

Manx Notes 376 (2019)

“WHO IS MONA DOUGLAS?” (12)

“WOMAN’S PROFILE...

MISS MONA DOUGLAS”

(1957)

[10e] Miss Mona Douglas is someone to whom succeeding generations of Manx people will have reason to be grateful. She is one of the small band who are trying, with success, to preserve our precious Manx traditions and heritage. It is not only the Manx language which is being preserved—but the folk lore, music and drama of bygone days, together with the Gaelic history.

Mona Douglas is extremely proud of the fact that she is a true Celt. On her mother’s side she is Irish and Manx, traced back for many generations, and from her father she inherits Scottish and Manx blood.

It was Mona Douglas’s unusual childhood which developed her intense interest in our national history, although she was unaware of it at the time. She lived at Lezayre, near the church, and she never remembers learning to read and write. Yet she could read by the time she was four years of age and held her first library ticket when she was only five! Delicate in health, she was allowed to have lessons at home from her mother, who had been a school teacher.

At the age of seven, Mona moved, with her family to Ballarragh, near Laxey, high up above Bulgham Bay. There, in the little hamlet, she spent the happiest of childhoods—out of doors during the day and doing the required school lessons after dark. Her day were spent helping the farmers and talking to the old Manx folk in the surrounding districts. On Sundays, she attended the nearby Sunday School, where old Mr Kelly taught his pupils the Lord’s Prayer in Manx.

It was when Mona Douglas was about 10 years old that she met Miss Sophia Morrison, of Peel, who was really responsible for setting her feet on the path they tread today. Realising the child’s love of everything Manx and hearing of her contacts with the old Manx people, Miss Morrison suggested that Mona should write down the stories she heard and to try also to record the old Manx tunes on her fiddle. This she did and in the years following she widened her field, visiting shepherds retired fishermen and farmers, listening to their tales and songs and getting them to show her the dance steps and figures. She was helped here by her own family. Her maternal great-grandfather was Philip Quayle, of Glentrammon, who was renowned in his day for being one of the finest dancers in the Island. Songs and dances handed down by him were added to Mona Douglas’s collection.

She took her first job when she was 18. Here the “Celtic influence,” which is threaded through her whole life story, continued. She held a secretarial post with Mr. W.C. Cubbon at [10f] Rushen Abbey, living in a two-roomed cottage in Ballasalla

and spending her off-duty time tapping the south of the island for folk lore. Mr Cubbon and his family greatly encouraged her in her hobby.

She left the Island after four years to become secretary to the late A.P. Graves, great Irish writer and father of a famous family. He was living in North Wales at that time, writing his autobiography. When this was completed, having literary aspirations herself, Mona Douglas was encouraged to go to London.

Here again, she found herself amongst some of the foremost literary people of the day, and through Ernest Rhys, editor of the "Everyman" series and his wife, she met many interested in the Gaelic arts. She held varied posts during her five years in London, and it was at this time that she first met Arnold Foster and his wife. The first Manx song that Dr Foster ever arranged was one from Miss Douglas's collection. Together they produced two volumes of twelve Manx folk songs. (At the present time they are completing a third volume, to be published this year).

Miss Douglas became secretary to the Village Drama Society, a branch of the British League, which had been founded by Mary Kelly (who was not Manx but came from Devonshire). This job brought her into contact with people from all over England, entailed a certain amount of travel, and the supervision of a very large drama library.

The ill-health of her parents recalled her to the Isle of Man in 1930. Mr and Mrs Douglas were then running a poultry farm, and Mona helped them until they were well again.

Two years later, she became Rural Librarian under the Isle of Man Education Authority. The library then possessed 9,000 books. Today, after 25 years' service, Miss Douglas is in charge of 50,000 books, three branches and seventy centres all over the Island.

Mona Douglas has thrown herself heart, and soul into everything Celtic. A honorary Bard of the first degree of the Welsh Gorsedd, with the Bardic name of "Mona Manaw," she was the first president of Aeglagh Vannin, Manx secretary of the Celtic Congress, the Manx Society, and a member of the Manx Folk Dance Society. She is a founding member of the International Folk Music Council, to which she is still Manx correspondent.

In 1955, she was one of the founders of Ellynyn ny Gael (Arts of the Gael), which came into being by accident. When the Festival of the International Folk Music Council was being held at Oslo that year, although [10g] the Island had contributed previously, they had never sent anyone to show the dancing of this Island.

Miss Douglas was one of those who thought should be represented, and so Ellynyn ny Gael was formed and Joan Owen was instructed in Manx to sing the lovely unaccompanied Manx songs for which she has now become justly famous. The old Dirk Dance, which was one of Miss Douglas's collection, was to be danced by Billy Cain, who, unfortunately, sprained his ankle and was unable to go.

Of all Mona Douglas's work today, Ellynyn ny Gael is perhaps the most satisfying. At the suggestion of several of the Island's school teachers who have joined the society, and as a result of their interest, co-operation and hard work, today more and more Manx drama, music and dancing is being taught in the schools.

Mona Douglas is happy that—at last—the younger generation are growing up with some knowledge of their proud heritage.

As Rural Librarian Miss Douglas is a busy person. The large number of books is still growing, and each book, she tells me, "is subjected to 15 different processes before it is issued." Her off-duty time is fully occupied with the societies mentioned and original writing. Last year, she contributed an article on the history of the Manx theatre to the Encyclopaedia Spettacolo, published in Rome.

It is only by rising at 5 am daily that she is able to run single-handed a large house at Ballarragh, look after eight cats, a dog, a pony, and work the half-acre of ground, on which she grows much of her food!

"Woman's Profile... Miss Mona Douglas." *Isle of Man Examiner* 1 March 1957: 10e-g.

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Another piece in the jigsaw that is the biography of Mona Douglas.

STEPHEN MILLER, 2019

OTHER REFERENCES

- Stephen Miller, "Who is Mona Douglas?' (3) 'I was brought up first in Lezayre'." *Manx Notes* 117 (2010): 1-2.
- . "Who is Mona Douglas?' (4) 'I was brought up in the Isle of Man'." *Manx Notes* 118 (2010): 1-2.
- . "Who is Mona Douglas?' (5) 'Beginnings'." *Manx Notes* 119 (2010): 1-2.
- . "Who is Mona Douglas?' (6) 'Beginnings (2)'." *Manx Notes* 120 (2010): 1-2.

