

# Behind every great town are plenty of great ladies

Women have been so often written out of history but not so in Ballinrobe where a new project is putting them centre-stage, writes Majella Loftus.

The women of Ballinrobe, past and present, will be immortalised in a new project.

Ballinrobe Women and its Hinterland is currently being compiled by the local historical society and will eventually culminate in the launch of a book that will feature 100 women who grew up in the area and stamped their mark on the South Mayo town.

Females such as environmental scientist, Professor Emer Colleran, author and historian, Bridie Mulloy; Maeve Kenny, mother of Courtney Kenny who was also the niece of Percy French and encouraged opera in the town; Mary Teresa Cooney, whose son Noel Browne introduced mass free screening for TB in Ireland; Dorothy Hearne, who is the reason Ballinrobe Library was initially opened, and Tess May, captain of the local Cumann na mBan in the early



Mina McHugh ran a public house on Glebe St until her death in 1999. She is pictured with Paddy Flannery of Flannery's Bar, Cornmarket which still trades today.

1900s, are just some of the women of Ballinrobe whose lives made a significant impact to Irish society.

Others still living and working in the area include Sr Francis McMyler, a national school teacher who set up the town band, local choir and choral society; Dr Maureen Dowd, columnist, author, and Pulitzer prize winner; Monica Horan who is an integral part of Ballinrobe life and is the chairwoman of Ballinrobe Festival; Kay Tracey, who helped set up the local Credit Union and librarian Mary Farragher.

Local historian and member of Ballinrobe Historical Society, Averil Staunton, came up with the idea for the project.

Some months ago, the first 30 women were unveiled within the community and historical boards in the library have documented the impact of these women in the town.

Averil's enthusiasm for the project is infectious and the ultimate aim is to have the history boards on display in the Heritage Centre, which is currently being developed at the site of the old courthouse on Main Street.

"Women from the area are rarely acknowledged. We know all the stories about the famous men from Ballinrobe and its surrounding areas but we decided that it was time our women were written about and remembered in our his-

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tory.” In 2010, Averil saw an advertisement by the National History Museum of Ireland which was looking to train people to start recording the heritage of their local areas. She was accepted for the course, having just set up Ballinrobe Historical Society in an effort to record the history of the area, and had recently completed a college thesis on Ballinrobe Library. Her love of all things history began from there.

"After that, I set up the historicalballinrobe.com website. The historical society raised €3,500 to set up the site and got grants towards this. Over the past 10 years, we have had a huge number of diaspora visiting the site."

Averil tells the story of Margaret Gibbons who was born in Ballinrobe around 1829. Margaret had two brothers and four sisters. On June 15, 1847, Margaret was tried and convicted at Ballinrobe Courthouse, at the height of the Famine, for supposedly stealing a lamb at the Common, now Cornmarket.

"If you even petted a lamb, that was considered theft. She was sentenced to 10 years' transportation. She was removed to Grangegoman Depot in Dublin which was the first exclusively female prison in the British Isles, to await transportation. Records show Margaret was retained there with her son on November 16, 1947. They state she was single, unable to read or write, and had no trade. She was finally 'disposed of' with her son on the convict ship The Kenner in June 1848 where she was sold to a Master. It is understood she would have been hired out into service in Tasmania."

She spent the rest of her life in Australia where she married and had a family. Unfortunately her son, who was



Margaret Gibbons' daughter, Mary Ann Gill, who was born and raised in Australia.



Ballinrobe librarian Mary Farragher features in the exhibition.

sent on the ship with her, died aged five.

Averil was contacted by Margaret's great, great grand-daughter, Rosalie Darby in 2016 while she was trying to trace her family roots in Ireland from Australia.

Averil explains: "These are the type of stories we are trying to immortalise. We are encouraging people to engage with our website and tell us the stories of their ancestors who had connections to the town and its hinterland."

Among those Averil is looking for information on include the story of the Ballinrobe Workhouse Early Grey orphans. Some of these followed in the footsteps of more than 2,200 young Irish girls who escaped from the Great Famine between 1848 and 1850. Of

the orphans, aged between 14 and 19, that were sent to Australia, some 137 were from Mayo and 25 were from Ballinrobe. They were sent as 'breeding stock' to areas where there were more men than women.

The idea for the project began at the National History Museum of Ireland when Averil and a group of others were involved in a project on Our Irish Women.

"We all contributed one woman and I focused on Bridie Mulloy. I adapted that idea to one highlighting our hidden women in Ballinrobe. That is where the initial seed started."

She says the response to the project has been amazing.

"We have 32 women documented on the website and this is growing.

We will reach 100 women at some stage. We have the first phase on display in the library and when we have phase two done, they will go on display also in the building. Eventually, they will all be mounted in the Heritage Centre, which is currently a work in progress."

Averil has been assisted in the design of the boards by a fellow student, Minh Tran, a Vietnamese student who is studying Computing and Digital Media at GMT.

"She has been a godsend and gets every woman's story across perfectly."

Averil is still encouraging people to document the story of their ancestors or those they believe are worthy of inclusion in the project.



Bridget Brown ran a very popular newsagents on Abbey St until recently. She is one of those honoured in the exhibition.



Maggie Brennan, Roundfort is remembered.

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Bridie Mulloy's historical board.

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