Library

Some of the books written by and about Birr people

Postcard

This "topics" column was once photographed by George Bernard Shaw. Who or what would you put on top of it? Draw your idea on top of the pictured column shown below and mail us the postcard. Or write and post your ideas on our Facebook page. (Free coffee from one of our excellent local cafés to the most witty/fun drawn/most philosophical in each month).

St. Brendan's Postbox
Tin Jug Studio
St. Brendan Street
Birr
Co. Offaly
Ireland

The Guide to

The Famous & Notables of Birr Trail

The Birr FAN Trail commemorates twenty-five remarkable people and places from this heritage town's fascinating history: All famous or infamous in their day.

The Birr FAN Trail is the creative collaboration of two artists of Birr: Jackie Lynch & Rosalind Fanning

www.visitoffaly.ie
www.facebook.com/Famous & Notables of Birr Trail
The BIRR FÉIN TRÁIL commemorates twenty-five remarkable people and places from this historic town’s fascinating history: all famous or infamous in their day, but since faded into memory.

Our selection includes:
- A Hollywood Icon;
- A Geologist-Speaking-Argentine-Champion Hurler;
- A Romantic O’P;
- A History-Loving Lawyer who should have stayed out of religion;
- A Successful Businesswoman and TD who harboured a German Spy;
- A poetical cabinet-maker;
- A ‘little character’ that made a big impact; as well as a jazzy newspaper editor, a geologist who has a peak in Canada named after him, and a few veterans of a former empire’s battles.

There are sportspeople and diplomats; those with strong threads through the arts, and explorers, and people of the church. Along the trail, we have also included locations linked with ‘dramatic events’. There was a murder, a schism, an out-done Dánz and a handful of revolutionaries.

Look for some films highlighting BIRR!

**British Pathé:** Parsons - Genius of Power 1955.
Greetings for Princess, 1961.
Stained glass window, unveiled by Field Marshal, Lord Alexander of Tunis, 1964.
YouTube: Birr workhouse.
*Vimeo:* Amazing drone footage of a beautiful Irish town, by Hello Camera.

**LIVING NOTABLES OF BIRR**

It is to be noted that Birr has a generous number of living notables too — being alive and well, they are not yet commemorated with a plaque!

**Fashion Designer** — Sorcha O’Raghallaigh
**Geologist, author and living treasure** — John Feehan
**Actors** — Des Keogh and Aidan Quinn
**Opera Singer** — John Molloy
**Singer-songwriters** — Mundy and Roséy
**Archaeologist and Author** — Calmín O’Brien
**Poet** — Eileen Casey
**Hurling Star** — Brian Whelehann
**Comedian** — Edwin Sammon
**Silversmith** — Cathal Barber
**plus Filmmakers** — Nicky Larkin, Gary Hooton and Mark Noonan

...And more!

This is a trail of discovery and revelation, for at first sight the plaques give only small clues through the names, professions and dates. As you stroll the route with this guide, a little more is revealed. Now, imagine all of Birr’s a stage. We are pulling back the curtains and as the spotlight illuminates our cast of characters one-by-one, their tales and images are unveiled in fleeting glimpses. Then open up this Guide to the Trail again to follow the route map, reading further entertaining notes on their dramatic roles. (As space is limited in this ‘newspaper’, and this being the era of the internet, visitors are promised to view information on the Famous & Notables Facebook page. More from their biographies and where they stood in the theatre of life in their times, can be researched online. There is a rich, social history to be discovered: about artists, mystics and the literary; from brave and daring soldiers who were heroes in their way, to the unfortunate, and some misguided folk. All spent some time in and affected this place, the place that is Birr/Birr, in the very centre of Ireland.

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts;
From *As You Like It* — William Shakespeare

**The FULL TRAIL ROUTE IS A SURPRISING 3.2 MILES/5.1 KILOMETERS — IT IS UP TO YOU HOW LONG IT MAY TAKE: PERHAPS ABOUT AN HOUR ON FOOT, OR LESS ON A BICYCLE. ALONG THE WAY YOU CAN PASS A GOOD ASSORTMENT OF CAFÉS, HOSTELS, RESTAURANTS, EATERS AND IMBIBING PLACES: STOP AWHILE TO REST, READ, RELAX AND PARTAKE, MAY YOU ENJOY THE LOCAL FLAVOURS AS YOU ST, SIP, SUEP AND SHOP; AND EVERYWHERE, RECEIVE A FINE WELCOME IN BIRR.*

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**ABOUT THE TRAIL CREATORS:**

Both artists have small arts studies in town and also share common ground in being well-travelled. Coming home to Ireland, they both love and consider Birr their home town.

Jackie Lynch was born in Birr, a stone’s throw from where her grandmother came to live in the 1930s. She graduated with a B.A. (Hons) Degree in Fine Art and a Postgraduate Diploma in Applied Arts from the University of Ulster. Rosalind has a BA in Fine Art and Interior Design in London and went to live and work in New York for leading architects and designers. She runs seasonal art classes for children, and tuition for adults, as well as festival art exhibitions, poetry readings and films screenings at ‘Tin Jug Studio’. She is an occasional designer, colour consultant and visual artist and writer of published articles and unpublished short stories. She won First Prize in the Flash Fiction Story Competition, Athlone Literary Festival 2012.

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Rosalind was born in England of Irish parentage and ancestry, North and South. After working for the family companies in restoration, historic tourism and property management, she studied the History of Fine Arts and Interior Design in London and went to live and work in New York for leading architects and designers. She runs seasonal art classes for children, and tuition for adults, as well as festival art exhibitions, poetry readings and films screenings at Tin Jug Studio. She is an occasional designer, colour consultant and visual artist and writer of published articles and unpublished short stories. She won First Prize in the Flash Fiction Story Competition, Athlone Literary Festival 2012.
1. Dame Nellie Melba, OBE, 1861–1931
Soprano Singer/Ashmolean College
Soprano singer Nellie Melba gave a concert at Dooly's Hotel, but she also gave an impressive performance in the square. In her biography she recalled that afterward, a small boy, who was a young artist in Dublin, told her she was the greatest singer he had ever heard.

2. Alice Meyrow Joyce, 09, 1913–1966
Orwell/Oradour
At the time Alice was living in Birr, her father was proprietor of Myers Chemist in Emmett Square. She graduated from the Royal College of Surgeons in 1936 and married a doctor, at which time she published her book when she was 20 and she wrote 32 more successful romantic novels.

Ahamasle Bheag Bhiarra
The community theatre was founded and run by J.J. and Islahe Fanning. At that time the Midland Tribune weekly newspaper was printed next door. J.J. Fanning was owner and editor. As producer-director and lighting genius, his attention to detail was meticulous. The standard and reputation of the productions was considerable and they staged regularly to full houses. The theatre lobby was made an exact but much smaller copy of The Gate Theatre, Dublin.

4. Thomas Laune, 1792–1869
Sollister and Historian/Clinical & Stair
Originally from Tipperary, he is best known locally for having written, "The Early History of the Town of Birr," which was published in 1865. He had applied for the first Sessional Crown Solicitor in Ireland but his great passion may well have been in matters historical. Next door to his house he had a small museum, housing his collection of antiquities.

5. Eamon Budge, 1893–1968
Revolutionary/Clinical & Stair
Bébhídhídh & Tadhúilseirh
Also an excellent soprano and Irish speaker, it was during his chairmanship of the county council that the name King's County was changed to County Offaly (Úibh Fhál). At the start of the Easter Rising young Eamon raised the Irish Republican flag at the GPO. After Paris and he was surrounded by a number of his fellow soldiers were executed. He was later safely saved because of his family's influence.

6. Angus Fanning, 1942–2012
Editor & Journalist/Inaugural & Trísole
He took his degree here, at Miss Caulfield's where doing his journalism's apprenticeship at The Midland Tribune. His grandmother, Annie Fanning (née Powell) was the first and only female proprietor of the weekly, national newspaper founded in 1881. Born in Tralee, he was a keen sportsman playing GAA for Kerry and later, a cricket aficionado. A talented sudden death, he was a member with well known jazz artists in Dublin. He was editor of The Sunday Independent for 28 years. Tonyshooinda EJ Kenny described him as a "charismatic newspaper man".

7. Thomas James Bate, 1842–1898
Engineer & Architect/Innefillid & Ailfile
Born here, the eldest son of the local doctor. Through his uncle, he met representatives of a noted British merchant, resident in Nagasaki. His work in Japan began with a steam powered sugar mill and he went to study in Osaka and Tokyo, including the Imperial Mint and rebuilding the Ginzza district. He was made foreign advisor in Tokyo where his title was Surveyor-General.

8. James Franklin Fuller, 1835–1924
Architect & Heraldist
All is wrong at the cattle fair that day. James Fuller was known to the crowds. This renowned and bewhiskered Dublin architect was commissioned by Cassandra Countess of Rosse and her companion on an overseas trip. It was his success. After the restoration in 1996, it became known as The Bitter Theatre & Arts Centre. Upon the whimsical facade of this Tudor Revival building away from the bustling crowds. In his youth Fuller had been a actor, a soldier and mechanical engineer.

9. Sir Winston, Lord Dugan of Victoria, GCMG, 1876–1951
Governor of South Australia/Gobharadh or as An Astrail Thesee
He was born in Birr as the son of an inspector of schools, Eilidhgh in the army, he served with distinction during the Boer War. Rising through the ranks, he went to France in 1853, commanding the 2nd Irish Regiment and was wounded during the Battle of the Somme. Mentioned in dispatches six times he was awarded the 1900 and CMG. Continuing his distinguished career, he succeeded Lord Greville as Governor of South Australia in 1914.

10. Susan Longstaff Mitchell, 1866–1926
Poet & Playwright/FILE & Briansdair
Walcot was the Mitchell family home. The 'Red-headed Rebel', an author, poet and mystic of the Irish Cultural Renaissance and friend of William Butler Yeats and his family. She was sub-editor of the Irish Statesman under George Russell and one of the founding members of the United Irish League of Feathernets, renamed the Irish Catholic Women's Association. Her portrait was created by renowned artists Sarah Purser and John Butler Yeats.

11. Jim Connell, 1921–1951
Songwriter & Author/Sorchoiche
e As An Astrail & Óscar
With pride, Communists and Socialists from China to union gatherings in the UK have sung his iconic song, The Red Flag. He was born in County Meath but the family moved to Birr Castle Demense in 1862, when his father got work as a groomman. Here in Birr, his first political activity began and he developed an interest in land agitation, and was aware into the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Connell was responsible for the 1916 uprising, and later was awarded a medal by Lenin in 1922.

Linguist/Botanist & Teanganna/Muirbheireach
Her first three years were at Birr Castle, while her father was astronomer there. She spoke German, French and a little Arabic and also knew Latin, Italian, Danish, Norwegian and became fluent in Slovenian. At the Paris Peace Conference 1919 she translated, interpreter and advisor. Later, she was professor of English at Ljubljana University. During her imprisonment by the Gestapo in WWII, her collection of Slovenian wild flowers, probably the finest in the world, disappeared irreversibly.

Choral Director/Sochead
It was the Crochite Shamb of Birr that was the doing of croats. Michael and William Crotty. They broke away from the established Roman Catholic church to form a new group in their own town. He then returned home “without making the least fuss” it was reported in the Kings/County Chronicle.

14. Kate Dunne, 1886
Murder Victim/Isráilishá Dúnmarbháithile
She was the owner of the cattle fair that day. She was a very clever and public speaker. After the restoration in 1996, it became known as The Bitter Theatre & Arts Centre. Upon the whimsical facade of this Tudor Revival building away from the bustling crowds. In her youth Fuller had been an actor, a soldier and mechanical engineer.

15. Thomas P. Connelly, VC, 1836 – 1900
Veteran of Ireland/Taradhghbair an Teandiles
Lieutenant Colonel Charles Boulton of Birr's three battle honours VC. The Victoria Cross being the highest and most prestigious award for gallantry in the face of the enemy that can be awarded to British and Commonwealth forces. Despite his active involvement in some less well known publications, Forder died a poor man but was buried among the distinguished at Glasnevin Cemetery. He deserves to be remembered as one of the first poets and patriots produced by the Labour movement.

16. John de Penrose, c1604 – 1652
Poet and Government/FILE & Céadlásdaire
A cabin maker with the heart of a poet lived here but he moved to Dublin later on. He was a known local but well as a poet and was buried among the distinguished at Glasnevin Cemetery. He deserves to be remembered as one of the first poets and patriots produced by the Labour movement.

17. Major John T. MacNair, 1797–1870
For & Author/Saalshaidh & Geàsail
From a family of fine bootmakers, at the age of 15 he went from this house to live with his uncle in Ontario. During his short spell in the Millard Regiment he won a medal at the Battle of Batoche. Graduating from the School of Practical Science, Toronto with a B.Sc in Architecture, from June 1907 Keefe and two associates began to explore and survey the Yukon.

18. Joseph Keefe, 1861–1923
Explorer & Geologist/Trísheilidh & Geàsail
He joined the British Army in 1933 as it held the promise of travel. Not long after training he was posted to the Far East, including China and India. It was to be 11 years before he returned to the UK. Captured by the Japanese while on a ‘recon’ trip the Uss Brasil, he was starved, tortured, and mortally wounded. He died in hospital, confirming a 14-year battle against further punishment by his captors to help others. He became the doctor for Rangoon jail. In retirement he wrote two books about his experiences.

Academic & Author/Scóil/ér & Óscar
When widowed, her mother returned from Jamaica to live in Birr. After a few years they moved to Dublin. In 1940, she completed her PhD on the速度 Manoel. In 1966 she was appointed Professor of Modern English at University College, Galway. Reynolds was also a poet, an author and co-author of a number of scholarly books. She also published a cookbook at the age of 88, called ‘Tasty Food for Hardy Folks’. A lively speaker and elegantly flamboyant, she contributed to the advancement of women's rights in Irish society and academic life.

20. Caitlin Kingston Brugha, 1879–1959
TD & Businesswoman/Teachta Dála & Bean Ghidh
This was the Kingston family home. Caitlin married the revolutionary, Cathal Brugha. She was also a talented footballer, hurley, boxer and linguist and they had 6 children. After her husband was killed during the Civil War, she started and ran her own successful business in Dublin, helping the family on her own income. In the 1933 general election, she was elected to Dáil Éireann as Síún Fhínn (TD (Teachta Dála) for the Waterford constituency and was re-elected in June 1927.

21. William Cunningham’s Hotel, 1860
Hotel/Laimsúr dh’i gCognó ‘na Muireach
On this spot was one of the town’s finest hotels. All 42 players of the two teams at the Goffs Complex in the Garden (Tipperary) ‘dem’ themselves of the Colmanona colours here. The First All-Ireland Hurting final was played on Easter Sunday, 1st April at Farrell’s Field (now built on) and over 3,000 people thronged the grand arena. After the match, the teams returned to enjoy a hearty dinner together.