

CREGGAN LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY



BIRTHPLACE OF ART MCCOOEY | Gaelic Poet

Art McCooey is the best known and last of the five Gaelic Poets from South East Ulster, the others being Pádraig Mac A Loindain 1665 - 1733, Séamus Mór Mac Murphy 1720 - 1750, Séamas dall Mac Cuarta c.1650 - 1733 and Peadar Ó Doirnín 1704 - 1769. He was called *Art na gCeoltai* – ‘Art of the songs’. His poem *Úrchill an Chreagáin* has been called "the national anthem of south east Ulster". His poetry is associated with the O'Neills of the Fews, whose castle was at Glassdrummond. His death, on 7 January 1773, represented the end of an era, marking the final eclipse of the old Gaelic order following the exile of the O'Neills after 1641.

McCooey was born in the townland of Ballinaghy now known as Mounthill. Having squandered his portion of the family property after his father's death, Art spent most of his life as a labourer and a gardener. He worked for several local clergy around Crossmaglen including Rev. Hugh Hill Rector of Creggan. Although poor and foolish he was popular with the common people, mainly because he voiced the feeling of the times, the sufferings, hatreds, laments and hopes. His melodious verses were sung with heart-moving feelings, for national hope was not dead in MacCooey's day. After the flight of the Earls, few if any of the chiefs in Ulster could support either court or poet.

Following his marriage which, although he was a Catholic, took place in the Protestant church after the dispensation to marry his cousin had been refused, he was exiled to Howth for a time. He later returned to the district and was reconciled to the church. This was about the time of his quarrel with Rev. Terence Quinn PP of Creggan and the satirical poem *Maire Chaoch* ‘One eyed Mary’ written about Fr. Quinn's sister, apparently because of her lack of hospitality to him. After his return he wrote *Cuilfhionn Ní Chuinne* ‘The fair-haired lass of the Quinns’ in praise of Mary Quinn, ‘a fulsome tribute which is metrically perfect and patently insincere’, which seems to have patched up their differences. Some 25 of his poems survive.

The epitaph on his headstone in Creggan churchyard (erected 1973) from the last line of his poem *Úrchill an Chreagáin* reads: *Gurb ag Gaeil chumhra an Chreagáin a leagfar mé i gcré faoi fhód.* ‘that with the fragrant Gaels of Creggan I will be put in clay under the sod.’

Part of the house where he was born is still standing, although fairly difficult to visit.