

Francis McGann

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THE BALLAD—'The Fate of Francis McGann' - records the tragic death in a snowstorm of a brilliant Co Leitrim mathematical scholar during the early part of the 19th century. For a century and a quarter after McGann had been laid to rest in the cemetery in Mohill, the ballad has kept his memory alive.

McGann was born in 1786 at Drumlara, in the parish of Mohill. His early education was received at a hedge-school in Drumlara conducted by Hugh McDonald. Later he attended a school kept by Owen Reynolds in Mohill. Reynolds was reputed to have been an excellent teacher of mathematics and earned for himself the title of 'Bright Star' in mathematical learning.

Turning his attention for a time to the study of the Classics, McGann went to the popular classical school conducted by Parson Kane at Drumsna on the banks of the Shannon. Mathematics, however, proved to be a stronger attraction than classics and McGann travelled to the South of Ireland—to Munster—to complete his education at the famous mathematical school of Ballingarry in Co Limerick, conducted by Baggot, a mathematician of European fame and a correspondent of the French physicist - Laplace.

At Baggot's school, McGann completed his studies in higher mathematics and, returning to Drumlara, soon established a reputation as a mapper and surveyor. He was a pioneer in the art of preparing accurate large-scale maps, developed later by the Ordnance Survey. On a dried and pressed sheepskin he drew a map of the district of Bunnybeg for the Lawder family. He also mapped the courses of the Killamaun and Eslin rivers. There is a local tradition that McGann was offered a position by the English Government of the day, as a

surveyor in India but he did not accept it.

For several years following the 1798 insurrection period there was considerable military activity in Co Leitrim where undisciplined and irresponsible parties of marauding militia and yeomen continued a harassing and oppressive campaign. McGann was appointed leader of the 'White Rocks'—a national, defensive organisation which was a development of the United Irishmen in 1798.

In 1815, the Yeoman led by Minor Peyton, a local despot residing near Keshcarrigan, burned Drumcollop. Shortly afterwards Peyton had the road torn up to prevent people having access to the local Catholic church. In December 1815, a public meeting was held at Keshcarrigan at which McGann denounced the mandarin in a speech which could be recited from memory by the people for a century afterwards.

The tragic death of Francis McGann took place less than a month later. While on his way to visit friends in the townland of Kilnagross he perished in a heavy snowstorm on the morning of 21st December 1815. His body was discovered in snowdrift.

The ballad recalling the fate of Francis McGann was composed by John Cox—the poet of Clooncarne and is typical of the popular ballad poetry of the early 19th century.

*He was versed in the language of all foreign parts,
And master of several bright liberal arts.
The art of surveying he had a command,
Mathematics and logic he did understand.
He could measure the air, the sea or the land,
John Cox gives his praises to Francis McGann.*

Schools and Scholars of Breiffne Philip O'Connell)