

# Manx Notes 120 (2010)

“WHO IS MONA DOUGLAS?” (6)

BEGINNINGS (2) \*

(1)

[5] I can scarcely remember learning to read or write, for I started when I was just a baby playing with bricks. My mother bought some of these with letters on them, and instead of building houses or castles or trains, I built words. Then, long before I could write legibly (in fact my friends tell me that I still can't!) I used to be perfectly happy for hours if I could get hold [6] of a pencil and some paper and just scribble.

It was in much the same un-self-conscious way that I began to absorb music and poetry. Mother used to repeat poems and sing songs to me long before I could understand them properly, but somehow the lilt and rhythm and beauty of them did penetrate to some extent, so that when, later on, I began to write poems, I always heard them first in my mind, and felt their colour and I still do so. Then, very early, I began to read books for pleasure. At four years old I had my first treasured book, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, and at five, my first public Library ticket; and it was at the public library some years later, when I was ten, that I discovered and became steeped in the enchantment of my favourite poet, W.B. Yeats.

(2)

[6] When I was about six, Mother and Father were close friends of a young Methodist minister who had formerly been a librarian and was a great lover of good literature, and a young Irishman named Pearce who was a good amateur violinist, and very knowledgeable about music in general. My parents themselves loved music, Father playing both the violin and the flute and Mother playing the piano and singing, while they both belonged to a choral society, and sometimes Father had to deputise for [7] its conductor. At this period, on Sunday evenings after church Mr Collins the young minister, Eamonn Pearce and a few other friends from time to time used to gather at our house for poetry readings, discussion and music; and in the midst of this circle of friends I grew into an appreciation, uncritical but vivid, of the great English and American and French poets, and of the music of Handel, Bach, Beethoven and Schubert, of Liszt and Chopin, Puccini and Verdi, of English madrigals and some of the moderns. We knew little of folksong, but the Manx National Songs were often sung and played, and it was about this time, I think, that I first became conscious of my Manx nationality, and felt the first stirrings of that passionate love for the Island and all things Manx which has been with me ever since. On my seventh birthday Mr Collins (who was for a time at Loch Parade by the way) gave me my first treasured book of poetry, which I still have and still love—R.L.

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Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verse*. It was this book, I think, which first made me try to write poems of my own.

You see, I am quite uneducated really. I never went to school and I used to just go round Ballaragh with the farmers and down to Laxey and went out in the boats with the fishermen, and wandering about pretty well as I liked. I got to know Sophia Morrison who was then the secretary of the Cheshaght Ghailckagh and lived in Peel. She knew my parents and she came to see us and when she found the kind of life I was living she started me collecting, putting things down. She didn't call it collecting then. She said, 'You know, you ought to write down some of these things that people tell you and sing to you.' And she gave me a little notebook in which I started to write things down and I still have. And I was learning music so I knew how to write the notes. But I never write notes straight [8] down from the singing. I can't pitch them properly for one thing. What I have to do when I learn a tune is to learn it from the person who teaches me until I can sing it myself and then I work it out on the piano. At one time I played the fiddle and I used to work it out on the fiddle. But I've given that up for many years now.

**Source:** Present in two extracts in Fenella Bazin, ed. *Mona Douglas: A Tribute* (Douglas: Manx Heritage Foundation, 1998) 5–6 & 6–8. **Note:** This typescript is a slightly different version from Mona Douglas, "BEGINNINGS," undated typescript, MNHL, MS 09545, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 4. See *Manx Notes*, 119.



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VIENNA, 2010

