

**A Lecture given by Berrie O'Neill  
of the Percy French Society at the Second International  
Percy French Summer School  
at Castlecoote House, Castlecoote, Co.Roscommon,  
17th July 2010.**

When I reflect on what I call my journey with Percy French it sometimes appears to me that in the matter of promoting appreciation of Percy French some outside invisible force is at work - just when we in our Percy French Society in North Down began a focus on the more literary side of Percy French up pops this Summer School and then a few months ago a lecture at St Patrick's College in Dublin looked at 'Comic Scenes of Edwardian Ireland: Somerville & Ross and Percy French'. - putting Percy French in the context of more established Irish literary figures

I hesitate to think that Percy French himself in some unearthly form but still with a metaphorical twinkle in his eye may be orchestrating these events. but some mysterious experiences are on record. Doors opening unexpectedly during concerts, pictures of Percy French falling from display almost on cue and so on. On one occasion, while preparing the Samuel Beckett Theatre at Trinity College, Dublin for a performance by our Percy French Concert Party, our talented director, Wilfie Pyper while taking a breather in College Park came upon a student dancing towards him while singing Percy French's very tuneful melody The Oklahoma Rose - It is a song certainly not to be found in the normal student's repertoire or in the hit parade of the day. So in responding to Kevin Finnerty's invitation to speak here today I may be just another part of some heavenly conspiracy!

**In the early eighties I was manager of a bank in Belfast - and among my customers was one Oscar Rollins..... (these were the days when Bank Managers were identifiable and when some people liked them!)**

Oscar Rollins, a business man and a councillor in the Borough of North Down had as a young man been impressed by Percy French's famous recitation the Four Farrellys. As you may know in this well known recitation Percy French is reflecting with humour and pathos about the common humanity shared by 4 very different individuals with the same name, Francis Farrelly. They represented, shall we say, a variety of Irishnesses

50 years later, on a golf trip to Lancashire, an unplanned coming upon the grave of Percy French in Formby was a life changing experience for Oscar Rollins. It turned out to be on Percy French's birthday and an unknown admirer had left a bunch of bluebells in a simple but moving tribute. Oscar Rollins became acutely aware that here was a great Irishman lying almost forgotten away from the land of his birth. The experience ignited within Oscar Rollins a crusading determination to make the name and works of Percy French properly appreciated in Ireland and to establish a permanent collection of his life's works.

Oscar's belief in his mission and his naked determination had him bring together to North Down at the outset such inspiring characters as Percy French's daughters, Ettie and Joan French, the famous tenor Brendan O'Dowda, the local mayor, Albert Magee (now our president), an enthusiastic BBC TV producer of Percy French material, Alan Tongue and believe it or not his bank manager - a kind of life changing experience for him also!

I was unable to handout the exorbitant amount of money that Oscar and his cohorts felt that his bank should subscribe towards a museum location to honour Percy French and I suggested, that he formalise a Percy French Society and trying to avoid damaging a valued customer relationship I added lamely and fatefully that I might give a hand with such a creation. A society followed in 1983 - guess who was treasurer and chief fund raiser?

**In addition to being a man before his time** in the promotion of Percy French it can be seen, in the context of recent banking revelations, that Oscar was also 30 years ahead of his time in seeking a very large amount of money from his bank without any strings or other pay back!

Anyway with the strong backing of North Down Borough Council and a number of commercial sponsors there followed a ground-breaking 8 day Festival with some 40 events. It was directed by Alan Tongue and made a huge impact in the North Down and Belfast area, I found myself gradually becoming more and more drawn into the story of Percy French and in the fate of the Society and I have covered many miles in a journey with Percy French ever since those exciting days.....

Nowadays, 27 years later in North Down Oscar Rollins has departed, as Percy French might say, to Kingdom Come and we have an active Society with a membership of 200 + 60 enthusiastic 'Friends' from further afield. We have regular concerts, monthly dinners and musical evenings. There have been many exhibitions and festivals. Our quarterly newsletter reaches some of you in Roscommon and also enjoys a small but enthusiastic readership in USA, Canada, New Zealand, Holland and Australia.

## The Percy French Collection

*But In terms of achieving our founder's ambitious and optimistic objectives, most important of all is what we call the **Percy French Collection**. We have amassed some 90 watercolours and approx. 600/700 pieces of other memorabilia*

Much of this magnificent archive was donated by Percy French's daughters and other family connections but it also includes other significant bequests and a number of paintings purchased by our Society. The archive reflects the extraordinarily varied and versatile output of Percy French as poet, journalist, watercolorist, songwriter and entertainer - all illustrating a huge range of artistic, musical and literary talents. To these can be added a subsidiary list of other abilities and accomplishments as engineer, composer, parodist, humorist, banjoist, tennis aficionado and cycling enthusiast.

This Percy French Collection which is cared for by the North Down Museum in Bangor will be our bequest to posterity and will hopefully encourage and help sustain other developments like this exciting Summer School. It is a wonderful insight to the life and times of Percy French - it is also a store of social history and above all a monument to our founder, Oscar Rollins.

Here I should mention a major project carried out by our Society led by David McShane. That has been the cleaning and conservation treatment of the 80/90 watercolors in the collection by specialist conservators at Marsh's Library Dublin - an expensive project which was 90% funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund with a grant of £40,000.

I must mention here that it really is astonishing that a hugely researched publication like The Encyclopaedia of Ireland fails to mention that Percy French was an outstanding watercolorist.

I should also mention that the said Oscar Rollins himself had for long owned a large Percy French watercolour entitled 'Evening in Achill' in which he took much pride. Achill was Percy French's "Island of my Dreams" -

Here some verses..... read by Gladys O'Neill

Having established contact with Percy French's homeland here in Roscommon some 20 years ago Oscar presented this painting to Father Beirne for the Strokestown Heritage Centre - a gesture typically made in the spirit of Percy French and demonstrating that Oscar took a wide and far reaching view of his mission.

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## **MAIN FOCUS TODAY**

**I would like to focus today is on Percy French the writer, journalist and poet.** This literary aspect of his talent has not as yet had anything like the study and research and understanding that it deserves and I note with satisfaction Father Beirne's mention of it in his greeting printed in the excellent brochure for the Summer School.

***Percy French was involved in creative writing from an early age - with other family members he produced the handwritten, hand illustrated and tongue in cheek, Tulsk Morning Howl - Tulsk of course being the nearest village / parish to Cloonyquin . Later they provided a more comprehensive and equally amusingly named Trombone of Truth - these titles suggesting perhaps that journalism was no less loud and aggressive then than at the present time!***

***At Trinity College Dublin in the 1870s he had acquired a banjo and with the Russian/Turkish war in full swing he wrote the famous song Abdallah Bulbul Ameer for a smoking concert. He imagined a duel between a brave but truculent Russian count and a heroic but sensitive Turkish gentleman.***

***Now sung by NORMAN CAIRNS with banjo***

***This song would travel far and indeed became the party piece of General Dwight D. Eisenhower***

*The banjo became an ever present feature of Percy French the entertainer for the rest of his life and Norman Cairns has brought that essential and colourful aspect of Percy French to our Society for many years.*

*Just to illustrate the vital importance of the banjo in French's career it is recorded that after his unexpected appointment as Inspector of Loans to Tenants in Co Cavan in 1873 he prepared for the heavy demands and responsibilities ahead - he went out and bought a tennis racket and some spare strings for his banjo!*

*Actually he had been about to emigrate to Canada before his Cavan appointment and taking his usual amused look at his new job he wrote in humorous verse*

*The Inspector of Drains. - here a verse or two from Gldys O'Neill*

In Cavan as 'Inspector of Drains' he developed a passion for cycling using the most up to date bicycles and tricycles. It was an interest that enabled him to contribute articles for the Irish Cyclist magazine - here again we note his propensity for writing and journalism

## **THE JARVEY YEARS**

And so when after five well paid years his post as Inspector of Drains in Cavan was dispensed with his writings for The Irish Cyclist and Athlete led to him being made editor of a new comic weekly published in Dublin. It was called The Jarvey. This was in the years 1888/90. Despite its clever content and high quality artistic illustrations it failed to achieve sufficient sales to overcome the very strong competition, undeservedly lasting only two years. Interestingly Michael D. Higgins last year mentioned the then fashion of English products being sought after to the detriment of equally good or even more authentic things produced in Ireland.

Anyway shortage of cash and profit meant that by necessity he was unable to pay other contributors and he had to write much of the material himself for The Jarvey.

**The only remaining full set of 104 original issues of The Jarvey is kept in the National Library of Ireland in Dublin** - in fragile condition they are not available to the public. Some 10 years ago our Society in North Down purchased a CD Rom of the 104 issues from the Library and with help from the National Lottery we have succeeded through modern computer technology and immense effort by my colleague, David McShane, to have the 104 issues of THE JARVEY splendidly repaired and reproduced in facsimile style. Now In pristine condition without tears, stains or other marks these have been bound into 10 volumes embellished with gold embossed lettering . One set has been formally presented for public access and research to the same National Library of Ireland. A further set has been given to Belfast's famous Linenhall Library and our association with these two great institutions must surely enhance our desire to have the literary importance of Percy French more fully recognised

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**Last year Michael D. Higgins** also made the point that in addition to tribute and celebration there are many themes to be explored and studied in historical and cultural terms by this and future summer schools. Personally I am intensely interested in the complications and nuances of local and social history rather than the more simplistic versions often emerging on a national scale. For instance Michael mentioned the many varied gradations in Irish Society in post famine Ireland, a context in which Percy French can perhaps be seen to cast a more realistic light than the more romantic and simplistic landlord/peasant society espoused by Yeats and Lady Gregory

In our Percy French Society in North Down we had amongst our members at one time the late and learned Derek Collie from that much under estimated town of Ballymena. His knowledge of the local geography, topography, social history and culture of all of Ireland was exceptional by any standards - mention any town land or village in any part of Ireland and Derek would immediately reveal the most detailed picture of its history and landscape..... I am pleased to quote Derek:

**“Percy French had an acute ear for the local idiom - an ability not given to all great poets - patterns of speech and thought revealing the character and expression of the people”.**

Derek compared Percy French to the fine English novelist, George Eliot and to Ireland's famed Myles na Gopaleen.

**This is a long way from one of the old criticisms directed at Percy French that his work was 'stage Irish'.**

Apart from Percy French's self taught ability as an artist the remainder of his many talents can to some extent at least be encompassed by an exceptional ability to use words - his abilities as songwriter, poet, author, journalist and humorist can be understood and enjoyed because of his way with words - sometimes poignant or sometimes comic but always colourful. His eldest daughter, Ettie, (herself an accomplished entertainer under her professional name, Ettie Percy French) has summed up her father's basic key to greatness under the heading of his exceptional ability as a 'wordsmith' -

In the poem/song 'An Emigrant's Letter' for instance he combines poignant metaphor with typical west of Ireland understatement as **“the waves hid the last bit of ould Donegal”** and the young emigrant lad with tears in his eyes says to his friend **“I think the salt wather's got into me head”** - I feel that the understatement makes the line even more powerful and more poignant

Many of French's best loved songs such as the Emigrant's Letter and Gortnamona are of course poems put to music by other composers and collaborators. It often seems as if an inherent musicality in the poem demands to be formalised. Take for instance the not very well known Road to Ballybay -- first as a poem

GLADYS O'Neill recites...

"Is this the road to Ballybay?" sez I to Miss Magee,  
"You're leaving it behind you" sez Mary Ann to me  
So I turned and walked beside her, and 'tis only fair to say,  
It was very pleasant walking on the road to Ballybay.

and then with music composed by Percy French's musically gifted daughter, Mollie

NORMAN CAIRNS repeats the song.

In these lines the poet is reflecting wistfully on and describing a youthful memory of boy and girl in the early and playful stages of getting to know one another.

Hiberno English *according to Terence Patrick Dolan in his 'Dictionary of Hiberno-English' is the language in which Irish people have for long communicated on a day-to-day basis.*

*The native Irish brought emphases from the Irish language in its structure, pronunciation and musicality to the English language and with a mixture of old English and more modern English combined with borrowings and phonetic translations from the Irish language created an almost new language - Hiberno English*

*Indeed many of the words picked up and recorded by Percy French as spoken are from old Elizabethan English introduced and kept alive here - there is a reference in the poem Ach I Dunno 'To ax for my hand' and from The Emigrant's Letter '... 'And Katie forninst me a wettin' the tay'. In the song McBreen's Heifer there is mention of Jamesy O'Burn being in a horrid 'namplush' - much more descriptive of his mathematical dilemma I feel than the the French/English 'Non Plus'*

And according to the Oxford Companion to Irish literature: "Percy French's songs have an alluring appeal and charm because of their affectionate use of Hiberno-English and a satiric edge"

*Here again there is emphasis on the words of Percy French's songs which I personally believe are best delivered in such a manner. I am also happy to note the word 'affectionate' describing his use of Hiberno-English - clearly he loved the language as spoken and recorded it as he heard it.*

**It is also important in my opinion to note the reference to what is described as a 'satiric edge' -**

I believe that much of French's work, what is commonly known as his 'comic songs', has a satirical quality albeit a gentle but probing one. Percy French was himself the most self effacing of men and it seems to me that in his songs he often deflated the pompous or pretentious or looked beneath what Michael D. Higgins colorfully described last year as the 'layers of pretension' that were evident in the growing acquisitive and property owning society that was emerging from the land clearances .

Humour I think is an essential part of the understanding and appreciation of Percy French - he puts people and events into a more realistic and down to earth perspective through his sense of the absurdities and frailties of human nature ---- Again reflecting on a point made by Michael D. Higgins last year that in the society that was emerging in 19th Century Ireland seriousness was the appropriate presentation of self and family. For instance Percy French's song *The Night that Miss Cooney Eloped* . (Sung by Norman Cairns)

Sometimes the satirical or the ironic emerges in Percy French's parodies - Around 1890 for instance the appointment by Queen Victoria of one of her Lord Lieutenants, Lord Zetland, to represent her in Ireland was an opportunity for some down-to-earth satirical poking of fun. Percy French imagines the Queen giving advice to the Lord Lieutenant about how he might behave in his new job in Ireland. This French relates in the Dublin idiom as if it was overheard by an Irish waiter, Larry Flynn, who happened, if you don't mind, to be eavesdropping on the conversation, .....

### ***The Queen's Advice - (Gladys O'Neill)***

**Grace Neill's pub cum restaurant in Donaghadee, Co Down is aged 400 years - it is the oldest inn in Ireland. I was delighted to find that a more recent extension has its large beams imprinted with the names of 4 famous Irishmen, James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, Oscar Wilde and for my delight ...wait or it.....Percy French! The owner or architect must have had a deep understanding of the major 19th century figures in Irish literary history. Never mind that Shaw, Synge and Beckett were not included!**

I suspect that an academic study of Percy French and all his writings can be as enlightening as the study of James Joyce - Indeed I should mention that there are a number of mentions of Percy French songs in Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*.

it is my belief that Percy French has a right to be included and it is the object of all Percy French Societies and this summer school to make the tribute that is set at Grace Neill's pub in Donaghadee more commonplace in the Ireland of today.

*(In case any of you get to Donaghadee Grace Neill's is no mean establishment - Welcomed such famous figures as Peter the Great of Russia, composer Franz Liszt and, more recently, singer Tina Turner. At the shortest point between Scotland and Ireland the inn opened in 1611 as the King's Arms. It was renamed in honour of a famous proprietor Grace Neill who is said to have welcomed her customers with a kiss between puffs on her clay pipe.)* I used to wonder were the clay pipes made here in Roscommon but I discovered recently that there was once a clay pipe factory in the centre of Belfast - so it is maybe they were of unionist/protestant manufacture!

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Today we cannot touch on everything that caused **Irish and Belfast- born novelist, George Bermingham to write:**

*'The genius of Percy French as entertainer, artist and author was a national asset, and the fact that his words and phrases had become family bywords was a mark of real greatness' -*

Again I draw attention to the focus by George Bermingham on Percy French's 'words and phrases'

Adding to that is the comment of **Walter Love of BBC NORTHERN IRELAND** who speaks of Percy French's songs and gentle humour bringing timeless qualities of colour and rhythm. I am thinking here of the colour and rhythm of the railway, its uneven movement and of the conversations recorded in the famous 'Are ye Right there Michael?' and of the colour and rhythm of the song 'Sweet Marie' conveying the movement of the horse at the races as mentioned by Michael D. Higgins last year.

NORMAN CAIRNS sings 'Sweet Marie'

Sweet Marie was in fact a parody on an American musical hall song - parodying being a major ingredient of Percy French's humour and creativity.

As I have said we have not touched on very many other fascinating aspects of Percy French - his short plays and sketches, his many years as an Edwardian entertainer in London, his ability to relate to children, his collaboration with his great friend and classical musician, Dr William Houston Collisson - their comic operas, their joint entertainment 'Humours of Art and Music' that travelled from the London stage to Canada, USA and West Indies, their activities in the winter sports centres of Switzerland

But at all costs we must not appear to be too earnest or solemn in our analysis - Even in his own kind of epitaph - written in the visitor's book at Glenveagh Castle in Donegal you find a touch of the ironic

***Remember me is all I ask,  
And yet, if the remembrance prove a task - Forget!***

I started by recounting the vision and inspiration of our founder, Oscar Rollins. A new mantle of vision and drive has now been assumed by Kevin Finnerty inspired as he is by his father, John and the Flanagan family of Cloonyquin. Now what interests me there is the Cloonyquin side - this gives the summer school the most authentic of foundations --- and there are others like Michael J. Cunnane and the late Seamus De Nash from the homeland of Percy French who have also kept alive the honoring of Percy French. To give further authenticity to this summer school is the fact that the very first Percy French Festivals were held at Cloonyquin House in 1957/58. We in North Down have performed minor miracles of our own but after 27 years these initiatives by Kevin Finnerty, so strongly mirrored by Richie Farrell of Roscommon Library and by the Co. Roscommon Percy French Society present an outcome that we in the Percy French Society welcome as an important enhancement of what has gone before

**The school has emerged at the right time and more importantly in the right place - the home land of Percy French.**

**Finally it is surely the ultimate tribute to Percy French that there is a spirit of friendship and goodwill that pervades all activities and meetings. On his gravestone in the said Formby can be read the following quotation "Write me as one who loved his fellow men". I believe that Percy French, his life and extraordinary prolific output adds a very special dimension to our understanding of our various Irishnesses**

**His life and the breadth of his literary, musical and artistic output is best articulated by the poet, Katherine Tynan:** *"Percy French was so versatile, so extraordinarily accomplished in such a variety of ways, so sensitive to human and natural appeals, that one must think of him as having a touch of that quality by which talent is dull, the quality of genius ... he was incapable of vulgarity: and he had a unique gift of making his audiences love him".*

***Berrie O'Neill, North Down Percy French Society, 2010***