartet. These four young Romanian musicians (two married couples) have an energy and excitement to their playing which is contagious! Their Haydn and Schumann made the audience, which was bigger than all expectations, sit forward and smile.

But it was the Janáček *Intimate Letters* Quartet which was the surprise. This could be regarded as difficult, modern music but the audience was spellbound, carried along by the charisma and technical wizardry of these young players, its sensuality and passion clearly defined. One Fermanagh businessman had never been to a classical music concert in his life but was persuaded to give it go by his musical wife. He sat on the edge of his seat enthralled. He wanted it to go on for hours. He didn't want to return to reality. He wants more and more and will be at our future concerts.

The Janáček quartet was inspired by the composer's long and spiritual friendship with Kamila Stösslová, a married woman 38 years his junior. The composition was intended to reflect the character of their relationship as revealed in the more than 700 letters they exchanged:

You stand behind every note, you, living, forceful, loving. The fragrance of your body, the glow of your kisses – no, really of mine. Those notes of mine kiss all of you. They call for you passionately...

The circumstances of the writing of this quartet was the subject of '*Performances*', the most innovative play of the late Brian Friel's later period, written in 2003. The play was memorably directed by our own Adrian Dunbar as part of Derry/Londonderry's year as European City of Culture, 2013.

So, what do we have in store for our friends and neighbours this year?

Four wonderful concerts, all at the Ardhoven Theatre:

VANBRUGH STRING QUARTET

On 4th June we have what I hear through the grapevine will possibly be one of the *Vanbrugh String Quartet's* last concerts before they disband. They have agreed to do three of Beethoven's string quartets, an early, a middle and a late, interspersing them with spoken commentary about the composer's development. We hope to have a lot of young people there.

MUSICI IRELAND

On 15th September we have *Musici Ireland* giving us a trio: flute, viola and harp, with music by Ravel, Debussy and the Elegiac Trio by Arnold Bax, expressing his sadness at the 1916 conflict between the two nations he loved most, Ireland and Britain, an admirable sentiment to note in the centenary year.

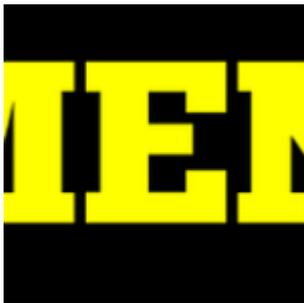
ASHLEY WASS

On 16th October we have the celebrated young English pianist, Ashley Wass, giving a matinee recital of Shakespeare-related pieces, coinciding with the 400th anniversary of the Bard's death.

LOVE AND WAR

From 4th to 6th November we have a weekend, a chamber music workshop, given (along with other members of the Delmaine String Quartet) by Dublin-based Vanessa Sweeney, who is possibly the most experienced chamber music coach for young people in Ireland and a performance, on the Sunday afternoon, where the Quartet will be joined by Michael James Ford and other actors and singers, entitled Love and War, a synthesis of poetry, love letters, readings, song and music which poignantly reflects the impact of the First World War on individuals from Ireland, both North and South.

Richard Pierce is a native Enniskillener, has sung opera professionally, and is currently preparing exhibitions of his huge, abstract photographs in Belfast, Brussels and Cologne.



[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, getting 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