

Athlone Literary Festival 2010

A Festival of Firsts.

By Mairead O'Connor

The 2010 festival was acknowledged by all to have been another successful and enjoyable addition to the cultural life of the town. It was indeed, as the subtitle of this report suggests, a festival containing many innovations, whilst retaining the characteristic elements of the festival, now in its 11th year.

“Loveliest of the Lawn” Art Exhibition

For the first time, the festival committee organised an art exhibition based on a literary theme. The exhibition ran all week, from the 20th to the 25th, in the Aidan Heavey Public Library. The launch on Thursday 16th September was performed by Levina Reeves. The work, by local artist Emer O'Connor, was based on the concept of “the garden in literature” and took inspiration from a number of literary sources.

Friday 24th September

Terence Frisby visits local schools.

UK actor, playwright and memoirist Terence Frisby made his first visit to the festival this year. He is a most accomplished and well-known dramatist whose play *There's a Girl in My Soup* was, at one time, the longest running comedy on the West End and was adapted for the silver screen in 1970, starring Peter Sellers and Goldie Hawn. Terence's most recent work is a memoir of his childhood as an evacuee from the London Blitz, *Kisses on a Postcard*. This heart-warming and honest account has won much praise from readers and reviewers and is currently being adapted as a West End musical.

It was this story of his childhood experiences of WWII that Terence related to wrapt audiences of secondary school students in Athlone Community College, St. Aloysius College, and St. Joseph's College in the town. Siobhan Bigley, Emer O'Connor and Catherine Ivers accompanied Mr. Frisby as he made his tour of these Athlone schools. At every stop the students were fascinated by his story and impressed by Mr. Frisby's lively and imaginative presentation.

This was the first time that the festival has held events in schools and after the success of Terry's visits it is hoped that it will not be the last such occasion.

Memories into Memoir Workshop with Irene Graham

This was Irene's second visit to the festival. Deirdre Collins introduced this year's workshop during which Irene guided her participants through a longer session than last year. The 12 participants enthusiastically engaged with Irene's specially designed techniques to unlock their memories and transform their personal history into a memoir for themselves and their friends and family. Each left greatly inspired and with their own copy of Irene's *Memoir Writing Workbook*.

Athlone Literary Festival @ Passionfruit Theatre

For the first time Athlone Literary Festival collaborated with Passionfruit Theatre and two events on Friday were hosted in the intimate venue on Northgate Street. The first of these events was a tribute to two Athlone writers, playwrights P.G. O'Dea and Joe Duce. Both fondly remembered writers attracted a large and appreciative crowd as readings were held from O'Dea's *Johnnie's Britches* and Duce's short story collection *Tell Me Sweet Little Lies*. The reading was followed by the official Gearoid O'Brien's unveiling of a portrait of the late Joe Duce, created by Ruth Ryan, daughter of P.G. O'Dea.

Later that night in the same venue Fionnuala O'Connell introduced an excited audience to the comedian Abie Philbin Bowman. This event was the first ever comedy show at the festival. Abie brought his new show "Sex, Lies and the KKK" to Athlone following successful runs at the 2010 Hollywood and Edinburgh Fringe festivals. The audience enjoyed his musings on American politics, monogamy, and philosophy. It was a thought-provoking and intelligent night of comedy in an agreeably intimate venue.

Official Opening of the Festival & Presentation of Honorary Membership.

This year the official opening of the festival was performed by Terence Frisby who gave a lively account of his memories of visiting Ireland as a teenager. After the opening, the Chair of the Festival Committee, Jarlath Duffy presented founding committee-member and long-standing patron of the arts in Athlone, Mel O'Flynn with the inaugural Honorary Membership of the Festival Society.

"Oh What A Glorious Thing is War...."

The Festival Forum was introduced this year by Fionnuala O'Connell and consisted of an engaging panel with first-hand accounts of wartime experience. The speakers were Terence Frisby, Roisin Boyd, Rtd. Col. Colm Doyle and Chair, retired Irish Times journalist, Jim Downey.

Jim introduced the topic for the night's discussion: the forgotten and overlooked civilian casualties of conflict. Terence Frisby began by describing, in engaging detail, his childhood

experiences as an evacuee from the London Blitz. Roisin Boyd outlined what she has learnt from her work as a journalist in Africa and from her experiences working with refugees in Ireland. Finally retired Col. Colm Doyle, formerly a UN envoy in the Balkans, gave his perspective on the causes and casualties of war.

These fascinatingly diverse voices were then drawn together under the chairperson's guidance and he opened the discussion to the floor. There followed a lively and intelligent exploration of the topic. After the forum finished the speakers and audience continued their discussions and conversations over a convivial drink in the hotel lobby.

Saturday 25th September

Reading from "Foster" and Seminar on the Art of Fiction with Claire Keegan

An excited and dedicated group (some had travelled from Roscommon, Mullingar and Wicklow) gathered on Saturday morning to hear what highly respected Irish short story writer Claire Keegan had to say on the topic of writing fiction. Having been introduced by Mairead O'Connor, Claire went on to outline her approach to the creation of a story. She examined aspects such as choice of subject, structure of plot and the use of time within the narrative – which Claire described as "making an incision in time." One aspect of writing which Claire particularly emphasised was the importance of the creation of well-crafted paragraphs.

Upstairs in the boardroom, that afternoon, Claire held an audience enthralled with her reading from her exceptionally crafted, newly published novella *Foster*. Claire's powerful reading from this tale of a young girl's coming of age seemed to capture the imaginations of those assembled. Claire signed copies of the book afterwards for the audience.

Poets' Corner

This event, curated and introduced by Mel O'Flynn and Grace Brennan, was once again a very popular addition to the programme. Writers from the Mullingar Scribblers, the Castle Writers group of Athlone and the Ballymahon Writers' Group were welcomed by a warm and friendly audience on Saturday morning. The varied selection of poetry was complimented this year by the music of Bernard and Patrice Coyle. This event has become a very enjoyable and useful platform for local writers to share their work with a receptive audience.

Funny Business Comedy Workshop with Abie Philbin Bowman

Following the success of "Sex, Lies and the KKK" the night before, Catherine Ivers introduced Abie Philbin Bowman's comedy writing workshop "Funny Business". Abie shared his insights into the business of stand-up during Saturday morning's session. An inquisitive group joined the comedian as they discussed the art of comedy.

Launch of Desmond Egan's ATHLONE ATHLONE

A large crowd gathered for the launch of local poet, Desmond Egan's new publication, *ATHLONE ATHLONE*. This handsome book is a collection of poems, new and old, based on the subject of the poet's home town. The book also contains some wonderfully evocative photographs of the town. The launch itself was carried out by friend of the poet and the festival, Dr. Patrick Murray, and was attended by friends and fans from the town and surrounding areas. Michael D. Higgins TD. also dropped by as he was appearing at the festival later that afternoon.

Kilbeggan Writers' Group Reading

An energetic and enthusiastic group of young writers arrived at the festival ready to put their contemporary stamp on proceedings. This group of young writers from the midlands meet regularly and their many fans turned out in force on Saturday to hear them read from their latest work. Following Fionnuala O'Connell's introduction, each member read from their varied work. The young writers and young audience were a wonderful sight at the literary festival and their good-spirits and engaging readings made them a very welcome addition to this year's programme. This event, along with the Michael D. Higgins Interview and the Miscellany on Sunday were recorded for posterity by Athlone Community Radio, a community based, non-profit organisation.

The Life, Times and Works of Michael D. Higgins TD

Mel O'Flynn introduced Michael D. and Donncha O'Connell to an expectant audience on Saturday afternoon. This interview, of the poet and politician, was conducted very ably and in a relaxed manner by Donncha. The event was very well attended and had added interest for the audience due to the recent announcement of Michael D's candidature for the Presidency of Ireland. He shared stories of his childhood and early education, of his time as mayor of Galway and his more recent career as a national politician and important representative voice for the arts and those working for human rights. Proceedings were interspersed with lively readings, by Michael, of his poetry.

Launch of the Willie Ryan Cocktail

This event followed the interview with Mr. Higgins and was a great success. The cocktail was named, by the festival committee, in honour of the author John Broderick, around whose work the festival has often taken shape. It was a very enjoyable way to round off a busy and stimulating Saturday at the festival.

Sunday 26th September

Athlone's Sunday Miscellany

It was a beautifully sunny late September Sunday morning by the river and a large crowd arrived at the Radisson with high expectations for this event. They were not disappointed. Five published writers with local connections had been invited to read, accompanied by music from Tony Dunne and Bean Dolan and the About Time quartet. Mel O'Flynn took on the role of MC for the morning and in her inimitable style introduced the writers and musicians. Tony and Bean played a gorgeous selection of O'Carolan pieces. About Time sang a selection of appropriately romantic and melodious tunes.

The readers delighted with their humour, reminiscences and, of course, plenty of local colour. Lorraine Francis read a piece which illuminated the creative process which inspires her art form, the children's illustrated book. Gearoid O'Brien prompted warm laughter with his tale of a holiday in Portugal made all the more memorable by the encounter of a Joe Dolan-singing chef. Jean Farrell highlighted the changing face of the school room over her lifetime. Liam Horan reminisced about the changing face of Athlone, drawing knowing laughter from the crowd. Finally Jason Gill read an intriguing and surreal extract from his recently published novel, *A Year in My Room*.

It was a very enjoyable way to round-off the festival weekend and an inspiring example of the talent which is to be found in the locality.

Photographs from the Festival Weekend 2010



Terence Frisby visits St. Aloysius College, Athlone.



Mel O'Flynn & Pat Eaton



Claire Keegan



Poets' Corner

Kilbeggan Writers' Group



Desmond Egan & Michael
D. Higgins, TD.



Michael D. Higgins,
Sabina Coyne &
Mel O'Flynn



Workshop attendees enjoy a break



Audience Members at Athlone's Sunday Miscellany



Contributors to Athlone's Sunday Miscellany