

THE NORTH OF IRELAND FAMILY HISTORY SOCIETY

LISBURN BRANCH



**LAURA BELL, COURTESAN AND EVANGELIST**

A privately printed pamphlet entitled 'A Short Visit to Ram's Island, Lough Neagh, and its vicinity' in the year 1853, contained a poem entitled 'The Island Queen', described as Mrs. A.F. Thistlethwayte's farewell to Ram's Island, on her departure for London, having spent some weeks in Lord O'Neill's cottage on the island, in the autumn of 1853.

Mrs Thistlethwayte [c. 1831–1894] was the former Miss Laura Eliza Jane Seymour Bell from Glenavy, who left home at an early age, after an unsupervised childhood, and supplemented her income as a shop assistant in Belfast by selective prostitution. Laura moved to Dublin where her finances were secured to the extent that she was able to drive in her own carriage in Phoenix Park. While in Dublin she was reputed to have had an association with Dr. William Wilde, the father of Oscar Wilde. About 1849 Laura Bell moved to London where her conquest of Jung Bahadur, a Nepalese Prince and prime minister and virtual ruler of Nepal from 1846-1877, established her reputation as a courtesan. It has been claimed that in the short time that Laura Bell was his mistress she deprived him of a quarter of a million pounds.

In 1853 she married a man of property, Captain August Frederick Thistlethwayte, with an address at Grosvenor Square, London, and an estate in Ross-shire in Scotland. In the 1860s, Laura Thistlethwayte experienced a religious conversion and became an established woman evangelist, preaching in public and holding evangelical tea parties at her home, which became famous in high society circles. About this time she met William Ewart Gladstone, Prime Minister of Britain, who with his wife maintained a friendship with Laura up until her death in 1894.