

# MARGARET CONNOLLY

Historian & Musical Director.  
Community Contributor

Leon O'Grady

IN EACH TOWN and village within the perimeter of Leitrim, there are people of an altruistic nature who go well beyond the call of duty in the interests of the locality where they live. They work effortlessly and unobtrusively their endeavours going unnoticed. On reading the 1989 issue of the *Leitrim Guardian* recently, it stated 'The *Leitrim Guardian* has always encouraged community involvement. Indeed, this is the cornerstone of the magazines survival. A lady in Manorhamilton immediately sprung to mind in this regard. On approaching Margaret Connolly of Amorset, Manorhamilton for permission to acknowledge her long involvement in the community here, she deemed herself unworthy of even a short paragraph.

Margaret was the musical director of The Breffni singers for twenty years. Margaret had done an apprenticeship for the Breffni Choral Group during her educational journey as a dedicated choir member in every school or college she attended during her life's journey beginning with National School. "Concerts, competitions, weddings and jubilees were included on their journey." This was stated by Margaret in her article entitled 'Historic Manorhamilton Venues' in the 2013 edition of the *Leitrim Guardian*, a journal she has contributed actively to, over a period of many years.

Margaret is a Tidy Towns activist since its inception and is always willing to lend her hand to many of the mundane tasks that are part and parcel of this activity including but not limited to gathering bags of litter, painting fences, weeding footpaths and unruly bridges and preparing and attending flower beds where it is deemed necessary. She accompanies visitors on local historical walks at the drop of a hat whether this be on Heritage Day or on request by curators, artists and others. Returned emigrants eager for knowledge of their roots or tourists from the length



and breadth of Ireland seek her out for genealogical skills. I know by repute that these requests never go unanswered and are researched with a keen eye to detail.

After retiring from her chosen profession of teaching Margaret proceeded to devote herself to another passion, local history. She also delivered numerous lectures on local history and mounted exhibitions on the same themes in the local library. Presently she is Vice-Chairman of the *Manorhamilton and District Historical Society*.

I asked Margaret how did this now vibrant *Manorhamilton and District Historical Society* come into being. From what I have heard through the grapevine, twenty six members have presently joined this society, one that will resonate in the future with talks and lectures for budding historians far and wide, local and otherwise. With Margaret's evident tenacity, input and work ethos, together with the work of other active society members, this will no doubt be attained.

A society like this doesn't just emerge from thin air. I prompted Margaret that there must have been preparatory work or an apprenticeship of sorts for this new society to emerge as it appeared to suddenly appear in full bloom. Yes, I was correct. There was an apprenticeship of sorts; a preparatory stage of

learning though members would not define it as such. Margaret told me 'lovers' of local history (her words not mine), met regularly for over twenty years to research local history. The experience they gained in the former Local History society bore valuable fruits in the formation and early stages of the New *Manorhamilton and District Historical Society*, which is now in operation for one year. Much preparatory work went into the organisation of this society as is appropriate in any new society of note.

During the years of the first history society, Margaret and the late Eamon Gunne contributed a chapter on the Manorhamilton Workhouse for a book entitled *Workhouses of the North West*. Within this first society, there were two significant achievements. These were in the artistic field. Marie McDonald painted 'Manorhamilton Workhouse' which is currently on display in the HSE buildings and offices behind Our Lady's Hospital. This is surely an apt location for this painting as the original workhouse complex was located on this site during earlier painful times in our history. The second painting of Manorhamilton castle is displayed in the Public Library and it begs attention on entering the building for the distinctly clear cut lines of this historic castle which heralded the birth of our town in the seventeenth century. Naturally much work went into collecting and gathering of funds for these acquisitions as Margaret recalls.

I asked Margaret if the new society had many events of note in the past year. 'Yes', she declared. The opening of Dominic Rooney's fascinating

## ■ Manorhamilton Historical Society



collection of photographs accumulated locally and shown in the local history library attracted considerable interest from both far and wide. Due to the generosity of Dominic, a native of Manorhamilton, this collection is now on permanent display for the benefit of posterity. The second notable event was the memorable launch of Dominic Rooney's book on Sir Frederick Hamilton in the historical setting of Manorhamilton Castle. A publication which merited the *Book of the Year* by Four Courts Press.

At the moment, research on World War One is Margaret's priority in this centenary year. As the cold piercing winds of World War One blew treacherously into our local area, many of our local men went and fought in the trenches; some returning after their time was completed and some leaving sorrow and desolation for their loved ones at home. This area of research for Margaret is both sensitive and profound, coming to terms with the social difficulties the soldiers and their families encountered here. Margaret at this stage paid great tribute to the other members of this newly formed society for the valuable work they are doing of collecting and recording of memories of Manorhamilton in former years and at present are giving their due attention to the residents of McDermott Terrace.

Margaret is also compiling a collection of local poems as well as recording the memories and stories of the elderly residents of the area. Both of these projects are ongoing and entail much research and detail.

Margaret is justifiably proud of this new society. This is a labour of love for Margaret which is reflected in the painstaking detail and dedication that she has brought to every event to date and we in Manorhamilton relish Margaret's presence in our midst. Her endeavours have most certainly not gone unnoticed.

#### Postscript:

Margaret Connolly, *Amorset, Manorhamilton* is the wife of Bernie Joe Connolly of Manorhamilton. She has three children, Ursula, Alison and Bernard. A primary teacher by profession, she secured her early education in Dromahair of which she is a native. She was a pupil of the Mercy Convent, Sligo and attained her academic qualification in Mary Immaculate College in Limerick. She taught in Dublin, Tarmon, Killarney and finally Manorhamilton where she currently lives.

## International Awards for Leitrim's Benbo Productions & Ocean FM

IN 2013 and again in 2014 Leitrim's Benbo Productions combined forces with Ocean FM to record two BAI — funded three-part radio fiction serials, *Francisco* and *The Cambria*. *Francisco* is the story of a Spanish Armada survivor in Ireland with music by four members of Kila, and *The Cambria* tells the story of escaped slave and asylum-seeker Frederick Douglass's 1845 journey to Ireland, as seen from the perspective of Ireland's treatment of asylum-seekers nowadays.

*Francisco* was nominated for the 2013 Prix Europa, and went on to shock the European radio industry by winning the *Prix Europa Taurus in Berlin for Best Radio Fiction Serial*.

In July 2014, *Francisco* went on to win the Gold Medal for *Best Drama Special* in the New York Festival of International Radio. It's the first time one production has won the two most prestigious radio fiction serial awards in the world.

In October 2014, the Ocean FM/Benbo team was again nominated for the *Prix Europa* for *The Cambria*. This time, *The Cambria* came fifth in the Radio Fiction Serial category, the only Irish nomination in the entire 2014 Prix Europa to make the commended shortlist. The placing has cemented Ocean FM/Benbo's position as leaders in European radio fiction, and the most successful radio drama producers in Ireland over the past two years.



■ *Top: Francisco* writer/ director Donal O'Kelly with Jaimie Carswell, who played Francisco, and the Prix Europa Taurus, at a celebration in the Glens Centre Manorhamilton, where both serials were recorded under the sound supervision of Ray Duffy.

PHOTO: BRIAN FARRELL

*Bottom: From the stage version of The Cambria, with Sorcha Fox and Donal O'Kelly.*

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