

Percy French *Frolics & Music*

Mary McTiernan

THE CORN MILL THEATRE Group were worthy winners of the *Leitrim Guardian Persons of the Year* for 2012. They have put Leitrim on the map in drama terms and have contributed to the continued success of the wonderful Corn Mill theatre in Carrigallen for many years now.

In the early part of the 20th century it wasn't to a theatre that the people in and around Carrigallen were heading for their entertainment but on Wednesday nights in the winter time, armed with a sandwich, a drink and a 1d piece, they headed for a hooley in some of the local cabins in Carrigallen held in aid of Phil Brady. Phil was a flute player who played at local wakes and weddings and during the summer he toured the villages playing at cross-roads dances, often for a week at a time. One winter, business was bad and Phil arranged a special subscription hooley in his own cabin at Druminchin, Carrigallen. The whole countryside turned up including a very talented composer who happened to be in the area at the time.

Percy French, an engineer working on drainage work in County Cavan, a drains inspector, as he described himself, was making one of his regular visits to his good friend, the Rector, Rev James Godley of Carrigallen on the

evening in question and the Reverend encouraged him to go along. Percy drew on his encounters with characters he met on his travels for his humorous compositions and the hooley at Phil Brady's cabin provided the perfect material. The following day Percy composed the famous "*Phil the Fluther's Ball*".

On his travels and visits around the area, Percy hired the services of the young jarvey, George Rosemond of Carrigallen, and often used to sing for George as they jogged along and ask his opinion of his songs. On the day after the hooley, and having just composed it, Percy sang "*Phil the Fluther's Ball*" for the first time, sitting on George's side-car on his way to a concert in Carrigallen. George and his horse "Neddy" were the sole audience at this world Premier of the immortal song. One other person, Biddy Mulligan, nearly collapsed across her half-door where she was throwing out scraps to the hens, when she caught a few bars just as Percy drove past bellowing out "*Begorraha Missus Cafferty, you're leppin like a hare*". Later that evening Percy sang the song at the concert in the Protestant School, Bredagh NS, in Carrigallen and brought the house down. Percy French was born at Cloonyquin House, near Elphin, Co Roscommon in

1854 and died in England in 1920 at the age of 66. George Rosemond remembers him as a small, stout man, round face, moustache and black hair. He remembers him also as a man full of energy, eager to sing songs and get his opinion on them. Although Neddy lived to a ripe old age George went on to drive a taxi but never again had a passenger who gave him the enjoyment he experienced driving Percy around. At the Percy French festival held in the summer of 1957, seventy four year old George Rosemond of Carrigallen was among the special guests—the first man to hear "*Phil the Fluther's Ball*" sung by the composer himself. *The County Leitrim Percy French Society* was launched in July this year. The launch was performed by Senator David Norris in the Hunt Hall, Mohill, where Percy French himself performed in 1914.

Frank Cadam and Tish Dunleavy, Aughawillian are the force behind this society. Tish performed a number of Percy French songs on the occasion of the launch and nobody can do them justice quite like her. The society was set up in appreciation of the hugely talented man who immortalised the local area of South Leitrim and West Cavan in song and word in the early 1900's.

Launch of the County Leitrim Percy French Society



County Leitrim Percy French Society
PHOTO: THÉRÈSE FOY

The official launch of the County Leitrim Percy French Society took place on 20th July 2012 in the Hunt Hall, Mohill. Tish Dunleavy & Frank Cadam organised the event and Senator David Norris performed the launch. Tish chose the Hunt Hall, Mohill as the venue for the launch because Percy French performed in the early 1900's in the Hunt Hall, Mohill and was a frequent visitor to the general area. The evening commenced with a short sketch written and directed by Frank Cadam and performed by 'The Killyran Wrackers' who got their name from one of Percy French's works. The name of the sketch was 'Sweet Marie' which was also named after another of Percy's famous songs about a racing mare called 'Sweet Marie'. The evening continued with the Percy French experience show directed by Tish Dunleavy. Frank Cadam took the part of Percy French and told his life story while linking the songs to events in his life. The audience were enthralled the whole night and participated in many of the better known Percy French songs such as 'The Mountains Of Mourne', 'Are ya right there Michael', 'Eileen Oge' and many more.

After a fifteen minute interval the Principal of the Hunt School Mrs. Hazel Tuttle addressed the audience and welcomed Senator Norris to the Hunt Hall. After a few more speeches, Senator David Norris took the stand. He performed a great Percy French piece 'Phil the Fluther's Ball' in Latin! He had the audience in the palm of his hand. They loved him and would have listened to him all night. Senator Norris very kindly accepted the position of President of the County Leitrim Percy French Society. Tish Dunleavy, on behalf of the Society, presented Senator Norris with a Leitrim Crystal penholder and pen and an original book of Percy French works. The feedback from this event was so positive that Tish Dunleavy and Frank Cadam, the artistic directors of this event are planning a weekend of events for the 2013 May bank holiday weekend in various venues in Mohill.

The week-end will have a Percy French theme throughout. A play directed by Frank Cadam will be staged in the Canon Donohue Hall on Saturday night 4th May. There will be an art exhibition which will include some of Percy French's watercolours and works by local artists. Workshops of Percy French will take place in the Hunt Hall. The Percy French Experience Show will be extended to include one of the original Percy French Society's from North County Down. This Quartet, who have performed all over the World, have agreed to participate in the main event on Sunday evening 5th May 2013, which will take place in the Hunt Hall. The weekend is called Percy's Party because it will be a celebration of the life and works of Percy French who was born on 1st May 1854.