

# Manx Notes 119 (2010)

“WHO IS MONA DOUGLAS?” (5)

## BEGINNINGS. \*

Miss Clague has asked me to write something about how I began to write, and I think the following is as truthful an account as I can give.

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 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.

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 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. Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verse*. It was this book, I think, which first made me

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try to write poems of my own; for the verses in it were so directly related to the daily experiences of childhood that they made me want to put some of my own thoughts and doings into verse. Once started, the habit grew on me, and soon I began to spend my pennies on pencils and exercise-books instead of sweets and ice-cream.

Most of my holidays were spent with my aunt and uncle in Douglas and when I was nine I happened to be with them when an Eisteddfod was held at Rose Mount in which was a competition for an original poem. I entered for this, and was quite surprised to be awarded the first prize for a poem on “Douglas Bay”—my first literary success, and very sweet it was! It also brought me into touch with a man who was to influence very strongly my later development, and to remain one of my most valued friends for the rest of his life—the late William Cubbon. I think I can say that he and two other persons, Walter Gill, himself a poet and folklorist, a scholar and a fine literary critic, and Sophia Morrison, Secretary of *Yn Chesbaght Ghailckagh* and a stalwart supporter of every branch of Manx and Celtic culture (both of whom I met a little later), were the strongest influences in determining the trend of my subsequent literary work. I have no adequate words to express my grateful consciousness of the help and guidance given me in my formative years by these three good friends—one of them, alas to be snatched away by death after only a short association. That was Miss Morrison; but in the year or so that I knew her it was she who set me to collecting songs and dances and stories, and so laid the foundations for one very important aspect of my later work. And it is in that aspect also that my early and continual association with music has stood me in good stead, though I could have done with a more thorough training in the theory and technique.

Other things and people and books have also influenced me, of course, notably the Irish and Scottish Gaelic writers; and from very early days I have found inspiration and a rich mine of beauty and imagery in Celtic folklore, legend and especially mythology, and in the writings of the mystics. But behind all the rest, for me, is always the beauty and mystery and glory of our own Sacred Island, the *Ellan Vannin* in the heart which is for ever our Mother and Queen to be adored and served, the ideal to be kept inviolate for those who shall follow us, and so handed on: our inspiration, and our ultimate rest—*Ellan Vannin dy brag!*

**Source:** Mona Douglas, “BEGINNINGS,” undated typescript, MNHL, MS 09545, Mona Douglas Papers, Box 4.



STEPHEN MILLER  
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